Moral Consumers and the Moral Economy

Mansour Omeira, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland
Valéry Bezençon, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

The concept of moral consumer is typically understood as encompassing those individuals who engage in moral (ethical) consumption. Drawing on multiple disciplines the paper proposes a broader understanding. It develops theoretical propositions about what and who moral consumers are, and about their interface with the moral economy.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/1024786/volumes/v45/NA-45

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Moral Consumers and the Moral Economy

Mansour Omeira, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland
Valéry Bezençon, University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Moral consumers are typically understood as those individuals who engage in moral (ethical) consumption (Komarova Loureiro et al. 2016). In the current paper, we develop theoretical propositions regarding moral consumers and their interface with the moral economy. After considering two aspects of moral persons, as moral agents and as moral subjects, we identify a first pathway of the moral consumer – moral economy interface, from consumers to the economy. We then argue that moral consumers include both natural and legal persons, and identify a second pathway of the interface, from the economy to consumers, before concluding with research implications.

Consumers are moral, in the sense of having moral personhood, independently of whether their consumption is deemed moral or immoral. Someone with moral personhood can be seen from two aspects: as moral agent and as moral subject (Gallagher 2007). As moral agents, consumers can take responsibility for their actions. As moral subjects or subjects of moral worth, they have rights and are owed respect. Is every moral agent a moral subject, and is every moral subject a moral agent? Some moral agents are not moral subjects. Humans forced into slavery conditions are moral agents who are denied the status of moral subjects. Some moral subjects, like biodiversity or culture, are not moral agents. Moral subjects who are also moral agents can respond to moral transgressions (Xie et al. 2014), such as product harm crises (Lu et al. 2016), through retaliation.

P1: Ethical (moral) marketing involves the recognition that consumers are both moral agents and moral subjects

P2: Moral transgressions entail undermining the status of one or more beings as moral subject(s)

P3: Moral agency can be exercised over oneself (e.g. ethical consumption) or over others (e.g. retaliation)

P4: The morality of consumption, and of the economy more generally, is multidimensional

P5: The difference between market economy and moral economy relates to the value(s) under consideration

P6: The struggle between market economy and moral economy relates to value conflict and can be investigated as such

What kind of persons are moral consumers? The typical focus is on the final consumption of individuals (natural persons). From a macro perspective, final consumption is undertaken by institutional units such as households or the government (European Commission et al. 2009). In addition to final consumption, intermediate consumption during production can be investigated. Can we consider legal entities as moral persons? There has been a growing recognition that corporations have a mind, and alongside it the notion of corporate crime has increasingly featured in legislation (Tombs 1999).

P7: Both final and intermediate consumers are moral consumers

P8: Moral personhood encompasses both natural and legal persons

We have already noted that consumers can respond to the moral transgressions of enterprises. Yet such moral transgressions can also transform consumer moral norms. A prominent example relates to the 2007 financial crisis, which came as people engaged in unethical behavior to receive bigger pay (Lewis et al. 2010). The pay structure focused on bonuses, which were unequally distributed (Crotty 2009). A bonus structure means that a certain pay is contingent on the achievement of set goals; such goal-setting increases the likelihood of engaging in unethical behavior (Schweitzer et al. 2004). A combination of income and status inequality and variable pay is likely to increase moral transgressions made for higher monetary gain. The highly visible status rewards and non-punishment of such perceived transgressions generates a social norm that challenges existing moral norms, and may eventually lead to habit change. Our approach provides a new interpretation of the finding that consumers assign less blame to people who morally transgressed if the transgression was to gain a large enough sum of money (Xie et al. 2014). That is, the outcome of the value conflict within a person can be tipped by the changing incentive structures and related evolution in social norms around her.

P9: Repeated exposure to the non-punishment of perceived moral transgressions modifies moral norms

P10: Changes in the incentive structures of the market economy can alter how consumers resolve their value conflicts

Our investigation into what it means to be a moral consumer has broad implications for furthering the research agenda on morality in and around markets. When are consumers not moral agents? The delimitations are important, including for accountability purposes in cases of consumer rage (Fullerton and Punj 2004). Who (or what) is or is not to be considered a moral subject? Shedding light on the
matter has major implications, including about whether to eat animals (Loughnan et al. 2014), or to protect cultural heritage (Vlasic and Turku 2016). Our analysis has also identified opportunities for research into the morality of corporate consumers, such as how consumers treat corporations as moral subjects. Taking corporations as moral agents, interesting questions include moral disengagement (Eriksson and Svensson 2016), risk-taking and the diffusion of responsibility (Wallach et al. 1964), and whistle-blowing (Dozier and Miceli 1985).

REFERENCES


