

# Lecture 22: Commodification of Women's Reproductive Labor

Carolyn McLeod – “For Dignity or Money: Feminists on the Commodification of Women's Reproductive Labour”



# Agenda

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2. Commodification
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4. For Money
5. For Dignity and Money
6. For Dignity

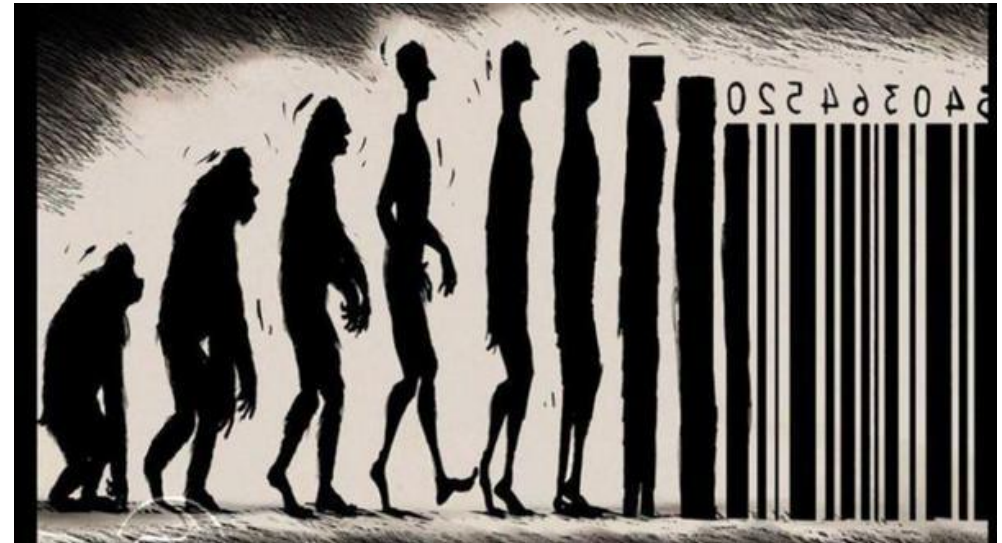
# Carolyn McLeod

- Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Affiliate Member of the Department of Women's Studies and Feminist Research at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada.
- Interests lie in health care ethics, feminist philosophy, and moral philosophy, and reproductive ethics.
- Wrote *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (2002).
- Past Co-Coordinator of fab, the *International Network on feminist approaches to bioethics*, and one of the founders and an editorial board member of *the International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, or IJFAB.
- Involved in policy-making and public debates in Ontario about the right of health care professionals to make conscientious objections, public funding for in vitro fertilization, and improvements to our adoption systems. Chair of the Board of Directors for Adopt4life: Ontario's Adoptive Parents Association.



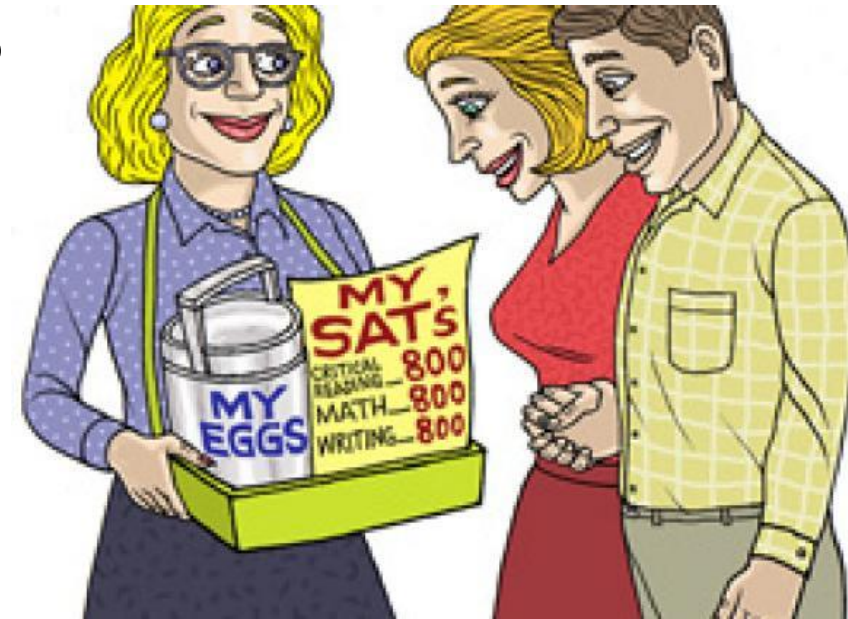
# Commodification

“Something is alienable to us if it is separable from us; and something is normatively (or benignly) alienable to us if it is separable without causing us harm or degradation. When we treat something that we possess as a commodity, we treat it as an ‘item of trade’ (*OED*), that is, as something that we can trade away and therefore separate from ourselves, to some degree at least. But we cannot separate everything from ourselves and remain intact as persons; therefore, we cannot commodify everything benignly” (3).



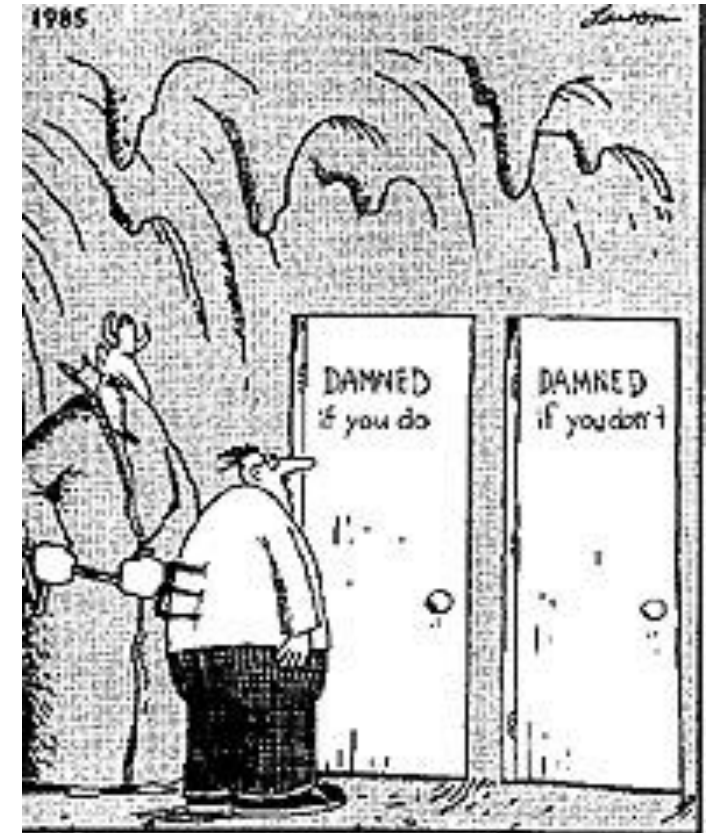
# Commodifying Women's Reproductive Labor

- What do women trade away?
  - Oocyte vending and contract pregnancy.
- What do women get in exchange for this labor?
  - Going rate for oocyte vending in USA is \$1,500 to \$5,000.
  - Gestational contract pregnancies run between \$18,000 and \$25,000.
- “Recent studies show that withholding information about procedures (and consequently undermining informed choice) is common in oocyte ‘donation’ programs in the United States (Gurmankin 2001; New York State Task Force 1998)” (4).



# The Double Bind of Choosing Dignity or Money

- “As feminists, they are damned if they allow the commodification of women’s reproductive labour and damned if they don’t” (5).
- Allowing commodification risks exploitation, and treating women’s reproductive capacities just as fungible market commodities.
- On the other hand, “being able to sell their reproductive labour gives women market power, which *is* power within capitalism” (5).



"C'mon, c'mon—it's either one or the other."

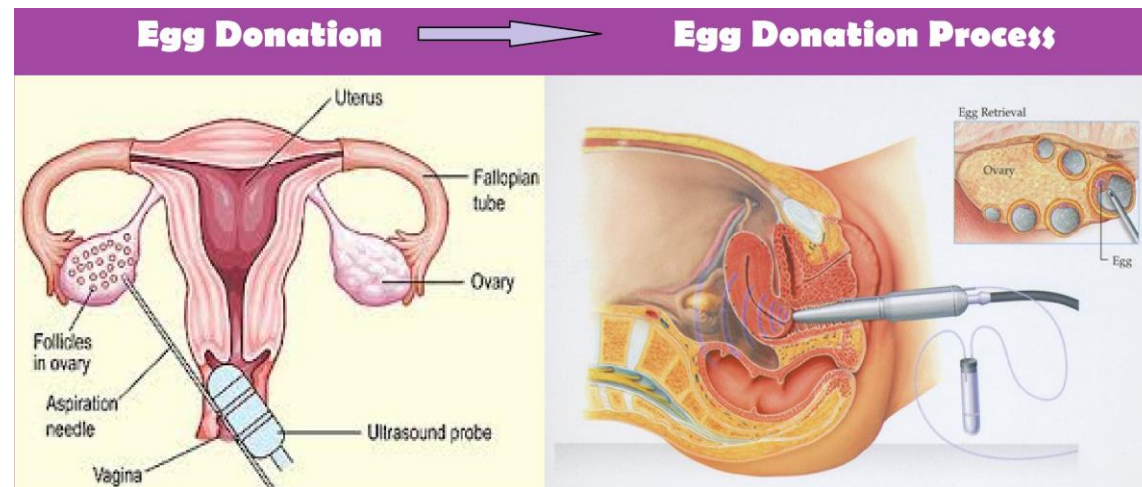
# The Double Bind of Choosing Dignity or Money

“This dilemma of dignity or money exists largely because of women’s oppression. If women as a social group were not so oppressed that they were taught to be self-sacrificing nurturers, were excluded from powerful positions in the market economy, or were regularly forced into poverty upon divorce and becoming single mothers, the issue of commodification would not be so troubling for feminists. Oppression has this effect of creating double binds (Frye 1983); it keeps people down by ensuring that they repeatedly face choice situations in which the only available options are grim ones” (6).

# For Money

“Arguments that are (merely) for money say that commodifying women’s reproductive labour is preferable to the alternatives. And the alternatives include:

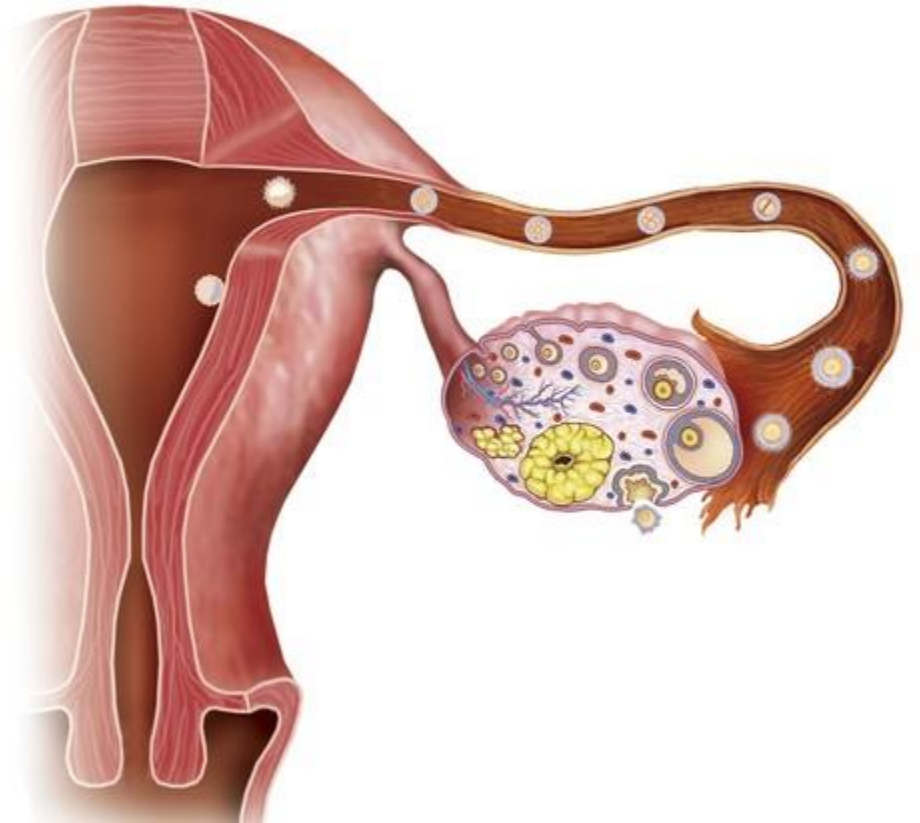
- (1) a system of donation that relies upon *altruism*;
- (2) *being paternalistic* toward women and telling them that they cannot perform reproductive labour for others at all; and
- (3) having a *black market* crop up in response to a ban on commodification. Arguments for money exist that address each of these possibilities” (6).





# For Money

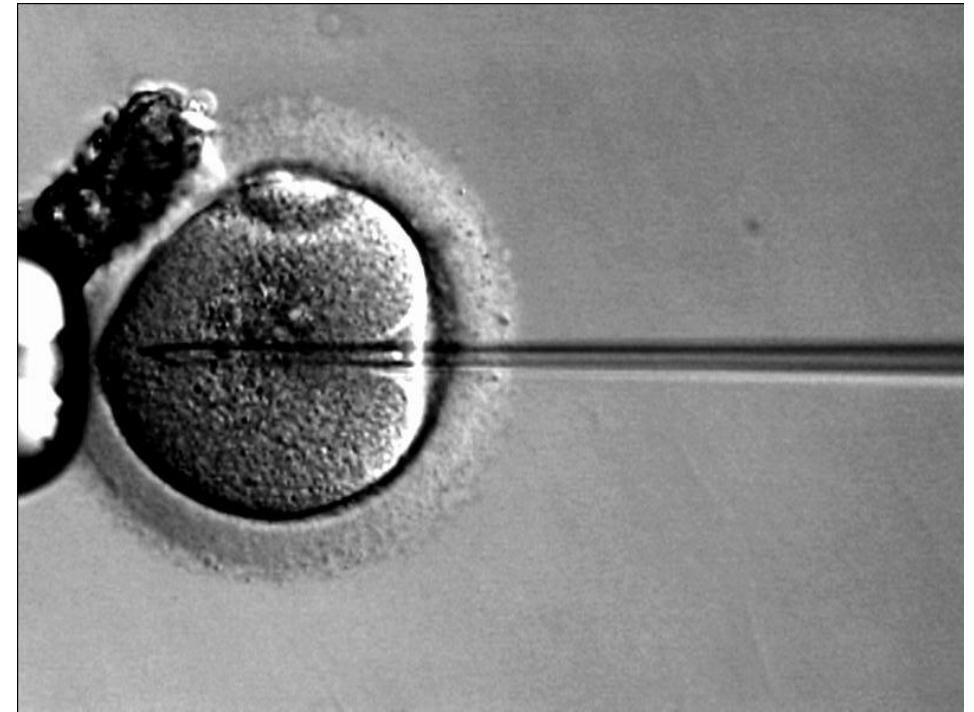
- “Feminists for money generally favour a *regulated* market in oocytes and contract pregnancies, compared to a black market or a system of donation” (8).
- This means non-market values can be factored in through regulations.
- Regulations might include caps on payments and mandated counsellors to help guarantee informed choice.



# For Dignity and Money

“Feminists for money assert that receiving payment for reproductive labour is dignifying for women for three main reasons.

- (1) Within capitalism, being paid to do things for other people is a sign of *respect*.
- (2) Getting paid to do reproductive labour for others can also enhance women’s *autonomy* by fulfilling autonomous desires they may have to sell that labour.
- (3) Such payment *disrupts patriarchal ideals of motherhood or womanhood*” (8).



# For Dignity

Feminists for money “defend a **‘symmetry thesis’** with respect to women’s reproductive labour: our treatment of it should be symmetrical with our treatment of other forms of labour. Feminists for dignity (alone) defend instead an **asymmetry thesis**. They contend that women’s reproductive labour is special, in that, unlike other forms of labour, no one should sell it, nor consent to perform it for others for free perhaps. The labour is special either because of *inherent* features of it, which is the view of some feminists for dignity, or because of *contingent* features that exist when the labour is performed in environments that oppress women” (10).



# For Dignity

Labor is Inherently Special

1. **The Identity Thesis:** “that because a woman’s reproductive activity is so intimately tied to her identity, it can never be an item of trade.
2. **The Autonomy Thesis:** (applies only to contract pregnancy) “that a woman’s autonomous perspective on her pregnancy may evolve in such a way that she could no longer perceive the child within her as one that belongs to someone else; and the possibility that such a shift in perspective will occur suggests that she should not treat pregnancy as labour like any other form of labour” (10).



# For Dignity

## The Labour Is Contingently Special

- “Satz’s main criticism of pregnancy contracts is that they strengthen gender inequality. They feed on an environment in which women earn significantly less than men, live in poverty more often than men, are more confined to the home because of an unequal distribution of child care and other domestic work, and, in general, have less opportunity to better their lives (1992: 124). Gender inequality extends as well to reproduction, where men have historically had more control than women over when, and how, women reproduce. Contract pregnancy reproduces this pattern by having women relinquish significant control to others (sometimes specifically to men) over their own bodies in pregnancy (Satz 1992: 124, 125). The practice is troubling for this reason, and because it reinforces a pronatalist connection between women and reproduction, and a further connection between women and the home, since women in contract pregnancies tend to stay at home” (11-2).