

This paper offers a normative analysis of boycotting. I address three related questions: (1) How can boycotting be defined?; (2) Are boycotts always morally permissible? and (3) Are boycotts ever morally obligatory, and if so, under what circumstances?

In a first step, I develop a definition of boycotting that separates it from other forms of negative consumer choice and stresses the connection between boycotting and the perception of a harm related to the product that is the target of the boycott; I also separate between instrumental and expressive kinds of boycotts.

Second, I address the moral permissibility of boycotts and defend a position that avoids two extremes that have recently been defended in the literature: the libertarian view on the one hand which treats boycotts like other price-quality decisions and opposes any constraints and the view that boycotts are to be considered analogous to the actions of democratic institutions and are therefore subject to demanding rules. I argue that a minimal set of conditions is sufficient to explain under what circumstances boycotts are moral.

Third, I turn to the obligatoriness of boycotts. While I agree that those obligations sometimes exist, I reject the popular view that they should be analyzed in terms of (1) the causal role or (2) the complicity of the consumer. Rather, I argue that duties to boycott are essentially tied to the normative commitments of the consumers. This helps to explain why some duties to boycott apply only to particular individuals due to their specific commitments while other duties to boycott have a universal scope and are due to commitments that all human beings share.