

BOYCOTTS AND THE SOCIAL ENFORCEMENT OF JUSTICE*

BY LINDA RADZIK

Abstract: This essay examines the ethics of boycotting as a social response to injustice or wrongdoing. The boycotts in question are collective actions in which private citizens withdraw from or avoid consumer or cultural interaction with parties perceived to be responsible for some transgression. Whether a particular boycott is justified depends, not only on the reasonableness of the underlying moral critique, but also on what the boycotters are doing in boycotting. The essay considers four possible interpretations of the kind of act in which boycotting consists: the avoidance of complicity, protest speech, social punishment, or social coercion. Each interpretation provides a plausible account of at least some cases of boycotting, yet each raises distinct challenges to justifying boycotting activities.

KEY WORDS: Boycott, social avoidance, protest, social punishment, social coercion, accountability, holding responsible, ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

The practice of boycotting is a rich topic for philosophical exploration, both because calls for boycotts have become so common in the age of social media and because reactions to boycotts vary so widely. It is unsurprising that we approve of some boycotts and not others in accordance with our moral and political views. But the variation that I mean to highlight is in the way we view the practice of participating in or calling for a boycott itself. When we disapprove of the targeted group, choosing not to do business with them and recommending that others not do business with them might seem like a natural expression of conscience, which does not require much, if any, effort to justify. I can do business with whomever I please and so can my friends. However, when our sympathies are with the target, we tend to see boycotts as aggressive, as attacking someone's livelihood, and clearly in need of some sort of special justification. Are we simply being irrational here by denying our opponents tactics that we happily endorse for ourselves? Or do these conflicting responses suggest that there is an open question about just what we are doing to others when we boycott them?

* This research was generously supported by the Social Philosophy & Policy Foundation, the Liberty Fund, Texas A&M's Melburn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research, and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Thanks are also due to Colleen M. Murphy, Clare Palmer, Robert R. Shandley, the other contributors to this volume, and, especially, David Schmidtz and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for their helpful comments.

In this essay, I explore different interpretations of the practices of participating in and calling for boycotts. I focus on paradigmatic consumer and cultural boycotts, wherein the boycotters conceive of themselves as collectively responding to an injustice or other wrong by refusing to interact with the guilty party. I then consider the possibility that such boycotts function as methods to avoid complicity, forms of speech, cases of social punishment, or strategies of social coercion. Each interpretation provides a different way of thinking about boycotting activities and raises distinct issues. What it takes to justify social coercion differs in subtle ways from what it takes to justify social punishment, or critical speech, or the avoidance of complicity. In other words, whether we are justified in organizing or participating in a boycott will depend, not merely on the reasonableness of the underlying moral critique, but also on what kind of action boycotting is.

Rather than identifying a single action-type with boycotting, I suggest that the four interpretations of boycotting mentioned above are appropriate in different circumstances and to different degrees. Furthermore, I will argue that, for any particular case, the best interpretation of what one is doing in boycotting depends not merely on the intentions of the boycotters, but also on factors that are out of their immediate control. I do not intend this essay to serve as a condemnation of the practice of boycotting. Indeed, I suspect that many boycotts are justifiable and others may even be morally required. However, I hope to convince the reader that decisions about when to boycott, and decisions about when to end a boycott, are morally complex in ways that are frequently overlooked.

Section II narrows the focus of this essay to a subset of those actions that are often labeled boycotts. I approach this topic from a broad interest in the ways ordinary people play a role in enforcing standards of justice and morality, and that interest guides the scope of this discussion. Sections III-VI take each of the four interpretations of boycotting actions in turn: boycotts as the avoidance of complicity, as speech, as social punishment, and as social coercion. In each of these sections, I explain why a boycott might be seen as an action of the type in question and how each classification raises distinctive questions regarding the justification of boycotting. Section VII summarizes my findings and offers some further reflection on when it is appropriate for protestors to end a boycott.

II. TYPES OF BOYCOTT

Many types of actions are labeled boycotts. At a general level of description, we can say that boycotting involves one party pointedly withdrawing from or avoiding interaction or cooperation with another party. Different types of boycotts can then be distinguished in terms of *who* is withdrawing, *what* forms of interaction or cooperation they reject, *from whom* they are withdrawing, and *why* they are withdrawing. I doubt that it is possible to

define “boycott” in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions.¹ Instead I focus on a set of central cases, to which the application of the term “boycott” is uncontroversial and which also appear to socially enforce moral norms. In defining this set, I acknowledge that other cases, which do not share all of these features, could also reasonably be described as boycotts. I draw the reader’s attention to some of these below in order to clarify what my paradigm includes.

A few well known examples of the sorts of boycotts that interest me are the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–1956, the boycott of California grapes in the late 1960s, and the boycott of apartheid-era South Africa by artists and musicians in the 1980s. More recent examples include: the campaign against Chick-fil-A by supporters of LGBT rights;² campaigns by the American Family Association against pro-LGBT businesses;³ and the 2015 boycott of a dentist from Minnesota who shot an endangered lion, named Cecil, in a highly publicized and controversial incident.⁴ The type of boycott that I take as my topic, then, is a collective action, which is organized by a non-state party and implemented voluntarily by private citizens. The action is publicly announced, involves the withdrawal or avoidance of consumer or cultural interaction or cooperation with a targeted group or individual, and protests perceived injustice or wrongdoing by the target.

Describing our paradigmatic boycott as a collective action emphasizes that a plurality of actors is involved, that the individual actors see their efforts as contributing to the group’s action, and that the action could not be performed without the efforts of the group. This paradigm excludes the possibility of a lone boycotter, then, although lone actors sometimes do engage in forms of pointed social avoidance that raise many of the moral issues that will be surveyed here.

I have also chosen to focus on cases in which the instigators and participants in the boycott are private citizens. States organize boycotts too, enforcing citizen compliance with those boycotts by law. These actions are usually labeled “sanctions.” I put these cases aside in order to explore the role private parties play in enforcing justice. Regretfully, I must also leave out cases in which for-profit businesses cut ties with other businesses, individuals, or states in reaction to perceived wrongdoing. Recent examples

¹ The word “boycott” derives from “the name of Captain Charles C. Boycott (1832–97), a land agent in Ireland, who was a prominent early recipient of such treatment” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “boycott”).

² Steven Petrow, “If My Husband is Pro-LGBT But Indulges His Chick-fil-A Cravings, Is He Waffling?” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 2, 2015, http://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/can-my-husband-eat-his-chick-fil-a-and-keep-his-pro-lgbt-principles/2015/01/30/6a90be40-a8cc-11e4-a06b-9df2002b86a0_story.html.

³ Mary Lyn Stoll, “Boycott Basics: Moral Guidelines for Corporate Decision Making,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 84, no. 1 (2009): 3–10, at 4.

⁴ Helen Regan, “Cecil the Lion, Walter Palmer and the Psychology of Online Shaming,” *Time*, July 30, 2015, <http://time.com/3978216/online-shaming-social-media-walter-palmer-cecil-lion/>.

are announcements by Macy's and NBC Universal that they cut business ties with presidential candidate Donald Trump, in response to comments he made about Mexican immigrants.⁵ While these cases closely resemble boycotting actions by other private groups, such as labor unions, they raise important questions specific to business ethics and law that I am unable to consider here.⁶

Boycotters vary widely in the degree to which they coordinate their efforts. Labor unions, churches, and political associations, which were common practitioners of the boycott in the past, often showed high degrees of organization in publicizing their actions, marshaling participation, and negotiating the resolution of the boycott with their targets. These days, in contrast, boycotts often result from more spontaneous groupings that briefly collect around a single issue through social media, as we see in the case involving Cecil the lion. The leaders of the group may simply be those whose pronouncements garner the most attention. The participants may have no more connection beyond being people who all think of themselves as supporting the boycott.

Turning to the question of what is being refused, the paradigmatic boycott consists in the withdrawal or avoidance of consumer or cultural activities. The boycotter "withdraws" from consumer activity when she refuses to purchase products or services that she normally does buy. Here, the target loses a customer. The boycotter "avoids" the target when she resolves not to begin doing business with them, when she otherwise might have done so. Here, the target misses out on a potential customer. It makes little sense to describe oneself as boycotting a product or service that one would never buy anyway. Living in Texas, I cannot boycott a dentist in Minnesota. However, it is possible for me to encourage others to do so. Decisions to promote boycotts should also be submitted to the kinds of moral reflection I discuss here.

Cultural boycotts involve refusals to interact through sporting, artistic, or academic activities. Academic boycotts help illustrate how the degree or scope of the avoidance involved may vary. Academic exchange takes many different forms.⁷ Boycotters might refuse to attend a conference at the targeted institution, but invite scholars from that institution to their

⁵ Alan Rappeport, "Macy's Drops Donald Trump's Fashion Line Over Immigrant Remarks," *New York Times*, July 1, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/politics/first-draft/2015/07/01/macys-drops-donald-trumps-fashion-line-over-immigrant-remarks/>.

⁶ A corporation has obligations to its stockholders and employees that would require consideration. Legal questions are also more complicated where the one refusing to interact is a business, as in the case of a florist who was fined for refusing service to a same-sex couple planning a wedding. The judge found that the florist had violated consumer protection laws (Kurtis Lee, "Fundraiser for Washington Florist who Rejects Gay Marriage Raises \$90,000," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 2015, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-nn-washington-florist-go-fund-20150405-story.html>).

⁷ Susan Koshy, "When You're the Target of a Boycott You Support," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Feb. 23, 2015, p. 7.

own campuses. They may refuse to conduct tenure reviews for the other institution, but be willing to hire their graduates. Variations in the scope of withdrawal or avoidance can also be seen in consumer boycotts. For example, the boycott of Nestlé in the 1970s and 1980s, which responded to Nestlé's marketing of infant formula in developing countries, led some consumers to reject only the infant formula, others to also boycott their prominent line of chocolate, and some to avoid all of the product lines owned by the parent company.

The paradigm I have defined excludes what are sometimes called "buycotts."⁸ These collective actions involve concerted efforts by groups of consumers to buy certain products rather than to pointedly avoid others. Buycott campaigns provide consumers with information or labels that guide them toward goods that they value positively, like fair trade agricultural products or domestically manufactured goods. In contrast, in a boycott, consumers withdraw from or avoid what is valued negatively.

In addition to withdrawal and avoidance, paradigmatic boycotting practices also include communication both with the target and the public at large, and these communications contribute to their character as protests. The organizers inform the target that it is being boycotted, why it is being boycotted, and, often, under what conditions the boycotters would be willing to resume normal interactions. Boycotters announce their activities and their moral criticism to the general public. This publicity typically attempts to persuade more people to join the boycott. Efforts to motivate participation may include more negative forms of influence, such as expressions of indignation or anger toward people who continue to interact with the target. An "obstructionist boycott" motivates participation by placing obstacles, such as a picket line, in the path of those who may be inclined to cooperate with the target.⁹ In a "secondary boycott," a party who is engaged in business or cultural activities with the primary target is itself boycotted by protestors, until they too cut ties with the primary target.¹⁰

Secondary boycotts do not fit neatly into the paradigm of boycotts that I defined in the beginning of this section. Secondary boycotts do not necessarily accuse their targets of injustice or wrongdoing, although interaction with the primary target might be seen as a form of complicity in wrongdoing in some cases. Where they seem to draw neutral parties into disputes, secondary boycotts are more controversial than primary boycotts, and have not enjoyed the legal protection primary boycotts have.¹¹ However, the line between primary and secondary boycotts is hardly a clear one. Even in

⁸ Monroe Friedman, "Ethical Dilemmas Associated with Consumer Boycotts," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2001): 232–40, at 239.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 236–37.

¹⁰ Ruth N. Reingold and Paul Lansing, "An Ethical Analysis of Japan's Response to the Arab Boycott of Israel," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 4, no. 3 (1994): 335–53.

¹¹ *National Labor Relations Board v. Retail Store Employees Union*, 447 U.S. 607 (1980).

an ordinary consumer boycott, there is often some vagueness or variation in the scope of the parties the boycotters avoid. For example, a consumer may simply refuse to buy an objectionable product, or he may also refuse to shop in any retail establishment that sells the product. Boycotters sometimes target geographical regions, refusing to travel to or do business with people in that region, usually in response to governmental policies or legislation. These boycotts result in withdrawal from citizens who oppose the government's actions as well as those who support them.

Boycotts may be further differentiated by reference to *why* boycotters withdraw from the target. The paradigmatic boycott that I focus on here protests some perceived injustice or wrongdoing on the part of the target. When I pass over one brand of coffee in the grocery store simply because it is more expensive or less tasty than another, I am not boycotting it. There is no protest; I am not declaring myself opposed to the values the coffee represents. Of course, not all protests are rooted in moral criticism. In some cases, collective avoidance is motivated by economic or practical goals. For example, in the 1960s, consumer activists targeted supermarkets they perceived as engaging in wasteful marketing schemes, because the activists believed these led to elevated prices.¹² Labor unions might use a boycott simply to increase their bargaining power. Where there is no moral criticism, cases fall outside the scope of this essay. However, interpreting the collective action is often difficult. The labor union may see the owners' comparative bargaining power as unfair. The consumer activists may have seen the grocers as insufficiently attentive to their legitimate interests.

The objectionable actions to which paradigmatic boycotts respond may or may not be illegal. Law enforcement is generally entrusted with the role of responding to legal wrongs. However, boycotters target legal wrongdoers when they believe that law enforcement agencies are unable or unwilling to respond adequately. Boycotters also focus on issues that are not currently addressed by law but that should be, in their opinion, as in the Civil Rights Era when boycotts were part of the fight for nondiscrimination legislation. In other cases, the boycotters agree that the law should not penalize the wrong in question. In a number of high profile cases in recent years, boycotters protested racist, sexist, or homophobic speech, yet agreed that such speech should remain legally protected.¹³

Traditionally, the boycott has been a tool for addressing ongoing injustice, by which I mean to refer broadly to practices that violate weighty deontological constraints on other-regarding actions. The protestors call on the target to end what they perceive to be an unjust practice. However,

¹² Monroe Friedman, *Consumer Boycotts: Effecting Change through the Marketplace and the Media* (New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. i-xii.

¹³ Examples of targeted figures include celebrity chef Paula Deen, the cast members on televisions' "Duck Dynasty," and Los Angeles Clippers owner Donald Sterling.

boycotts are also prompted by objections to isolated actions rather than ongoing practices. An example is the academic boycott of the University of Illinois for revoking a job offer to a scholar over controversial comments he made.¹⁴ Boycotts that respond to derogatory speech might be characterized as responses to particular, objectionable utterances. Often, however, the moral criticisms that animate the boycotters in these cases regard character rather than action. The target is avoided because she is perceived as being a certain kind of person (for example, a racist) and not simply because she has uttered a specific racial slur. Boycotts motivated by objections to character fall outside of the paradigm that I present above.

So, a wide variety of activities are described as boycotts. The cases that I treat as central are collective actions, which are organized, publicized, and carried out by private (non-state, non-profit) parties, and involve the withdrawal or avoidance of consumer or cultural interaction or cooperation with a group or individual as a protest to perceived misdeeds. Boycotts of this type are social responses to injustice and wrongdoing. The term “social” emphasizes both that the boycotters bear no legal form of authority, and that their own actions consist in things that people are normally legally permitted to do. Boycotting is a behavior in the moral toolbox of ordinary people. Other items in this toolbox include verbally persuading, delivering rebukes, and gossiping behind wrongdoers’ backs, as well as other collective actions, such as picketing, protest marching, and shunning. Boycotting shares features with each of these other social responses to wrongdoing, but is distinct from them as well. Shunning, which also involves the collective avoidance of a perceived wrongdoer, is most similar to boycotting. However, traditional shunning practices cut off a broader swath of interactions than boycotting does. A boycotter who refuses to do business with the target is typically still willing to speak with him. Indeed, boycott leaders may be eager to engage in debate and negotiation with the target.

In the next few sections, I examine a series of interpretations of the function of boycotting actions. Given all the other ways in which it is possible to respond to wrongdoing, what is the significance of a collective refusal to engage in commercial or cultural activities with a target? In better understanding what a boycott does, we can better evaluate when such tactics are appropriate responses to wrongdoing.

III. BOYCOTTING AS AVOIDING COMPLICITY

My interest in what boycotts do is partly motivated by a fear that they may be unfair or unreasonably harmful in some cases. However, one might suggest that such worries are misplaced because the boycotters are

¹⁴ Koshy, “When You’re the Target of a Boycott You Support.”

not doing anything to their targets. To boycott is to *not* do something — to not buy a product or service, to not participate in a sporting, artistic, or academic activity. Given that these are all optional activities, which we are under no legal or moral obligation to perform, we are in no danger of wronging the target when we decide not to perform them, no matter what our reason for avoidance might be. A particular decision to boycott might express a vice (such as pettiness or intolerance), but it does not wrong its target.

This response is not satisfying, however, because boycotting is not simply a case of non-action. It is helpful to recall John Stuart Mill's distinction between natural penalties and social sanctions. In *On Liberty*, he writes that when we judge another party to have a vicious character, it is only to be expected that we will avoid his company. Our avoidance is a "natural penalty," which is "strictly inseparable from [our] unfavorable judgment."¹⁵ Our moral evaluations influence our decisions about how to best satisfy our own preferences. But as long as we do not "parade" our avoidance of the vicious person, we are not holding him accountable for his vices.¹⁶ In the case of boycotting, we *do* parade our avoidance. Boycotts are announced and publicized. We are not merely minding our own business, we are protesting the target. In *On Liberty*, the distinction between a merely natural penalty and a social sanction is morally significant; Mill's Harm Principle limits our use of the latter, but not the former.

For Mill, avoidance behavior is converted from a natural penalty to a social sanction when it is paraded, which I take to mean, when one communicates one's disapproval to others, perhaps especially to people other than the wrongdoer.¹⁷ The next section asks why the communication of disapproval is so significant. However, we must first consider another way in which the function of boycotting might lie in what is *not done*.

By boycotting, one might argue, people refuse to contribute to or condone something they perceive as wrong. So, one function of boycotting may be to avoid complicity in wrongdoing. The sorts of complicity avoided by boycotts may be either material or symbolic. In buying a shirt that was made by forced labor, I would provide the means by which the manufacturer profits from abusing the workers. By eating in a restaurant whose owner contributes to dangerous political candidates, I am indirectly funding them too. Symbolic complicity, in contrast, concerns the expressive content of continued interaction. By purchasing clothing from a company that promotes an unhealthy ideal of beauty (say, by using dangerously underweight models in their advertisements), I may be seen as

¹⁵ John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. XVIII, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), IV.6. (Citations to Mill are given by chapter and paragraph number.)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.5.

¹⁷ Mill laments the fact that it is often considered rude directly to tell a person that you find his behavior morally lacking. Such frank talk could be useful (*ibid.*, IV.5).

condoning their message. By vacationing in a place governed by unjust laws, I imply that those laws are tolerable. A related interpretation of boycotts draws on the suggestion that “you are what you buy.” Where consumers have ample means and are presented with a broad array of products, purchasing choices may be perceived as expressions of their values. For these consumers, boycotting producers known to violate their values may then be required for the maintenance of integrity or virtue more generally.

Complicity claims can be controversial in different ways. For one thing, complicity considerations may not be decisive. You may believe that the workers at your local coffee shop are subjected to abusive scheduling practices, yet notice that the shop provides one of very few job opportunities for low-skilled workers in your area.¹⁸ While some form of protest may be appropriate, the claim that boycotting the store would avoid complicity is not a decisive reason for choosing this form of protest in this case.

One might also question whether the interaction counts as a form of complicity at all. The claim that in paying for a sandwich I am contributing to a political candidate is a bit odd. By that logic, the number of things I am responsible for expands exponentially. Who knows what is done with money that once passed through my hands? Did my money go in the politician’s pocket or the minimum wage employee’s? Perhaps the money ceases to be mine once I spend it. What the restaurateur then does with it is her own responsibility, not mine. But this view is also problematic. If it is wrong to return a borrowed sword when the owner is in a murderous rage, then surely it is also wrong to buy a sword from a seller I know will use the money to hire a hitman. Does knowledge of the other’s intentions make the difference? Or is it the severity or the obviousness of the wrong? Hiring a hitman is clearly seriously wrong, while reasonable people might disagree about the wrongness of donating money to the candidate in question.

Symbolic forms of complicity are similarly complex. Surely, I can do business with a person without endorsing all of her opinions. Certainly I can visit a foreign country without endorsing all of its laws, just as I live in my own country without endorsing all of its laws. But here too context matters. Crossing a picket line *does* imply that one sides with the owners rather than the workers. When the CEO of a clothing company has just publicly stated that they do not make larger sizes because they do not want fat teens tarnishing their brand, buying one of their t-shirts for my daughter *would* condone their offensive value system. Given the timing, I would send my daughter a terrible message. Whether boycotting functions to avoid complicity with wrongdoing, and whether that consideration is decisive, must be judged on a case-by-case basis. For now, let us just say that avoiding complicity is one thing boycotting sometimes does.

¹⁸ Ginia Bellafonte, “Chick-fil-A and the Politics of Eating,” *New York Times*, Oct. 9, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/11/nyregion/chick-fil-a-and-the-politics-of-eating.html>

When boycotters use the language of complicity, they also tend to use the language of obligation. Complicity in injustice is itself a violation of justice. In order not to be unjust oneself, the protestors argue, one is obliged to join the boycott.¹⁹ Those who oppose a particular boycott commonly turn such arguments against the protestors by pointing to all the other ways in which they are complicit in injustice. The boycotters refuse to buy product A, but still buy product B, which is also problematic. They refuse to travel to region C to protest its policies, but they have not called for a similar boycott of region D, which is just as bad.²⁰

But how, exactly, are such consistency objections meant to work? Is the suggestion that it is wrong to end one form of complicity if one does not also end others? This is not a plausible claim, given how difficult (if not impossible) it is to avoid complicity from within a huge nation-state and a globalized economy. Why isn't a reduction in my participation in injustice a good thing? I suspect that the real intent of consistency objections is to question the sincerity of the boycotters, by suggesting that their true motivation is not a concern to avoid complicity, but instead something either less respectable (such as prejudice)²¹ or more aggressive.

Similar objections charge the protestors with hypocrisy. Why do they refuse to travel to region C because of its poor human rights record, when their own government is guilty of human rights abuses as well? Again, such objections are puzzling. From the fact that the boycotters' own home country is also unjust, it does not follow that he could travel to C without becoming complicit in their injustice as well, or that he should not avoid additional forms of complicity. Hypocrisy might, as with other forms of inconsistency, provide reason to doubt the protestor's account of his motives. But hypocrisy might also be a legitimate concern for other reasons. There is something unfair in insisting that other people abide by rules that one breaks oneself.²² It may imply that one is superior to other people. Perhaps the offensiveness of hypocrisy in these cases has more to do with the expression of moral condemnation contained in the boycott, than the avoidance of interaction. The protestor in our example may have good reason to avoid extending the scope of his complicity in injustice by declining to travel to region C, but his overt messages of protest may be better directed to his own state.

¹⁹ Petrow, "If My Husband is Pro-LGBT But Indulges His Chick-fil-A Cravings, Is He Waffling?"

²⁰ Martha Nussbaum, "Against Academic Boycott," *Dissent*, Summer Edition (2007): 30–36.

²¹ Opponents of the academic boycott of Israel often claim that the boycotters' true motivation is anti-Semitism (Paul Berman, "A Sane Face on an Old Insanity: Parsing the Anti-Israel Boycott," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Oct. 31, 2014). For a defense of the boycott, see Mohammed Abed, "In Defense of Academic Boycotts: A Reply to Martha Nussbaum," *Dissent*, Fall Edition (2007): 83–87.

²² R. Jay Wallace, "Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 38, no. 4 (2010): 307–341.

IV. BOYCOTTING AS SPEECH

Identifying boycotts as protests acknowledges that at least part of what a boycott does is send a critical message, wherein the boycotters declare their opposition to the actions of the target. Paradigmatic boycotts include verbal or written forms of communication, as leaders announce the collective action both to targets and the public at large. However, one might also interpret the function of the withdrawal or avoidance of interaction as a form of communication in itself. That is, the point of socially avoiding the target is to send a message of disapproval or condemnation to the target, the general public, or the state.

In the United States, the interpretation of boycotting practices as a form of speech has been central to their legal protection. Rather than being classified as conspiracy in restraint of trade in violation of the Sherman Antitrust Act, boycotts have been defended under the First Amendment.²³ As long as boycotters do not employ illegal means to implement the boycott, such as violence or libel, protecting speech has been prioritized over concern for trade.

Interpreting boycotting as a form of communication is also compatible with much contemporary philosophy, wherein actions of many kinds are viewed as having expressive content.²⁴ Unfair or abusive actions are interpreted as sending insulting messages about the value of the people wronged or harmed by the actions. By mistreating the victims, the wrongdoer expresses the view that the victims do not deserve better, that they are of low value. In turn, boycotting the wrongdoer is akin to answering objectionable speech with counter-speech. On both sides of this interaction, the message is expressed through behavior. What makes the second bit of behavior appropriate is, at least in part, the role it plays in correcting an unacceptable moral claim.

As a means of counter-speech, boycotting has some valuable features. It typically conveys both a moral critique and demand for change. It enables individual citizens to increase the reach of their speech by joining it with the speech of others. Boycotts can also symbolize a depth of earnestness. The more valuable the activity has been for the boycotters, the stronger

²³ For the legal debate about boycotting, see Michael C. Harper, "The Consumer's Emerging Right to Boycott: NAACP v. Claiborne Hardware and Its Implications for American Labor Law," *Yale Law Journal* 93, no. 3 (1984): 409–454; Elian Dashev, "Economic Boycotts as Harassment: The Threat to First Amendment Protected Speech in the Aftermath of *Doe V. Reed*," *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review* 45, no. 1 (2011): 207–254; and Theresa J. Lee, "Democratizing The Economic Sphere: A Case for the Political Boycott," *West Virginia Law Review* 115 (2012): 531–76.

²⁴ Examples of such views in moral philosophy in particular include Joel Feinberg, "The Expressive Function of Punishment," in *Doing and Deserving* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 1970); Jeffrie G. Murphy and Jean Hampton, *Forgiveness and Mercy* (New York: Cambridge, 1988); and Stephen Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect and Accountability* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

their moral message becomes. For example, the Montgomery Bus Boycott created significant inconveniences for the boycotters, who had limited access to other forms of transportation. Finally, boycotts (at least implicitly) invite a response from their target, which is considered a mark of respect.²⁵

On the other hand, one might question the rhetorical effectiveness of boycotts. Insofar as targets perceive boycotts as aggressive rather than simply expressive, the persuasive potential of the boycott may be undermined. In the case of cultural boycotts, specifically, protestors send a moral message to the target, but then curtail speech. The British Actors' Guild's refusal to allow BBC productions to be aired in apartheid South Africa was believed to be counterproductive by many, given the liberalizing potential of those productions.²⁶ Similarly, critics of academic boycotts argue that more speech is better than less. Indeed, a commitment to the value of free debate is central to the academic mission, which suggests that the bar for the permissibility of an academic boycott should be placed rather high.²⁷

In addition to these concerns about the effectiveness of boycotts as a form of counter-speech, we should also ask when counter-speech — and especially when public, condemnatory counter-speech — is morally appropriate. Are the values the protestors advocate legitimate and authoritative in this context? Does the targeted party deserve blame for transgressing these values? Furthermore, do the protestors have the standing to publicly express the criticism and the indignation that the target deserves? Do they have the standing to publicly demand that the target change its ways? Surely there are some instances of wrongdoing that are none of our business. Not just anyone, I would think, has the standing to call a person out for committing adultery. On the other hand, racial bias is an issue in which the broader moral community takes a legitimate interest, given that racism is a pernicious social ill with widespread consequences. Still, one might worry about the public condemnation of comments made in private, or about the public condemnation of private individuals as well as public figures.

Counter-speech deserves legal protection, but not everything that is legal is also morally justifiable. While Mill was a strong defender of free speech, he was worried about the power of morally condemnatory speech.²⁸ Alan Ryan argues that, for Mill, publicly declaring an action wrong is much more significant than calling it foolish or ugly because, "If we say that an action is wrong, we are committing ourselves to the view that the action is socially harmful, and we are invoking the aid of

²⁵ R. A. Duff, *Trials and Punishments* (New York: Cambridge, 1991), 47; and Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, p. 40–41, 256.

²⁶ William H. Shaw, "Boycotting South Africa," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 3 (1986): 59–72, at 66–67.

²⁷ Michael Davis, "Academic Boycotts," *Perspectives on the Professions* 15, no. 1 (1995): 1–2.

²⁸ John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. X, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), V.13.

public opinion in stopping that action."²⁹ According to this interpretation, the protestor reminds the wrongdoer that she is dependent on the community, perhaps subtly playing on a deep-seated fear of isolation.³⁰ In the age of social media, a single ill-considered post by a private citizen may be publicly rebuked by hundreds of thousands people.³¹ There is good reason to worry that the overall effect of such practices will be toward self-censorship rather than productive discourse about morality. Public moral condemnation is speech, but even when it is conveyed only by words, it is not merely speech. It is also a form of social pressure. In the case of boycotting, where the protestors send their message *by* doing something else, boycotting is never merely speech.

V. BOYCOTTS AS SOCIAL PUNISHMENT

Boycotts are often described as punitive.³² But what is involved in classifying boycotts as punishments? David Boonin's definition of punishment, which was developed for the legal context, provides a helpful starting point. He defines punishment as authorized, intentional, reprobative, retributive harming.³³ The harming is retributive in that it reacts to a perceived transgression, and targets the party who is believed to be responsible for that transgression. "Reprobative" harming indicates that the act of harming expresses disapproval. The harm is intentional in the sense that the punisher acts both knowingly and purposefully. The authorization condition, as it is applied in the legal context, allows us to distinguish between things like a criminal sentence that follows due process of law and mob violence. Given this definition of punishment, one might resist categorizing boycotts as punitive on a number of grounds.

First, one might deny that boycotting is a form of harming. Boycotting typically does set back the interests of the target, and so satisfies Joel Feinberg's conception of harm.³⁴ However, David Shoemaker suggests that the form of harming involved in punishment must deprive the target of something to which she "would otherwise have rights" had she not committed the wrong.³⁵ Think, for example, of imprisonment, which

²⁹ Alan Ryan, "John Stuart Mill's Art of Living," in *J.S. Mill on Liberty in Focus*, ed. John Gray and G. W. Smith (New York: Routledge, 1991), 162–68, at 166.

³⁰ Duff, *Trials and Punishments*, 39–71. One reason for viewing boycotts as morally distinct from boycotts is the absence of public moral condemnation in the former.

³¹ Jon Ronson, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), chap. 4.

³² Carmen-Maria Albrecht, Colin Campbell, Daniel Heinrich, and Manuela Lammel, "Exploring Why Consumers Engage in Boycotts: Toward a Unified Model," *Journal of Public Affairs* 13, no. 2, (2013): 180–89, at 183.

³³ David Boonin, *The Problem of Punishment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1–36.

³⁴ Joel Feinberg, *Harm to Others*, Vol. I, *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law* (New York: Oxford, 1987), chap. 1.

³⁵ David Shoemaker, "Blame and Punishment," in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, ed. D. J. Coates and N. A. Tognazzini (New York: Oxford, 2013), 100–118, at 115.

would count as a violation of a right to liberty in any other context, or punitive fines, which would count as theft. The problem with Shoemaker's stronger conception of harm, though, is that it leaves little room for distinctively social forms of punishment. The chief means by which ordinary people aim to make one another suffer for their misdeeds are behaviors that do not infringe on rights: voicing moral condemnation, displaying anger, ending relationships, emotionally withdrawing, and refusing to speak to the other. Unless we wish to deny the category of social punishment altogether, we should reject Shoemaker's stronger conception of harm.

A second reason one might resist categorizing boycotts as punishments highlights the authorization condition in Boonin's definition. Here, too, we seem to have a conception of punishment, developed with legal examples in mind, that leaves too little room for the category of social punishment. Outside the legal realm, parents may have authority over their children, and employers may have authority over their employees. But, for the most part, ordinary people stand in relationships of equality with one another. This is certainly true in the boycotts that are our topic here. Consumers, business-owners, athletes, artists, and scholars are equal members of the moral community.

So, it seems, we may either: accept the authorization condition in the definition of punishment and conclude that boycotts are not a form of punishment; deny that authority is necessary and allow for a robust notion of social punishment; or, as I would recommend, locate a distinctive form of authority in the moral community. In *The Second-Person Standpoint*, Stephen Darwall argues, "it is part of the very concept that moral obligations are what those to whom we are morally responsible have the authority to demand that we do."³⁶ For Darwall, the moral community is defined as "a community of mutually accountable equals."³⁷ The extent of this kind of accountability is often difficult to define. As I noted above, some wrongs are simply none of our business; we are not morally entitled to take people to task for them. But, in other cases, "We should be gratified to see the obligation enforced by anybody who had the power," as Mill puts it.³⁸ Our views about who has the authority to enforce morality in a particular case and who does not are frequently inarticulate or controversial, but we seem to assume that authority is required. For example, moral rules against hypocrisy suggest that someone who is guilty of a wrongful act,

³⁶ Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, 14. Mill writes, "We do not call anything wrong, unless we mean to imply that a person ought to be punished in some way or other for doing it; if not by law, by the opinion of his fellow-creatures; if not by opinion, by the reproaches of his own conscience. . . . It is a part of the notion of Duty in every one of its forms, that a person may rightfully be compelled to fulfil it" (Mill, *Utilitarianism*, V.14).

³⁷ Darwall, *The Second-Person Standpoint*, 35.

³⁸ Mill, *Utilitarianism*, V.13. While *On Liberty* demonstrates Mill's concern about the overuse of social sanctioning, and its extension into purely self-regarding matters, he does acknowledge that social punishments can be appropriate responses to injustice.

and who has not made proper amends, loses his standing to hold other people accountable for the same sort of transgression. This implies that, absent such guilt, he would have had standing. By positing a symmetrical (rather than hierarchical) form of authority in the moral community, we may retain the authorization condition in our definition of punishment. Social punishments, like legal punishments, can be described as cases of authoritative, intentional, reprobative, retributive harming.

Perhaps paradigmatic boycotting activities qualify as cases of social punishment after all. These boycotts are plausibly described as cases of intentional, reprobative harming. They are responses to perceived injustice or wrongdoing. The targets are presumably meant to experience the withdrawal of cooperation or interaction as detrimental to their interests. Furthermore, boycotters likely believe themselves to have the authority to intentionally and purposefully inflict social harms.

Whether boycotters really have the required sort of authority in any particular case depends on a number of factors, including: the boycotters' relationship to the wrong (for example, are they victims of the wrong, have they been complicit in it, or are they mere bystanders?), the nature of the wrong (for example, some wrongs permit the interference of bystanders, others do not), the quality of the evidence of wrongdoing and blameworthiness, and the nature of the social harm being imposed. In the case of boycotting, the harm includes both the loss of the value of the interaction and the unpleasantness of being subjected to public moral condemnation.

How significant are accusations of inconsistency when we conceive of boycotting as social punishment? In the legal system, to the extent that criminal punishment is inconsistent across similar cases within a single jurisdiction, we have *prima facie* reason to regard it as unfair. However, this may not be the case for social punishment. While legal jurisdiction is quite stable, the standing to engage in social punishment may well vary depending on the particulars of the case. As a result, one might be permitted to engage in social punishment in one case, but not in another case involving a similar kind of wrong. Furthermore, for the punishers, applying punishment may be costly (participating in a boycott is inconvenient, alternative products or services may be more expensive, and so on) or risky (given the possibility of a backlash). Unlike the state, social punishers are volunteers in the cause of justice. So, demanding too much consistency may be unreasonable.

Other factors that would be relevant to justifying the permissibility of boycotting as a form of social punishment include considerations of proportionality. The ethics of punishing requires that the harm inflicted on the wrongdoer not exceed the harmfulness or wrongfulness of the original offense. Proportionality requirements are notoriously difficult to make precise. Significantly damaging someone's livelihood as punishment for a small donation to an objectionable, though politically mainstream, cause seems like a clear example of disproportionality. Boycotters may be willing

to accept the principle of proportionality; the problem is that the intensity of a boycott is hard to manage. Organizers publicly announce the boycott and then, especially in the age of social media, they generally have little control over how many people join in or when those participants resume relations with the target. Boycotts can be harder to end than to begin.

Another issue for boycotting as a form of social punishment raises the problem of innocents. Consumer boycotts may harm low-level employees to a greater extent than bosses, who are likely responsible for adopting the objectionable practices in the first place.³⁹ These low-level employees are not apt targets of punishment. Academic, sporting, and tourism boycotts, which are frequently designed as protests to governmental policies, also penalize people who do not set policy.⁴⁰ These could be interpreted as cases of collective punishment for collective guilt, but such categories are highly problematic.

Both the issue of proportionality and the problem of innocents can serve as objections to socially punishing through boycotts. But they may instead suggest that boycotts should not be categorized as punishments. Let us revisit Boonin's characterization of punishments as retributive.⁴¹ While he uses this term to mean merely that the harm is imposed on a perceived transgressor in response to the transgression, one might also claim that punishment is retributive in a stronger sense. One might argue that a measure is not really a punishment unless at least part of its aim is to hold the wrongdoer responsible for the past wrongful action. Punishment may, of course, also have forward-looking aims, such as deterring future wrongdoing or morally educating the guilty party. But unless at least part of the point is to hold the wrongdoer responsible for the past (say, by delivering his just deserts), one might reasonably doubt whether we have a case of punishment.

If we think of punishment as retributive in this stronger sense, as serving a backward-looking aim, then the category of punishment once again looks like a poor fit, at least for many paradigmatic cases of boycotts. Protestors frequently approach their targets first with an announcement that a boycott is being planned. If the target agrees to change the behaviors that the protestors find objectionable, then the protestors are typically happy to call off the boycott before it begins. In other words, boycotts are often purely forward-looking; they aim at getting the targets to change their ways. Since future good action alone does not wipe out negative desert for past wrongdoing, retribution is not a significant aim of the boycotters.

³⁹ Claudia Mills, "Should We Boycott Boycotts?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 27, no. 3 (1996): 136–48, at 139.

⁴⁰ Nussbaum, "Against Academic Boycott," 31.

⁴¹ Boonin, *The Problem of Punishment*, 17–21.

In other cases, however, boycott participants continue avoiding the target even after the group's demands have been met, which may indicate that they do have a retributive purpose. Boycotting campaigns sparked by isolated acts of wrongdoing might also be socially punitive. Since the problem cannot be resolved simply by a change in policy going forward, boycotters may focus their energies on delivering just deserts.

VI. BOYCOTTS AS SOCIAL COERCION

A better interpretation for many paradigmatic cases of boycotting may be social coercion rather than social punishment. Here, we pay special attention to the fact that the boycotters typically make demands regarding the target's future behavior. They enforce these demands by applying material and emotional forms of pressure.

Robert Nozick's classic account of coercion, formulated here by Scott Anderson, holds that:

P coerces *Q* if and only if:

1. *P* aims to keep *Q* from choosing to perform action *A*;
2. *P* communicates a claim to *Q*;
3. *P*'s claim indicates that if *Q* performs *A*, then *P* will bring about some consequence that would make *Q*'s *A*-ing less desirable to *Q* than *Q*'s not *A*-ing;
4. *P*'s claim is credible to *Q*;
5. *Q* does not do *A*;
6. Part of *Q*'s reason for not doing *A* is to lessen the likelihood that *P* will bring about the consequence announced in (3).⁴²

Where *P* are the boycotters, *Q* is the target, and action *A* is an ongoing behavior that is perceived to be unjust, this analysis fits many examples of boycotting quite well. By avoiding or withdrawing from interaction or cooperation with the target, the boycotters aim to make continuing with the objectionable behavior unattractive to the target.

Nozick's account uses "coercion" as a success term. A boycott counts as coercion only if the target does in fact alter its behavior in line with the activists' demands (at least in part) as a consequence of the social withdrawal. Where the boycott is unsuccessful, we can label the boycott as "coercive" but not "coercion." Adding the modifier "social" to "coercive/coercion" indicates that the means that *P* uses in order to create undesired consequences for the target are ones that are legally permissible and at

⁴² Scott Anderson, "Coercion," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta (Stanford, CA: CSLI, 2011), 10; and Robert Nozick, "Coercion," in *Philosophy, Science, and Method: Essays in Honor of Ernest Nagel*, ed. S. Morgenbesser, P. Suppes, and M. White (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1969), 441–45.

the disposal of ordinary persons or groups. Holding a gun to your roommate's head is not *socially* coercive; threatening to move out unless he cleans up his act is.

While threats of punishment are coercive, not all cases of coercive pressure are also cases of punishment. Interpreting boycotts as socially coercive rather than socially punitive may help boycotters avoid some of the objections noted in the last section. While punishment may only be imposed on perceived wrongdoers, it is not the case that coercion may only be applied to the guilty. *Threats* of punishment (a form of coercion) are delivered to both the guilty and the innocent; they aim to deter future wrongdoing. Similarly, it is widely agreed that punishment may not exceed negative desert; but the point of social coercion is to achieve change, not to deliver just deserts. Further, punishment accumulates over time. A small punishment over a long period adds up, eventually becoming proportionate to the wrong or harm and rendering more punishment inappropriate. But a small amount of coercive pressure might remain appropriate to the issue in question, no matter how long it has been applied. Here is an example: A teenager shows up drunk at a community center and gets into an ugly shouting match with the director. The teen is, alternatively, banned from the center as punishment or else, as a form of coercion, until she apologizes. Where we interpret her social exclusion as punishment, it is appropriate only for a length of time that would make it proportional to the wrong. A lifetime ban, for example, seems excessive and the director would be at fault for imposing such a measure. However, if we read the social exclusion as a form of coercion, meant to press the teenager to apologize, then if she never does apologize and is never again allowed into the club, then the fault is her own and not the director's. An apology is not too much to demand in this case, and making entry conditional on the apology is reasonable.

So social coercion can be distinguished in various ways from social punishment. But surely there is still something akin to a proportionality requirement in cases where harmful forms of social pressure are applied. The severity of the pressure applied to the target can be excessive compared to the good being pursued by the coercer. In our example, a total, neighborhood-wide shunning campaign to coerce an apology from the teenager would be far too much. Again, how such a proportionality requirement could be made precise is a difficult question, one I am not in a position to answer.

More generally, one might object to the use of social coercion in enforcing justice or morality. R. A. Duff suggests that using social coercion to enforce moral behavior is problematic because the wrongdoer is offered the wrong sort of reasons to improve her behavior.⁴³ At best, the target is offered prudential reasons to behave morally. At worst, the coercive

⁴³ Duff, *Trials and Punishments*, 45–46.

measures sidestep the wrongdoer's rational capabilities altogether, triggering emotions like fear, and amounting to a kind of "conditioning or aversion therapy."⁴⁴ In Duff's view, offering the agent the wrong sort of reasons rather than the right sort of reasons fails to properly respect her as a moral agent.

A defender of boycotts may reply that the prudential reasons are accompanied by moral reasons. Coercive boycotts are also a form of speech. The boycotters communicate moral objections. They may prefer that the target change her behavior for the correct, moral reasons. However, in case she does not, they provide prudential reasons as well. Furthermore, one might argue that the prudential reasons boycotters provide to their targets are not inappropriate or disrespectful at all. Maintaining social cooperation, cultivating a good reputation in the community, and preserving the goodwill of one's fellows are perfectly legitimate (though not always decisive) reasons for guiding one's behaviors.⁴⁵ Such concerns are prudential but they can also be seen as moral. Attending to profits is an appropriate, even if purely prudential, reason for a business to change its manufacturing or marketing practices. There are limits, of course. Targets should resist letting such concerns lead them into behaviors that they sincerely believe are wrong or that threaten their integrity. Remember, the boycotters' views may be mistaken. But the reasons social coercion provides are not necessarily the wrong sorts of reasons. So boycotters are not necessarily failing to respect their targets by presenting such reasons to them.

Whether any particular use of social coercion is justifiable depends, of course, on a number of factors. One needs a good reason to engage in social coercion. It is not something that one may do simply for one's own amusement, even when the means of coercion are merely critical speech or emotional coldness. In the cases of boycotting at issue here, social coercion aims to enforce justice or morality. Whether that aim is sufficient will depend on a number of factors, including the legitimacy of the norm being enforced, the significance of the moral norm in comparison with the severity of the pressure applied, and the standing of the coercers to enforce that norm on this target. In addition to these moral issues, we should not underestimate the significance of having the facts straight. Boycotts carry risks that parties who are poorly informed about underlying empirical or policy issues (such as, whether one manufacturing practice or another is better for the environment) will heavily influence outcomes.⁴⁶ The fact that individuals frequently join boycotting campaigns in response to emotionally charged appeals, having done little or no independent research, increases these risks.

Another crucial issue involves the likelihood of success. Purposefully constraining another person's options through social means can be justified.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁵ Mills, "Should We Boycott Boycotts?" 140.

⁴⁶ An anonymous reviewer for this journal raised this point.

But where the end is unlikely to be achieved, the justification for social coercion is undermined. Social coercion in general and boycotts in particular often backfire. Targets become more recalcitrant to change. The publicity brings new supporters to their cause.

As with our other interpretations, the consistency objections that are so commonly made in debates about boycotting continue to be of limited importance when we categorize boycotting as a form of social coercion. Activists often do boycott one target, while neglecting to boycott other, similar targets. But, far from delegitimizing the boycott, this seems like a sensible strategy. Because boycotts involve costs and risks, because the permissibility of coercion depends on its likelihood of success, and because success often rides on the ability to catch and hold the public's attention, it is perfectly reasonable for activists to pick their battles.⁴⁷

VII. CONCLUSION

This essay has presented different interpretations of what one is doing by organizing or participating in a boycott. I have limited my focus to consumer and cultural boycotts that are collective actions, organized and carried out by private citizens, and aimed at groups or individuals who are perceived to be guilty of injustice or wrongdoing. All boycotts in this class function as speech, specifically as protests, whereby they communicate disapproval and a demand for better future behavior. In contrast, the other interpretations—of boycotts as efforts to avoid complicity, as social punishments, and as social coercion—fit some cases but not others. For any particular case, one of the apt interpretations may be more significant than another.

Our classification of boycotts into these action-types should take into account what the protestors take themselves to be doing. However, the protestors' intentions do not fully settle the matter. For one thing, the group's intentions may not be fully articulate. For another, different, more or less influential members of the boycotting group may have different intentions. More importantly, the boycotters' self-understanding may impermissibly ignore the consequences that they create for the target, or how the target reasonably interprets their actions. These concerns are especially important in cases where the target is an individual or small group, rather than, say, a multinational corporation. What is intended as a form of moral communication or an attempt to avoid complicity can destroy a small business owner's livelihood. She will reasonably interpret the action as punitive. On the other side of the scale, too, it seems sensible to take the effects of the boycott into account when considering how best

⁴⁷ The recent success in reducing the prevalence of the Confederate flag demonstrates the significance of timing. Debates about the flag have taken place for many years, but within days of the 2015 massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, several major retailers, including WalMart and Amazon, agreed to stop selling products displaying the flag. Within weeks, the flag was removed from the grounds of the South Carolina statehouse.

to classify the action. Where there is little chance that a boycott will affect the bottom line of a huge corporation, viewing it as counter-speech is preferable to viewing it as coercive. The coercive pressure applied is too small to be morally significant. In another case, the boycotters may aim to punish a business by inflicting financial harm on it, but instead wind up helping the target by providing the business with free publicity, which leads to increased sales. Here, the boycott fails as punishment, although it might succeed in enabling the protestors to avoid complicity.

As we saw in Sections II-VI, different conceptions of the action of boycotting raise subtly different challenges to justifying the choice to organize or participate in a boycott. Avoiding complicity is always permissible unless complicity is the lesser evil. Counter-speech is also relatively easy to justify, if one takes proper care to get the facts straight and defend reasonable views. However, where speech morphs into social pressure, questions of authority and proportionality arise. Engaging in social punishment may require a stronger degree of authority but remain justifiable, even when it has little chance of deterring future wrongdoing. On the other hand, socially coercive actions may require less authority but a greater chance of success in order to be permissible.

The relationship between categorizing and justifying boycotts also emerges when we consider when and why it could be appropriate to end a boycott. Coercion must end when demands are met, or else it becomes something else, such as punishment. Coercion also loses its justification when its force becomes excessive compared to the good at which it aims, or when it has no hope of achieving its end. Punishment can continue even after the target has mended its ways, but must end when adding more harm would make the penalty disproportionate to the offense. One is no longer avoiding complicity by refusing cooperation with the target when the target has given up its unjust ways. Counter-speech too may lose much of its point when the target stops asserting unreasonable moral claims; on the other hand, one might claim that there is nothing wrong with continuing to speak, through one's actions, about past wrongdoing.

This essay raises more questions than it answers. I have offered no definitive method for categorizing particular boycotts into the four action-types. Nor have I given the reader any reason to believe that there are only four categories. Similarly, my discussion of the justification of these four ways of responding to perceived wrongdoing has uncovered additional moral concepts that need elucidation, including the authority to socially punish and the proportionality of social coercion. However, I hope to have shown: first, that boycotts are morally complex; and second, that their justification depends not only on what boycotters are protesting but also what they are doing by socially avoiding the target.