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Ethical Action Requires Thoughtful Execution

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In the wake of the Gulf oil spill, there has been a call to boycott BP products; including gasoline. This call is understandable and reflects a justified anger with BP. Additionally, it appears that one of the best methods to punish a company is by way of its profits. However, I believe this boycott is wrong-headed.

The boycott fails to take into account that BP gas stations are often franchises. In many cases, actions taken to punish BP actually have a negative impact on local franchise owners who had no *direct* responsibility for the spill or its aftermath. Organizers of this boycott (for example, see the “Boycott BP” Facebook page) also fail to recognize that the gas sold at a BP station is not always produced by BP (for example, see the U.S. Energy Information Administration <http://www.eia.doe.gov/>). BP is fairly insulated from the boycott.

Thus, I make the following claim: to act ethically entails more than having the right kind of intentions. Ethical action also requires thoughtful execution. What does it mean to be informed enough to act ethically? While I cannot offer a definitive account of informed action, I will try to offer some initial guidelines.

The BP boycott example shows why being informed is an important component of ethical action. People likely participate in boycotts for several reasons. For some, a boycott offers catharsis. When people are angry at the actions a company has taken, a boycott vents that anger. Other people participate in boycotts for what we might call “distancing” reasons. For such individuals, it is important to distance themselves from a company; regardless of the effect such a distance will actually have on it. But I suspect that the primary reason people engage in boycotts is to create a tangible impact on the targeted company (e.g. to punish or cause change.). In BP’s case, the boycott does not communicate a message that the company has not already received. Insofar as efficacy is the goal of the boycott, I believe it fails.

Being informed extends beyond concerns of efficacy. Uninformed action can also be harmful. Those boycotting BP punish gas station owners with no direct input into Gulf drilling operations. Any sustained boycott is more than simply an inconvenience for local business owners and, by extension, their communities. When we act out of ignorance, we also risk harming our own welfare and moral development.

The following stages can be a starting point for more informed action in any situation.

Stage 1: Initial Questions

It is essential to keep an open mind, and useful to consider some preliminary questions to frame a situation and our response to it. These questions include:

What are some possible responses to this situation? What is being proposed? Who and what will be affected by the action proposed? How? How are the affected parties connected to the original problem? What capacity do they, in turn, have to rectify the situation? Why am I doing this? What is the goal of the action? What additional impacts might this action have?

These questions may seem obvious, yet well-intentioned people can and do fail to reflect on them before acting.

Stage 2: Research

When considering something like a boycott, it is important to have an understanding of not only the company in question but also the industry it is a part of. What are the positive and negative impacts of that industry? Does the industry provide vital services? Locally? Nationally? Globally? What is your connection to the industry? These questions highlight a general strategy: seek to understand a situation's context and complexity.

It is also important to consider where your information is coming from. Wikipedia, for all its usefulness, should not mark the beginning AND end of one's research. Instead, look at a variety of sources: trade publications, various news outlets, credible experts, etc. College students, in particular, have access to a wide range of experts on campus who can provide meaningful insight and guide further research.

Stage 3: Connections

Finally, develop a thoughtful course of action based on what has been learned in Stages 1 and 2. What is the most effective course of action? What will be the negative impacts of the action? Will these impacts affect innocent people? If so, how can they be mitigated or eliminated?

Knowing when one is informed enough to act ethically is a challenge: deliberating endlessly is not an option. Figuring out when enough is enough is one of the most difficult problems to solve, but this does not excuse us from trying to define the threshold and from acting in an effective and responsible way.

The aftermath of the spill is one of many complex problems facing us right now. Addressing each will require more than simply a desire to make the world a better place.