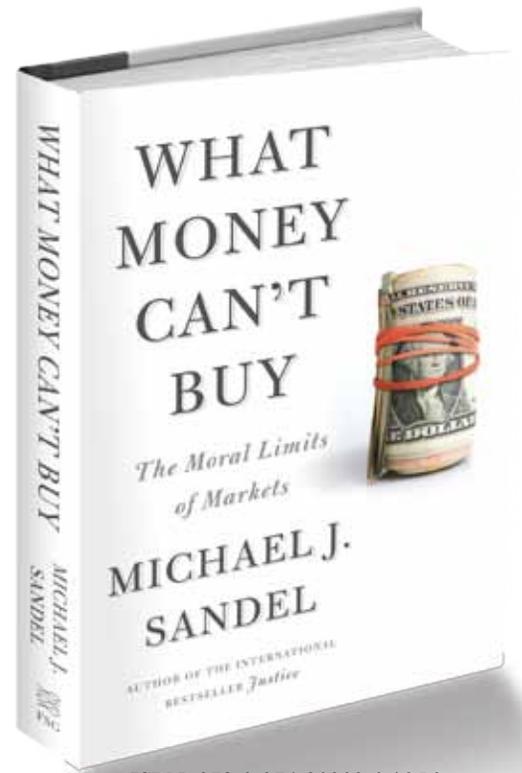


Reading Group Gold

What Money Can't Buy by Michael J. Sandel



ISBN: 978-0-374-20303-0 / 256 pages

Should we pay children to get good grades? Should we allow corporations to pay for the right to pollute the atmosphere? Is it ethical to pay people to test risky new drugs? What about selling citizenship to immigrants who are willing to pay? In *What Money Can't Buy*, Michael J. Sandel invites you to join one of the most important ethical debates of our time. Describing our seismic shift from having a market economy to being a market society, Sandel examines the effects of market values on traditionally sacrosanct, nonmarket arenas, including medicine, education, sports, and family life. Sparking provocative questions in an age of widening gaps between rich and poor, this timely book provides rich territory for discussion, providing a comprehensive tour of our market-driven world.

Whether you explore the book with your friends, your colleagues, or other concerned groups, this guide is designed to foster inspiring dialogues. We hope the following topics will enrich your experience as you probe the book's ultimate question: What is the moral limit of markets?

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did you react to the list of startling price tags in the book's introduction? How has this trend manifested itself in your workplace and your community?
2. Chapter 3, "How Markets Crowd Out Morals," outlines two general objections—fairness and corruption—in the debates about what money should and should not buy. In your opinion, at what

Reading Group Gold

point does commercialization start to create inequality? Can the market process itself “taint” certain commodities, such as surrogate motherhood?

3. Sandel traces our culture of commercialization to Reagan-era deregulation, when free markets were touted as the key to prosperity and freedom. As the recent global economic crisis unfolded, did you blame the private sector, the government, or both? How have you been affected by the economic downturn?
4. Sandel describes the concept of jumping the queue for everything from “free” theater performances and papal masses to doctor’s appointments and congressional committee hearings. How is this new revenue stream redefining our concept of “public”? What is the harm if public audiences no longer reflect a broad spectrum of citizens?
5. The distinction between fees and fines raises the dilemma faced by many government agencies that are torn between their need to make up for financial deficits and their role as instillers of responsible behavior. Does Finland’s approach, which ties speeding-ticket fines to income, solve the dilemma?
6. The Advanced Placement financial-incentive program described in chapter 2 was sometimes successful simply because of the way certain students perceived money. In these cases, it didn’t matter if the reward was \$500 or \$100; it was simply cool to have cash. What can money symbolize, beyond just a means to purchase goods and services?
7. The author says economists have a hard time understanding gift-giving as rational social practice. What does this say about the irrationality of generosity? Is it socially destructive to rely solely on rational thinking?
8. Chapter 3 features a study of Israeli students who went door-to-door soliciting money for worthy causes. The unpaid group, which received a motivational speech beforehand but no commission, raised 55 percent more than those who were offered a 1 percent commission, and they raised 9 percent more than those who were offered a 10 percent commission. What do you make of this? How do you personally define a “rewarding” experience?
9. Chapter 3 includes the premise that altruism is limited and can reach a depletion point. Do you have any evidence of this in your community? Or do you agree with Sandel that altruism is a muscle that grows with exercise and is only diminished by a market-driven economy?
10. Discuss the concept of viaticals and “janitors insurance.” Does consent make any difference in the debate? Should there be limits on which aspects of death (mortuary services, annuity terms and conditions) can be commercialized?
11. Is there anything wrong with using your body as a billboard, as long as it’s your choice to do so? If you’re doing it because you are in deep poverty, does this mean you really didn’t have a choice?

Reading Group Gold

12. For public entities (especially schools and jails), is there a moral difference between raising revenue through bond sales versus advertising sales? Is taxation the noblest way to fund public services?
13. Should there be a different set of standards for naming rights and other forms of advertising in the world of sports? Or should the sports industry have the same status as other private-sector enterprises?
14. The income gap between America's highest and lowest earners has reached record levels. Does this book describe a trend that will make the gap wider, or will these new revenue streams save the middle class?
15. Where do you draw your own line in response to the question "What can't money buy?" Among the book's dozens of examples, from paying drug-addicted women to become sterilized to the practice of "carbon offsets" (paying a price to offset the damage caused by energy consumption), which ones made you uncomfortable? Which ones made you curious about trying to profit from them yourself?
16. How do the concepts in Sandel's previous book, *Justice*, apply to the moral dilemmas raised in *What Money Can't Buy*?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael J. Sandel is the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass Professor of Government at Harvard University. His work has been the subject of television series on PBS and the BBC. His most recent book is the international bestseller *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*

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