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WSCHODNI ROCZNIK HUMANISTYCZNY  
TOM XIX (2022), №2  
„Filozoficzne wyzwania XXI wieku”, red. Leszek Gawor  
s. 63-69  
doi: 10.36121/jkalajdzitis.19.2022.2.063

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## The triumph of the market as a challenge for the moral philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

**Annotation:** Today's world can be characterized as a world dominated by market values – A world in which the market triumphed in almost every area of our lives. The triumph of the market is a phrase used by American social and political philosopher Michael J. Sandel to describe a situation that reveals the current state in which market values (such as those typical for economic activity) are being pushed into the sphere of our lives to which they originally did not belong. The market, which is understood as a sum of tools, forms, mechanisms, and social-economic relationships, began to trade with goods that were originally not part of it. The presented paper introduces the issue of the triumph of the market as a challenge for moral philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Keywords:** market, triumph, academia, values, publishing.

### Triumf rynku jako wyzwanie dla filozofii moralnej XXI wieku

**Streszczenie:** Dzisiejszy świat można scharakteryzować jako świat zdominowany przez wartości rynkowe. Świata, w którym rynek triumfował w niemal każdej dziedzinie naszego życia. Triumph of the market to określenie używane przez amerykańskiego filozofa społeczno-politycznego Michaela J. Sandela do opisanie sytuacji, która ujawnia obecny stan, w którym wartości rynkowe (takie jak te typowe dla działalności gospodarczej) są spychane w sferę naszej życia, do którego pierwotnie nie należeli. Na rynku rozumianym jako suma narzędzi, form, mechanizmów i relacji społeczno-gospodarczych rozpoczął się handel towarami, które pierwotnie nie były jego częścią. Prezentowany artykuł wprowadza problematykę triumfu rynkowego jako wyzwania dla filozofii moralnej XXI wieku.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rynek, triumf, academia, wartości, wydawnictwa.

### Introduction

Today's world can be characterized as a world dominated by market values – A world in which the market triumphed in almost every area of our lives. Triumph of the market is a phrase that I borrowed from American social and political philosopher Michael J. Sandel. This phrase is used to express today's social situation, in which the market values are being promoted and many times already enforced into the domains of life, to which they originally did not belong at all. The market is understood as a composition of tools, forms, mechanisms, and social relations whereby parties engage in exchange. This exchange today occurs with goods that were not originally part of it. The triumph of the market also refers to the increase in power and universal acceptance of the hegemonic position of the market as an exclusive way of organizing almost every circumstance in our lives.

The most significant manifestations of this trend can be shown in the trade with health and the aspects which are related to health – From luxurious orthopedic replacements, adjustments of female eggs or male sperms in assisted reproduction, to the outsourcing of pregnancy to poor women in developing countries. We can also demonstrate it in the business with public security, such as private security services, mercenary legionnaires fighting in wars, the possibility to upgrade your prison cell, or the possibility of buying a right to pollute – trading with emissions. One of the very interesting areas, in which this contemporary tendency occurs, is education. Today it is possible (whether officially or not) to buy a place at prestigious schools, universities, or to get paid to read a book (programs that encourage children to read)<sup>1</sup>. A widespread issue that is typical in the academic realm (in this context) is the unavailability of papers that were published in prestigious journals and/or are available only through the databases of those journals. There is a very simple reason why these papers are not available: it is because the university (workplace) cannot afford a subscription to those journals or databases.

For a better understanding of the issue, we need to grasp at least a simple recognition of the problem of values. Values are understood as something that can bring satisfaction, as something that can satisfy human needs. Values are useful. The issue of values is definitely a very complex topic but for the purpose of the presented article, we need a basic understanding of the way how they can be divided. It is sufficient for us to accept that values can be instrumental or terminal. Instrumental values are the means by which we can achieve our end goals. The terminal values are those that we define as our end goals. The term terminal value is used to mark subjects or conditions of which value is based on their very existence. Those conditions or subjects that we refer to as target (terminal) are valuable in themselves, regardless of everything else. A typical example might be love, friendship, pleasure, health, or knowledge. Instrumental value is understood as a means to something, it can be used to mark a subject or a condition of which importance is based on being a means of achieving something else. Instrumental values are not desirable for themselves. They cannot satisfy our needs on their own, and they can acquire and lose their status. The merit of those values is lost if they are no longer a means to an end. For example, money is not valuable for itself but only as a means. Most

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<sup>1</sup> M. J. Sandel, *What money can't buy. The moral limits of Markets*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2012.

of us have no desire to own the money for the sake of money, but only the money as a means to something else, as something that can help us to satisfy our needs or desires.

However, some authors claim that some things, conditions, or objects can have instrumental as well as terminal value at the same time<sup>2</sup>. As an example of those, we can show education. On the one hand, education is desirable for itself as it does satisfy our (human) natural desire for knowledge. On the other hand, however, education can also be understood as something very instrumental as a means to satisfy our other needs. A good education can (or maybe should) provide us with a better social status or a better-paid job.

### The triumph of the market

The triumph of the market is a complex issue that is a subject of the studies of several disciplines. Nevertheless, with regard to the presented problem, it seems important to focus on one of its accompanying phenomena – reduction of understanding of subjects or goods to their instrumental value. The triumph of the market can be characterized by the instrumentalization of social goods and entities. One of the most dramatic manifestations of the phenomena is the instrumentalization of moral subjects (or humans in general). This instrumentalization happens on several levels and in relation to several activities – instrumentalization of moral subjects is often part of the instrumentalization of aspects related to them. This process generally results in other social problems characterized by the commercialization of social life, materialism manifested in prioritization of material interests, consumerism (understood as excessive consumption), or even commodification (which is understood as excessive instrumentalization) leading to a completely reduced understanding (which is exclusively instrumental) of subjects and objects. Subjects and objects are understood exclusively through their monetary – instrumental value. This reduction manifests itself through the illusion that everything can be sold and bought in the market.

The issue of commodification is not exclusively a contemporary problem. It was Marx who, as one of the first contemporary philosophers, realized the existence and seriousness of these processes and introduced the issue of commodification as a subject of philosophical interest.<sup>3</sup> However, the problem of reduction of the understanding of subjects and objects can also be found in other philosophical schools. One of the most famous historical figures who noticed it was Kant. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he wrote: “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a price or a dignity. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity”. He adds: “What is related to general human inclinations and needs has a market price; that which, even without presupposing a need, conforms with a certain taste, that is, with a delight... has a fancy price, but that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself has not merely a relative worth, that is, a price, but an inner worth, that is dignity”<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> D.E. Palmer, *Instrumental value*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of business ethics and society*, ed. W. R. Kolb, Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications, 2008, pp. 1139–1140.

<sup>3</sup> K. Marx, *Capital. A critique of Political Economy*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 2015.

<sup>4</sup> I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge university press 2006, p. 42

It is possible to identify three fundamental attitudes in relation to commodification. The first extreme is the position which is held by libertarians, according to whom commodification is not a problematic issue. On the other hand, there are opponents of any commodification at all. They argue that it is dangerous to replace any human relations with market relations. Finally, the third (moderate) approach, which can be identified is the one according to which we can commodify some subjects, objects, and conditions, but not all. This approach is the most problematic, as it faces the task to provide us with the criterion by which we could determine the limits of the possibility of commodification.

In the context of the paper, the question which arises in front of us is whether it is fair to pay for the publication of our academic papers. And the second question which follows is if it is fair to pay – significant amounts for downloading (reading) an academic paper.<sup>5</sup> One of the problems which are the result of the market triumph is that we are trading with goods (e.g., knowledge) that were never a part of the market relations before. Another is that the markets on which the goods are offered have the ability to change their value (intentionally but also unintentionally). The change that occurs is in their understanding. We are no more able to understand those goods as terminal values, we look at them only as instrumental<sup>6</sup>. Thus, what happens is that the understanding is reduced. From the moral perspective, the triumph of the market brings many other problems. Among others, it is an issue of social inequality which is connected to economic inequality, the problem of justice, corruption of goods through their devaluation, the problem of freedom and dissolution of responsibility.

The triumph of the market is in my opinion a challenge for moral philosophy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. One of the most widespread areas, in which it manifests itself, is academia. If we investigate the issue of education and knowledge, we will learn that its original goal is the satisfaction of a person's inner need, or what we call self-fulfilment. This self-fulfilment is mostly available through academia. Even today, education and knowledge are understood mostly as something instrumental, which does not mean that this understanding is right or even original. The fact that it is possible to transform them into goods that are sold and bought does not mean that it is their essence. On the contrary, this reduced understanding of knowledge and education can be marked as an outcome of the market triumph. When education and knowledge are commodified, what we have left is their narrow understanding as tools, as an investment into the future, as an expectation of a higher income and better social status. They became a commodity and are no longer understood as something desirable for themselves.

### **Academic capitalism**

The triumph of the market produced what we now call academic capitalism. In the context of the paper, it can be very simply defined as a transfer of the logic of the markets to the academic environment. The examples would be a formation of the knowledge economy and knowledge society or focus on competitiveness and market financing. What happened is that education and results of the research have been

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<sup>5</sup> The very similar problem (just different approach) is to pay for access to databases where the paper can be found.

<sup>6</sup> M. J. Sandel, op.cit.

transformed into goods, and researchers and university teachers have been transformed into suppliers of education and innovations into goods. These goods must be involved in a market exchange, they must be sold to the state, companies, or future students. The production must have the ability to be used as a source of income<sup>7</sup>. What is happening in the academic world is that education and research are gradually transforming (being reduced) solely to commodities.

According to the logic of the current discourse, it is necessary to consider research (knowledge) and education not as a public good, but on the contrary as something which must be able to make a profit. A University teacher is understood as a producer of knowledge that must be sold as education (commodity) to students (customers), or as an innovation (commodity) to entities operating on the market (businesses). Another manifestation I have already mentioned is a capitalization of knowledge that is produced with the help of public money in the public universities but contributes to the profitability of the private sector – such as publishing in scholarly journals (with a high impact factor). Publication of the research is a natural manifestation of the process of research. Its objective should be communication, exchange of information, verification or falsification of the findings, and many others. Today the role of academic publication changes. The process is becoming not only a method of promoting the knowledge or creating the recognition (of individual or topic) but above all a systematic normative prerequisite for evaluation – of performance and potential career growth. And this might be considered as problematic. One of the problems relates to the fees which are often asked before the publication (even it is not a norm), but what is more problematic is access to these scientific articles and to these scholarly journals which are overcharged.<sup>8</sup>

The price is not only excessive, but it also has a growing tendency. One of the important factors which allow journals to demand high fees for access to articles is the existence of what we might call the information monopolization of scientific knowledge.

This monopolization is possible, because of how academic publishing works. The same information (articles) is not published in several sources. Additionally, knowledge, unlike goods or services (although we try to consider them to be goods or services), has different characteristics which enable monopolization, unlike, let us say, a transport vehicle (example of commodity/service) that can be substituted – if I cannot afford an expensive car, I may travel by bicycle or use public transport – it is impossible to do the same with knowledge. I cannot replace one ‘piece’ of information that I need for my research or lecture with another cheaper ‘piece’ – knowledge is not a standard commodity. If my university cannot afford access to a resource (database, scholarly journal, etc.). I will not have it and it cannot be replaced or obtained from another source (same information cannot be published in a different journal – you could even be accused of auto-plagiarism).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> L. Kobová, *Akademický kapitalizmus na Slovensku*. [Academic capitalism in Slovakia] [in:] *Situovaná veda. Podoby a kontexty tvorby poznania*. [Situating science. Forms and contexts of knowledge creation], ed. M. Szapuová, Bratislava: Centrum rodových štúdií FF UK, 2009, pp. 106–107.

<sup>8</sup> Prices as high as 40 € to buy an article are not unusual. Whether it is Elsevier, Springer, or Wiley-Blackwell.

<sup>9</sup> Another factor which influences the rise of the prices of scholarly articles is the shift which happened. Journals were originally published by non-profit organizations – such as academy of science or

It must be pointed out that a large part of the research published in these scholarly journals is publicly funded (whether directly by salaries of academics, or through scholarly grants). These journals, therefore, publish the results of research that is publicly funded, the author provides the paper free of charge – moreover, he is (must be) grateful, because his evaluation and career depend on the publication. The author pays for the editing, formatting, and other necessary arrangements, reviewers review the paper for free, most of the editors work for free, but if somebody wants to read it, the paper suddenly becomes very expensive.<sup>10</sup> British author Monbiot compared this system to pure rentier capitalism (economic parasitism), which is the opposite of productive capitalism. He even compares it to a former feudal vassal relationship.

### Conclusion

I call what academic capitalism created an academic perpetuum mobile – it does create a cycle in which large publishers own the journals with the highest impact factor, in which academics must publish to present their findings that will help them obtain a grant (which is necessary for career advancement), which can subsequently fund research that will be published again in scholarly journals (and so on).

The aim of the paper was to point out the existence of market triumph in the academic realm. The negative phenomenon which accompanies this triumph is a reduction of understanding of values as well as their confusion. As an example for a better understanding of the reduction of values in academic practice, I mentioned the deformation of one of the most important academic practices – scholarly publishing, which in today's academic world has become an instrument of economic parasitism of commercial publishers. The negative consequences of this commodification of knowledge in relation to its normative nature can be enormous.

So academic perpetuum mobile works like this: the scholars who are mostly publicly funded create output as a matter of their research – usually it would be a paper/article. Without considering who should be a primary reader (students/colleagues) they must instead look for a journal with the highest possible impact factor (not the one which is available for students/colleagues). The article is edited by the author or paid aid to be in accordance with the editors' requirements. After all of this, the article moves ahead to “round two” and is admitted to the procedure during which it goes through a “peer review” process. The cost of this process is again shifted from editors/journals to scholars who do the reviewing for free. And if everything goes well, the journal will print or publish the article online and starts charging the fees for something which they got for almost entirely free. And if everything goes well even for the author, he gets a few citations which will give him a chance to get another grant or job and to obtain money for another research and another scholarly paper.

I do, of course, understand that this is not the entire process and some steps were excluded from the description, but it does very well describe the triumph of the market in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the task which lies ahead of us and moral philosophy.

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universities. Today, most of the journals are published by commercial publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Only for the sake of interest: Relx, the parent company of Elsevier B.V., reported a drop in revenues citing the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. Adjusted operating profit came down to “only” 1 billion € in 2020 (RELX, 2020).

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