Market Processes and the Ethics of Consumption

Mark Peacock

Research Scholar, Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity
Associate Professor of Social Science, York University, Toronto
Market Processes and the Ethics of Consumption

Mark Peacock

Research Scholar, Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity
Associate Professor of Social Science, York University, Toronto

Abstract

Consumers are often implicated in upholding unjust economic practices that arise when they purchase commodities produced in ethically unacceptable ways. Consumers are, however, ignorant about the production of many of the commodities they buy, and so they often unwittingly consume such products. This essay asks whether consumers are culpable for their ignorance about the commodities they purchase.

Keywords: Ethical Consumption, Market Process Theory, Culpable Ignorance, Attitude-Behaviour Gap

JEL codes: D8, D11, D12, D180, P1
Market Processes and the Ethics of Consumption

Mark Peacock
Research Scholar, Global Institute for Sustainable Prosperity
Associate Professor of Social Science, York University, Toronto

Much has been written during the past two decades about “ethical consumption” and the way in which consumers’ ethical views toward the commodities they purchase stand in contradiction to their actual consumption behaviour. Numerous explanations of this “gap” between consumers’ attitudes and behaviour have been offered (Bray et al. 2011; Carrigan and Attalla 2001; Carrington et al. 2010). Normative attention has also been directed at the topic, which raises the question whether consumers bear responsibility for purchasing unethically produced commodities (Schwartz, 2010). In this essay, I approach consumer behaviour from a normative standpoint and limit my analysis to one issue: does a person’s ignorance about the commodities she purchases absolve her of responsibility for perpetuating injustices associated with the production of those commodities? By “perpetuating” injustices, I mean that, by purchasing an unethically produced commodity, a person is implicated in (though not necessarily the perpetrator of) injustices committed in the production of that commodity. For instance, a person who buys a certain perfume is implicated in experiments on animals conducted during the testing of the perfume, and although she deems such experiments cruel, she might not be aware that her favourite perfume has been thus tested. The act of purchasing such a commodity, I will assume throughout, involves wrongdoing on the part of the consumer because it engenders or perpetuates wrongdoing perpetrated in the production of the commodity. Consequently, the question just posed concerns the relationship between (i) a prior state of ignorance the consumer has about the commodity and (ii) the act of buying it. Whether (i) absolves the consumer of performing the act given in (ii) depends on whether the consumer’s state of knowledge or ignorance is itself culpable.

As a backdrop to this investigation, section I gives an account of how markets function, which turns on the notion of ignorance. This “Austrian” account of “market processes” holds that a merit of the market is its epistemological modesty; that is, markets can function relatively well even though market participants are ignorant about many characteristics of the commodities they buy and about the processes through which they are produced. Market participants, including consumers, can, therefore, economize on knowledge about market processes whilst remaining able to make tolerably rational consumption decisions on a slim epistemological foundation. However, consumers’ lack of knowledge about the conditions under which commodities are produced means that they often lack information necessary for making ethical consumption decisions. In section II, I commence the normative analysis outlined in the previous paragraph. I draw on the work of Michele Moody-Adams and ask whether her notion of “affected ignorance” provides a good depiction of consumers’ role in unethical market practices. If it is, then it follows that
consumers’ ignorance is culpable. My discussion of Moody-Adams gives me cause to refine her concept of affected ignorance and to outline the conditions under which a consumer may be deemed culpably ignorant. In section III, I consider circumstances that might lessen the degree of culpability we ascribe to a consumer for being ignorant.

I. Market Processes and the Division of Knowledge

The “knowledge” argument in “Austrian” economic theory is multifaceted and has a long history (Hayek 1963/[1935]; 1945), Kirzner 1992). For the purpose of this essay, I look at one aspect of the argument which concerns the division and dissemination of knowledge in a market economy and its relevance for consumers’ decisions. This allows me to take up the argument of the following section which considers the knowledge necessary for consuming ethically.

Consider the following situation of a consumer:

Food reaches his local supermarket through processes of which he is probably ignorant, if not misinformed. He lives in a home constructed by an involved process whose technical, economic, and political intricacies are barely suspected, much less known to him. His home is likely to be stocked with many devices working on mechanical and technical principles which he neither understands theoretically nor can cope with as a practical matter (Sowell 1980, 7).

Our ignorance of such quotidian matters is not solely an economic affair, as evinced in sociological discussions of modernity and “expert systems”. These are “systems of technical accomplishment and professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today” (Giddens 1991, 27). We rely, that is, on material items, such as computers, cars and cooking devices about the technical workings of which we know little; we also use the knowledge of doctors, dieticians, financial advisors and architects, whose expertise is not within our reach but is, we trust, reliable enough to serve as a guide to our conduct. Ignorance is thus a “modern” condition that is particularly pronounced in economic affairs regulated by the market.

In the market, our ignorance of the details of products we consume is not a barrier to our ability to make serviceable decisions because much information is conveyed to us in the form of relative prices. If the price of an item of food falls relative to those of other foodstuffs, a consumer can buy more of this food and economise on other items. She does not need to know about the technical development in farming methods that has brought about the reduction in price to make a rational consumption decision. This applies to businesses which use this food in their production processes, e.g. restaurants. If, for instance, the price of a particular olive oil falls, restauranteurs can substitute relatively more expensive olive (and other) oils with this cheaper rival. In this way, restaurants can undercut competitors who might not have discovered the lower-priced oil. Why the price of a particular type of olive oil has fallen is not something restaurant owners need to know; that a supplier of olive oil has offered them this cheaper variety suffices, and the technical development in olive cultivation in certain orchards in Turkey, which has caused the fall in
price, is something of which they may remain ignorant. The decision of a restaurant owner to use the cheaper oil might be conveyed to consumers in the form of lower-priced meals. The consumer, too, is ignorant of what has gone on upward in the supply chain to make the price of meals at this particular restaurant cheaper. But what occurred in Turkey to reduce the price of olives is communicated to market participants in the form of price information. And the knowledge which led to the technical development in Turkish agriculture, and which might be known in all its details only to a few agricultural scientists, becomes dispersed in the market, although the market participants who benefit from the technical development know nothing of its details, but only its effects on relative prices. This applies to all commodities, each of which has a complex genealogy which is known in its entirety to nobody and of which most of us are ignorant. But if economic agents are allowed to act autonomously, those with knowledge of, say, a new production technique can communicate this knowledge via the price system to her own advantage and to that of others for whom the new technique is useful. This includes consumers whose knowledge seldom extends to the technical details of production, the source of raw materials, the modes of transport involved in conveying goods to retailers, or to most of the activities of the corporations in whose name commodities are produced. In fact, there are innumerable details of the genealogy of a given commodity of which consumers are typically ignorant. This has implications for consumers who wish to act in ways they deem ethical.

Consider the following examples:

1) The wedding ring on my finger hails from South America where a mining corporation has developed a new mining technique which allows it to undercut other companies.
2) The T-shirt I wear was made in south-east Asia at a low price, which reflects an innovative personnel policy used by a textile factory.
3) The price of beef falls thanks to a change in institutional conditions in the Amazon basin.

There is much about which consumers of wedding rings, T-shirts and beef are ignorant in such examples. Let us fill in a few of the details:

Ad 1) The new mining technique of which my wedding ring is a product involves the detonation of explosives which removes the summits of mountains and exposes the ore which can be mined cheaply. This causes considerable environmental damage, leaving the landscape scarred and the water table polluted, thus causing a shortage of fresh water on which many communities depend.

Ad 2) The innovative personnel policy, which I have to thank for giving me the shirt on my back, consists of outlawing workers’ associations and collective bargaining, a measure passed by a military government and enforced by the army which has a permanent presence in textile factories. This ensures a cheap and disciplined labour force.

Ad 3) The price of beef has fallen due to the conversion of forest land to cattle farming. This not only causes deforestation but is also enabled by the government having granted property rights on the hitherto “unowned” land to large cattle farmers. These farmers clear the land of aboriginal communities, which have lived on it for generations without having a
formal title to the land; members of such communities, who resist and organize protest against cattle farmers, are intimidated and forced from the land; some lose their lives.

In example 1), consumers may be said to “use” the knowledge of the mining innovation when they purchase a wedding ring made from metal thus mined. The mining technique will have given the mining corporation a competitive advantage, which is reflected in a lower relative price of the rings produced. It is through such relative price differentials that consumers are alerted to the existence of the new mining technique, yet consumers have no direct knowledge of how the ore is mined. If consumers possessed such knowledge, many would not buy rings thus made because they hold that purchasing such unethically produced items to be unethical. The same goes for the other examples and for innumerable others besides. Such examples reveal that consumers’ ignorance of market processes can lead them to purchase commodities of which they would not approve ethically were they to know more about them. That is, because of their ignorance, consumers are implicated in the perpetuation of injustices in the supply chain. This leads us to the next section, which explores the connection between consumers’ ignorance and their culpability.

II. Ignorance and Culpability

The processes through which commodities pass before they reach the consumer are, according to the standards of many consumers, unethical, yet such processes exist and persist because consumers are ignorant of their details. Under some circumstances, ignorance excuses a person who performs an unjust act. The task of this section is to enquire whether consumers’ ignorance excuses or whether it is culpable. First, though, some clarifications and limitations I draw around my analysis.

First, many people lay the blame for unethical market practices not at the door of consumers but of corporations which produce commodities in unethical ways, such as those given in the examples above. If one were to pursue this line of argument, one might contend that the problem lies with corporations: “if only corporations were to produce ethically, consumers would not need to worry about purchasing unethical products,” one might say. This argument has much cogency, but I bracket it in what follows. My reason for doing so is that, in the contemporary world, many corporations fail to make products in accord with consumers’ ethical standards. I take this fact as given, at least in the current economic climate, and so the question on which I focus becomes: given that there are many unethically made products on the shelves of retail stores, is consumers’ ignorance about these products culpable? The discussion that follows, then, is a contribution to “non-ideal theory” (Rawls 2001, 13). That is, I am considering a market society which is not “well-ordered” in the sense that not everyone, in particular, not every corporation, “strictly complies” with widely accepted ethical norms regarding economic activity, particularly in the realm of commodity production. The non-ideality of my analysis applies also to the sphere of government, for although some people would hold that it is the government’s role to provide information about corporations’ ethical scorecard, governments do not disseminate sufficient information for the making of ethical consumption decisions. Whether this is a legitimate task of government is not a question I discuss here. One could locate the responsibility to disseminate information about corporations with NGOs, and one could also envisage that private, for-profit organizations sell such information to private
subscribers, though the “public” nature of the good being sold might undermine a market for such information. These matters, though, are all bracketed in the following discussion.

Second, when I write of consumers’ ethical views regarding the goods and services they purchase, I am not proposing a view of ethics that consumers ought to uphold; rather I take consumers’ own quotidian ethical sentiments as a standard of judgement, and I do not judge them according to my own ethical judgements. Hence, when I issue statements such as: “the production of commodity, $C$, for reasons $x$, $y$ and $z$, violates the ethical standards, $e_1, e_2$, ..., of a person, $P$,” person $P$ is a given consumer, and $e_1, e_2$ ... are his own ethical standards. I impose this “normative neutrality” because I wish to focus on consumers’ culpability with regard to their own ethical standards; I thus take consumers’ ethical values as they are.

Let us first turn to Michele Moody-Adams’ notion “affected ignorance” as a basis for exploring consumers’ ignorance.¹ Moody-Adams (1994, p. 296) defines affected ignorance as a person’s “choosing not to know what one can and should know” and thereby committing or perpetuating injustice. A much discussed example in this context is slavery in ancient Greece. In apparently seeing slavery as an acceptable institution, of what were the ancient Greeks ignorant? Ancient Greek literature is replete with material that reveals the view that slavery was an unfortunate condition, and so it is implausible to argue that they were ignorant about the facts of slavery. If they were ignorant about anything, the ancient Greeks, rather, were morally ignorant – they accepted slavery as a social institution and did not condemn (let alone abolish) it; they were apparently ignorant that slavery was unjust. Were ancient Greeks culpable for being thus ignorant? To those who adhere to what one may call the “inability thesis,” the answer is “no.” The inability thesis provides “moral excuses” in the guise of “culture”: if you come from a certain culture, your ability to identify certain types of injustice is diminished because your culture prevents you from seeing some forms of wrongdoing as wrong; one’s culture, the argument goes, can render one unable to acquire the moral judgement that other (“normal”) people possess; being unable to acquire this moral judgement, one cannot be to blame for one’s moral ignorance because blaming somebody for this moral ignorance would be to blame him for being born into a particular culture; the culture into which one is born, however, is not of one’s own choosing or, in any way, under one’s control, and so one should not be blamed for this “accident of birth” and for the consequences which follow therefrom. Thus, being a citizen of an ancient Greek city-state, e.g. Athens, hindered Athenians’ ability to see slavery as immoral; similarly, a male American in the 1950s might be held to have been rendered unable by his culture to question gender stereotypes which consigned women to the domestic sphere and opened the world of careers only to men; to such a man, this state of affairs might have appeared normal or natural rather than unjust.

Moody-Adams (1997, p. 100) contests the inability thesis. On the one hand, she suggests that the mastery of a language equips one with the critical ability “to question existing practices, and to imagine that one’s social world might be other than it is.” A culture, she also holds, is never sufficiently totalizing or determining to give rise to a single view of all those embedded in it; there is always room in a culture for dissenting voices and influence by other cultures which spread alternative norms and opinions (Moody-Adams 1997, 21, 68-)

¹ For discussions of Moody-Adams’s work, see Pleasants (2008) and Peacock (2011).
Some manifestations of the inability thesis propose that the tools for criticising a particular injustice are “beyond the reach” of certain peoples as a result of “cultural” rather than “personal” limitations (Slote 1982, 72-74). Thus Bernard Williams (1993, p. 106) asks “how far our rejection of [slavery] ... depends on modern conceptions that were not available in the ancient world.” This carries the perhaps unfortunate suggestion that moral knowledge is analogous to technical knowledge: Williams’ statement, that is, might suggest that, rather as we would say that ancient Greece did not have steam power because it had neither a Newcomen nor a Watt, so it had no critique of the injustice of slavery because it had neither a Mansfield nor a Wilberforce. The analogy between moral and technical knowledge falls down, however, in the case of ancient Greek slavery because dissenting voices about the justice of slavery, though they were rare and obscure, are to be found amongst ancient Greek sources (Guthrie 1971, 159-160). But Moody-Adams would contest the analogy more generally for the reason that the injustice associated with slavery is patently obvious and its identification and condemnation do not require the invention of specialized moral concepts which, in the ancient world, had yet to be developed. This leads her to conclude that ancient Greeks were not “unable” to overcome their apparent ignorance about the injustice of slavery; rather they affected their ignorance. To explore the notion of affected ignorance, let us examine two examples (Moody-Adams 1994, 301-302):

1) Actively shielding oneself from others’ knowledge so as to remain isolated from the consequences of actions in which one is involved. Here, Moody-Adams offers the example of the CEO of an investment bank who instructs her staff to increase profits but insists that they not inform her about their means of doing so (and about the “potential wrongdoings” they commit in trying to obey the CEO’s instruction).

2) Not acknowledging one’s own fallibility, e.g. a university administrator who declines to investigate charges of misconduct against a colleague because the latter “can’t possibly’ be guilty of sexual harassment.”

When we compare these examples to the case of ancient Greek slavery, we see that the type of ignorance involved differs. The ancient Greeks, we noted above, were morally ignorant about slavery: they apparently did not grasp that slavery was unethical. In Moody-Adams’ examples, the ignorance of the parties described is not moral but factual; they are ignorant about morally relevant facts. The CEO is not morally ignorant. If she were to know about her staff’s methods, be they fraudulent, threatening, etc., for increasing profits, she would presumably be disturbed; her request not to be informed about these methods makes little sense without this assumption. The university administrator does not investigate the allegations against his colleague because he finds it incredible that his colleague could sink so low as to be guilty of sexual harassment. This description makes it clear that the administrator thinks sexual harassment is execrable. His refusal to investigate the allegation does not follow from his thinking that sexual harassment is morally unobjectionable; rather, he does not investigate the allegation because he cannot believe the colleague would be capable of such an abomination. By classifying both moral ignorance (of ancient Greeks) and ignorance of morally relevant facts (as in the cases of the CEO and

---

2 Slote (1982, p. 76) suggests an analogy between progress of scientific and of moral knowledge, whereby, just as in the steam power case, we may say that certain moral ideas were “not attainable” at stages of history which had yet to undergo particular developments in moral knowledge.
the administrator) under the heading of “affected ignorance,” one is destined to overlook the distinction between moral and factual ignorance. Though, there is a further distinction to be drawn in the category of ignorance of morally relevant facts, for although the CEO and the administrator described in Moody-Adams’ examples share a factual, rather than a moral, ignorance, there are differences between them.

The CEO is fully aware that her staff will use dubious means to increase company profits; this is why she would rather her staff kept their knowledge of these means to themselves. Through her instructions, the CEO actively cultivates her state of ignorance: she is ignorant of the details of her staff’s doings, yet she knows there is something – probably morally distasteful – of which she wishes to keep herself ignorant (in a different context, Donald Rumsfeld described such doings as “known unknowns”). The CEO’s ignorance corresponds to Moody-Adams’ definition of affected ignorance as involving “a choice not to know something that is morally important” (1997, p. 102). Her awareness of the probably immoral methods to be used by her staff presents the CEO with two options: (i) investigating these methods, and (ii) remaining ignorant about them. That she opts for (ii) whilst being aware of option (i) means that she is making a choice.³ The CEO’s position is like that of a doctor who stalks the pages of philosophical essays on culpable ignorance. In one version, the doctor has not kept up with innovations in his field as disseminated in medical journals; “he is aware that he should read a certain article, yet decides ... to take the risk of not reading it” (Montmarquet 1995, 45). The doctor is aware that the article might contain something of relevance but he decides not to read it, perhaps with bad consequences for his patients.

Compare this to the following interpretation of the university administrator. I offer this interpretation, not because it is the only one, but because it is one which makes his case contrast with that of the CEO and thus highlights an ambiguity in Moody-Adams’ conception of affected ignorance. The administrator, as I wish to present him, is factually unaware of any wrongdoing on his colleague’s part and does not actively cultivate his ignorance about his colleague’s behaviour. By not acknowledging the fallibility of his opinion about the case, the administrator is not deliberately taking steps to keep himself “in the dark” about potential wrongdoing; rather it simply does not strike him as possible that his colleague could be involved in such sordid affairs. The administrator does not choose to remain ignorant about something morally important of which he is more or less aware; for, to make a choice here, the administrator would have to be aware that an investigation into the allegation might reveal the colleague’s misconduct. But this is precisely the possibility the administrator cannot entertain; he lacks an awareness – perhaps incorrectly – that an investigation might lead to a substantiation of the allegation against his colleague. The administrator’s position is like that of the doctor who has not kept up with innovations in his field, though in a different scenario from that of the previous paragraph. In this second scenario, the doctor does not read the article in the medical journal because he considers the journal in which it appears unnecessary for those in his field (perhaps because he thinks that significant innovations in medicine are published only in more prestigious journals). The doctor does not think it feasible that the journal in question could carry an article of any significance.

³ The above depiction of the CEO makes her affected ignorance correspond to what some scholars call “self-deception” (e.g. Martin 1986; Jones 2004).
To conclude the two previous paragraphs, we may introduce the *awareness condition*:

**awareness condition**: if an agent’s ignorance is to be deemed culpable, she must be aware that, by maintaining her state of ignorance, there exists a risk that some morally undesirable state of affairs will arise or be perpetuated through her actions.\(^4\)

An agent who fulfils the awareness condition makes a choice between remaining ignorant or enlightening herself about the details of the case. The CEO does, but the administrator does not, fulfil this condition.

We have thus distinguished two types of factual ignorance: one is when the ignorant person is aware – perhaps only dimly – that she is ignorant of something and chooses to maintain or propagate her ignorance; in the other type, the ignorant person is not only ignorant of certain facts but is unaware that there is anything about which he is ignorant (these matters correspond to Donald Rumsfeld’s “unknown unknowns”); such a person does not choose to be ignorant but simply *is* ignorant.\(^5\) Each type of factual ignorance can lead to different normative conclusions about a person who is thus ignorant. Let us begin with the first type.

The CEO is ignorant of facts which, because of their moral significance, might lead her, were she to be cognizant of them, to assess a situation as morally dubious and, hence, to change her behaviour. She might be censured for maintaining her ignorance *wilfully* instead of overseeing her staff’s activities and stipulating in advance that their methods for increasing profit be “above board.”\(^6\) Contrast this with a person, like the university administrator as I have depicted him, who is genuinely unaware of his ignorance because he has not the least suspicion that wrongdoing could be afoot. We might, at first, be inclined to be more lenient on such a person because he does not actively cultivate his ignorance. But he might nevertheless be condemned for not entertaining the merest suspicion that potentially disquieting matters are afoot. Let us imagine that wrongdoing on the part of the colleague were subsequently to come to light; one might say that he *should have been aware* of the possibility that there was indeed some substance to the allegations against his colleague, and that he should, therefore, have investigated them. Let us ask what light the foregoing sheds on consumers’ ignorance.

**II.1 Affected ignorance and consumers’ behaviour**

If we are to use “affected ignorance” as a conceptual basis for exploring consumers’ culpability for their part in upholding injustice, we have three types of ignorance to consider: (i) moral ignorance (whereby people are ignorant of what is good and bad, as ancient Greeks apparently were towards slavery); (ii) ignorance of morally relevant facts of which one is aware but unwilling to confront in full; (iii) ignorance of morally relevant facts of which one is unaware but perhaps should be aware. Although all three types of ignorance

\(^4\) In different ways, and with different terminology, Smith (1983, pp. 551, 565-566) and Zimmerman (1997, p. 420) recognise this condition.

\(^5\) Zimmerman (1997, p. 422) clearly distinguishes these different types under the headings “moral” and “nonmoral error.”

\(^6\) For a discussion of “wilful ignorance,” see Husak and Callender (1994).
might be manifested amongst consumers who purchase unethically produced commodities, I bracket, in what follows, the first type, for I am not interested in consumers who have abnormal or deficient moral capacities, as some people would ascribe to ancient Greeks for their blindness to the injustices of slavery. Consumers who, for instance, are simply unconcerned about the plight of factory workers exposed to hazardous working conditions, about environmental degradation caused by corporate malfeasance or about the use of below-school-age children as factory workers are not the subject of this essay. I focus rather on consumers whose deficiency is in the realm of factual knowledge and whose moral conscience makes them susceptible to modifying their consumption habits in line with knowledge they acquire about the ethical characteristics of commodities.

Neither am I interested in consumers who know that their consumption habits are unethical but maintain them nevertheless. Many people, I suspect, purchase commodities knowing full well that they do not conform to their ethical standards; the consumer who said the following about her/his consumption of fair trade products probably falls into this category:

“I’ve thought some times that I should be more ethical in what I buy...but part of me is quite lazy actually” (Chatzidakis et al. 2007, 92).

The authors of the study in which this response was given classify it under the heading of “appeal to higher loyalties,” and although the consumer in question might perceive “being lazy” to be a “higher” loyalty than consuming ethically, it is not a recognisably moral argument through which the consumer tries to justify her behaviour. I pass over such cases because they fall outside the purview of this essay, for the consumer is not ignorant of her wrongdoing. Rather, we have a case, here, of “moral backsliding” (Hare 1965, 76), whereby an agent knows the morally correct course of action (consuming ethically and thus informing herself about the commodities she considers purchasing), but instead does something else (being lazy and not consuming ethically). Moral backsliding is blameworthy not because the backslider is ignorant about anything, but because she knowingly does wrong. This essay, by contrast, considers only cases in which a consumer occupies a different epistemological position marked out by the following two points. She is:

(i) aware of the possibility of injustices surrounding commodities she consumes;
(ii) not sufficiently aware of the disturbing details to prevent her from purchasing them.

The moral backslider is too aware of the disturbing details to satisfy point (ii) (cf. Smith 1983, 546).

To turn now to cases in point, let us consider a representative consumer whose consumption habits are as follows: she buys groceries from large supermarket chains, brand-name clothing from multinational retailers and non-sustainable furniture; she tends to ignore “fair trade” products and drives a car which has a high rate of fuel consumption. Asked about her ethical views, the consumer answers the following questions affirmatively:
(a) Would you be concerned about cotton farmers in India incurring high levels of debt and being driven to suicide in large numbers?
(b) Would you be concerned if textile workers in south-east Asia were routinely exposed to unsafe working conditions?
(c) Would it worry you if major clothing retailers sourced textiles from factories in which children were employed?
(d) Do you think that deforestation is a matter of concern?
(e) Does the finite nature of fossil fuels mean that human beings should economize to a much greater extent on their use?
(f) Are you disturbed that a rise in the sea level which results from climate change poses a threat to the survival of many of the world’s species and of people in parts of the world?

This consumer manifests the “gap” between her behaviour and stated beliefs commonly found in studies of ethical consumption. Let us now enquire whether this gap is accounted for by the consumer’s ignorance.

When probed further, our representative consumer reveals that she manifests rudimentary awareness of a number of issues which pertain to the ethics of economic and business practices. She is aware of the issues mentioned above, though mainly incidentally, through newspaper reports, television news items or conversations with acquaintances. But she does not take measures to inform herself further such that she would be in a position to comprehend her own causal role as a consumer in these processes, and, hence, she does not inform herself sufficiently to change her consumption habits in accordance with her ethical views on these matters. Our representative consumers’ ignorance is akin to that of Moody-Adams’ CEO, for the consumer fulfils the awareness condition described in section II. The consumer is thus situated epistemologically in that “in-between” space, in which the question of culpable ignorance arises: she knows a little but not too much about the commodities she purchases. That is, she has “enough evidence” to give rise to her suspicion that she might be contributing to injustice, but she has “insufficient evidence to warrant holding back from the contemplated act,” (Smith 1983, 546), in this case, from the act of purchasing a particular commodity. What, though, might make this ignorance culpable? Not the act of unethical consumption to which ignorance might give rise, for the relationship between the ignorance and the wrongful act of consumption runs the other way: we wish, that is, to ascertain whether the wrongful act is excused by the ignorance, which it will be if the ignorance is not culpable; to suggest that the wrongfulness of the act (or its consequences) might “infect” the ignorance on which it is based and thus make the ignorance culpable would be to invert the central question, namely, whether, or to what extent, ignorance excuses wrongdoing. We thus need to identify a source of culpability attributable to ignorance which is independent of the wrongfulness of the act. Following a suggestion from Smith (1983, pp. 556, 570), we may identify this source, which makes the consumer’s ignorance culpable as having an objectionable psychological state, which leads her to choose not to overcome or reduce her ignorance. This objectionable psychological state consists in willingness to risk the perpetuation of an injustice through acts of unethical consumption based on ignorance; indifference to this risk, then, is how one might best characterize this objectionable psychological state. And the agent’s willingness to risk the perpetuation of injustice presupposes that she is aware of the risk.
III. Degrees of Culpability

Having argued that the representative consumer depicted above is culpably ignorant, we enquire now into different degrees of culpability, which one may ascribe to consumers, for there are many details of such cases which influence the degree of culpability involved. If we recall that the question of culpable ignorance arises when the consumer unwittingly perpetrates a wrong, viz., consuming an ethically tainted commodity, there is a distinction between the (unwitting) act of unethical consumption and the consumer’s prior state of ignorance. The question is: to what extent, if at all, does the prior state of ignorance absolve the consumer of blame for perpetrating such an act (cf. Smith 1983, 548-549)? One way into this issue of the degree of culpability attributable to the consumer is via the awareness condition: the fulfilment of which requires that the consumer be aware of a risk that a morally undesirable state of affairs will arise or be perpetuated if she maintains her ignorance. Following a line of thought cast by Smith (1983, p. 551), we may say that ignorance is only culpable if the act of consumption, which ensues from ignorance about the unethical nature of the commodity purchased, “falls within the known risk” (Smith 1983, 551) of the consumer’s state of ignorance; that the consumer knows (or believes) that such a risk exists is simply another way of stating that she fulfils the awareness condition. Two variables regarding this risk influence the degree of culpability of the consumer’s ignorance:

1) the magnitude of the risk (as estimated by the consumer herself), and
2) the moral severity of the consequences (again, as judged by the consumer), should the undesirable state of affairs actually ensue as a result of her act of unethical consumption.

Starting with 1), one may say that the magnitude of the risk and the consumer’s degree of culpability are positively related. Consider a consumer who buys cheap clothing made in Bangladesh. He is aware of a risk that he is thereby perpetuating working conditions in textile factories which he considers unjust. That is to say, his act of consumption falls within the “known risk” of the consumer’s ignorance. The risk involved is almost self-evident, for the conditions of production under which cheap clothing is manufactured in developing countries are widely known and discussed. Furthermore, the deplorable working conditions in textile factories are, as it were, internally related to the production of the T-shirts (and to their low prices), for low wages and poor working conditions are a fillip, some would even say necessary, to the production of cheap clothing. In Zimmerman’s (1997, p. 420) words, there is a straightforward “cognitive connection” between the existence of cheap T-shirts in retail stores around the world and the sort of pay and conditions, which those workers who produce them have to suffer. Consequently, if a consumer were to plead that he had no inkling that purchasing these items carried such risks, his words would not convince; he has ample opportunity to be aware, at little cost, of the risk involved of purchasing the T-shirts of his preference. This is not, however, always the case, as an extension of this example

---

7 Zimmerman (1997, p. 420) makes a similar point when he states that, decisive for the ascription of culpability and its degree, is the existence of a “cognitive connection” between the consequences of one’s act and the decision to perform this act. In the case of consumption, this cognitive connection resides in a mental state whereby the consumer decides to purchase a particular commodity in the awareness that doing so might have bad moral consequences. The bad moral consequences, then, are not merely unintended consequences of the act of which the consumer is unaware.
shows. If the consumer’s purchase of cheap clothing from Bangladesh risks perpetuating working conditions that he deplores, and the risk of their perpetuation falls within the known risk of his purchase, he might not be aware of a different risk associated with such purchases, namely, the risk that the factory in which the T-shirts are made will collapse with the result that over 1,000 people will die. If the consumer were to protest that he is not culpable for the collapse and the deaths, his words would meet with some credence because the existence of cheap T-shirts is not so obviously related to the collapse of factories in which they are made, even though we might have an inkling that “sweatshops” are not the safest of work places. The consumer who has bought T-shirts made in a factory which collapses might, in his defence, say that it is common that textiles are produced in factories that are not prone to collapse. The collapse of the factory and the consumer’s purchase of the T-shirts are, to be sure, causally related, for, by purchasing the T-shirts, the consumer is partly responsible for the profitability of the business that sells them, and without such profitability, the factory might have closed before the collapse. But the consumer can, with some plausibility, protest his innocence with regard to the collapse of a factory, which is a rare event in textile manufacturing and, in the consciousness of the consumer, a “distant” risk. If, on the other hand, the consumer were to claim that he had no idea that his buying of T-shirts from Bangladesh had any relation to sweatshop labour and its continuance, few people would give him credence; the connection between the two is too obvious, and this gives us grounds for saying that he should have known about the connection.

Examples in which purchasing an ethically tainted commodity falls beyond the known risk of the consumer’s ignorance are common amongst commodities that are produced by one branch of a corporation which simultaneously produces a different commodity under ethically dubious conditions. Judith Schrempp-Stirling’s (2014) examination of the pharmaceutical corporation Roche presents such a case. Roche developed a drug, CellCept, which hinders the rejection of transplanted organs by their new hosts. The company developed this drug having acquired organs “donated” by executed prisoners in China. Consider, in light of this, a consumer who receives treatment using a different product manufactured by the same company, say, an antibacterial solution administered intravenously. Such a consumer would, I believe, be absolved of responsibility for contributing to the profits of a corporation which, according to the consumer’s ethics, is ethically corrupt because of its use of dead prisoners’ organs; for again, the injustice of contributing to the profits of a corporation associated with the use of such organs cannot be held to fall within the known risk of undergoing an antibacterial treatment; the connection is a distant one and this will relieve the consumer of culpability.

The foregoing discussion of point 1) above, issues in the following precept regarding consumers’ ignorance:

**Precept I:** inform yourself first about those commodities the consumption of which, ceteris paribus, has the highest probability of giving rise to a moral wrong.

The probability of giving rise to a moral wrong will be determined, inter alia, by the consumption of commodities for which the risk of the moral wrong has a close cognitive connection to the purchase of those commodities. If, for instance, one has a concern about
animal welfare, purchasing meat or dairy products from a budget supermarket has a close
cognitive connection to the moral wrong of harming animals, and, hence, the probability
that the harm ensues, as estimated by the consumer, should be high. For the consumer of
the antibacterial medication, by contrast, the cognitive connection between buying this
treatment and the use of organs taken from dead prisoners is less close, and hence the
probability that harm ensues – again as estimated by the consumer – is lower. Other things
being equal, one is more culpable the closer the cognitive connection between one’s act of
purchase and the accompanying harm.

Turning to 2), the more severe the moral consequences that might ensue from my acts of
consumption based on ignorance about the commodities I purchase, the more culpable I am
for consuming them. Consider a consumer who is aware of a risk that buying commodities A
and B will perpetuate injustices, denoted \( I_A \) and \( I_B \) respectively. The consumer also roughly
estimates the probability that \( I_A \) and \( I_B \) will be perpetrated by his acts of consumption to be
\( p(I_A) \) and \( p(I_B) \) respectively. If \( p(I_A) \approx p(I_B) \), then the consumer is more culpable for his
ignorance which leads to the purchase of A if he deems \( I_A \) to be more severe in its moral
consequences than \( I_B \). This, then, issues in the following precept:

\[ \text{Precept II: inform yourself first about those commodities the consumption of which,} \]
\[ \text{ceteris paribus, risks engendering or sustaining the most severe moral consequences.} \]

Other things being equal, one’s degree of culpability for purchasing an ethically dubious
commodity is greater the more severe the moral consequences of doing so are. Precepts I
and II must be augmented by a third which addresses the ease with which information
about commodities can be gathered. I turn to this matter now.

Consider the following moral excuse, ME, which might be offered on behalf of consumers
whose ignorance leads them to purchase unethically produced commodities:

\[ \text{ME: “Those who advocate ethical consumption underestimate the difficulty of} \]
\[ \text{finding out the morally relevant facts needed to assess whether a commodity has} \]
\[ \text{been ethically produced. Of the thousands of products we buy, we would be} \]
\[ \text{cognitively overstretched if we were to apprise ourselves of the details of even a} \]
\[ \text{handful of value chains that some of those commodities had traversed before} \]
\[ \text{arriving on the shelves of retail stores. The impossibility of informing ourselves} \]
\[ \text{sufficiently about every available product means that our ignorance is not culpable} \]
\[ \text{and hence we must be absolved of culpability for our acts of unethical} \]
\[ \text{consumption.”} \]

ME casts doubt on the very feasibility of subjecting all or even many of our consumption
decisions to ethical scrutiny. Even the most conscientiously ethical consumer will
unwittingly purchase some ethically dubious commodities. The consumer’s state of
ignorance regarding such commodities, ME would have us believe, absolves the consumer
of blame for purchasing them. This excuse might apply to many ethically concerned
consumers who, despite a general awareness of corporate malfeasance in many sectors,
often lack specific information about individual corporations (Carrigan and Attalla 2001,
566). It would seem to apply to the consumer of the antibacterial treatment made by the
ethically tainted pharmaceutical corporation mentioned above, if the source of the
corporation’s human organs is one of those things about which the consumer has not
informed herself.

One interpretation of ME would try to absolve consumers of responsibility for any ignorance
they might have about the commodities available to them. This interpretation would run as
follows: it is an impossible task to inform oneself about every morally relevant detail
concerning the production of every single commodity one consume, and hence consumers’
ignorance cannot be culpable; it is simply inevitable that each of us is ignorant about some
details of some of the commodities we consume. If true, this would absolve us of
responsibility for our unethical acts of consumption. But ME presents a faulty argument if
the first part of its final sentence is understood to suggest that: “the impossibility of
informing oneself sufficiently about every available product means that whatever degree of
ignorance one has about however many commodities one purchases, one’s ignorance is non-
culpable.” A consumer who uses ME to argue that she is absolved of culpability for any
and all acts of unethical consumption she perpetrates would be misusing ME. Her faulty
inference can be seen if she interprets ME as follows:

(i) Since it is impossible for me to inform myself completely about every detail of
every commodity on offer, I will necessarily be non-culpably ignorant about the
ethical characteristics of at least one commodity, let us call it $C_1$, which I
purchase.

(ii) If the impossibility of completely overcoming my ignorance about all
commodities, as stated in ME, absolves me of blame for my ignorance about $C_1$,
it must also absolve me of blame for my ignorance about all the commodities, $C_1$,
$C_2$ ... $C_n$, which I purchase.

The generalization of absolution in step (ii) is faulty; for the fact that it is impossible that the
consumer inform herself about every commodity she considers purchasing does not warrant
the inference that she is permitted to be ignorant about every commodity she considers
purchasing, or even about a large number of them. The impossibility of informing herself
about every commodity she considers purchasing does not mean that it is impossible (or, for
some commodities, even terribly difficult) for her to inform herself to some degree about
some commodities. Therefore, ME does not provide a justification for relinquishing ethical
consumption tout court.

The question then becomes: about which, amongst the sea of commodities available, should
a consumer inform herself so as to avoid the state of being culpably ignorant about the
characteristics of these commodities? One consideration which we should add to the two
precepts given above is the relative ease with which reliable information can be found that
can strengthen or weaken the consumer’s suspicion about the unethical nature of a
commodity. Thus, we have precept III:

**Precept III:** Obtain information first about those commodities about which, ceteris
paribus, reliable information is relatively easily gathered.
Precept III takes the onus of arduous information-gathering exercises from the consumer’s shoulders, but it does not tell us at which point the consumer may relieve herself of further information collection whilst being non-culpable for her remaining ignorance. For we have absolved the consumer of culpability for being ignorant about all the commodities available. But at which point may she stop collecting further information about some of the commodities she purchases? The answer to this question depends on the consumer’s moral priorities, and because these will differ from person to person, no general rule can be given here. Consequently, a formal rule – that is, one which is independent of particular moral values and their prioritization must suffice (particularly in the context of this essay which subscribes to the tenet of normative neutrality). One suggestion for such a formal rule takes its inspiration from Peter Singer who, in a discussion of duties of assistance, writes:

If it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it. By “without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance” I mean without causing anything else comparably bad to happen (Singer 1972, 231).

I call this the Singer criterion for moral action. One can apply this criterion to the information-gathering duties of consumers who are ignorant about commodities they might purchase. The Singer criterion applied to this task would issue in the following precept:

**Precept IV:** Gather information about commodities you might purchase up to the point at which the cost of further information gathering involves a moral sacrifice which outweighs the moral harm avoided by collecting more information.

The application of this precept is more complicated than one might believe at first blush because gathering information about commodities we might consume has two effects: informing oneself further about commodities (i) reduces the risk that injustice associated with the production of those commodities will be perpetuated, and (ii) imposes a cost on the consumer who gathers the information. Only the effects cited under (i) are necessarily moral, and these must be taken into account when one decides to what extent one informs oneself about commodities one might purchase. The costs of gathering that information given under (ii) might be included in the moral deliberation of the consumer, but only if they are morally relevant. They are morally relevant if the time the consumer spares himself by not gathering information about commodities is instead used in the pursuit of something else which the consumer estimates to be of greater moral worth than informing himself about commodities he might purchase. Hence, if a consumer decides not to spend a further unit of time collecting information about the ethical characteristics of commodities he might purchase, he relinquishes a moral gain that consists in a reduction of the risk that the consumer will unwittingly purchase ethically tainted commodities; relinquishing this moral gain can only be compensated if the consumer uses that unit of time to pursue an end which is morally at least as valuable as the reduction in the risk that he purchases an ethically tainted commodity. An example: if I decide not to spend a further hour informing myself about the clothing I buy because I deem that hour morally better spent in pursuit of activities in the name of “animal liberation,” then, in my moral deliberation, I will be doing the right thing by using that hour to fight for a cause I deem to be of greater moral consequence than seeking information about certain commodities I purchase. If, however,
one’s reason for not informing oneself further about the world of commodities is simply “laziness,” “convenience,” a feeling of “helplessness” or the fact that “other people do not inform themselves about commodities, so why should I?,” one cannot compensate for the moral loss of not informing oneself further (and hence increasing the risk that one purchases an ethically tainted commodity) because the excuses just given are not moral excuses. However, this does not mean that the consumer must set herself the impossible task of informing herself about each and every commodity she might purchase, but it does commit her to informing herself up to the point at which she believes she would relinquish something of greater moral importance were she to continue to gather information about the commodities she consumes.

Conclusion

This essay has argued for a position which casts consumers’ ignorance about commodities they purchase to be one of culpable ignorance. Although there are mitigating circumstances which lessen the degree to which our ignorance may be deemed culpable, my argument suggests that we, as consumers, look upon ourselves as less innocent than many will wish to admit. Many issues related to ethical consumption have not been discussed, e.g. how it is that consumers routinely make unethical purchases without apparently being troubled by their consciences. To significantly narrow the ethical attitude-behaviour gap manifested by consumers would, no doubt, require dramatic changes in behaviour the attainment of which, to many, will seem hopelessly unrealistic. Yet the difficulty in making our conduct ethical should not deter us from reminding ourselves of what we ought to do in the sphere of consumption.

References


