

# Commodification & Woman's Labor

## Commodities & Valuing

*X* is properly regarded as a **commodity** if and only if the norms of the market are appropriate for regulating (1) its production, (2) its exchange, and (3) its enjoyment.

There are various *modes of valuation*. To value something involves treating it in accordance with a particular set of norms.

When *X* is *commodified*, we treat it in accordance with the norms of the market. This, then, involves *valuing X* in a particular way: in terms of its *use*.

But is this always the appropriate way to value things?

## Commercial Surrogacy

**Anderson's Thesis:** "When woman's labor is treated as a commodity, the women who perform it are degraded. Furthermore, commercial surrogacy degrades children by reducing their status to that of commodities." [75]

1. *The Degradation of Children*. Anderson argues that commercial surrogacy commodifies children — they will be treated in accordance with the norms of the market. And this involves treating children in accordance with a lower mode of valuation than is proper to them.

Children are properly loved by their parents and respected by others. Since children are valued as mere use-objects by the mother and the surrogate agency when they are sold to others, and by the adoptive parents when they seek to conform the child's genetic makeup to their own wishes, commercial surrogacy degrades children insofar as it treats them as commodities.

But why think of the *children* as the commodity and not the surrogate's *gestational service* as the commodity instead? (**Example:** Why not think of commercial surrogacy like prenatal babysitting?)

2. *The Commodification of Women's Labor*. Commercial surrogacy transforms women's labor into a commodity "... by replacing the

Anderson says: "Let us reserve the term 'use' to refer to the mode of valuation proper to commodities, which follows the market norm of treating things solely in accordance with the owner's nonmoral preferences." [74]

What determines how we should value things? Anderson says, "The ideals which specify how one should value certain things are supported by a conception of human flourishing." [73]

Something is **degraded** when it is treated in accordance with a lower mode of valuation than is proper to it.

Anderson's argument, here, is that "the sale of an infant has an **expressive significance**" that undermines the norms of parental love.

However, she also thinks that commercial surrogacy can have negative **psychological effects** on other children; and "the widespread acceptance of commercial surrogacy would psychologically threaten all children" [78]

See Anderson's response on pg. 79-80.

parental norms which usually govern the practice of gestating children with the economic norms which govern ordinary production processes." [80] Norms of **respect** and **consideration** are violated by this commodification in three ways:

- (a) **Alienation.** The surrogate mother is required to repress whatever parental love she feels for the child.

Her labor is alienated because she must suppress her emotional ties with her own child, and may be manipulated into reinterpreting these ties in a trivializing way.

Pregnancy is *not* merely a biological practice — it is also a *social practice*. The end which the social practice of pregnancy promotes is an emotional bond with her child. So, the surrogate mother is alienated from the social practice of pregnancy.

- (b) **Degradation.** The surrogate mother's "evolving perspective" on her pregnancy are manipulated and denied legitimacy.

She is degraded because her independent ethical perspective is denied, or demoted to the status of a cash sum.

The commercial surrogacy industry has a strong incentive to suppress, manipulate, and trivialize the surrogate mother's perspective (in order to prevent her from seeing her involvement from the perspective of a parent as opposed to the perspective of a contract laborer).

- (c) **Exploitation.** The surrogate mother's noncommercial motivations are taken advantage of, without offering anything but what the norms of commerce demand in return.

She is exploited because her emotional needs and vulnerabilities are not treated as characteristics which call for consideration.

The social meaning of pregnancy prevents surrogate mothers from entering into the surrogacy contract on equal footing with the surrogate agency (because surrogate mothers are vulnerable to the charge that "if they were really generous and loving they would not be so solicitous about their own [financial] interests.")

**The Source of the Problem:** "[T]he failure to acknowledge and treat appropriately the surrogate mother's emotional engagement with her labor." [87]

To *respect* someone is to treat her in accordance with principles she rationally accepts.

To treat someone with *consideration* is to respond with sensitivity to her (and her emotional relations with others), refraining from manipulating or denigrating these for one's own purposes.

Anderson claims that "[t]he fundamental problem with commercial surrogacy is that commercial norms are inherently **manipulative** when they are applied to the sphere of parental love." [89]

- (a) **Manipulation:** *S* is *manipulated* when norms are used to psychologically coerce *S* into a position where she cannot (i) defend her own interests, or (ii) articulate her own perspective without being charged with irresponsibility or immorality for doing so.
- (b) Surrogacy contracts use commercial norms which imply that mothers should feel guilty and irresponsible for loving their children.

Surrogate mothers are put in a *doublebind*: On the one hand, (1) the social norms governing **motherhood** compel her to experience parental love for her child; on the other hand, (2) the commercial norms governing **contracts** compel her to uphold her end of the bargain (which involves relinquishing the child).