

WHAT SHOULD NOT BE BOUGHT AND SOLD?

Illustrasjon: Øystein Eikssund



By Ole Martin Moen

While most of us have no objections to things such as pets, books, and childcare being bought and sold, many feel uncomfortable when it comes to pregnancies and sexual services. When we consider the buying and selling of friendships, babies, human organs, and political votes, the vast majority would say that a line has been crossed. But where do we draw the line? And how do we determine that? Those are pressing ethical questions, for how we understand and delimit markets has a profound impact on society, and as technological develop-

ment advances, more and more things become potential commodities.

My research project, which is funded for four years by the Norwegian Research Council, will contribute to the development of ethical criteria for what should, and what should not, be treated as commodities. The first aim of the project is to systematize and make accessible the ethical commodification debate, which is currently fragmented. A further aim is to identify and correct three recurring conflationations in influential commodification arguments. These are conflationations between objections to: (a) people trading item A and people having item A, (b) people trading item A and people trading item A under certain conditions, (c) people trading item A and what causes people to trade item A. On the basis of this, three central lessons will be drawn. One lesson is that the proper scope of commodification is independent of the proper scope of distributive justice. Two other lessons involve the identification of a new informal fallacy in applied ethics (The Bulldozing Fallacy) and a new phenomenon in moral psychology (Moral Mist). The final aim of the project is to draw lessons from the commodification debate to the methods of applied ethics more broadly. In doing so, the project aims at moving the frontiers of commodification ethics, one of the areas of philosophy that are most urgently relevant to public policy.

In addition to myself, the project group consists of Brian Earp (Oxford/Yale) and Francesca Minerva (Ghent), who will be visiting researchers. Later this fall, a PhD student will also be hired to work on the project.