

Investigate before you boycott

Corporations, like individuals, should be given benefit of the doubt, argues philosopher

Montreal, Quebec – June 3 – Consumers have a moral duty to investigate any company they decide to boycott, says a Calgary philosopher.

Travis Dumsday is a PhD candidate at the University of Calgary's Philosophy Department. He argues, in a paper a paper presented at the 2010 Congress for the Humanities and Social Sciences taking place at Montreal's Concordia University, that consumers have the same ethical and moral duties towards corporations they have towards human beings. And for that reason, he says consumers need to do due diligence by researching companies they decide to boycott or otherwise protest.

That includes exercising the principle of charity, which says that if someone is accused of something, you start by giving the benefit of the doubt. Dumsday says his interest in the topic grew out of his own experience as a student, when he was invited to join in a boycott against Pepsi and PepsiCo products because of the company's activities in Burma.

He says he came to feel that by joining a boycott immediately, he would be shirking his moral duty to give PepsiCo the benefit of the doubt until he had done some research.

"If there's a genuinely heinous activity and the accusation comes from a credible source, there may not be an obligation for the consumer to do more research," he says. "But outside of situations like this, most of the time it would be unethical for most consumers to participate in a boycott campaign because they are going to lack sufficient information."

Dumsday adds that consumers need to assess several things before joining a boycott or attacking a corporation.

The first is the nature of the charge: If a company is accused, say, of deliberately poisoning its products, and they can find evidence of it, then there would be a reason to boycott.

But some boycott campaigns require the consumer to adopt a particular perspective. You can disagree with a call to boycott animal fur if you believe killing animals for meat and fur is not morally wrong.

"Then it's not a matter of trying to do factual research, it's a matter of deciding 'What's my moral position on this issue?'"

But either way, he says, consumers should take the time to think things through – and exercise due diligence.

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practitioners, and policy makers to share groundbreaking research and examine the most important social and cultural issues of the day. Montréal's Concordia University is the host of Congress 2010, May 28 to June 4.

The Congress program includes original research from across disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, providing a great collection of expert sources and innovative story leads. Contact the Congress Media room for assistance connecting with researchers at Congress.

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