Are there “Proper” Motivations for Market Transactions?

Free markets require voluntary exchange between buyers and sellers of goods and services. Are there situations where people should be forced to buy products they don’t want to buy? Are there situations where people should be forced to sell products they don’t want to sell? The use of force makes markets less free. Is that good or bad?

Take an individual laborer. Should she be forced to work in an occupation against her will or for a wage for which she does not voluntarily work? This practice used to be legal. Slavery existed in the US and some laborers were indeed forced to work against their will. Slavery ended not because it was unprofitable to slave owners, but because society recognized forced labor as immoral.

Is the right to choose one’s employer absolute? If a person decides to bake their neighbor a cake, they choose to work for their neighbor. By baking a cake for their neighbor do they forfeit their right to decide who else they bake a cake for? That is, if a person agrees to work for one person, should society force them to work for everyone else under the same contract?

Does the motivation of the baker matter? If a person bakes a cake for their neighbor to welcome them to the neighborhood and charges no money, should they be required to bake a cake for every neighbor at no cost? Is it fair for some neighbors to have free cake if the free cake is not made available for all? If the baker charges the neighbor for the ingredients only because the cake is going to be used at a charity cake walk, should the baker be forced to sell all cakes at cost?

If the baker sells a cake for a profit, does every cake they sell have to be sold at the same profit margin? What if a second neighbor eats a piece of the free cake and wants to contract with their neighbor the baker to bake them a birthday cake for an agreed upon price. Should the baker be forced to offer that same price to everyone in the world who wants a cake? Should the baker be able to price discriminate? Should they be allowed to give senior citizen or veterans’ discounts? Should they be allowed to charge more for cakes on the weekend during peak demand?

Are there grounds where a baker can refuse to bake a cake for someone? If they make cake for people who were nice to them as children, should they be forced to bake for people who bullied them in years past? Should they be allowed to refuse to make cake for left handed cake eaters? What if due to some strongly held bias against left handed people, the baker gets extreme displeasure from selling cakes to left handed people? If a baker refuses to work for left handed people should society outlaw her baking of cakes for right handed people?

The idea of corporate social responsibility is that corporations should look beyond the bottom line of profit and also show concern for employees, consumers, the community, and the environment. For profit firms should be about more than profit. There is no reason to believe producers who make a profit only care about profit. They may enjoy the lifestyle that production of their profit brings, or they may enjoy bringing happiness to their consumers. They may even find joy in being able to employ their out of work son-in-law.

This suggests that society recognizes the value of looking beyond profit for the motivation of producers. What society must answer, is what other motivations it will deem acceptable and which ones it will not. Should we allow restaurants to close on Sundays for religious reasons if people want to eat at them? Should we force kosher butchers to sell non-kosher meat to people who don’t want to buy kosher meat?

What kind of behaviors should we regulate on the consumer’s side? Should we force people to buy products from mean business people or from producers who have higher than normal prices? Should we force people to eat out on Sundays because restaurants are open and they need business?

In a country of over 320 million people, there will certainly be a wide variety of producer and consumer tastes and preferences. The more that centralized government demands that all tastes and preferences conform to a single standard, the more animosity they build within society. It’s one thing for your preferences to differ from mine; it’s quite another for you to force your preferences upon me.