

PHD THESIS SUMMARY:
The market's place in the provision of goods.

RUTGER CLAASSEN

PhD in philosophy, May 2008

University of Utrecht

Which goods should we be able to buy and sell on the market and, alternatively, which goods should remain sheltered from the market? For many goods in modern societies, this has proven to be a thorny question. Moreover, as I argue in the introductory chapter, it is a question that cannot be answered by way of a theoretical shortcut, that is, by attributing certain general values (or disvalues) to the market and inferring from these general attributes that the market is (or is not) the best institution to govern the provision of a specific good. Rather, we need a framework for making decisions at the level of these specific goods.

In the first part of this work, three theoretical building blocks are proposed to frame the way we should handle the market question. First, a social theory is formulated which treats the market as one out of five main socio-economic modes of provision, the others being public provision, professional provision, informal provision and self-provision. Second, in choosing the best institutional framework for a specific good, it is argued that we should not restrict ourselves to the option of implementing one of these modes of provision only. Special attention should be paid to the option of 'institutional pluralism', i.e., instituting a market and a non-market alternative simultaneously for the same good. Both, the attractions and the limits of such an institutional pluralism are discussed. Third, in making institutional choices about these modes of provision, we need a normative theory providing the moral criteria to guide our choices. Here a capability theory is proposed, which consists of three central principles, parallel to a distinction between three types of capabilities: those that are 'immoral', those that are 'morally required' and those that are merely 'morally permissible'. The principles prescribe avoiding the realization of the immoral type of capabilities and promoting the realization of morally required and permissible capabilities.

In the second part of this work, this threefold framework is applied to three specific goods. The first good is security, i.e., protection against criminal threats. The second good is media, i.e., mass communication by media such as television, radio, the press, and the like. The third good is care, i.e., caring activities provided on a structural basis to people in a position of dependency, such as care for children, chronically ill and elderly people. For each of these goods it is argued—on the basis of a capability analysis—that the most appropriate institutional framework is institutional pluralism. In the case of security this is a pluralism of market and public provision, in the case of media a pluralism of market and professional provision, and in the case of care a pluralism of market and informal provision.

In the final chapter, I investigate the conditions that have to be fulfilled for these institutionally pluralist arrangements to be stable, that is, to have a robust chance of survival. The main challenge to stability comes from the dynamic toward capital accumulation that is inherent in contemporary capitalism, and if left unchecked requires an ongoing conversion of non-market practices into markets. Two solutions are proposed to counter this threat: a general working time reduction which reduces capital accumulation and a strategy of publicly funded investment of accumulated capital in non-market parts of institutionally pluralist practices.

Rutger Claassen obtained his PhD in philosophy from Utrecht University, The Netherlands, in May 2008. He was supervised by Marcus Düwell (Utrecht University) and Elizabeth Anderson (University of Michigan). He currently works as a political philosopher in the Political Science Department, University of Leiden.

Contact e-mail: <claassenrjg@fsw.leidenuniv.nl>