
DEFENDING THE NRR FROM CHUNG'S “WHEN TO LIMIT THE MARKET”

Gregory Robson*

AN INVITED RESPONSE TO Victor Chung (2026), “When to Limit The Market.”

Bus Ethics J Rev 13(6): 32–37,

<https://doi.org/10.12747/j1m06>

ABSTRACT

Victor Chung (2026) thoughtfully challenges my 2023 argument for the “Normative Representativeness Requirement” (NRR). According to the NRR, a successful moral objection to a system of political economy (e.g., shareholder capitalism, stakeholder capitalism) must both address a representative sample of firms and show that the sample is unethical overall. These conditions are difficult to meet for objections to highly complex socioeconomic systems, and critics often ignore them. In this Response, I describe the NRR and show why Chung’s argument, though interesting, relies on both a mischaracterization and questionable focal cases.

IN AN INTERESTING recent Commentary, Victor Chung (2026: 32) targets the view that “a moral objection to the market is successful only if we can show that there is [1] a representative sample of business activity [2] engaging in unethical behaviour” (see Robson 2023: 217). The two conditions constitute what I (Robson 2023) call the “Normative Representativeness Requirement” (NRR)—though, as we will see, the NRR is meant to apply to whole systems of political economy, not necessarily markets as such or particular markets. After praising parts of my argument, Chung (34) says: “What I disagree with, however, is Robson’s central claim that ‘no objection can

* University of Notre Dame.

Email: grobson@nd.edu

Discuss this commentary at <https://wp.me/p2x7zx-MN>

Cite as: *Bus Ethics J Rev* 13(7) (2026): 38–43, <https://doi.org/10.12747/j1m07>

succeed without meeting these [the NRR's] conditions (2023: 206).'" In this Response, I will clear away mischaracterization and then address Chung's thoughtful counterargument.

The mischaracterization

To begin with, I do not argue that any objection to markets themselves must meet the NRR. My focus is instead on objections to whole systems of political economy. The main scholarly target of Robson (2023) is Anderson (2017), especially in regard to corporate governance and managerial practices. I examine criticism of what I call "the profit system": U.S.-style shareholder capitalism that includes *both* markets and firms. I write (Robson 2023: 205, *et passim*):

By the "profit system" I will mean, more precisely: A decentralized political economic system of legally backed voluntary exchange in which firms, usually hierarchically structured, acquire, use, develop, and distribute resources while competing with each other for profit.

Firms in the profit system are not markets but more like socialist islands. They lack a price mechanism and allocate resources centrally, making decisions from the top (C-suite) down. In fact, firms remove resources *from* a market, transform them, and then put them back into the market for sale, usually to make a profit (see Robson 2027: Part III on firms' full priorities).

The focal questions of Robson (2023: 207; emphasis added) are: "How, then, can one morally diagnose a *system* of political economy? How can one successfully develop a system-level moral objection?" In developing the NRR for objections to whole systems of political economy, I claim (2023: 206) that

This argument [for the NRR] is at once modest and radical—*modest* because its main aim is just to explicate the conditions of a conclusive objection to the profit system, and consider whether some leading accounts meet these conditions; and *radical* because it will show that *no* objection can succeed without meeting these conditions, and, perhaps, none does[.]

Thus, *pace* Chung's account of my view, I do not claim that all objections to *markets* must satisfy the NRR, but only objections to the "the profit system" (Robson 2023: 206; italics added).

Chung's concerns about the morality of markets

Even though this critique is off target in its focus on markets rather than the whole, firm-based capitalistic system, Chung's concerns about the morality of markets are well worth considering. Let's limit our subsequent focus then, *arguendo*, to markets instead of the full set of markets, firms, economic agents, and formal and informal laws, rules, and norms that jointly constitute a political-economic system such as capitalism.

Chung correctly interprets (33) my argument as focused on moral diagnosis (see Robson 2023: 207). His strategy (34) is to try to refute the NRR by arguing for two focal objections to specific markets that succeed without meeting the NRR. Let's take these intuition-eliciting cases *seriatim*.

1. *Kidney market*. Chung (33–34) writes:

Let us suppose that a market for kidneys could be feasibly designed [feasibly emerge?], but that in the only feasible market open to us there remains a persistent minority of egregiously unethical transactions. Suppose that the costs of enforcement are too high to prevent these unethical transactions from occurring, and that this persistent minority can only be prevented by adopting a state-administered kidney matching system, which happens to perform just as well as a market in terms of allocating kidneys . . . one can still say that there is something wrong with this kidney market, even if unethical behaviour is not pervasive. . . . the non-market arrangement does at least as well as the market arrangement, and the only difference—by construction—is that the market arrangement contains a persistent minority of egregiously unethical transactions. So, contrary to what the NRR requires, a moral objection to a market might succeed even if it does not address a representative sample of business activity. A small problem is still a problem.

Here we get an argument with the following basic structure:

P1: There is a specific market (in kidneys).

P2: The market includes cases of egregious ethical violations.

C: Contra NRR, this market could in principle be morally objectionable.

Let us grant that we can (rationally) morally object to *such sales*. Further, even if no one ever objected, this market would still be morally objectionable. (In fact, the situation is morally worse than

Chung lets on, insofar as “egregious unethicity,” even if rare, is no “small problem” at all.)

Notice, though, that to object in *Kidney market* is not to object to (a) whole systems of kidney markets themselves. In the example, we need not object even to (b) *this* kidney market per se, but only to the particular (c) way in which (part of) this specific market operates—the egregious part. Notice further: Were the bad actors in this market removed, the objection would disappear, but the market *itself* would remain. Consequently, we are left objecting not to (b), much less (a), but only to (c). I conclude that the objection in *Kidney market* is not to a market system per se, much less U.S.-style capitalism itself, but to a specific set of persons acting in particular, contingent ways. And just as we should not reject whole school systems because some students engage in unruly behavior to the point that they should go to the principal’s office or even be expelled, we should not reject entire kidney markets because some of their participants act unethically some of the time, even egregiously so. No damage to the NRR here.

2. Fire brigade. Chung’s second case, though also interesting, involves (only) a potential market. This market, we learn, *could* include a private fire brigade or a public fire brigade. Chung (35) observes:

It might simply be the case that a public fire brigade would capitalize upon economies of scale and avoid transaction costs that a series of private fire brigades could not do, thus running more efficiently and – importantly – saving more lives. So, a moral objection might succeed even if there is absolutely no unethical business activity in the market.

These are merely proposals, and there is no objection here to a market system itself; for, again, there is no market. Even so, suppose, *arguendo*, that this potential market will certainly eventually exist. Chung (35) stipulates that the public brigade will have better results; it will save more lives. I reply: important point, wrong implication. For we have here a claim about the *whole* provision of fire services by either a public brigade or a set of private brigades. But if we know, *ex ante*, that the public brigade is more efficient, has lower transaction costs, and would save more lives than the private brigade, then we are indeed morally entitled to favor it, and object to its competitor, under the NRR; after all, by stipulation, we know these features of the entire market. Similarly, if we know that American-style capitalism saves or

protects far more lives than Soviet-style socialism, we can favor the former under the NRR. No problem here. Chung and I agree. But this is because a reliable generalization meeting the NRR has been inserted at the start.

Now the main point of the NRR is that entire political-economic systems are staggeringly complex, and we need a representative sample of their activity if we are to land a successful objection to a whole *system* of political economy (rather than an objection to particular members, groups, institutions, or activities). Even sophisticated systematic objections often glide by or ignore much of this complexity and fail fully to satisfy the NRR. Consider the example of criticizing Walmart, a firm with over two million employees. Successfully (systematically) criticizing this enormous, complex organization, and not merely some of its members or operations, is far more difficult than many realize; criticizing it *and* the whole system of millions more firms is, *a fortiori*, extremely difficult. As I say (Robson 2023: 215),

it is not clear that, at a distance and with statistics, we can fully describe, reliably enough for present purposes, a single large firm like Walmart, much less the entire, far larger and more diverse, profit system of millions of firms that Anderson's criticism targets.

The issue I (Robson 2023: 206, emphasis added) address is that

most opponents of the profit system pursue a cumulative strategy: They present considerable evidence of particular cases (or kinds of cases) of unethical firm behavior (e.g., rights violations or bad consequences of firms or markets) and then move quickly from adducing this evidence to endorsing general judgments about the profit system itself.

Chung's criticism seems similarly to fall short as a reply to the NRR, even as (we agree) it arguably hits the target with respect to the immorality of particular features of particular markets.

Conclusion

Now if most criticisms of the profit system do not satisfy the NRR, can a criticism ever satisfy it? In Part III of Robson (2027), I develop an account of how an adequate understanding of the human condition can help us to identify defensible objections to shareholderism, stakeholderism, and other approaches to the systems of firms we find within and across capitalistic democracies. Readers who find the NRR

compelling might find there helpful fodder for an account of when and how it can be satisfied.

Received 10 August 2026 / Posted 23 October 2026

REFERENCES

- Anderson, E. 2017. ***Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It)***. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400887781>
- Chung, V. 2026. "When to Limit the Market." *Bus Ethics J Rev* 13(6): 32–37, <https://doi.org/10.12747/j1m06>
- Robson, G. 2027. ***True Prosperity: People and Profit in the Technological Age***. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, <https://www.cambridge.org/us/universitypress/subjects/management/business-ethics/true-prosperity-people-and-profit-technological-age?format=PB&isbn=9781047770071>
- Robson, G. 2023. "How to Object to the Profit System (and How Not to)." *J Bus Ethics* 188: 205–219, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-022-05317-5>