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The Moral Limits of Markets: On the Commodification of the
Female Body

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Abstract

This thesis examines whether women's sexual capacities may be treated as marketable goods. It distinguishes between two main strands of objection to sex work. *Intrinsic objections*, according to which women's sexual capacities should never be exchanged for money, and *consequentialist objections* which reject sex work because it causes harm, such as exploitation, coercion, stigma, or gender inequality.

I argue that neither objection succeeds. Intrinsic objections rely on contested ideals about an 'essence' of sex as necessarily tied to intimacy or romantic love, and they cannot explain why commodifying sexual labor is uniquely degrading or entails a loss of value. Consequentialist objections, meanwhile, cite harms that are neither unique to sex work nor present in every instance of it; and comparable harms in other precarious or bodily labor typically motivate calls for regulation, instead of moral rejection. Taken together, these arguments suggest that the moral problem lies not in commodification itself but in unjust social and economic conditions. Reforms could make possible markets in sexual labor that are egalitarian, feminist, and grounded in respect for the autonomy and dignity of participants, while preserving freedom in occupational choice.

Kurzzusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht, ob die sexuellen Kapazitäten von Frauen als marktfähige Güter behandelt werden sollten. Sie unterscheidet zwischen zwei wesentlichen Einwänden gegen Sexarbeit. *Intrinsische Einwände*, wonach die sexuellen Kapazitäten von Frauen niemals gegen Geld entlohnt werden sollten, und *konsequentialistische Einwände*, die Sexarbeit ablehnen, weil sie Ausbeutung, Zwang, Stigmatisierung oder Geschlechterungleichheit verursacht.

Ich argumentiere, dass keiner dieser Einwände überzeugt. Intrinsische Einwände stützen sich auf umstrittene Vorstellungen über die „Essenz“ von Sex, die notwendigerweise mit Intimität oder romantischer Liebe verbunden sei, und können ferner nicht erklären, warum die Kommodifizierung sexueller Arbeit besonders erniedrigend sei oder einen Verlust von Wert impliziert. Konsequentialistische Einwände hingegen führen Schäden an, die weder spezifisch für Sexarbeit sind noch in jedem Fall auftreten; vergleichbare Schäden in anderen prekären oder körperlichen Arbeiten führen in der Regel zu Forderungen nach Regulierung statt zu moralischer Ablehnung. Zusammengefasst deuten diese Argumente darauf hin, dass das moralische Problem nicht in der Kommodifizierung selbst liegt, sondern in ungerechten sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Bedingungen. Reformen könnten Märkte für sexuelle Arbeit ermöglichen, die egalitär und feministisch sind und auf der Achtung der Autonomie und Würde der Beteiligten beruhen, während gleichzeitig die Freiheit der Berufswahl gewährt bleibt.

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1 Introduction

For both [the prostitute and the married woman], the sexual act is a service; the latter is engaged for life by one man; the former has several clients who pay her per item. One male against all the others protects the former; the latter is defended by all against the exclusive tyranny of each one. In any case, the advantages they derive from giving their bodies are limited by competition [...].

— Simone de Beauvoir (2011 [1949], 681), *Second Sex*

There are things money cannot buy: friendship or love, for instance. But these are rare exceptions. Today, almost anything can be bought on markets. A few examples from Sandel (2012) are the right to emit one metric ton of carbon dioxide under the European Union Emissions Trading System (around €70 as of mid-July 2025), increased visibility on dating apps (ranging from €10 to €40 per month, depending on the platform, region, and duration), or priority access at amusement parks (up to €450 per person, per day, depending on the park and season). More contested things are hunting rights for endangered animals, upgrades in prison sales, or access to private phone numbers of doctors. Are these things we should not be able to buy? And if so, why?

Particularly contested markets are those that involve the human body: its organs (such as kidneys), its fluids (like blood or plasma), and its capacities (such as pregnancies). Do such markets serve the public good, or do they raise particular - moral, economic, or legal - concerns? In this master's thesis, I focus on one particularly controversial market involving the body: the market for women's sexual labor.

Sex work is a controversial topic, where public and academic opinion spans a wide spectrum, from complete rejection to full legal, social or moral endorsement. Some hold the view that selling sex is inherently wrong, arguing that sex is a uniquely intimate act that belongs exclusively within the private realm of romantic or intimate relationships and, thus, should never be commodified. To them, introducing money into sex alters, changes, or taints the essence or nature of sex in ways we should reject. Others observe that most, if not all, paid labor involves certain aspects of our bodies – minimally, our intellectual capacities. These authors question whether there are any morally important differences

1 *Introduction*

between sex work and offering massages, dancing professionally, or playing in the theater. At the other end of the spectrum are market liberals, who claim that, irrespective of the good or service, as long as both parties consent and the exchange complies with legal norms, the state should not interfere. According to this view, if someone wants to sell sex and someone else is willing to buy it, given that certain conditions such as full agency, no coercion, and symmetric information exist, people should be free to sell anything, including sex. They treat markets (and the goods and services sold on them) as morally indifferent, and objections to markets arise only under limited circumstances, such as when sex markets impose costs on third parties not directly involved in the transaction.

Even within feminist discourse, the debate is profoundly divided. On one side, some feminists view sex work as one of the oldest and most severe forms of exploitation. They find sex work deeply oppressive as women, in their view, are required to surrender their bodies for male pleasure, reinforcing patriarchal power and gender hierarchies. Some go as far as considering sex work a (legalized) “practice of serial rape” (MacKinnon 2011, 274), rejecting the terms ‘sex work’ and ‘sex worker’ as they obscure - in their view - what is done to the women in the industry. To them, women are neither sex workers nor prostitutes; they are prostituted. On the other side, sex work is defended as a form of sexual freedom and empowerment. From this perspective, it offers women autonomy, financial independence, and sexual agency. Proponents argue that sex work challenges the double standards that condemn female promiscuity while celebrating male sexual conquest, that sex workers are departing from gender norms that women should only have sex with a few (or one) sexual partner(s), whilst the same behavior of men is praised.

These perspectives also underlie contrasting pictures or narratives of the sex worker herself, portraying her between victimhood and culpability. In one depiction, she is a victim of systemic violence: sexually abused, exploited, stripped of agency, coerced into work she could not possibly want, merely an object for male pleasure and thus, the ultimate product of patriarchy. Her identity is shaped not by choice, but by coercion, economic desperation, or trafficking, rendering her an object upon which male dominance is enacted. In contrast stands the image of the sex worker as the culprit. Thereafter, she is a mysterious, autonomous, free, and seductive woman who threatens ideals of monogamous partnerships and the reproductive character of ‘good’ sex within the boundaries of romantic or marital love. According to such views, she is not seen as a victim but as a danger: a disruptive force who deceives, seduces, and subverts. Her very presence

is constructed as a threat to social order: to men, whom she allegedly manipulates and seduces; to other women, who cannot 'provide' what she offers; and to society, whose morals she challenges.

Unquestionably, sex work raises many profound questions, because it touches on fundamental issues of sexuality, choice, and labor. What does it mean to consent, and is consent sufficient to render a market transaction morally permissible? Is there something uniquely problematic about selling one's sexual capacities, as opposed to one's intellectual or physical labor? Are all forms of objectification inherently troubling, or can it be - even within the context of commodified sex - pleasurable? Can sex be meaningfully realized within the market sphere or does commodification affect sex in ways we should reject? And are women's sexual capacities a kind of good that ought not to be commodified at all, and if so, on what grounds? There also exist extensive studies on empirical issues of sex work, such as the prevalence of violence, abuse, and exploitation within the industry. How do those relate to normative questions about the commodification of sex? And do they provide reasons to object to sex work in general, even though instances of consensual, voluntary, and safe sexual transactions already exist?

Furthermore, one difficulty in addressing these questions lies in the fact that sex work is a very diverse practice, ranging from the poor street worker, the self-employed online streamer, the night club dancer, the virtual girlfriend, the domina, and so on, each operating within very distinct socio-economic contexts. These differences manifest not only in what kinds of services are offered but also in the level of physical proximity to clients, as well as the degree of autonomy and creativity. Some sex workers operate exclusively in virtual spaces, engaging in camming or content creation without any physical contact, while others provide in-person services that may or may not involve penetrative acts. Given these vastly different realities of sex workers and the spectrum of the work itself, are there common features that make a moral assessment of the profession altogether possible?

In this thesis, I want to work through some of the most important philosophical arguments for and against markets in women's sexual labor. Thus, the question this thesis aims to answer is what, if anything, is wrong with sex work. Therefore, I am primarily interested in the question of whether we should reject sex work from a *moral* point of view, and not how we should regulate it legally, although I'll touch upon the topic of regulation in the final chapter. Ultimately, I will argue that there is, *per se*, nothing wrong

1 Introduction

with the commodification of sex. What is morally troubling are the conditions under which sex work is still too often carried out. It is these conditions that we ought to reject and need to change.

Before outlining the structure of the thesis, I will briefly address three preliminary aspects. First, this thesis will only focus on sex sold by women. This is not to deny the existence of male sex workers or clients of different genders and sexual orientations, which certainly exist.^[1] Nevertheless, sex work remains predominantly performed by women and purchased by men, and it raises particular moral questions concerning the female body. Second, as minor trafficking raises additional and more profound issues in the moral assessment, I'll focus on female adult sex work only. Third, while some treat the words moral impermissibility, moral objectionability, and moral wrongness differently, I'll use them interchangeably. Thus, when asking the question of whether sex work is morally wrong, the question of whether it is morally impermissible or objectionable could have been equally asked. Last, a note on terminology, which is already a controversial debate.^[2] Some authors explicitly reject the term 'sex workers' (sex work), either because they think it masks the violence, abuse, and exploitation many women in the industry face (Dworkin [1992](#)) (MacKinnon [2011](#)) (European Parliament [2023](#)); or because they think that it misleadingly or wrongly suggests that sex work is akin to other forms of work.^[3] Others worry that the word 'prostitution' denotes criminality and immorality, further stigmatizing sex workers and their profession (Satz [2010](#)). For others, the term 'prostitution' is primarily a legal category, as most laws (e.g., in Germany or Austria) employ it. However, since many individuals engaged in the industry describe themselves as sex workers and prefer the terminology of sex work (Bailey [2024](#)), I will use these terms throughout this thesis.

The thesis is structured as follows. Commodities are exchanged on markets. Thus, when asking whether sex should be a commodity (or commodified), one is implicitly

¹For ease of reference, I use the term "female" to refer broadly to individuals who identify themselves as women, including trans* women.

²See, for instance, Paul ([2023](#)) and Bailey ([2024](#)).

³The European Parliament ([2023](#)), for instance, writes that their report "[...] acknowledges that some people in prostitution refer to themselves as 'sex workers' and that this term is used by some international organisations; [...] whereas this report highlights the importance of each person's right to self-identification in this regard, whereas this report however intentionally and exclusively uses neutral terms, namely people and especially women in prostitution, as we do not want to idealise the reality of prostitution or mask the violence, abuse and exploitation that the large majority of people, especially women and girls, in prostitution endure."

asking whether sex should be available on markets. Therefore, in Chapter 2, I'll begin by giving a broad introduction to markets: what are they, how do they function, and what are their background conditions? Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 represent the main chapters of this thesis. In Chapter 3, I explain and discuss the most important arguments for and against sex work, ultimately arguing that there is nothing wrong with the commodification of sex. Still, many things need to change in the sex industry. Therefore, Chapter 4, apart from summarizing my main arguments and clarifying my own position, provides some thoughts on how to improve the background conditions of markets in women's sexual labor, as well as how sex work could look like in a more feminist and egalitarian future. Chapter 5 concludes.

2 Commodification and markets

Before I turn to the specific market of women's sexual labor, in this chapter, I want to give a brief introduction to markets in general. Why have they become such a central institution in most economic systems? What are their benefits and limitations? What background conditions are necessary so that they function properly? Two preliminaries are important. First, in many disciplines — and in everyday language — the term 'market' refers to a concrete, socially embedded institution, such as the labor market, the financial market, or the housing market. Economics, particularly empirical economics, often examines these specific markets (e.g., studying how an increase in the minimum wage affects employment). By contrast, neoclassical economics sometimes treats markets not as particular institutions but as abstract mechanisms within models for determining relative prices. Here, I focus on the first sense or understanding of markets, i.e., markets as real institutions in which particular goods or services are exchanged. Second, some terminology. A commodity, as I understand it in this thesis, is a good or service that is made available for purchase on markets. Thus, the term commodification refers to the process of becoming an object for sale when previously free, gifted, or otherwise (market-)inalienable.

Markets are central to modern capitalist economies because they coordinate exchanges between strangers and distribute resources on a vast scale (Herzog 2021). Under certain conditions, they promise efficiency and innovation, but - and this is the core claim of this chapter - they also raise moral questions (Satz 2010). In other words, markets are not morally indifferent places where transactions occur.⁴ Entering goods or services into market exchange, thereby turning them into tradable commodities, can transform these goods and reshape the relationships between transaction partners. This is why debates about markets reach beyond efficiency or resource allocation to concerns about justice and the social meaning of exchange. Markets can expand individual choice, but they may also affect relationships, deepen inequalities, or expose people to exploitation.

⁴However, as a friend rightly commented, it is important to note that economists are aware of market failures and normative issues related to them, and many have investigated questions around inequality and just distribution. However, philosophers like Anderson (1990a, 1990b, 1993), Satz (1995, 2010) or Radin (1987) argue that much of the normative critique focuses too narrowly on resources and inequality, often neglecting broader concepts of relational equality.

2 Commodification and markets

In this chapter, I proceed in three steps. In Section 2.1, I outline the virtues commonly attributed to markets, such as efficiency and individual freedom. In Section 2.2, I consider the background conditions necessary for these virtues to be realized. Last, in Section 2.3, I discuss some standard cases of market failure and motivate why markets also raise moral questions.

2.1 Market virtues

In her book *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale*, Debra Satz (2010) identifies two central virtues of markets: efficiency and liberty. Drawing on the foundational theorems of welfare economics, Satz acknowledges that real-world markets often fall short of the ideal assumptions embedded in these theorems, for instance, perfect information, absence of monopolies, and no third-party effects. Nonetheless, she contends that these theoretical theorems still illuminate a key feature of markets: their capacity to generate welfare improvements for individuals. In her words:

“[. . .] [E]fficiency theorems do give us some insight into the individualistic basis for the mutually advantageous nature of trade. [. . .] In a market’s best-case scenario, where information flows, there are no third-party effects of exchanges, no monopoly power, and the parties are completely trustworthy, the network of individual trade serves to generate improvements in getting people what they want.” (Satz 2010, 20-12).

Thus, under certain conditions, markets generate efficient and welfare-maximizing allocations of resources.

Another virtue of markets, Satz sees in their capacity to promote individual freedom with respect to decision-making and choice. She lists several aspects of this, including that markets empower people to “allow people to experiment, to try new commodities, to develop new tastes, to opt out of traditional ways of life” (21), they “present agents with the opportunity to choose between a set of alternatives” (21), and they decentralize decision-making free from personal ties. The experimental aspect of markets has been popularized by Joseph Schumpeter (1942), who coined the notion of *creative destruction*. While focusing on capitalist systems more generally, he emphasized that competition and

technological pressure spur innovation (Schumpeter [1942](#), 83). Price competition and innovations constantly challenge sellers to improve their goods, which can have beneficial effects on buyers or society as a whole. For instance, through competition, goods may become cheaper, be produced with better materials, increase in quality, or become less energy-intensive.

A last benefit Satz does not explicitly mention but is typically put forward is markets' capacity to make efficient use of the information within an economy. This argument was advanced by Friedrich A. Hayek ([1945](#)) in his famous essay "The Use of Knowledge in Society". He argues that only in a decentralized free market system can individuals make the best use of the dispersed knowledge of society (524). The central problem, to Hayek, is that individuals have only knowledge about their immediate surroundings and thus possess only limited, localized information – e.g., knowledge of their immediate environment or their personal preferences - on which they can base their decisions. The price system, Hayek argues, functions as a communication network that transforms private, localized knowledge into public signals (526). Through price changes, markets convey essential information about the relative scarcity of goods and services - much more efficiently than a centralized board of a planning economy. In his own words:

“If we can agree that the economic problem of society is mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in the particular circumstances of time and place, it would seem to follow that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them. We cannot expect that this problem will be solved by first communicating all this knowledge to a central board which, after integrating all knowledge, issues its orders. We must solve it by some form of decentralization.” (Hayek [1945](#), 526)

He gives the example of tin becoming more scarce (526). There may be various reasons for this, and it can happen anywhere in the supply chain. However, within a market system, all relevant information is conveyed by increases in prices, which themselves trigger various responses such as substitution or decreased production, all without a central authority needing to intervene, no matter how complicated the supply chain is. The market, in short, makes the best use of the specific knowledge of individual agents.

Thus, to Hayek, it should be preferred to other institutions from an epistemological point of view.

2.2 Background conditions

As many have emphasized, however, markets do not automatically realize their virtues (Satz [2010](#), 26) (Herzog [2021](#)). Instead, they crucially depend on a variety of background conditions - legal, institutional, and social - that enable them to function efficiently. Among these background conditions, Satz ([2010](#)) names the “existence of legal and regulatory frameworks” (26), including the protection of property rights, contract enforcement mechanisms, and reliable financial institutions such as banking systems. Furthermore, she writes that for markets to run smoothly, free and accurate information must be available to all market participants (27-28). Another aspect she emphasizes is the importance of trust: participants must have confidence that others will act reliably and be trustworthy; otherwise, market exchanges will not take place (29-30). Finally, competition must be preserved through anti-monopoly laws and regulatory oversight, especially in sectors where natural monopolies (e.g., energy, telecommunications) are likely to arise (29-30). Without these measures, markets risk becoming distorted or dominated by powerful actors, who can impose high prices on consumers. She concludes that “state regulations, redistribution, and widespread acceptance and use of norms such as sympathy and honesty can bring markets closer to their ideal conditions” (30).

2.3 Market vices

Critics of markets often point out that even under ideal conditions, markets can generate negative outcomes – legal, moral, or economic. One prominent concern is their tendency to exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities. For this reason, in many countries, certain institutions that are central to human flourishing, such as education and healthcare, are organized as public goods, ensuring that access is not determined by an individual’s ability to pay.⁵ For other goods, markets may be inherently ill-suited to provide them,

⁵In many countries, hybrid systems exist, in which goods such as healthcare or education are provided both through markets and by the state. These systems are often criticized, as private institutions often have much better resources and provide better services, exacerbating already existing inequalities

such as parks, national defense, or essential medical research. They are under-supplied or not supplied at all through market mechanisms because people cannot be excluded from their use, thus creating free-riding problems. Another classic example of market failures is externalities: costs or benefits that fall on third parties outside the immediate transaction. Pollution is perhaps the most well-known example of a negative externality. Typically, costs arising from pollution are not borne by the polluter but by the broader community or third parties. As these external costs are not reflected in market prices, markets tend to overproduce such goods.

Furthermore, as Frey and Jegen (2001) note, markets can sometimes crowd out civic values. They give the example of Swiss villagers who were offered financial compensation in exchange for agreeing to host a nuclear waste facility nearby (603). Paradoxically, the willingness of residents to accept the facility declined when financial incentives were introduced. The authors' interpretation is that these incentives displaced citizens' sense of civic responsibility. Finally, markets are often criticized for failing to enhance welfare universally. Critics frequently highlight exploitation within global supply chains, such as sweatshops, where individuals endure unsafe working conditions to support the profit margins of larger corporations.

Still, from a purely economic perspective, as Satz (2010, 15-16) points out, so long as certain background conditions are met, there should be *prima facie* no restrictions on the kinds of goods available for sale. In her words, "no act of commodification is ruled out in advance" (139). Satz criticizes this view, noting that when markets are considered solely through the lens of economic reasoning, both the structure of markets and the nature of the commodities exchanged are treated as "morally indifferent" (135).

Whether economic critique is indeed this narrow, particularly given that at least some of the theoretical literature is concerned with abstract models rather than specific markets, is open to debate. Furthermore, economists have long investigated different forms of market failures such as externalities, public goods, and information asymmetries, as well as issues of fairness and distributive justice.⁶ Still, I agree with Satz that some questions cannot be fully addressed by standard considerations of efficiency or distributive justice. These questions also require reflection on the moral significance of commodification — that is, whether certain goods or services ought to be for sale. Markets not only

between those who are able to pay and those who rely on the state-funded institutions.

⁶The first work on externalities, for instance, was already published in 1920 (Pigou 1920).

2 Commodification and markets

allocate goods but also shape social relations and influence how individuals relate to one another and to the goods themselves. Applied to the market examined in this thesis, questions extend beyond the costs markets in women's sexual labor may impose, even when broadly defined to include moral or emotional costs. They raise broader concerns about how commodifying sex might transform the nature of the good itself, reshape the relationships between sellers and buyers, or whether certain characteristics of sex render it market-inalienable.

3 What, if anything, is wrong with sex work?

In this chapter, I outline and critically discuss the most prominent philosophical arguments for and against sex work, if applicable, within their broader theories of commodification. Philosophical critiques of sex work can be divided into two main camps: *intrinsic* and *consequentialist* critiques.⁷ These two camps differ in where they locate the wrongness of sex work. Intrinsic critiques maintain that there is something inherently wrong with sex work. Thus, even in vastly different social or legal contexts, proponents of this view would reject sex work. By contrast, consequentialist critiques reject sex work based on the harm it causes.⁸ Thus, if the cultural, economic, or social context changes — that is, if the causal link between the proposed harms and sex work no longer exists — anti-sex work consequentialists would no longer consider sex work morally problematic. In Section 3.1, I consider the first camp; in Section 3.2, the second.

3.1 Intrinsic objections to sex work

Within the first camp, in Section 3.1.1, I begin with the most radical position against sex work: radical feminist abolitionism, according to which sex work represents a profound form of female oppression. Next, in Section 3.1.2, I turn to Anne Phillips' critique of commodification, which questions whether the body is something we own in the first place, and therefore something that can legitimately be sold. Then, in Section 3.1.3, I consider a more moderate form of abolitionism as advanced by Elizabeth Anderson and Michael Sandel. Finally, in Section 3.1.4, I offer a summary of the intrinsic objections and my discussion thereof.

⁷This distinction is due to Satz (1995).

⁸Or, as Satz (1995) has put it sharply, intrinsic critiques are stronger insofar as they think that “[p]rostitution is not wrong simply because it *causes* harm; prostitution *constitutes* a harm” (70, own emphasis).

3 What, if anything, is wrong with sex work?

3.1.1 Radical feminism

The first position against sex work can be characterized as radical feminist abolitionism, a perspective which is represented, amongst others, by Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin.⁹ Both were prominent figures in the feminist movements of the late 1970s and 1980s, especially known for their role in anti-pornography campaigns. At the heart of radical feminist abolitionism lie three ideas. First, a critique of liberal feminism, particularly the way it has approached sex work within academic and theoretical frameworks. Second, a strong emphasis on the empirical realities faced by many sex workers, which they argue are often ignored or abstracted in liberal discourse. And third, a structural understanding of prostitution as deeply entwined with male dominance. At its core, abolitionists find sex work intrinsically wrong, as it is incompatible with human flourishing.

Dworkin, in a speech delivered at an academic symposium on sex work, is especially vocal in articulating the view that academia is too distanced from the lives of sex workers: “[t]he assumptions of academia can barely begin to imagine the reality of life for women in prostitution” (Dworkin 1992). In her work, she often uses graphic, confrontational language and invites the reader to imagine what it feels like to work in the sex industry:

“Prostitution is not an idea. It is the mouth, the vagina, the rectum, penetrated usually by a penis, sometimes hands, sometimes objects, by one man and then another and then another and then another and then another. That’s what it is.” (Dworkin 1992)

Similarly, MacKinnon (2011) emphasizes that “prostitution in the real world is not an abstraction or a metaphor” (295). Like Dworkin, she insists that prostitution is not

⁹As abolitionist views have long existed within both women’s and broader social movements, it may be more accurate to describe the positions of MacKinnon, Dworkin, and others as *contemporary* feminist abolitionism. In *Dialektik der Hure*, Theodora Becker (2023) extensively discusses the views of German abolitionists Anna Pappritz and Katharina Scheven in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While both contemporary and historical abolitionist movements aimed to eliminate sex work, they did so for very different reasons. Contemporary feminist abolitionists primarily emphasize human rights violations and the role of sex work in sustaining patriarchy and the systemic oppression of women. By contrast, figures like Pappritz and Scheven regarded prostitution as a kind of moral and social “contamination” (Becker 2023, 48; own translation), reflecting a desire to preserve particular social and sexual norms rather than addressing gender or power relations. Additionally, they expressed concerns about the health risks associated with sex work and did not view it as a form of “honest” or respectable labor (86–87).

3.1 *Intrinsic objections to sex work*

something abstract to theorize about, but a reality, oftentimes violent and exploitative to many women. Already, their definitions of sex work mirror the deep inequality they see in prostitution: while to Dworkin (1992), sex work is “the use of a woman’s body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants”, MacKinnon (2011) is even more explicit defining it as “gang rape” or a “practice of serial rape” (274). She explicitly rejects referring to women as sex workers or using the term ‘sex work’ as she believes that such terminology “misleadingly and denigratingly equate who [sex workers] are with what is being done to them” (273). She advocates for using the past participle verb form, as it “[. . .] highlights the other people and social forces who are acting upon them” (273). Thus, to her, women in the sex industry are neither sex workers nor prostitutes. They are prostituted (274).

In both of their writings, Dworkin and MacKinnon frequently refer to studies about the abuse, violence, and psychological trauma that many women in prostitution experience. However, their arguments go further than pointing at the harm sex workers suffer. In their view, sex work is inherently abusive and incompatible with the realization of selfhood or human flourishing. For Dworkin, for instance, the question is not whether a woman is mistreated in individual transactions. Rather, the institution of prostitution itself is inherently or, as she says, “per se” abusive: “[p]rostitution in and of itself is an abuse of a woman’s body” (Dworkin 1992). Instead, it is destructive of the body and its dignity:

“In prostitution, no woman stays whole. It is impossible to use a human body in the way women’s bodies are used in prostitution and to have a whole human being at the end of it, or in the middle of it, or close to the beginning of it. It’s impossible. And no woman gets whole again later, after.” (Dworkin 1992)

Dworkin and MacKinnon also criticize the role of money within sex work. Often framed as a neutral medium of transaction, money to them is a central tool of coercion that (unsuccessfully) disguises what is being done to women against their will. As Dworkin asks cynically, “money has a magical quality, doesn’t it? You give a woman money and whatever it is that you did to her she wanted, she deserved.” MacKinnon similarly asserts that “the money coerces the sex rather than guaranteeing consent to it [. . .]. In this analysis, there is, and can be, nothing equal about it. Prostituted

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people pay for paid sex. The buyers do not pay for what they take or get” (MacKinnon 2011, 274). To her, the monetary compensation sex workers receive for their services does not recompense for what they in fact give. Thus, both thinkers reject the premise that sex can be freely and consensually sold. Instead, they insist that it is the prostitute and not the buyer who ultimately pays the highest price, bearing the physical, emotional, and social burdens of a transaction framed as mutual, which is in reality profoundly unequal. The underlying picture of sex workers is very clear: they are victims, without agency or choice, forced into an industry that treats them as sexual objects.

The victimized sex worker

Dworkin and MacKinnon are right to emphasize the horrors many, often young and even minor, women experience in the sex industry. Numerous studies show how sex workers are particularly vulnerable to various forms of violence (Deering et al. 2014) (Moran & Farley 2019) (Bundeskriminalamt 2025). Yet, paradoxically, the point they raise against academic discourse being too abstract and too detached from the lived experience of sex workers can and has been made also against radical feminist abolitionist positions. Ferguson (2014), for instance, reviewing a book from a former San Francisco sex worker Melissa Grant, describes a whole “rescue industry” of activists who impose on all sex workers the picture of being passive victims of male dominance. Grant advocates against falling into either pitfall: portraying the sex worker as a voiceless slave for the sexual gratification of men, or denying the harsh realities of violence, exploitation, and coercion that many sex workers do face. Other sex workers question why they have to convince society that they always have to like their job or that their job is “good” or “meaningful” (Ferguson 2014).

However, I think Dworkin’s and MacKinnon’s uncompromising views are still valuable insofar as they reveal some fundamental questions that a (moral) inquiry into sex work must address and that I’ll get back to in Chapter 4.

1. **Money and its role as the medium of exchange.** Abolitionists like Dworkin and MacKinnon argue that money distorts the sexual exchange by masking coercion as consent. It allows what would otherwise be recognized as a violation or abuse to be reframed as a transaction amongst equals. What is the role of money in an act that otherwise takes place within romantic, intimate, or casual relationships?

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Does money transform the character, nature, or ‘essence’ of sex in a morally objectionable way? Is money an inappropriate means by which sex should not be remunerated?

2. **Sex as a commodity.** Closely related is the question of what, exactly, is being sold in sex work. Dworkin and MacKinnon insist that the sex worker is selling herself, which is destructive to her as a person. Others argue that sex workers sell fantasies, sexual capacities, or provide bodily capacities, akin to much other physical labor. So what, exactly, is the kind of labor the sex worker does? How is its value determined? Are there any fundamental differences between sex and other kinds of physical labor that ground moral arguments against it? And, lastly, are one’s sexual capacities more fundamentally or more intimately connected to selfhood such that it ought not to be sold?
3. **Empirical reality, moral theory.** Dworkin and MacKinnon emphasize the material conditions under which much sex work occurs such as poverty, violence, trafficking, addiction, rape, and coercion. While this is not the experience of all sex workers, the question remains how such harm suffered bears on the moral assessment of the sex industry as a whole. This question becomes particularly pressing given the gendered structure of the industry: while not exclusively composed of women, the majority of sex workers are women (including trans women), and the vast majority of clients are men.¹⁰ What does it mean that female bodily capacities are so disproportionately being bought (and sold)?

In this thesis, I aim to get closer to understanding moral issues regarding commodified sex, aiming not to fall into the narrative of the prostitute as a victim, nor denying the harsh realities of many sex workers. I begin by examining the work of Anne Phillips, who questions the very idea of body ownership in the context of markets. Then, I turn to the work of Elizabeth Anderson and Michael Sandel, who offer more general theories of markets.

¹⁰Of course, the sex industry is also deeply intertwined with issues of race and class. Due to constraints of space, a fuller exploration of these dimensions is beyond the scope of this thesis.

3 What, if anything, is wrong with sex work?

3.1.2 Body ownership

In *Our Bodies, Whose Property?* Anne Phillips (2013) approaches the question of the moral permissibility of commodifying women's reproductive or sexual capacities by asking whether bodies are something we own in the first place. She summarizes her position concisely: "The body *is* yours, but that does not make it property, and does not give you the automatic right to determine whether to rent out or sell" (3).¹¹ Ultimately, I will argue that, while I find this a very interesting perspective on the question of commodification, it does not tell us whether sexual labor should or should not be for sale.

At the beginning of her book, Phillips sets out two starting points in her argument. First, while she fully acknowledges that many people who sell bodily services face coercion, she argues that focusing exclusively on consent or coercion offers a limited framework for philosophical critique. As she writes,

"Ironically, making choice the central concern may lead to a denial of people's agency, for if the only grounds on which an activity can be regarded as unacceptable is that people did not voluntarily choose it, there will be a temptation to understate the extent to which they knew what they were doing."¹² (Phillips 2013, 8)

For this reason, Phillips focuses her analysis on markets where sellers have agency in their choices. Second, she notices that at the heart of many liberal feminist defenses of sex work lies the claim that individuals own their bodies. According to this logic, as you are the owner of your body, you have the right to use it however you want, including selling your sexual or reproductive capacities. But even for feminists opposed to sex work, the claim of ownership of the body is very central, as shown by one of the most prominent feminist slogans: my body, my choice (14). To Phillips, however, the body

¹¹Thus, as a book reviewer notices, the title is somewhat misleading. Phillips is not challenging the idea of whose property the body is, but if the body is the property of anyone in the first place (Chambers 2015).

¹²The only exception is her analysis of organ sales, where Phillips questions whether people would freely choose to do it. To her, inequality is the only plausible explanation for why someone would choose to sell an organ: "In the decision to become a vendor rather than purchaser of organs, [. . .] neither taste nor talent can conceivably be involved. Inequality is the only explanation" (120). This argument is surprising, given her repeated insistence that we need to move beyond the question of free choice when assessing specific markets. Why is it that with the sale of organs, inequality can be the only explanation? To me, it is conceivable that in a perfectly equal world, some people would be willing to sell a kidney or other bodily parts, such as plasma, blood, or skin, if prices were set appropriately.

is not something we own, and treating the body accordingly affects how we may think about its commodification. In my reading, Phillips launches two main arguments against an understanding of ownership of the body:

1. **Claims to property in the body introduce a potentially harmful separation of the body and the self.**

The first argument is that a “claim to property in the person introduces an analytic distinction between capacities and self” (35), which tricks us into thinking that our capacities are separable from us. In my reading, Phillips offers two different arguments in which such a separation can be problematic. First, she holds that separating the body and its capacities can lead to vulnerability, as it portrays bodily work as contracting the body out and then ‘getting it back’, obscuring what happens in between. In her words, the language of property “represent[s] work as the leasing out of capacities” (36) which focuses “on the beginning and end of the process: on the beginning, when the deal is struck, and we decide whether the terms are fair; on the end, when the payment is made, and the body and its capacities are returned to our exclusive use” (36). Phillips presents the analogy of renting out one’s car: we bargain a deal, rent it out, and then receive it back. To her, this is problematic because it makes power relations less apparent and thus abuse more likely:

“The metaphors of property encourage fantasies of the person as separable from her capacities and the self as separable from her body. In obscuring, and thereby softening, the nature of the relationship, the language reduces our vigilance when new demands are put upon us, limits our capacity for resistance, and may help convince us that nothing more can be done.” (Phillips 2013, 36)

The other idea is that separating the self from the body and its capacities can lead to a “state of alienation” (36) or even dissociation (37). Later, she comes back to this idea, arguing that “[w]e do not just ‘have’ our bodies. In an important sense, we ‘are’ them” (111).

Phillips explores this argument further through an analysis of rape. Historically, she explains, rape was not understood as a violation against women, but as a property crime against the husband or father of the victim (42). Today, she writes

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rape is - both in popular and legal discourse - not understood as a property crime against men anymore, although general notions of property are still "lingering" (44). She challenges the conception of rape as a property crime as it "obscures the bodily experience" (48). She explains that the current "legal definition of rape is nonconsensual sex" (48), emphasizes, however that this should not be interpreted as rape being sex minus consent, where "the only difference between the two experiences being that you wanted it in one case and not in the other" (49).¹³ To her representing rape as a property crime is dangerous, insofar as "rape is represented in this way, the actual bodily experience (the supposed common factor) is bracketed out, and everything focuses on what was happening in the mind" (49). Another common way to conceptualize rape is as a form of boundary transgression, an intrusion of personal space. Phillips also finds this problematic because the idea of border crossing reduces sexuality into a thing rather than an activity (55). As she does not explain this point in much detail, it is not entirely clear what she means here. In my reading, the main idea is that treating rape as an illegitimate trespassing or boundary-crossing frames female sexuality as a fixed object (a "thing" to be protected) rather than an active, living part of a person's experience.¹⁴

Unfortunately, Phillips does not fully explore the implications of rejecting bodily ownership for commodification, particularly in contexts where the body is more intrusively involved. For example, in her discussion of surrogate motherhood, her main critique centers on exploitation and not on body ownership (Phillips 2013, 86). While her reminder that we are not just owners of our bodies, but that we *are* them, as well as her analysis of how the ownership understanding potentially distorts our understanding of rape — by framing it as a property violation rather than a bodily or relational harm — is important, yet it remains unclear why (or how)

¹³Phillips does not refer to any explicit legal statutes and makes no further refinements. Her description of rape as nonconsensual sex is therefore incomplete and should not be read as an explanation of prevailing legal standards. As my supervisor Dr. Anni Rätty rightly noted, many jurisdictions still define rape primarily in terms of coercion rather than absence of consent. For example, the German law (§ 177 StGB) criminalizes sexual acts performed against a person's discernible will. While this overlaps with the concept of lack of consent, the legal standard often emphasizes coercion or resistance rather than explicit consent.

¹⁴Additionally, it is important to stress that rape is never an expression of sexuality, but rather an act of profound violence and domination. A more detailed discussion lies beyond the scope of this thesis but is central to feminist analyses of sexual violence and can be read as complementing Phillips' critique, which focuses on conceptual framings such as consent and boundary crossing.

this critique extends to commodified bodily services such as surrogacy, sex work, or organ sales. How does the idea that we are (and do not have) our bodies help us assess the moral permissibility of selling certain bodily capacities? Does this perspective suggest we should exercise greater moral caution in markets involving deep bodily intrusion, such as pregnancy or sexual labor? Or does it emphasize that we should be more attentive to how individuals *experience* sex work?

2. **Claims to property in the body undermine reciprocity.**

The second argument against the idea of ownership in the body relates to reciprocity. To Phillips,

“[w]hen we frame bodily rights as property rights, we transform something that potentially connects us into something that keeps us apart. Bodies alert us to reciprocity and what we have in common, because all bodies need nourishment, all bodies feel pain, and all bodies are potentially vulnerable.” (Phillips 2013, 37)

She wants to avoid biological essentialism, i.e., the idea that there is something unique or special about the female body that justifies treating it differently (28). To her, if there is anything special about our bodies, it is the fact that we all have them. In her words, bodies are reminders “of our shared vulnerability, that which alerts us to the common experience of living as embodied beings in the same world” (11). The common experience of having a body is, to Phillips, connected to our capacity to relate to each other as equals, whereas a property understanding of the body may undermine this equality: “bodies alert us to reciprocity and what we have in common; property alerts us to inequality and what keeps us apart” (37).¹⁵

The main concern I have with this argument is that Phillips largely avoids discussing gendered embodiment or gendered experience. She is right to warn against grounding female identity too closely in sexual or reproductive capacities, something

¹⁵Here, although not the main focus of this chapter, I share my supervisor’s doubts whether bodies truly alert us to reciprocity and commonality. Attention to bodies often highlights differences and inequalities rather than shared experience. For instance, social phenomena such as fat-shaming, ageism, and the advantages afforded to conventionally attractive individuals (sometimes referred to as “pretty privilege”) suggest that bodily appearance (and differences therein) can reinforce social hierarchies rather than foster reciprocity or commonality.

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that has long been used to justify women's exclusion from political and economic life (Phillips 2013, 27). Her insistence that the body is not sacred or exceptional but fundamentally ordinary - and shared amongst all - is an important challenge to views that base gender discrimination on the female body. Furthermore, I think she correctly emphasizes that people relate to their bodies in varied and subjective ways, which may shape what kinds of bodily work they find meaningful, enjoyable, or acceptable. However, I wonder whether gender can really be 'bracketed out' in this discussion — first, because bodily experience is also mediated through gender (as, for instance, Iris Marion Young (2005) has explored extensively when describing diverse aspects of women's lived body experience, such as menstruation, pregnancy, homemaking, and even throwing); and second, since sex markets are markets where female bodily capacities are so disproportionately bought and sold (and with surrogacy, it is only women who can become sellers in the first place).

As a result, the claim that the ethically salient feature of embodiment is simply that we all have bodies starts to feel too thin. How does gender shape the experience of commodification, especially when the commodification of bodily capacities is itself deeply gendered? Finally, Phillips does not fully explore whether a different conceptual relationship to the body, e.g., shifting from 'My body belongs to me' to 'I am my body', would change our moral assessment of commodification.

To summarize, while Phillips's account invites us to rethink our relationships to our bodies and provides a very unique angle from how to approach the question of commodification, her account ultimately does not provide answers as to when and why certain bodily capacities should (not) be for sale. Therefore, I now turn to another intrinsic objection to markets in women's bodily capacities, as advanced by Elizabeth Anderson (1993) and Michael Sandel (2012).

3.1.3 Essentialism

In her book, *Value and Ethics in Economics*, Anderson (1993) approaches the question of the moral permissibility of markets by asking which kinds of goods are appropriately treated as commodities. To her, what distinguishes commodities from other goods is that they are valued as *use-objects*, instead of higher valuations such as appreciation, honor,

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love, or respect. Applied to markets in women's sexual labor, Anderson's main argument against them is that customers of sex work treat sex workers as objects for their sexual gratification, thereby degrading them to things.

Anderson's pluralistic theory of value

The starting point of her theory is the observation that we value things very differently: we admire art, we respect the elderly, we cherish good memories, and so on (Anderson 1993, preface, 3). She calls these valuative responses to different goods, experiences, or relationships *modes of valuation*. Valuing, to her, is a social practice. She gives the example of honoring. One cannot express honor for something outside of a social context where one's gestures, expressions, or mimics are understood as acts of honoring. Thus, individuals are not self-sufficient in their capacity to value, but "[t]o care about something in a distinctive way, one must participate in a social practice of valuation governed by norms for its sensible expression" (12).

The fundamental intuition behind her theory of value is that we not only value in quantitative terms, i.e., more or less, but also in qualitative terms: "we experience things not as simply good or bad, but as good or bad in particular respects that elicit distinct responses in us" (1). This is where the pluralism in her theory of value enters: as opposed to monistic theories of value that reduce value to a single metric such as utility or pleasure, she aims to capture a broader range of valuing attitudes. To her, goods are incommensurable when they do not share a common standard of value (70). For example, a good friend is not better or worse than a well-functioning kitchen machine; they simply cannot be compared with a single metric of value. In Anderson's words, "[t]wo goods are incomparable in intrinsic worth if they are not candidates for the same mode of valuation" (70).

This theory of value provides the ground for her critique of markets. To Anderson, different social spheres, such as markets, the state, or the family, "are structured by norms that express fundamentally different ways of valuing people and things" (preface, 8). She characterizes the market by five different norms (Anderson 1990b, 182-184). First, market relations are impersonal: between buyers and sellers, there are usually no personal ties. Second, markets are characterized by a great degree of freedom, as, within the limits of law, market participants are free to engage in any exchange conducive to their own aims. Third, market commodities are exclusive and rival in consumption, meaning that

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when someone buys a commodity, other people are restricted from their access, and it cannot be consumed infinitely. Fourth, Anderson maintains that within markets, matters of value are of personal taste insofar as sellers neither care about why people buy certain goods, as long as they are willing (and able) to pay for the goods. Last, she maintains that market exchanges are governed by ‘exit’ (instead of ‘voice’): when consumers are discontent with a product or service, they typically just refrain from buying it, instead of changing the product.

She juxtaposes the sphere of the market with the personal sphere, which she thinks is structured by “intimacy and commitment” (Anderson 1993, 150). Goods in the personal sphere, such as trust or affection, are shared goods and exchanged through gifting, not buying or selling. Furthermore, very different norms govern exchange in the personal sphere. First, Anderson observes that while denying a gift can be very insulting to a friend, to an impersonal seller, it is simply a missed opportunity for the seller (151). Second, people have personal ties in the personal sphere, and, third, the motives behind gifting matter to both parties (as opposed to the market sphere, where sellers are typically indifferent to the motives of the buyer).

The most fundamental difference, however, is that the market and the personal sphere embody entirely different modes of valuation. The mode of valuation proper to markets, as Anderson argues, is *use* (144-145). To her, “[u]se is a lower, impersonal, and exclusive mode of valuation” (144). Drawing from the Kantian distinction between respect and use, using “is to subordinate it to one’s own ends, without regard for whatever intrinsic value it might have” (Anderson 1990b, 181). The modes of valuation proper to goods in the personal sphere are very different, as they are “[. . .] valued less through use than through appreciation and cherishing, for they are tokens of shared understandings, affections, and commitments” (Anderson 1990b, 186). So what happens when goods of the personal sphere are exchanged on markets? Why is it the case that certain goods ought to be protected from commodification?

Anderson advances two main arguments against the commodification of certain goods: what I will call the arguments from *degradation* and from *destruction*. She uses both to argue against the commodification of sex. In the remainder of this section, I will explain and discuss each argument in relation to sex work, and argue that neither succeeds. First, against the destruction argument, I argue that commodification may change sex, but it does not entirely extinguish it. Second, against the degradation argument, I argue that

i) commodification is compatible with plural modes of valuation and ii) establishing "proper" modes of valuation risks relying on difficult metaphysical claims about some "essence" of sex.

1. **Destruction through commodification: Does commodification destroy sex?**

The first argument Anderson makes against commodification is that some goods are destroyed entirely when bought and sold on markets. Sandel (2012) explicitly builds on this idea by referring to the example of honorific goods (94). Suppose the Nobel Prize were auctioned off to the highest bidder: its value as a recognition of merit and achievement would be undermined. In such a case, the Nobel Prize would lose its meaning: it would no longer express honor, respect, or esteem but instead signal privilege or manipulation. Applied to markets in women's sexual labor, Anderson argues:

“The specifically human good of sexual acts exchanged as gifts is founded upon a mutual recognition of the partners as sexually attracted to each other and as affirming an intimate relationship in their mutual offering of themselves to each other. This is a shared good. The couple rejoices in their *union*, which can be realized only when each partner reciprocates the other's gift *in kind*, offering her own sexuality in the same spirit in which she received the others - as a genuine offering of the self. The commodification of sexual “services” destroys the kind of reciprocity required to realize human sexuality as a shared good.”
(Anderson 1993, 154)

Thus, according to Anderson, buying (and selling) of sex alters the activity: it changes the nature of the encounter, from something reciprocal and symmetric into something that is deeply unequal. In commercial sex, people do not receive each other as equal partners who desire one another; quite the contrary. Thereby, sexuality as a shared good is destroyed.

The destruction argument compellingly shows that commodification can, in some cases, destroy goods. This is especially convincing in the case of honorific goods such as the Nobel Prize or other awards granted for achievements in the arts, sciences, or sports. If they were bought and sold on markets, for instance, by

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auctioning them off to the highest bidder, their value as symbols of merit would be destroyed. They simply could not fulfill their function as their meaning depends on being earned, not purchased. In other words, if bought and sold on markets, such goods would not merely be distorted or function differently; commodification would completely undermine them. Does the same happen with sex, as Anderson thinks?

Clearly, commercial sex is not 'reciprocal' in the ways intimate or romantic partner sex is. Sex workers would (at least in the great majority of cases) not have sex with their clients without remuneration, but so would professional movers not help lift heavy furniture for free. Furthermore, often, only the client experiences sexual pleasure. But unlike the Nobel Prize, which simply does not work as an honor for extraordinary achievement when bought and sold, I am not convinced that sex does not "function" when commodified. Surely, it may be less intimate, but intimacy is not a necessary condition for sex to count as sex. Commercial sex still fulfills its function as a sexual act, even if it lacks the reciprocity or mutual pleasure of romantic or intimate encounters. In this sense, commodification may alter the context and meaning of the practice, but it does not destroy it.

Relatedly, it is unclear to me why she thinks the kind of reciprocity she envisions, i.e., where individuals offer themselves to one another and join in union, is "necessary" to realize human sexuality. This kind of reciprocity may be one way of realizing human sexuality, but it is not the only one. Without doubt (otherwise the industry would have long ceased to exist), many people find sexual interactions pleasurable even when based on monetary exchange, suggesting that sexuality is very much possible when money enters the encounter. Moreover, even outside commodified contexts, such as in casual sex, the deep reciprocity Anderson describes can be absent. For some, sex may express love and emotional intimacy; for others, it may 'just' be about physical pleasure, adventure, distraction, curiosity, or even stress relief. Thus, for some, sex is only pleasurable within a framework of romantic or intimate union, and commodification might indeed erode those qualities. Yet, for others, sex (or human sexuality) may be very much compatible with non-intimacy, money, or casual encounters.

Last, the strict separation Anderson draws between the market sphere - charac-

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terized by use and instrumental rationality - and the private sphere - defined by intimacy, romantic union, and altruistic gifting - may present a (both historically and presently) inaccurate picture of society. Economic considerations have always been deeply intertwined with personal and intimate relationships. Consider, for instance, the long-standing practice of dowries, or the fact that marriage has historically been as much an economic institution as a romantic one, or the struggles of financial independence whilst co-managing care work obligations. These examples suggest that money has always played a role in romantic or erotic relationships. Thus, rather than seeing commodification as an intrusion into a 'pure' private realm that destroys certain practices of that realm, these sphere boundaries seem less rigid than Anderson's theory suggests. So what about the degradation argument?

2. **Degradation through improper valuation: Does payment imply devaluation?**

The second argument Anderson makes against markets is that some goods or practices are not destroyed, but degraded when bought and sold on markets. At the core of Anderson's theory is her idea that "things that differ in the kind of worth they have merit different kinds of valuation" (1993, 9). She argues that certain goods and social relationships are properly valued not through use, but through modes that affirm their intrinsic worth. When we treat such goods as commodities, i.e., assigning them a price and circulating them on markets, we fail to value them as they ought to be valued. This improper valuation is what Anderson calls *degradation*.

Again, a very similar argument to Anderson's is advanced by Sandel (2012), who explicitly draws on her work. Sandel argues that when we decide to sell certain goods, we are not merely enabling their exchange; we are also making a normative statement about how those goods ought to be valued. To allow something to be treated as a commodity is, in effect, to permit its valuation in terms of profit and use (9). Like Anderson, he maintains that not all goods are suited to this kind of valuation. When we subject certain goods or practices to market norms, we risk "corrupting" them, meaning that we treat them in ways that are incompatible with their proper moral or social significance. As Sandel puts it, "[t]o corrupt a good or a social practice is to degrade it, to treat it according to a lower mode of valuation

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than is appropriate to it” (126).

Applied to market's in women's sexual labor, Anderson argues that paying for sex is degrading to the sex worker. She is used as a thing, exchangeable for any other sex worker who provides a similar service:

“In appropriating her sexuality for his own uses, the customer expresses a (de)valuation of women as rightfully male sexual property, as objects to be used for men's own sexual purposes, which need not respond to the woman's own personal needs.” (Anderson 1993, 154)

Thus, in commercial sex, the buyer uses the sex worker for his own sexual gratification, valuing her instrumentally according to the pleasure he derives from her services. Her status is thereby reduced to that of a thing, disregarding her intrinsic worth.

At first sight, the general argument seems highly intuitive: the problem with certain markets is not that an inappropriate price is assigned, but that a price is assigned at all. If we think about a very extreme case, say a market for children, the problem would not be the prices (no matter how high they are) but that children are human beings, and thus not the kind of entities to be sold in the first place. But this leaves the crucial question open: how do we determine which modes of valuation are appropriate for which kinds of goods, especially in more contested cases? And, applied to the case at hand, how do we know that sex is a practice to which no price should be assigned?

Sandel argues that identifying appropriate forms of valuation is a deliberative task that requires a broader, societal debate. We must, he says, “debate, case by case, the moral meaning of these goods and the proper way of valuing them” (10). This implies making qualitative judgments, i.e., decisions about what certain goods mean to us as a society, rather than quantitative ones that reduce value to price (101). In contrast, Anderson suggests a much stronger account, rooted in the concept of *ideals*. She writes:

“Ideals tell individuals how they should value different things, depending on their value and personal importance. Some goods merit a particular mode of valuation because they meet a standard of value: beautiful

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things are worthy of appreciation, rational beings of respect, sentient beings of consideration, virtuous ones of admiration, convenient things of use. [...] Other goods are appropriately valued in a particular way because of their relation to the valuing agent, which makes them important to him.” (Anderson 1993, 11)

In other words, Anderson tries to find the appropriateness of different modes of valuation in a hierarchy of value determined either by ideals or by their relationship to the agent. However, as others have also pointed out (Jaeggi 2001) (Hansson 1996), Anderson’s theory is left with some fundamental challenges. If ideals tell us how to value things appropriately, but are themselves based on prior standards of value, the theory risks circularity. In other words, if ideals determine value but themselves depend on value or standard of value, what, exactly, determines value then?

I find the appeal to “personal importance” equally problematic, though intuitive at first sight. A family heirloom, for instance, matters more to me than to someone outside the family, so I should value it more deeply. Yet if the appropriateness of valuation is based on personal relations to certain goods, it becomes hard to explain why some valuations are improper, as valuing then becomes ultimately a matter of individual preference.¹⁶ For example, if one person treats a painting as an object of aesthetic appreciation and another treats it as a tool for speculation, on what grounds is the former an improper valuation and the other is not? And, in our example, if someone treats sex as a marketable good like many other bodily services, while someone else only enjoys it in the context of intimate or romantic relationships, what gives the one view hierarchy over the other?

Relatedly, Rahel Jaeggi (2001) raises another concern about Anderson’s reliance on ideals. Once we acknowledge (like Anderson clearly does) that valuing is a social practice and thereby historically contingent, the authority of any given ideal becomes hard to defend. As Jaeggi puts it:

“If we hold that values are constituted through social practices, it is difficult - especially when both versions, a commodified and a non-

¹⁶And this, as a friend remarked, is not far from traditional monistic economic theories of value, where individual preferences serve as the primary metric of value and which Anderson explicitly rejects.

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commodified one, exist as social practices - to justify one mode of valuation as the appropriate one.” (Jaeggi 2001, 405)

In other words, when multiple valuative attitudes coexist, it is difficult to see how one valuation is improper. Or, as Jaeggi asks pointedly: “Social practices can disappear or change. What, then, makes one of them more appropriate than another?” (405).

This problem arises very visibly in the case of sex work. Anderson thinks that sex is something that ought to be confined to the private sphere, to intimate relationships, where partners receive each other as a “genuine offering of the self” (Anderson 1993, 154). But why is it, exactly, inappropriate to value sex as a commodity, especially if it has been sold for centuries? Undeniably, within sex work, the kind of “union” based on mutual attraction and shared intimacy that Anderson describes when romantic partners offer themselves as “gifts” to each other is not realized within commercial sex. “But,” as again Jaeggi (2001) puts it sharply, “that does not provide us with an argument that it is inherently inadequate also to conceive of sex as commodity-exchange – unless we hold an ideal concerning the very “essence” of sex as being inherently bound up with love” (256).

Last, I want to raise the objection that paying for a good or service may not necessarily (or merely) express a lower mode of valuation. As explained in detail before, Anderson thinks that the mode of valuation in the market sphere is *use*, which she thinks is a lower mode of valuation than, for instance, appreciation or love. Treating goods from one sphere according to the norms of another, especially treating personal or relational goods as commodities, amounts to a form of degradation that fails to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of the good or relationship in question. While I find her general idea of allowing for a plurality in modes of valuation (and not reducing them to one metric such as utility or pleasure) very interesting, I am not entirely convinced that the commodification of a good or a service *necessarily* (or only) expresses (embodies) a lower mode of valuation that is inherently degrading to the good itself. Consider, for instance, the case of a nanny who is paid to care for someone’s children. The contractual nature of this relationship allows the children’s parents to impose certain obligations on them, such as punctuality, attentiveness to the child’s emotional needs, or adherence

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to specific educational or dietary practices they deem appropriate for their child. Because the nanny is providing a service, the parents are entitled to make certain demands that align with their values, even if these differ from the nanny's personal views. However, this transactional element and the fact that the nanny is paid do not imply that the nanny (or her services) are only valued in terms of their use. Rather, they may still value her services with other modes of valuation, including respect, gratitude, or appreciation.

Or consider any other activity in the creative or expressive domain, such as painting, singing, acting, writing, dancing, and even cooking. These can be deeply personal or intimate, often revealing something meaningful about the individual doing or performing them. Yet paying for these kinds of services does not typically suggest devaluation or disrespect. There seems to be nothing inherently corrupting or value-diminishing about exchanging money for a service, even when that service involves intimate (or self-expressive) dimensions. Furthermore, as Nussbaum (1998, 694) notes, paying for something could even enable creative expression because it provides people with the financial freedom to pursue their professions. So why is it that sexual acts - particularly penetration - are so often seen as requiring love or desire to avoid devaluing the person offering them? Asked differently, why can sex only be remunerated with 'love' or 'desire' instead of money, not to be devaluing to the one that offers it (Young 2015)?

This argument can also be extended to tangible goods. Take, for instance, house plants. Many people form affective bonds with their plants, feeling sadness when they lose a leaf or joy when they grow. People propagate them, ask friends to take care of them whilst on vacation, and even move with them, although commonly store-bought houseplants can be replaced by others of the exact same kind. The act of purchasing a plant doesn't preclude emotional attachment, nor does it reduce the plant to a *mere* use-object, nor does it necessarily express a lower mode of valuation. To me, these examples illustrate that the valuative attitudes regarding commodities include other modes of valuation than use, too. In other words, paying for a good or service does not erase, preclude, or distinguish the possibility of "higher" modes of valuation. In my view, Anderson's pluralism in value should thus not be limited to having different valuative attitudes, but also *having different valuations within*

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all spheres.

To summarize, I think that paying for sex does not necessarily express a devaluation of women or their services. Undeniably, such degradation can and does occur, but the presence of payment does not inherently communicate this view. Just as we can pay caregivers and buy certain physical objects like houseplants while maintaining emotional or respectful relationships with them, it is possible that commercial sex need not be inherently degrading. Commodification alone does not preclude having higher modes of valuation for certain goods or services. Or, more shortly: commodification is compatible with plural modes of valuation. Yet, there is still one aspect of Anderson's arguments left, namely, that when buying sex, sex workers are used as male sexual property or objects for male pleasure alone.

3. (Sexual) objectification

Anderson (1993) argues that in commercial sex, “the customer expresses a (de)valuation of women as rightfully male sexual property, as objects to be used for men's own sexual purposes, which need not respond to the woman's own personal needs” (154). Importantly, this claim is not merely about commodification (i.e., the process of becoming a commodity), but about objectification, that is, treating someone as a thing¹⁷. Furthermore, Anderson's claim is not (merely) about the consequences of objectification - such as stigma, harm, or violence, which I return to in Section 3.2 - but about the intrinsic ethical wrong involved in reducing someone to a sexual object. On this view, the wrong of objectification does not lie in its consequences, but in its denial of individuals' status as subjects with equal moral worth.

The literature on objectification is itself very extensive, and for reasons of scope, I cannot address it fully here (see Papadaki (2024)). For instance, there is already disagreement about the relationship between “objectification” in general and the narrower phenomenon of “sexual objectification” that Anderson and others describe. For the purposes here, I will understand objectification in the Kantian sense as the lowering of the status of a human being to that of an object, thereby disregarding

¹⁷ Although these concepts are closely related, they are typically treated as distinct (Carrette 2016). While objectification concerns treating or reducing someone to the status of a thing, commodification concerns the process of turning something into a commodity.

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their dignity (Korsgaard [2018](#), 77). Sexual objectification, then, is a specific form of objectification in which a person is made into a sexual object (Papadaki [2024](#)).

To me, two central questions about objectification in the context of sex work arise. First, is sex work necessarily objectifying of women, as Anderson and others suggest? And, second, is sexual objectification always morally wrong, or are there forms of it that are morally permissible?

a) **Kant and actual vs. possible consent**

A common reply to the second question is that objectification is not wrong, provided it takes place with consent. The argument is that most, if not all, forms of labor involve directing one's efforts toward the ends of others. Consider the taxi driver who enables people to commute, the physiotherapist who alleviates back pain, or the therapist who listens to problems not her own. Labor, accordingly, by its very nature, involves subordinating one's time, attention, and skills to purposes one may not personally share. Defenders of sex work argue that since many women do in fact consent to it, and since we routinely pay others to satisfy our needs and desires, there is no reason to think that the objectification within sex work is worse than other forms of labor.¹⁸ As, for instance, Marino ([2022](#)) argues: "Kantian ethics applied to sex would lead to a straightforward consent-based view: that as long as everyone is consenting for their own reasons to an activity, then everyone's autonomy is being respected, and the interaction would be respectful and ethical" (488).

However, this line of reasoning does not fully address the Kantian objection.¹⁹ As Korsgaard ([2018](#)) explains, to treat someone as a mere means is "to use her to promote your own ends in a way to which she herself *could not possibly consent*, or for ends that she *could not possibly share*" (77, own emphasis). Importantly, this is not a claim about actual consent, i.e., the Kantian question

¹⁸This, of course, stands in stark contrast to certain feminist accounts, which think that sexual objectification of women is a very profound (and morally distinct) form of objectification. Furthermore, it does not distinguish between objectification in the general sense and the specific form of objectification that is in question with sex work.

¹⁹I am very grateful to my supervisor for drawing my attention to this point, as this seems to be a very common misunderstanding in the literature.

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is not whether some sex workers do in fact consent, but whether sex work is the kind of practice to which one *could consent at all* - or whether it necessarily involves ends that cannot *possibly* be shared.

This completely reframes the debate, insofar as to say that “objectification is not wrong, as long as people consent to it” is, strictly speaking, not really addressing the Kantian concern. The deeper issue is whether sexual gratification, when obtained through commercial sex, is the kind of end that can be shared in the relevant sense. This is a much more challenging question than that of actual consent, and one I cannot fully resolve here. Yet, I find it at least imaginable that sex work is a practice to which the stronger Kantian consent is possible. In the following, I will therefore consider two further argumentative strategies that complicate the claim that sex work necessarily objectifies the sex worker in a morally troubling way.

b) **The moral permissibility of sexual objectification**

The first challenge is that sexual objectification may not always be morally wrong. As Nussbaum (1995) argues, some forms of objectification are not only morally acceptable but are often “necessary or even wonderful features of sexual life” (251). Drawing from various literary references, she develops a more refined account of objectification, distinguishing between seven different forms of objectification (257). These range from treating someone as lacking agency, or as perceiving them interchangeable with other things of the same type or kind, to ownership, instrumentality, or denying feelings or subjectivity. Importantly, Nussbaum argues that some forms of objectification are not morally troubling, even joyful, and occur in much intimate/ romantic partner sex, too. Erotic play, fantasy, and desire often involve elements of mutual objectification - seeing the other as a body, an object of lust. What matters, she insists, is the context: whether the objectification occurs within a relationship characterized by “mutual respect and rough social equality” (275). Thus, to her, not all objectification is degrading, some forms can be playful, affirming, and even loving. Or, summarized in her own words: “In the matter of objectification, context is everything” (271).

While Nussbaum does not explicitly address sex work, her broader account

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suggests three important ideas. First, objectification is not necessarily a moral wrong. Second, if objectification can be ethically permissible in consensual and loving contexts, then its mere presence cannot be what makes sex work morally objectionable. Third, her view draws attention to the conditions under which objectification takes place. The crucial question, of course, is whether the kind of context Nussbaum envisions - marked by mutuality and respect - can exist within commodified sex. Many critics explicitly deny this possibility. Still, Nussbaum's account opens the door to the thought that the ethical concern lies not (merely) in objectification itself, but in the specific conditions under which it occurs.

c) **The dialectic of the sex worker**

The second challenge comes from Theodora Becker (2023), who develops a Marxist–dialectical account of sex work. She argues that the sex worker's simultaneous position as subject and object is not incidental but rather the “constitutive condition” of sex work itself (*konstitutive Bedingung*, 12). In her book *Dialektik der Hure* (Dialectic of the Whore), Becker suggests that both the fascination and the distinctiveness of the sex worker lie in her being at once seller, product, and advertisement. Drawing on Walter Benjamin, she contends that the prostitute must appear to sell herself, but in fact does not: she remains a subject, not a slave. What is sold is not the person herself, but a performance. In Becker's words:

“With the prostitute, commodity, advertisement, and seller become indistinguishable. In order to advertise her goods, the prostitute must advertise herself and present herself as a desirable object. The prostitute *appears* to sell herself, but then again, she does not sell herself, because she is not a slave but remains a subject. She works with the suggestion that her desire is for sale, and that her client not only acquires a sexual act, but can desire her, while in reality, he is only dealing with his projection.” (Becker 2024, own translation)

The illusion that the buyer can actually buy the sex worker's desire is central to what Becker calls a “necessary misunderstanding” (*zwingendes Missverständnis*, 12): the client buys something that is not actually for sale,

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and the sex worker pretends to offer something she does not, in fact, surrender. As Becker sees it, this contradiction is precisely what provokes moral outrage. It seems as though the woman sells herself, but this is not quite true. The exchange then appears as a kind of "fraud" (*Betrug*, 178), because what is being bought and what is being sold are not the same. In this reading, the sex worker is not a passive object but a highly skilled actor who stages the illusion of objectification. She thereby becomes, in Becker's analysis, the ultimate commodity:

"The whore is not a slave, she is not traded as a tangible commodity, as if she were an *inanimate thing* to which a subject can claim ownership rights. Rather, she herself appears to be as a commodity *alive*: As if the commodity itself would become a subject and desire the customer independently." (Becker 2023, 451, own translation)

While Becker's analysis may be contested - perhaps seen as overly theoretical or idealized - I think that it offers an interesting challenge to simplistic narratives of objectification. Rather than being reduced to a thing, the sex worker inhabits a contradictory space in which objectification is, in a certain sense, enacted, and thereby controlled; challenging accounts where the sex worker has no authorship of or autonomy in the objectification herself.

The two strategies outlined above can, of course, be challenged. The mutuality-based argument (b) raises the question of whether the kind of symmetrical objectification Nussbaum describes can ever occur under conditions of commodification. And the performativity-based, dialectical understanding of the sex worker (c) may be dismissed as unrepresentative and inaccurate, idealized, or too theoretical. Still, taken together, these perspectives offer, in their very own way, challenges to the claim that sex work *necessarily* reduces the worker to the status of a thing, or that objectification in all its forms is morally impermissible. For now, several conclusions are in order.

3.1.4 Conclusion

Dworkin and MacKinnon voice uncompromising concerns about sex work, raising a number of important theoretical and practical questions. I began the discussion with Anne Phillips and her challenges to the very concept of body ownership. While I share her unease with the idea that we own our bodies in the same way we might own property - an idea that may indeed be inaccurate or even harmful - I argued that this alone does not tell us whether it is wrong to sell the body or its capacities. Anderson offers a broader and more elaborate theory of value and commodification. While her account provides valuable insights, I raised several objections.

First, her theory struggles to establish a normative standpoint from which we can determine appropriate modes of valuation, without appealing to contested ideas like the 'essence' of sex and its proper connection to love and intimacy. Second, I argued that her supposedly 'pluralistic' theory of value is surprisingly restrictive when it comes to the market: modes of valuation beyond mere use can - and often do - exist within market contexts. Thus, the rigid boundary Anderson draws between spheres does not reflect social reality. Third, I turned to Anderson's concerns about the objectification of women in the sex industry. With Nussbaum, I suggested that objectification is neither unique to commercial sex nor necessarily harmful. In fact, it may be a joyful feature of sexual life. Finally, drawing on Becker, I challenged the idea that the sex worker is merely a passive object: on her account, the sex worker occupies a much more complex position that is in between the lines of subjectivity and objectivity, desire and performance, commodity, seller, and advertisement. Ultimately, then, I do not find essentialist objections to sex work persuasive. Therefore, I now turn to the discussion of consequentialist objections to sex work.

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3.2 Consequentialist objections to sex work

*I give you my body / for your filthy money
I am young like a star and I shine
You are old and look like a beast
(...)
Your sweating belly in its folds
And when I close my eyes / so I can forget you
In this darkest hour / I wish you dead.*

— Grisélidis Réal, *Chair vive*²⁰

According to consequentialist objections to sex work, the wrongness of sex work does not lie in the fact that it *constitutes* harm, but rather in the claim that it *causes* harm. However, this requires further clarification. What, exactly, are the potential harms involved? What is their nature, and what are their sources? Who suffers from them, and at what level - individual, collective, or both - do they occur?

To distinguish between different harm-based claims, I'll use the following dimensions. The first is *time*, i.e., whether the harm occurs *during* or *after* the sexual encounter. The second is the *target*, i.e., whether the harm is inflicted on the parties directly involved (primarily the sex worker, but potentially also the client) or third parties (women or general society). The last dimension is the *nature* and *moral relevance* of harm: What kind of harm is done, and crucially, does it provide morally sufficient reasons to oppose sex work as a practice or industry?

In Section 3.2.1, I begin with first-party harms during the sexual encounter, particularly coercion, violence, and health-related risks. In Section 3.2.2, I consider first-party harms after the sexual encounter, particularly stigma. In Section 3.2.3, I consider third-party harms after the sexual encounter, or more specifically, relational inequality. Finally, in Section 3.2.4, I offer a summary of the consequentialist objections against sex work and my discussion thereof.

²⁰Own translation: «Je te donne mon corps / pour ton sale argent. Je suis jeune comme un astre et je brille. / Tu es vieux et ressemble à une bête. / (. . .) Ton ventre suant dans ses replis. / Et lorsque je ferme les yeux / afin que je t'oublie / En cette heure si sombre / je te souhaite la mort.»

3.2.1 Coercion, violence, and health-related risks

Perhaps the most frequent objection raised against sex work is that sex workers do not genuinely choose their work, but are instead coerced, either through external force or economic necessity. I want to address both aspects of this concern, beginning with the former.

Coercion through external force

There is substantial evidence of women that are forced into prostitution. Most generally, this is referred to as *sexual exploitation*, although sexual exploitation is not limited to instances of paid sex. A serious form of sexual exploitation is human trafficking, where victims are recruited through force or fraud to exploit their (sexual) labor, often involving violent transfers to other countries. According to the most recent German federal report on human trafficking, in 2023, German authorities conducted 509 investigations related to human trafficking, 319 of which focused specifically on sexual exploitation (Bundeskriminalamt 2025, 5). The overwhelming majority of victims were women (95.1%), predominantly from Eastern Europe (especially Romania and Bulgaria), with an average age of 27. Recruitment often occurred via the internet or through the so-called “loverboy” scheme, in which a male perpetrator pretends romantic interest to manipulate women into prostitution. Coercion, according to the report, can take multiple forms: physical violence, psychological manipulation (including threats, blackmail, or family-related pressure), as well as passport confiscation and the creation of economic dependency (Bundeskriminalamt 2025, 13).

On a European level, there were 10,793 registered victims of human trafficking in 2023, a figure that includes not only sexual exploitation but also forced labor and other forms of exploitation (Eurostat 2024). Nearly two-thirds (63%) of all victims were women or girls. Reported cases of sexual exploitation varied significantly across countries: Luxembourg had the highest reported rates with 157 cases, followed by Greece (51), the Netherlands (49), Austria (47), and Sweden 45. Croatia, Lithuania, and Czechia had the lowest rates of reported cases with 5, 5, and 2 cases respectively.²¹

Without question, human trafficking and sexual exploitation are serious moral wrongs

²¹It is important to note, however, that these numbers do not directly reflect prevalence. Rather, as the report notes, they are likely due to countries’ reporting practices and institutional capacities. Luxembourg’s relatively high numbers likely result from targeted training programs for law enforcement designed to improve victim identification (Eurostat 2024).

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that inflict severe and lifelong trauma on the victims. Many women in the sex industry are not there by choice. Some are deceived, coerced, or forced into it through means that strip them of their basic human rights. These realities must not be minimized or dismissed.

And yet, at the same time, many sex workers insist that they are freely choosing their work. Organizations such as the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) regularly document and amplify the voices of sex workers who advocate for the recognition of sex work as legitimate labor. Across various contexts, sex worker unions and advocacy groups have published numerous testimonies from individuals who actively defend their work. One such figure is Kata Loba, a French sex worker and artist, who created the *Bal des Putes* ("Whores' Ball"), described as a "lettre d'amour à la communauté des travailleur*euses du sexe" ("love letter to the community of sex workers"). Through their performance, which blends elements of cabaret and feminist expression, Loba and her colleagues explore themes of identity and empowerment, seeking to reclaim the narrative around sex work. Thus, although some scholars argue that no sex worker truly chooses their profession (Moran & Farley 2019), to me, such claims overlook the diversity of experiences within the sex industry. Coercion is not a universal or intrinsic feature of sex work; rather, both coerced and consensual forms exist alongside. The central question, then, is whether instances of coerced prostitution render sex work, in general, morally objectionable.

While I have sympathy for such concerns, I worry that conflating the existence of exploitation with the entirety of the profession misplaces the source of the harm. In my view, the wrong lies not in sex work itself, but in the actions of those who exploit, deceive, or coerce others into it, as well as in the precarious conditions under which sex work is often done. The ethical issue, in other words, is not inherent to sex work, but arises when individuals are compelled to engage in it without genuine consent. Consider, for instance, various other industries with precarious labor conditions: forced labor, as well as human trafficking, is present in many other sectors, such as agriculture, domestic work, and construction. Yet, we do not regard these professions as morally objectionable in and of themselves. The same reasoning, I believe, should apply to sex work. Instances of coercion do not demonstrate that the profession is intrinsically objectionable. Rather, they highlight the need to address the contexts in which coercion occurs. The focus, then, should be on protecting individuals from coercion through legal safeguards, labor rights,

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and comprehensive social support, not on rejecting the profession as a whole. Such an approach would also respect the autonomy of those who freely choose to engage in sex work, affirming their right to pursue the profession. This brings me to the second form of coercion frequently discussed: economic necessity.

Coercion through economic necessity

Another frequently raised objection against sex work is that women are driven into the sex industry by poverty only, doubting that anyone would otherwise choose to do sex work. Economic necessity, according to proponents of such views, compromises the voluntariness of sex workers' consent. Moran and Farley, for instance, write:

“Prostitution has to do with one person's sexual desires and the other person's economic needs. [. . .] Having to smile as multiple men your grandfather's age come on your face cannot accurately be described as ‘freely chosen sex work.’” (Moran & Farley [2019](#), 2)

Apart from once again undermining the voices of sex workers, this position reveals two assumptions that often underlie objections to sex work. First, that sex work is so inherently unpleasant that no one could reasonably choose it; and second, that economic motivation somehow invalidates a person's choice - or at the very least, that it is not a justifiable reason for pursuing a particular job or occupation. In my view, both assumptions are deeply questionable and fail to offer compelling arguments against sex work.

Regarding the first assumption, it is certainly true that many people would not want to work in the sex industry. But the same can be said of countless other forms of labor: some could never imagine themselves serving in the military, others find the thought of writing a dissertation deeply unappealing, and still others may find the idea of working in finance unattractive. That one finds a certain profession unthinkable for oneself does not constitute an argument against it. And surely, as Overall ([1992](#)) notes, many women in the sex industry do not have the opportunity to pursue any career they wish to pursue, as they lack the necessary educational or socio-economic background (713). Yet this is equally true for countless other women working in the low-paid sector such as cashiers, cleaners, or caregivers. If some women choose to earn their income through sex work rather than through domestic labor or caregiving — professions that are often more poorly paid — then, *prima facie*, they should have the right to do so. Respecting that

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decision requires acknowledging sex work as a form of legitimate labor, even if it is not a profession one would choose for oneself. To do otherwise is to deny individuals agency over their economic lives while holding sex work to a moral standard not applied to other forms of low-wage labor.

The second assumption, that sex work is morally suspect because it is done for money, is equally problematic. It overlooks a fundamental fact about labor (Overall 1992) (Mac & Smith 2018): most people, including sex workers, do not work purely out of passion or personal fulfillment, but rather to earn a living and support themselves or their families. As Mac and Smith put it:

“People sell sex to get money. This simple fact is often missed. To many it seems inconceivable that people do something considered so terrible for the same mundane reasons that govern everybody else’s everyday lives.” (Mac & Smith 2018)

In other words, sex work is not unique in being motivated by financial need. Countless people engage in forms of labor they find (sometimes) tedious, unpleasant, or boring, solely to earn an income. Economic necessity does not render their work less legitimate or less chosen, and the same standard should apply to sex work.

To emphasize, I do not want to downplay the reality that many people endure years in jobs they find draining or unfulfilling simply to survive. Rather, it is to highlight the inconsistency in treating sex work as uniquely disqualified by its economic motivation. Some individuals are fortunate enough to pursue work that is both meaningful and well-compensated; for others, such options are simply not available. If someone chooses to earn their living through sexual labor rather than, for example, cleaning toilets or scrubbing floors - particularly in a context where their rights and safety are protected - then that decision ought to be respected. Or, again, Mac and Smith (2018): “Sex workers ask to be credited with the capacity to struggle with work—even hate it—and still be considered workers. You don’t have to like your job to want to keep it.”

To conclude, coercion is a serious form of harm that denies people’s agency and autonomy. But it is not exclusive to sex work, nor does it define all instances of it. Thus, if the moral concern is about coercion, then the concern should apply equally across all forms of labor, not uniquely, or even especially, to sex work. Thereby, the focus could shift away from debating whether individuals ‘truly’ choose their work (which risks

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undermining people's autonomy and agency), and toward the question of how to ensure that sex workers - like all workers - can exercise their labor under safe, dignified, and rights-protected conditions.

Violence and health risks

Another common argument raised against sex work is that it is wrong because it exposes sex workers to physical violence and various health risks, particularly sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Again, these concerns are not unfounded. Empirical research across multiple countries has shown that sex workers face elevated risks of violence and health-related harms. For instance, Moran and Farley (2019, 2) report that in many countries, clients are willing to pay significantly more for unprotected sex, thereby increasing sex workers' risk of contracting STIs. Furthermore, Deering et al. (2014) conducted a systematic review of 42 empirical studies across different geographic contexts to assess the prevalence, risk factors, and structural determinants of violence against sex workers globally. They found that between 45% and 75% of sex workers had experienced workplace violence in their lifetime, with 32% to 55% reporting such experiences within the past year (Deering et al. 2014, 42).

But again, two key questions must be asked. First, are the violence and health-related risks inherent to sex work itself, or are they the result of specific social, legal, and economic conditions under which sex work currently takes place? And second, to the extent that risk is a part of many other legally and socially accepted practices and professions (think about gambling, logging, construction, or health-care), should sex work be treated differently and ruled out morally (or legally) based on such harms?

These are complex questions. Yet, again, my position is that the risks commonly associated with sex work are not intrinsic to it. Moreover, the fact that such risks may be more likely or prevalent in sex work than in other forms of labor does not, by itself, provide sufficient reason to object to the commodification of sex. As Deering et al. (2014) and others found, structural factors, particularly criminalization, stigma, and abusive policing, are major contributors to the violence and health risks sex workers face. In other words, the risks depend significantly on the social and legal context in which sex work takes place. It is thus not sex work per se that creates risk, but the conditions under which it often operates. The authors therefore emphasize the need for structural interventions, including the decriminalization of sex work and enhanced legal protections

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(Deering et al. 2014, 52). Regarding the second question, again, it seems like society does not apply the same moral standards to sex work and other forms of risky labor. As Nussbaum (1998, 711) observes, boxing, a profession that involves substantial bodily risk and long-term health consequences, is not only legal but also morally accepted. Similarly, high-risk industries such as logging, commercial fishing, and construction report some of the highest rates of injury and fatality, yet remain accepted. If we do not prohibit these forms of labor despite the dangers they pose, it appears inconsistent to reject sex work on the grounds of such harms alone.

3.2.2 Stigma

The next kind of harm I want to consider is first-party harms occurring *after* the sexual encounter. These harms can potentially affect both the client and the sex worker. On the client's side, one may speculate that commodified sex produces negative effects such as dependency, addiction-like behavior, emotional detachment, or distortions in relational and/or libidinal capacities. However, demonstrating a clear causal pathway from sex work to such harms is difficult, especially given the variety of other contributing factors to these harms. Consider, for instance, the claim that sex work is harmful to buyers because it negatively affects their relational capacities. Establishing this claim is empirically challenging, as one's ability to build and sustain relationships is influenced by a wide range of factors, including individual personality, social environment, and learned behavior(s). Moreover, even if such harm were demonstrable, liberal societies typically permit individuals to engage in activities that are harmful (think about alcohol, gambling, or driving at high speed) - without treating those harms as sufficient grounds for moral rejection or legal prohibition. Last, empirical evidence on buyers' harms is sparse, mostly focusing on changes in perceptions or attitudes among buyers (Monto & Milrod 2020) (Farley et al. 2017).

For these reasons, I will focus here on first-party harms after the sexual encounter to the sex worker, specifically the harm of stigma. Accordingly, even in the absence of coercion or violence, sex work remains morally problematic because it subjects the sex worker to enduring social devaluation, shame, and exclusion - short, to stigma. The harm, thus, is not in the immediate act of commodified sex but extends beyond.

Stigma and gender prejudices

The term stigma originates from the Greek word *stizein*, which referred to a physical mark or brand placed on the bodies of slaves to identify them as inferior (Arboleda-Flórez 2002, 25). In modern usage, according to Arboleda-Flórez (2002), stigma no longer signifies a literal mark but a social construction by which a sign of disgrace is symbolically attached to a person or group to devalue them. As he explains:

“The modern derivative, *stigma*, is therefore understood to mean a social construction whereby a distinguishing mark of social disgrace is attached to others in order to identify and to devalue them. Thus, stigma and the process of stigmatization consist of two fundamental elements, the recognition of the differentiating ‘mark’ and the subsequent devaluation of the person.” (Arboleda-Flórez 2002, 25-26)

In sex work, the “mark” is typically the association with sexual availability for money, viewed as incompatible with dominant norms of sexual modesty, respectability, or femininity. Given that stigma can inflict real and enduring harm on sex workers, socially, emotionally, and materially, it raises an important question: does this harm provide a reason to reject sex work?

Martha Nussbaum (1998) addresses this question in her paper “Whether from Reason or Prejudice: Taking Money for Bodily Services”. She argues that the stigma attached to sex work is not a reflection of any inherent moral failing in the work itself, but rather the result of irrational cultural prejudices. Through analogies with other forms of labor, Nussbaum argues that the stigma around sex work stems from irrational and often misogynistic beliefs, and thus cannot justify its moral rejection or legal restriction.

Nussbaum starts with the observation that in the 18th century, opera singing was considered a form of public prostitution (694). She identifies two historical prejudices underlying this judgment: *aristocratic class prejudice against wages* (taking money corrupts the activity) and *prejudice against the body and its passions* (the shamefulness of showing one’s body to strangers). Today, these judgments are seen as irrational. Salaries for artistic or bodily performances do not corrupt the activity but enable creative expression (695). Similarly, society no longer views public (bodily) performance as shameful. But many still hold that women’s sexual capacities ought not to be sold. Are

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those beliefs rational, or do they stem from similar prejudices, as in the case of opera singing?

Nussbaum compares sex work to various other forms of labor, arguing that sex work is not fundamentally different from them (701). Factory workers and sex workers are often low-paid and exposed to risks, but sex work involves more skill and higher vulnerability to violence and stigma. Domestic servants, like sex workers, must serve employer needs; both face stigma, though gender plays a larger role for sex workers. Nightclub singers and sex workers both “use their bodies to provide pleasure” (703), with varying autonomy. The differences are primarily in health risks, working conditions, and social judgment. Health masseuses are closer to sex workers in labor, differing mainly in the sexual nature of the work, respectability, and stigma (705).

The last two professions Nussbaum considers are the philosophy professor and a fictive job she calls “colonoscopy artist” (701), someone who is penetrated to test medical tools. Both sex work and philosophy involve intimate engagement with one’s personhood (704). Differences appear in salary, working conditions, and stigma: the professor may challenge gender hierarchies, whereas the prostitute is seen as reinforcing them (705). For colonoscopy artists, consent is medical, and no stigma attaches, as most people do not object to anal penetration by a doctor (706).

Nussbaum concludes that sex work shares many features with other labor (both bodily and intellectual), including autonomy and creativity. The primary difference lies in its illegality and the stigma it faces. She identifies two sources of stigma: the *immorality view* (sex work is shameful because it involves non-reproductive, non-marital sex) and the *gender hierarchy view* (sex work threatens male control over women’s sexuality) (707-708).²² To Nussbaum, both views are irrational and inconsistent with contemporary norms. While non-reproductive sex is no longer widely considered immoral, stigma persists, sustained by outdated ideas about female sexuality. As Nussbaum explains:

²²A brief clarification: the distinction between the *immorality view* and the *gender hierarchy view* is, in my view, not clear-cut, since both ultimately stem from beliefs about female sexuality. Nussbaum herself concedes this point (708). One could therefore reduce the source of stigma to the idea that sex work threatens widely held beliefs about morality and sexuality. This aligns with Arboleda-Flórez (2002), who distinguishes between tangible and symbolic threats: “[t]angible threats are those that pose a risk to material or concrete goods and symbolic ones are those that threaten beliefs, values, ideology or the way in which a group ordains its social, political or spiritual domains” (26). In the case of sex work, the threat is symbolic rather than material: it challenges beliefs about, for instance, the immorality of non-romantic sex, the perceived danger of female sexual autonomy, and the low status ascribed to occupations that provide pleasure, especially sexual pleasure.

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“The stigma traditionally attached to prostitution is based on a collage of beliefs, most of which are not rationally defensible and which should be especially vehemently rejected by feminists: beliefs about the evil character of female sexuality, the rapacious character of male sexuality, the essentially marital and reproductive character of ‘good’ women and ‘good’ sex.” (Nussbaum 1998, 723)

Nussbaum concludes that the “correct response” to this issue is the legalization of sex work (723). Legalization, in her view, should be accompanied by the strengthening of sex workers’ rights, particularly their employment conditions, and a broader societal effort to dismantle the irrational stigma that continues to surround sex work.

I have summarized Nussbaum’s position at length because I find it makes two important points. First, her analogies - though not all equally convincing (for example, I remain unconvinced that a philosopher’s intellectual intimacy is as vulnerable as a sex worker’s bodily intimacy) - nonetheless compellingly challenge the intuition that sex work is categorically distinct from other forms of bodily labor. Minimally, they show how difficult it is to draw a clear boundary between sex work and other professions. Many occupations involve significant bodily intrusion (e.g., medical examinations), emotional labor (e.g., caregiving), or physical exposure (e.g., massage therapy or performance arts), yet these do not provoke the same moral outrage.

Second, the most fundamental difference between sex work and other kinds of bodily and intellectual labor is stigma. Stigma, however, cannot ground a moral objection to the commodification of sex, since it is not morally defensible but very likely rooted in outdated and often misogynistic ideas - as shown by the interesting example of opera singing and Nussbaum’s reflections on the roots of those ideas. The proper moral response, then, as Nussbaum argues and I agree, is to challenge the unjust stigmatization of sex workers. But what about the harms that occur after the sexual encounter, particularly to third parties?

3.2.3 Gender inequality

Third-party harms that occur after the sexual encounter can either affect general society or specific groups, most notably women. Regarding the former, one may argue that sex work undermines social institutions such as monogamy, the family, or certain religious

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values. However, such objections often rely on contested or non-universal assumptions, for instance, about the moral primacy of monogamous heterosexual family structures, or essentialist views of sexuality, which I have already addressed in Section 3.1.3. To claim that sex work harms those institutions, one would not only need to establish a clear causal link between sex work and the supposed damages to these institutions, but also defend those institutions themselves as morally justified. Therefore, I will focus instead on the more compelling concern that sex work causes harm as it contributes to the broader subordination of women by reinforcing and eroticizing certain attitudes and conduct that are injurious to women. The concern, thus, is not merely that sex work represents women in a problematic way, but that it *causally contributes* to sustaining attitudes and behaviors that perpetuate women's subordination Satz (1995, 2010).

Satz' relational egalitarianism and her objections to sex work

In her book, *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale: The Moral Limits of Markets*, Satz (2010) provides an elaborate theory on what makes a market noxious, i.e., problematic from a moral point of view.²³ Central to her account are four parameters that guide the moral evaluation of particular markets. These are “vulnerability, weak agency, extremely harmful outcomes for individuals, and extremely harmful outcomes for society” (9). Importantly, these parameters are not ranked, nor does identifying a noxious market automatically imply that it should be banned. Furthermore, her theory operates within the ethical framework of *relational egalitarianism*. Relational egalitarianism is different from traditional egalitarian views, insofar as it is not merely concerned with the just distribution of certain goods but also with relational aspects of equality. Accordingly,

“[t]o evaluate markets we need to consider not only the production and distribution of goods, but also the social and political relationships that various markets sustain and support, including their effects on rich and poor, women and men, and the more or less powerful.” (Satz 2010, 10-11)

With respect to her theory on noxious markets, this means that her analysis of markets aims to consider not only distributive aspects of equality but also the “standing of the parties before, during, and after the process of exchange” (93).

²³The description of Satz's theory, more specifically, her four parameters below, is partly based on a seminar paper I submitted with a colleague in the summer term of 2024 in the course of the seminar *Ethics, Welfare and Justice: Between Libertarianism and Egalitarianism*.

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The first parameter qualifies a market as noxious if it produces extreme harm to individuals. However, Satz emphasizes that not all markets with negative individual outcomes are morally problematic, only when someone's basic interests are unmet (95). These basic interests are drawn from Amartya Sen's distinction between welfare interests, which concern overall well-being, and agency interests, which affect a person's ability to make decisions regarding that well-being.²⁴ The second parameter concerns societal harm: some markets can undermine the social framework that allows people to interact as equals (95).

The third parameter concerns highly asymmetric knowledge or agency, occurring when participants lack information about the transaction or its consequences. The fourth parameter addresses vulnerability resulting from people coming "to the market with widely varying resources or widely different capacities to understand the terms of their transactions [. . .]" (97). For instance, a desperately poor person may accept a price they would otherwise reject, increasing their risk of exploitation by more powerful participants.

In her chapter on markets for women's sexual labor, she introduces three different cases: an underage girl who prostitutes herself to finance her boyfriend's heroin addiction, a male prostitute who sells his sexual services to other men, and a high-paid, self-employed, and well-educated escort selling her services to wealthy clients (137). To her, the first case is clearly objectionable according to vulnerability, weak agency, and extremely harmful outcomes for the individual. Thus, her analysis of sex work focuses on sex workers who are not coerced into prostitution (financially or physically), as, for instance, the well-educated and highly paid sex worker who has other employment options available to her.

Satz does not think that sex work is intrinsically wrong, but condemns it based on its *consequences*: namely, its negative impact on gender equality (144). As explained before, for Satz, egalitarianism is not just about access to resources or opportunities; it concerns how people relate to each other, particularly their social status. While she doubts that sex work directly affects distributional inequalities between men and women - such as income gaps or the division of care work - she argues that it reinforces women's inferior status in society:

²⁴In the seminar paper, we noted that this requires further precision: many luxury markets (cars, jewelry, handbags) fail to satisfy basic interests for the poor. We suggested adding that markets must be causally relevant to these interests.

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“[. . .] I believe that it is a plausible hypothesis that prostitution, along with related practices such as pornography, makes an important contribution to women’s inferior social status. [. . .] If prostitution is wrong it is because of its effects on how men perceive women and on how women perceive themselves.” (Satz 2010, 147)

Thus, to Satz, there is nothing wrong with sex work *per se*, but it is problematic because it contributes to gender inequality in the relational sense. In her own words, sex work is wrong because of its role “[. . .] in sustaining a social world in which women form a subordinated social group” (135). Importantly, this wrongness is contingent: if sex work no longer played a role in sustaining women’s subordinate status, i.e., there is no causal link between women’s inferior status and sex work, it would not be morally objectionable.

While Satz outlines the normative core of the argument, her account leaves open important questions about the causal pathways through which sex work produces harm. How, exactly, does it shape societal attitudes or institutions in ways that sustain gender inequality? To clarify these mechanisms, I draw on Eaton (2007), who develops a causal framework in her article “A Sensible Antiporn Feminism.”

Harm hypothesis refined

Although Eaton’s focus is on pornography rather than sex work, her model can be effectively applied here. Like Satz, Eaton is concerned with third-party harms that extend beyond the immediate participants. She argues that feminist critiques often fail to persuade because they do not adequately explain how porn consumption leads to harm (Eaton 2007, 685). In response, she develops a two-stage model that tracks the pathway from exposure to perception and behavior (685). Adapting this model helps clarify the claim that sex work promotes attitudes that sustain women’s subordination. In what follows, I outline Eaton’s framework and then apply it to sex work in order to substantiate Satz’s critique.

In her model, *stage-1 causes* refer to exposure to pornography, either in isolated instances (“singular causes”) or continuous engagement over time (“diffuse causes”). To Eaton, this exposure can affect consumers in various ways, for instance, by shaping their attitudes, desires, and emotional responses. *Stage-1 effects*, thus, can be very diverse,

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ranging from physiological and attitudinal effects (e.g., explicit sexist beliefs) to more diffuse dispositions (e.g., a preference for sexual scenarios involving female submission) or unconscious biases (687). She further distinguishes between effects that are isolated and cumulative. Cumulative effects increase through repeated exposure to porn and cannot be produced by the consumption of a single unit. Importantly, she notes that these effects are not necessarily negative and depend on the frequency and intensity of exposure (687).

Stage-2 causes are the public manifestations of these attitudes or responses (687). This conduct can be verbal or non-verbal, violent and non-violent, ranging “[. . .] from something like a habit of openly glancing at women’s bodies in professional contexts, to an unconscious disposition to be lenient with rapists on trial, to an inability to distinguish coerced from consensual sex” (688). Furthermore, conduct can be overtly aggressive (e.g., harassment or assault) or take more ‘subtle’ forms, such as treating women with less respect or credibility. These behaviors produce *stage-2 effects* that can harm individual women or women as a group. These harms may be physical or psychological, isolated or cumulative, overt or structural. Crucially, Eaton emphasizes that these causal links are to be understood as probabilistic, not deterministic: exposure to pornography may increase the likelihood of harm, but it does not guarantee it.²⁵ In her words: “Probabilistic causation is a defensible, practical, and common conception of cause that any sensible APF should adopt” (697).

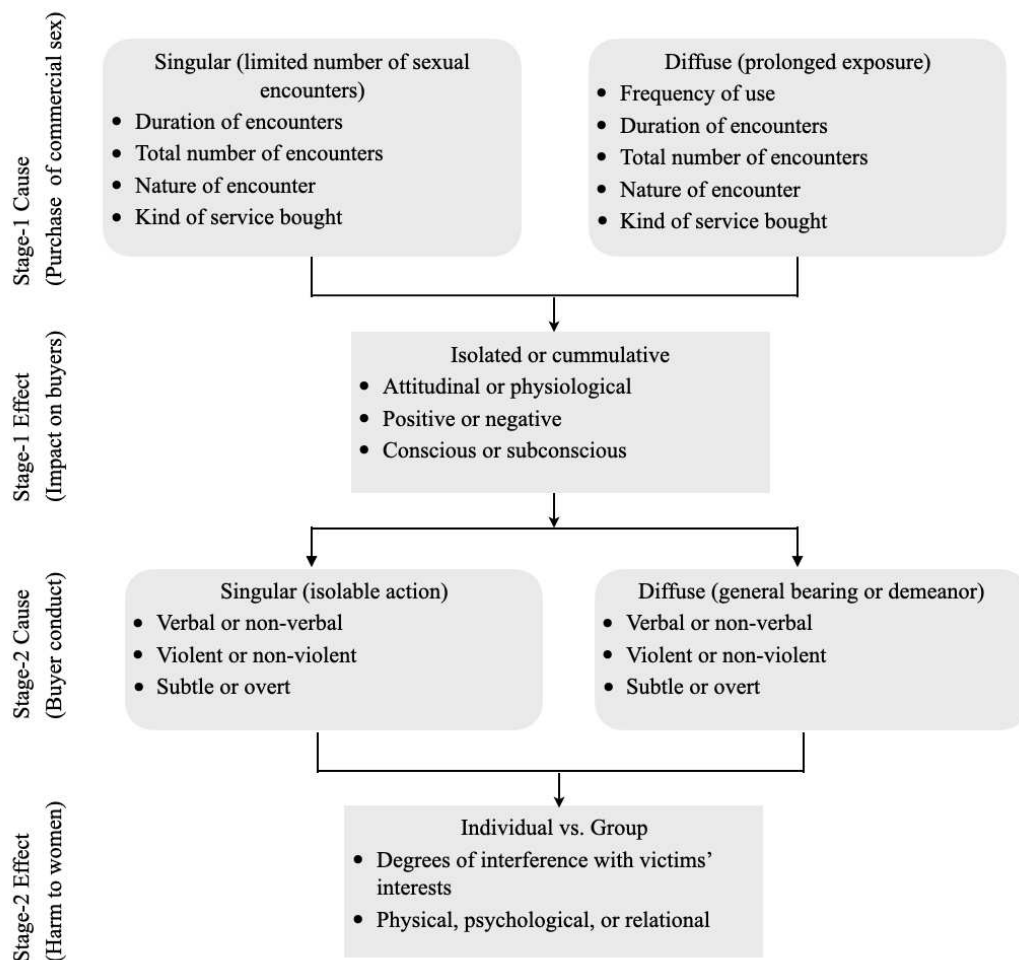
Applied to sex work, the *Stage-1 cause* is the act of purchasing sexual services, whether occasionally or routinely, in person or online. Similar to the consumption of pornography, this act may alter a client’s sexual preferences, beliefs about gender roles, or emotional expectations, etc. These *Stage-1 effects* may occur after a single encounter or develop cumulatively through repeated transactions.

Over time, these internal changes may translate into *Stage-2 causes*, patterns of behavior that reflect and enact those altered beliefs and dispositions. For instance, clients might begin to treat women as sexually available in contexts where they have not explicitly asked for consent, or carry implicit biases into the workplace or interpersonal relationships. The resulting *Stage-2 effects* may harm sex workers themselves, but also extend to other

²⁵Eaton exemplifies this by the case of smoking. Some people smoke all their lives but never get cancer, while others get cancer, but not because of smoking. In other words, just as not everyone who smokes develops cancer, not everyone who consumes pornography (or sex work) will harm women, but these practices potentially increase the risk of harm.

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Figure 3.1: Adapted Two-Stage Model of Harm *after* sexual encounter



Note: Visual adaptation of Eaton's two-stage causal framework originally developed for pornography. The model illustrates how exposure to sex work (Stage-1 causes) may lead to changes in attitudes or desires (Stage-1 effects), which in turn can manifest in behaviors (Stage-2 causes) that contribute to individual and structural harm (Stage-2 effects). Adapted from (Eaton [2007](#), 686).

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women who are not engaged in sex work, either through individual interactions or as part of a general demeanor towards women. Moreover, such harm may occur during the commercial sexual encounter (e.g., disrespect, boundary violations) or afterwards, in the form of persistent stigmatization, social exclusion, or the reinforcement of norms that contribute to women's subordination. These causal pathways are displayed in Figure 3.1, where I have tried to illustrate them graphically.

Eaton's model thus helps to substantiate how sex work could contribute to sustaining a world in which women are subordinated. Thereafter, sex work eroticizes, promotes, or normalizes gender hierarchies in similar ways to pornography. Clients exposed to such dynamics may internalize beliefs that reinforce women's subordination. Over time, these internalized beliefs could contribute to conduct that harms women collectively, even if no individual transaction (or interaction) is overtly harmful.

Discussion

How is Satz's argument different from essentialist arguments we have seen in Chapter 3.1.3? Authors like Anderson, Dworkin, or MacKinnon maintain that sex work is inherently morally objectionable, which Satz rejects. However, to her, sex work is nevertheless wrong because of its *current* contribution to gender or status inequality. Thus, the validity of the argument depends on the causal link between status inequality and sex work, and is thus contingent. How is the argument to be assessed?

I think that Satz's framework provides a significant contribution to how we can think about the noxiousness of markets from a consequentialist point of view. However, I believe that her argument against sex work is ultimately misguided, because I think that it misplaces the source of the problem. The real issue is not the practice of sex work itself, but the deeply ingrained social norms and stereotypes that shape how we view sex work and women in the first place. In other words, sex workers are not *causing* women's inferior status; rather, it is the existing social framework that interprets and judges sex work as something inferior.

Assume that the world was such that sex work was perceived like any other job that involves using certain bodily capacities for others, such as physiotherapy, sports teaching, or cooking. In such a world, engaging in sex work would not signal or reinforce women's lower social status. If the stigma were removed and if sex work were treated with the same dignity as other service-oriented professions, the practice would not be degrading.

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Satz, in my view, fails to adequately consider how much of the perceived wrongness of prostitution arises from the background cultural attitudes and moral assumptions we bring to it. Sex workers do not cause women's inferior status in society, nor our perception of women.

Consider nurses. The nursing profession is largely occupied by women. Like sex work, nursing could be understood as perpetuating traditional female roles like caregiving or nurturing. Framed so, it also plays into stereotypical ideas of women being more suited to supportive, subordinate roles, rather than leadership or decision-making positions. Furthermore, it is also a highly sexualized profession; just think about sexy nurse Halloween costumes. Applying Satz's reasoning about the moral impermissibility of sex work to the nursing profession may go something like this: nursing plays into traditional gender roles of women as emotional caregivers, assigning nurses to a 'mere' supportive role. Thereby, it contributes to women's inferior status in society and how men (and women themselves) perceive them. Thus, because of its consequences for women's status in society, nursing, if practiced by women, is morally wrong.

The reason why an argument like this I think is misguided is that it assigns a strange causal role to those already subject to status inequality. It treats sex workers as if they are responsible for the prejudiced ways they are perceived. But this inverts moral responsibility: the problem is not the practice itself, but the background norms and social valuations that make the practice appear "inferior." In other words, what is wrong is not nursing itself, but how the profession is often undervalued compared to male-dominated medical roles like physicians or physical therapists (despite the critical skills and knowledge nurses possess), reflecting broader societal views and norms about gender. Criticizing the practice rather than these norms confuses cause and effect, and risks placing the burden of reform on those least positioned to bear it. What should be challenged is not nursing's (or sex work's) contribution to women as being inferior, but why, exactly, we perceive those kinds of work as inferior in the first place.

To clarify my argument, I want to bring in another author, Laurie Shrage, who defends a very similar argument as Satz. In her paper "Should Feminists Oppose Prostitution", Shrage (1989) draws an analogy between someone who wishes to start eating domestic animals in a society where this is taboo. She writes:

"In evaluating the moral and political character of this person's behavior,

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it is somewhat irrelevant whether eating cats and dogs “really” is or isn’t healthy, or whether it “really” is or isn’t different than eating cows, pigs, and chickens. What is relevant is that, by including cat and dog flesh in one’s diet, a person may really make others upset and, therefore, do damage to them as well as to oneself. In short, how actions are widely perceived and interpreted by others, even if wrongly or seemingly irrationally, is crucial to determining their moral status because, though such interpretations may not hold up against some “objective reality,” they are part of the “social reality” in which we live. [. . .] Indeed, what is wrong with prostitution is not that it violates deeply entrenched social conventions - ideals of feminine purity, and the noncommoditization of sex - but precisely that it epitomizes other cultural assumptions - beliefs which, reasonable or not, serve to legitimate women’s social subordination.” (Shrage 1989, 351-352)

I cite this passage at this length because it makes clear three implications that I find deeply problematic. First, it shifts the burden of harm onto the individuals subject to it: sex workers become morally accountable for how they are perceived. Yet, negative perceptions of sex workers are not the moral responsibility of sex workers - no more than racialized people are responsible for the racism they encounter.²⁶ Second, it risks a form of moral conservatism. If the moral status of an action is determined by prevailing social perceptions as Shrage argues, then there is no critical standpoint from which to challenge them. Consider the case of women’s suffrage: it was once widely regarded as morally unproblematic to deny women the right to vote. Would Shrage’s argument imply that this denial was morally justified at the time simply because it was so perceived? In other words, how to foster change when current perceptions - even if wrong or irrational - determine moral status?

To be clear, I agree with Satz and Shrage in recognizing that sex workers are often harmed by negative and demeaning stereotypes and perceptions. But the harm doesn’t come from sex workers themselves or from sex work as such. I also do not want to challenge the causal link between sex work and how women are perceived. But, I strongly challenge that these perceptions make the practice itself wrong (i.e., determine the moral status of sex work or sex workers).

²⁶Thank you to my supervisor for this analogy.

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3.2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed various consequentialist objections to sex work, including concerns about harms to sex workers during and after the sexual encounter, as well as broader harms to clients, society, and the status of women. Overall, I find consequentialist critiques more compelling than essentialist ones, as they avoid difficult metaphysical claims and instead focus on empirical harms.

However, I have raised two central concerns. First, as discussed in my analysis of coercion, violence, and health-related risks, many critiques fail to recognize that the conditions often cited as morally troubling - economic pressure, dangerous working environments, and exposure to exploitation - are not unique to sex work. If we accept these conditions as morally tolerable in other forms of labor, we must either show that sex work differs in a morally relevant way, or acknowledge that the problem lies not in sex work itself but in the broader context: unsafe working conditions, abusive clients, lack of legal protection, etc. Second, in my discussion of stigma and social perception, I argued that some consequentialist critiques risk reinforcing the very prejudices they seek to address. By treating stigma as a consequence of sex work rather than interrogating its roots, such arguments risk moral conservatism.

4 The answer: nothing

May all the men who come to us "weary and burdened", as it says in the Bible - those we save from suicide and loneliness, those who find in our arms and in our vaginas the vital impetus that is frustrated elsewhere, those who leave, with their balls light and the sun in their hearts - stop pissing us off, judging us, denying us, taxing us, bludgeoning us, locking us up, taking our kids away from us and putting them on welfare, locking up our lovers and our men of the heart [...].

— Grisélidis Réal 2005, *Carnet de bal d'une courtisane*²⁷

After having discussed various arguments for and against sex work, I now turn to the implications of these arguments and my discussion thereof 4.1. Then, I provide some thoughts on what needs to change in the sex industry 4.2, and what the future of sex work could look like 4.3.

4.1 Revisiting intrinsic and consequentialist objections

For intrinsic objections, I began with radical feminism, setting out the core commitment of this thesis: falling into neither narratives of the sex worker as the ultimate victim of patriarchal oppression, nor denying the violent and coercive realities many sex workers face. Then, I considered Phillips's ideas about body ownership arguing that it does not inform us whether bodily capacities may permissibly be sold.

Against Anderson and Sandel, I argued that neither the destruction nor the devaluation argument offers convincing grounds to reject the commodification of sex. Sex, unlike honorific goods, is not destroyed when bought and sold on markets. Neither does paying for sex preclude 'higher' modes of valuation, such as respect or admiration. This becomes

²⁷Own translation: «Que tous les hommes qui viennent à nous, "fatigués et chargés", comme il est dit dans la Bible — ceux que nous sauvons du suicide et de la solitude, ceux qui retrouvent dans nos bras et dans nos vagins l'élan vital dont on les frustre ailleurs, ceux qui repartent, les couilles légères et le soleil au cœur — cessent de nous emmerder, de nous juger, de nous renier, de nous taxer, de nous matraquer, de nous enfermer, de nous prendre nos gosses pour les mettre à l'Assistance Publique, d'enfermer nos amants et nos hommes de cœur [...].»

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particularly evident when we consider other forms of bodily labor, such as artistic performances, which are neither devalued nor lose their expressive value when bought and sold: quite the opposite, paying for them even allows artists to pursue their professions. So perhaps, as Anderson and Sandel argue, commodification taints or corrupts sex in a morally questionable way? Undeniably, commodified sex is different from sex in romantic or intimate relationships. But even if we accept that *commodification* (as opposed to, for instance, the relationship between the participants) changes the nature, context, or dynamics of the sexual encounter, we would still need to show that this difference is morally troubling. As I argued, this is difficult: (i) given widely accepted practices of casual sex, which in many aspects resemble practices of commodified sex (e.g., lack of commitment and romantic intimacy), (ii) given the long-standing co-existence of commodified and non-commodified sex, and (iii) given the challenges of defending sex as necessarily tied to intimacy or romantic love. In short, even if commodification changes sex, it is questionable whether it turns sex into something necessarily bad, coercive, or abusive; or that there is something about the ‘essence’ of sex that makes its commodification wrong.

Still, several important insights can be drawn from these views. Phillips reminds us that the body is not something external to us but that experience is always embodied. In markets where the body is more intrusively or intimately involved, this underscores the importance of taking bodily vulnerability seriously. From Anderson and Sandel, we can learn that markets may be more prone to foster attitudes of diminished care or respect than other spheres. Last, at the beginning of this thesis, I posed three central questions for a moral inquiry into sex work: the moral status of sex as a commodity, the implications of commodification and money as a medium of exchange, and the relationship between empirical realities and moral theory. I am now in a position to answer the first two. Very shortly, not to repeat myself. Money is not, per se, a means of coercion, nor does commodification necessarily corrupt sex. What is sold in sex work is not the self or aspects of it, but sexual capacities. And even if for some, those capacities are more intimately tied to selfhood or identity, they are not for all, as bodies and relationships to the body differ.

So, if intrinsic objections do not establish the wrongness of sex work, are there better grounds for critique when we turn to its consequences? I explored three harm-based consequentialist objections against sex work: coercion, violence, and health-risks; (ii)

4.1 *Revisiting intrinsic and consequentialist objections*

stigma; and gender (status) inequality.

Essentially, I advanced two objections to consequentialist arguments against sex work. The first was comparative: many of the harms cited also occur in other forms of bodily labor. Yet we do not condemn those practices as morally impermissible. Rather, we treat these harms as reasons to improve working conditions or change our social perceptions about them, not abolish the practices. The second argument was more fundamental and emerged most clearly in my discussion of Satz, Eaton, and Shrager's claim that sex work (pornography) is morally problematic because it contributes to women's subordination. I did not deny the empirical possibility of a causal link between sex work and harmful social perceptions about sex workers and women in general. Rather, I questioned what conclusions legitimately follow from this. First, even if sex work does contribute to negative perceptions of women, these perceptions are not the moral responsibility of sex workers. To locate the harm in the actions of the marginalized is to misplace moral responsibility. Second, negative perceptions (and the harms produced thereby) do not by themselves establish that selling sex is wrong, as I tried to exemplify with the example of nursing. Last, allowing current perceptions to determine moral status risks entrenching a form of moral conservatism where existing prejudices define moral wrongness and foreclose the possibility of social change, as I tried to illustrate with the historical example of women's suffrage.

This leads me to address the third question posed at the beginning of this thesis: How should the empirical realities of harm shape the moral assessment of sex work? While harms such as stigma, inequality, and coercion are real and demand attention, I argue that they do not reveal anything wrong about the commodification of sex itself. Rather, they point to the need for radically transforming the conditions under which sex work occurs, i.e., changing the market, rather than abolishing the market altogether.

These considerations bring me back to the central question of this thesis: what, if anything, is wrong with sex work? Is there anything wrong with making sex a marketable good, a commodity? My answer is simple: nothing. In other words, I find no compelling intrinsic or consequentialist reasons to object to the commodification of sex. This is not to deny that change is needed, as the harms discussed by consequentialists and others show. How might the sex market be brought closer to the ideal of markets capable of realizing the virtues discussed in Section 2.1?

4.2 Improving the conditions of sex work

To address the moral concerns surrounding sex work, the background conditions under which sex work currently takes place must be changed. Markets, as discussed in Chapter 2, have the potential to allocate resources efficiently, maximize welfare, and provide both buyers and sellers with genuine freedom of choice. For sex work to realize these virtues, however, the structural and regulatory frameworks governing the industry must be reformed. Legal regulation is itself a controversial debate. Even within the EU, Member States adopt widely divergent approaches as the regulation of sex work falls exclusively within the competence of individual Member States and there exist “strong disagreements between Members subscribing to opposing approaches” (European Parliamentary Research Service 2024, preface 1).²⁸²⁹

However, in my view, and given the growing body of evidence that shifting from criminalization to comprehensive regulation significantly improves the health, safety, and autonomy of sex workers, regulation should be preferred. For a comprehensive overview, see the systematic reviews by Vanwesenbeeck (2017) and Deering et al. (2014), which highlight reductions in violence and health risks under regulatory frameworks. Additionally, meta-studies like Platt et al. (2018), where the authors have reviewed 40 quantitative and 94 qualitative studies, show that “[r]epressive policing of sex workers was associated with increased risk of sexual/physical violence from clients or other parties [. . .] and condomless sex” (Platt et al. 2018, 1). Furthermore, they show that police harassment was higher in contexts of criminalization, and “displaced sex workers into isolated work locations, disrupting peer support networks and service access, and limiting risk reduction opportunities” (1-2). These findings suggest that regulation, especially

²⁸Although the EU has some leverage over the sex industry because it holds competence in related domains such as gender equality, violence against women, or human trafficking (European Parliamentary Research Service 2024, 6).

²⁹As of 2019, 21 Member States fall under the legislative model. These are further divided into countries where prostitution is legal and regulated, such as Austria, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, and the Netherlands; and countries where prostitution is legal but unregulated or only partially regulated (e.g., with restrictions on brothels), including Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Spain. Prostitution is explicitly prohibited in only six EU Member States. Approaches also differ regarding who is criminally liable—the buyer, the seller, or both. Only in Croatia and Romania, sex workers themselves can face criminal prosecution. In contrast, France, Ireland, and Sweden implement the so-called *Nordic model*, where the purchase of sex is criminalized, but selling sex remains legal, aiming to reduce demand while decriminalizing sex workers (European Parliament 2023).

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decriminalization combined with supportive social services, offers the most effective means to protect sex workers' rights and well-being. Last, decriminalization is important, not merely for removing punitive barriers, but also for its expressive function in signaling social acceptance and respect, thereby helping to reduce stigma.

Another way to improve the industry would be to offer accessible and free health services, such as regular STI testing and provision of protective equipment, as already implemented in countries like the Netherlands. Furthermore, sex workers should be paid decent and adequate wages. Simultaneously, law enforcement should vigorously prosecute human trafficking, coercion, and sexual exploitation, to protect the most vulnerable in the industry. A barrier to effective law enforcement - and to protecting sex workers from coercion or trafficking - is the frequent language barrier and limited access to police services (Bundeskriminalamt [2025](#)). Many sex workers, particularly migrants, cannot communicate effectively with authorities or may fear approaching them due to immigration status. Addressing this requires not only specialized training for law enforcement but also the provision of translators and culturally competent support services, ensuring that sex workers can report abuse and access protection without fear of misunderstanding.

Transforming legal and material conditions alone, however, is insufficient without also addressing the stigma attached to sex work. As argued earlier, stigma arises from deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about sexuality, gender, and what counts as 'proper' or 'good' sex. Overcoming such prejudices requires sustained cultural change and the creation of spaces for dialogue and mutual understanding. Some initiatives already point in this direction: in Amsterdam's Red Light District De Wellen, for example, local residents and sex workers engage in exchanges to address shared challenges such as overtourism, aiming to make the area livable and vibrant for all parties (ARTE [2023](#)). Similarly, community centers like 'Sex work information centers' or trade-union offices for sex workers could provide not only information and legal support but also foster solidarity and visibility, countering the isolation that fuels stigma. Scaling up such initiatives, through public education and funding, and representation of sex workers in policymaking, could gradually dismantle (some of) the prejudices.

4.3 The future of sex work

To conclude, I want to offer some ideas on what sex work might look like in a future where legal, economic, and social conditions are significantly improved, i.e., where sex workers enjoy full labor protections, are free from stigma, and operate within a framework of safety, autonomy, and respect. At least two (not mutually exclusive) directions for the future of sex work seem imaginable to me.

1. The sex therapist

First, sex worker could work more like sex therapists. In a culture increasingly focused on self-optimization and personal growth, many people regularly invest significant time and resources into seeking professional guidance from people who have superior knowledge, expertise or information in various domains. Just think about career coaching, nutrition counseling, meditation, and mindfulness apps, or private training in different sports. In a future, where sex workers are completely de-stigmatized and their profession is accepted socially, their services could be more like a form of professional, skilled support. This could include, for instance, assisting individuals or couples in exploring intimacy, trying new sexual practices, improving their communication skills, developing sexual agency, or helping to resolve issues around sexuality. The sex worker would be comparable to a psychotherapist, dietitian, personal trainer, or choreographer, respected for her expertise, skills, and information. She would be well-respected because her skills are not seen as something ‘natural’ (as it is still often presumed with sex work, hence, no skill, creativity, or expertise is involved).

In this world, surely, not all sex workers would be equally (high) paid, and not every sex worker would find their job meaningful or enjoyable. Just as some professionals are more sought after due to their specialization, communication style, expertise, or experience, so too would some sex workers distinguish themselves through particular talents or areas of focus. Furthermore, some sex workers might wish to have chosen other career paths, for instance, because they do not enjoy constantly adhering to clients’ needs. Yet, this would not be seen as an indicator of something morally troubling with the entire industry (or the commodification of the service altogether). Employment structures, too, would be diverse, ranging from

self-employment to working in cooperatives or professional collectives. Crucially, however, sex workers would be supported by enforceable labor rights, access to healthcare, and freedom from social stigma.

2. The sex entertainer

Second, sex work could also be integrated into the broader cultural/ artistic sphere as a form of sex entertainment, comparable to performance art, massaging, immersive theater, and other sensual or aesthetic experiences that provide pleasure, relaxation, or aesthetic enjoyment. Just as people today attend dance performances or book luxury massages, they might seek out sex workers as part of leisure or artistic experience. In this future, too, sex workers would be recognized and properly remunerated for their artistic, emotional, and physical labor. As with other artistic services, not all individuals would be drawn to them. But they would be understood as legitimate forms of labor, practiced by people with expertise, skills, and a right to fair remuneration.

In both scenarios, essential preconditions include the absence of coercion, robust regulatory frameworks, and a cultural environment that affirms the agency and dignity of those involved. Professional training programs might even exist, teaching not just technique, arts, or safety practices, but also how to navigate emotional labor, draw boundaries, and handle challenging situations with care and professionalism. These programs could resemble vocational or artistic training in other domains and might help standardize practices, improve safety, and elevate public understanding. People of all genders would seek the services without shame, and people of all genders would offer them. In such a future, sex work would no longer be viewed solely through the lens of harm, exploitation, or degradation. Instead, it would be understood as one form of intimate, artistic, creative, or therapeutic labor among many, worthy of the same moral, cultural, or professional legitimacy as other forms of work.

A final aspect worth considering is the digital and technological transformation, which is already reshaping the sex industry and will continue to do so. Technological advances have introduced new phenomena such as sex robots designed to simulate human-like interactions, VR glasses which simulate various sexual experiences, and AI-powered virtual companions. Additionally, the sex industry is increasingly moving into digital spaces through streaming platforms and subscription-based services like OnlyFans,

4 *The answer: nothing*

offering new paths for sexual expression and income generation. While these innovations expand opportunities and diversify the industry, I do not believe they will ever fully replace in-person sex work. At the same time, this digital transformation raises new ethical and regulatory challenges for the sex industry and the commodification of sex, including privacy concerns and emerging forms of exploitation. Simultaneously, new ethical fields have begun to emerge, such as the ethics of humanoid sex robots (Richardson 2016) (Nyholm 2022), or the ethics of intimacy and dating within the digital world (Klincewicz et al. 2022).

5 Conclusion

Not everything should be for sale. And many people believe that sex is among those things that should never become a commodity. Yet, after examining both intrinsic and consequentialist objections to sex work, I have arrived at a different conclusion: morally speaking, there is nothing wrong with the commodification of sex. This, however, does not imply that nothing should change in the industry. On the contrary, exploitation persists, coercion remains a real threat, and sex workers continue to face stigma, shame, and social exclusion. But, as feminist and egalitarian forms of sex work demonstrate, these problems are neither necessary nor unique to the practice. They reflect unjust background conditions rather than a moral concern about the commodification itself, as one of my core arguments in this thesis was.

I have outlined several ways through which sex work can move closer to an ideal, where sex workers are respected, adequately protected, and their labor valued. Perhaps these changes pave the way for a radically different future, one where I imagined sex work to be more like therapy or a well-respected form of entertainment. And perhaps, in such a world, we might look back - much as we now do to opera singing in the 18th century - and wonder how our objections to the commodification of sex rested on irrational and misogynistic beliefs about 'proper' sex, 'good' women, and 'appropriate' female sexuality. My vision calls not for the abolition of sex work, but for radically transforming the social and legal conditions surrounding it, fostering dignity, safety, and equality for those women who choose to sell their sexual capacities.

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