Market Processes and the Ethics of Consumption

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Abstract
Consumers are often implicated in unjust economic practices when they purchase commodities produced in ethically unacceptable ways. Consumers are, however, ignorant about the production of many of the commodities which leads to these unwitting consumption of unethically produced commodities. This article asks whether consumers are culpable for their ignorance about the unethical commodities they purchase.

Keywords
ethical consumption, market process, culpable ignorance, attitude–behavior gap

Much has been written during the past two decades about ethical consumption and the way consumers’ ethical views toward the commodities they purchase stand in contradiction to their actual consumption behavior. Some scholars attempt to explain the “gap” between consumers’ attitudes and behavior (Bray, Johns, & Kilburn, 2011; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001; Carrington, Neville, & Whitwell, 2010). Other scholars have asked whether consumers bear responsibility for purchasing unethically produced commodities (Barrera, 2011; Schwartz, 2010). In this article, I approach this topic from a normative standpoint. My aim is to distinguish among the myriad types of ignorance that consumers manifest toward the commodities they consume. The article is philosophical in intent and undertakes a conceptual analysis of the conditions under which consumers’ ignorance may be deemed culpable. What follows not only draws on philosophical work on ignorance and culpability but also contributes to such work by refining aspects of it and applying it to a topic hitherto neglected by philosophical research, namely, consumption. The conceptual work, though philosophical in nature, reaches beyond a philosophical audience because it provides a framework for future empirical work into the ethics of consumption. Although highly enlightening, empirical work on ethical consumption has heretofore lacked a clear analytical framework with which to differentiate the multifaceted forms of unethical consumption behavior. This article suggests such a framework, one which will relate empirical study of ethical consumption to the normative concerns of moral philosophy.

What is an unethically produced commodity? The ethical criterion I use for a commodity’s being unethically produced is that its production involves harm or injustice being inflicted on innocent parties. Innocent parties are numerous and include

i. fellow humans beings, for example, sweatshop laborers who produce commodities or farm laborers who are exposed to toxic chemicals when they harvest crops destined for the market;

ii. future human beings, for example, those to whom we will bequeath depleted and inadequate environmental resources as a result of our consumption choices;

iii. non-human animals, for example, those kept under detrimental conditions and turned into feed for humans, or those on whom cosmetics are tested.

These categories are not exhaustive; some people, for instance, would include plant life among those parties that human economic activity harms. The examples I discuss in this article reveal the diversity of innocent parties, and I will not add to the categories of innocent parties here. More important, by way of introduction, is to clarify the wrongfulness involved in purchasing unethically produced commodities and its relationship to ignorance and culpability.

Purchasing unethically produced commodities is wrongful because of the harm it causes to others or the injustices that are perpetuated through purchasing such commodities. Consumers are usually not the direct perpetrators of these harms and injustices; the latter are more often perpetrated by businesses that produce the commodities in question. Consumers are nevertheless implicated in the harm and injustice that extend along the value chains along which commodities travel. They are implicated in the sense that their decisions

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to purchase such commodities contribute to the profitability of corporations that perpetrate harms and injustices. Consumers are therefore a causal force in sustaining unethical business practices. Consumers are often ignorant of these harms and injustices, and the question at the core of this study is “Under which circumstances does consumers’ ignorance absolve them of culpability for the existence of wrongs for which they are partly causally responsible on account of their purchase of unethically produced commodities?” By focusing on consumers in this article, I do not intend to deflect attention from the culpability of corporations (or of governments) for their role in the existence of unethically produced commodities. My enquiry into consumers’ culpability should not therefore be interpreted to imply that consumers alone bear responsibility for the persistence of unethical economic practices. Rather, my aim is to theorize, from an ethical point of view, the role of consumers in the persistence of such practices and how consumers can act to reduce or avoid culpability.

The structure of the article is as follows. The section “Market Processes and the Division of Knowledge,” 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. The claim is that markets function relatively well despite market participants’ ignorance about many characteristics of the commodities they buy and the processes through which they are produced. Market participants can therefore economize on knowledge about market processes while remaining able to make rational economic decisions on a slim epistemological foundation. Consumers’ lack of knowledge about the conditions under which commodities are produced means, however, that they often lack information necessary for making ethical consumption decisions. In the section “Preliminaries and Caveats,” I clarify a few preliminaries and caveats to explain why I focus on consumers’ culpability rather than that of corporations or governments. The normative analysis begins in the section “Ignorance and Culpability,” in which I ask whether the notion of “affected ignorance” (Moody-Adams, 1997) provides a good depiction of consumers’ role in unethical market practices. If it is, it follows that consumers’ ignorance is culpable. My discussion leads me to draw a number of distinctions within the category of ignorance and its culpable nature. In the section “Degrees of Culpability,” I consider circumstances that might lessen the degree of culpability we ascribe to consumers for being ignorant, and the section “Precepts for Ethical Consumption,” contains precepts to guide ethical consumption.

**Market Processes and the Division of Knowledge**

The knowledge argument in Austrian economic theory is multifaceted (Hayek, 1935/1963, 1945; Kirzner, 1992). For the purpose of this article, I look at one aspect of the argument that 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, p. 7)

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 economize on other items. She does not need to know about the technical development in farming methods which has brought about the reduction in price to make a rational consumption decision. This applies to businesses that use this food in their production processes, for example, restaurants. If, for instance, the price of a particular olive oil falls, restaurateurs can substitute relatively more expensive olive (and other) oils with this cheaper rival. 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 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 can 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 that 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 prices. One such group of market participants are 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 the activities of the corporations in whose name commodities are produced. In fact, there are innumerable details of the genealogy of commodities of which consumers are typically ignorant. This has implications for consumers who wish to consume ethically.

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 that allows it to undercut competitors.
2. The T-shirt I wear was made in southeast Asia at a low price that 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 details:

Ad (1) The new mining technique involves the detonation of explosives which removes the summits of mountains and exposes the ore that can be mined cheaply. This causes 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 consists of outlawing workers’ associations and collective bargaining, a measure passed by a military government and enforced by the army that has a permanent presence in textile factories. This ensures a cheap and disciplined labor force.
Ad (3) The price of beef has fallen due to the conversion of forest land to cattle farming. This causes deforestation and is enabled by the government having granted property rights on the hitherto “unowned” land to large cattle farming corporations. These farmers clear the land of aboriginal communities who 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 benefit from the knowledge of the mining innovation when they purchase a wedding ring, yet they have no direct knowledge of how the ore is mined. The mining technique will have given the mining corporation a competitive advantage that is reflected in a lower relative price of rings. It is through such relative price differentials, not through direct knowledge of the innovation itself, that consumers are alerted to the existence of the new mining technique. If consumers possessed such knowledge, many would not buy rings because they hold their mode of production to be unethical. 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. By purchasing such commodities, consumers commit wrongdoing because they are ignorant about these commodities. Whether they are blameworthy for doing so depends on whether their ignorance is culpable.

**Preliminaries and Caveats**

Before diving into the theme of consumer ignorance and culpability, I clarify some limitations I draw around my analysis. First, many people lay the blame for unethical market practices at the door of corporations that produce commodities unethically. “If only corporations were to produce ethically, consumers would not need to worry about purchasing unethical products,” one might say. This is a cogent argument, and ethical-consumer activism should indeed draw attention to corporate misdemeanors as a means to outlawing the malfeasance of business. Often, corporations only improve their ethical record when it is revealed that their business practice transgresses ethical norms. Corporations’ attempts to “conceal their sourcing practices” (Oxfam, 2013, p. 33) represent a barrier to consumers who wish to overcome their ignorance about corporations’ practices. Without wishing to make light of the ethical dubiety of many corporate practices, I take the existence of such malfeasance as a regrettable fact of life for the foreseeable future. The question regarding consumers then becomes “Given the existence of unethically made products, is consumers’ ignorance about these products culpable, even if other actors, namely corporations, are the primary perpetrators of injustices committed in the production process?” The discussion that follows, then, is a contribution to “non-ideal theory” (Rawls, 2001, p. 13). That is, I am considering a market society that is not “well-ordered” in the sense that not everyone—certainly not every corporation—“strictly complies” with widely accepted ethical principles regarding commodity production.

The non-ideality of my analysis applies also to government. Government, some people hold, is responsible for punishing unethical corporate practices. If government carried out this task perfectly, consumers would not be in a position in which they would have the option of consuming unethically produced commodities, for government would prohibit the sale of all such commodities. In this way, government could divest consumers of the moral burden they currently face, namely, the burden of deciding whether to become more informed about commodities with a view to cease purchasing those of an ethically dubious nature. Governments, however, do not ban the production or sale of all unethically produced commodities, nor can they realistically be expected to do so. One reason for this is that consumers hold ethical values which governments wish not to endorse legislatively. Consumers, for instance, who find the slaughter of animals morally unacceptable will hope in vain that government will prohibit the sale of meat, for a broad consensus on this policy does not appear to exist. The moral burden of whether to consume meat remains, therefore, in the judgment of each consumer. However vigilant a government might be in passing and enforcing laws about consumer goods, the law will never correspond exactly to any consumer’s ethical values. This gap between law and a consumer’s ethical values will always mean that the ethical burden cannot be carried by government alone.
Government can nevertheless fulfill a different role that falls short of prohibiting ethically unacceptable of commodities, namely, providing information about commodities so that consumers can make informed purchasing decisions. This is precisely what government does when it insists that nutritional information be provided about the foods we consume or when it decrees that imported items carry a “Made in _____” label. Such information can serve as a fillip to ethical consumption, for it gives consumers access to information, which allows them to make ethical consumption decisions. A proponent of ethical consumption should, certainly, support further-reaching informational policies and hold accountable a government that did not provide information with which consumers could fully assess the ethical constitution of commodities.

A further limitation on government concerns international treaties. A member state of the European Union (EU), for instance, must uphold the “country of origin principle” whereby corporations that export goods to any EU state must comply with the regulations of their home country only, not with those of other EU states in which their goods are sold. This limits, say, the Irish government’s power to outlaw products made in Slovakia which the Irish populace deems ethically unseemly. Whether European governments made an ethically defensible decision when they agreed to the country of origin principle does not fall within the purview of this article, but the existence of the principle creates an ethical onus for consumers whose government may not ban commodities that its citizens find ethically unacceptable. This is a further aspect of the non-ideal world the consumer inhabits.

### Ignorance and Culpability

The processes of production through which commodities are created are often unethical. One reason such processes persist is because consumers are ignorant of their details. Consumers’ ignorance is thus a causal factor for the existence of unethically produced commodities and this causal role leads us to ask how much responsibility consumers bear for their ignorance that perpetuates unethical business practices. Under some circumstances, ignorance excuses a person who performs a wrongful act. This section enquires into the extent of the culpability of consumers’ ignorance which leads them to undertake wrongful acts of consumption.

Let us start the discussion by attending to Michele Moody-Adams’ notion “affected ignorance” as a basis for exploring consumers’ ignorance. Consider two examples:

1. Actively shielding oneself from others’ knowledge so as to remain isolated from the consequences of actions in which one is involved. 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 carrying out 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 “‘couldn’t possibly’ be guilty of sexual harassment” (Moody-Adams, 1994, pp. 301-302).

Of what are the CEO and the university administrator ignorant in these examples? Using a distinction drawn by Allen Buchanan (1996), we may distinguish two types of ignorance, each of which may account for a person’s wrongdoing. The first type is factual ignorance, when a person lacks the factual basis for judging the nature of a particular situation. Buchanan draws his distinction in a study of human radiation experiments conducted in the United States from the 1940s to the 1970s in which civilians were exposed to harmful radiation by government-sponsored scientists. If, arguendo, we suppose that the scientific knowledge of the day led scientists who conducted experiments to judge the risk to subjects of these experiments to be non-existent, we would absolve the scientists of culpability for their actions. Their actions, to be sure, were wrong because they harmed experimental subjects; but the fact that they would have acted in the faith that they were not harming their subjects lessens the culpability of their acts. Buchanan’s second type of ignorance is moral ignorance whereby a person is “unable to discern what he ought to do because he is unable to make certain moral distinctions” (Buchanan, 1996, p. 28). A person is morally ignorant when she cannot ascertain what is right and what wrong in the way that other people can. For instance, if I break a promise, believing that there is nothing wrong in doing so, I am morally ignorant about the right course of action.

Returning to Moody-Adams’ two examples, the ignorance of the CEO and the university administrator is better interpreted not as moral but as factual; they are ignorant about morally relevant facts, but their moral sense itself is not faulty. If the CEO knew about her staff’s methods, be they fraudulent, threatening, and so forth, for increasing profits, she would presumably be morally disturbed; her request not to be informed about these methods makes little sense without this assumption. The university administrator fails to investigate the allegations against his colleague, not because he finds sexual harassment harmless, but because he finds it incredible that his colleague could be guilty of sexual harassment. This description makes it clear that the administrator holds sexual harassment to be execrable. Although the CEO and the administrator share a factual type of ignorance, their ignorance differs in a way to which I now turn.

The CEO is aware that her staff will use dubious means to increase company profits; this explains her instruction to them to keep 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 remain ignorant. (In a different context, Donald Rumsfeld described such doings as “known unknowns”). The CEO’s ignorance corresponds to Moody-Adams’ (1997) definition of affected ignorance as involving “a choice not to know something that is morally important” (p. 102) or, in an earlier formulation, “choosing not to know what one can and should know” and thereby committing or perpetuating injustice (Moody-Adams, 1994, p. 296). The CEO’s awareness of the (probably immoral) methods to be used by her staff presents her with two options: (a) investigating these methods and (b) remaining ignorant about them. She opts for (b), but her awareness of option (a) means that she is making a choice. The CEO’s position is like that of the doctor who crops up in many philosophical writings on culpable ignorance (e.g., Montmarquet, 1995; Smith, 1983). 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, p. 45). The doctor is aware that the article might contain something of relevance but he decides not to read it and thereby risks inflicting deleterious consequences on his patients.

Compare this with the university administrator. He is factually unaware of any wrongdoing on his colleague’s part, but unlike the CEO, he does not actively cultivate his ignorance. By not acknowledging the fallibility of his opinion, the administrator does not deliberately keep himself in the dark about the facts of the matter; rather it simply does not strike him as possible that his colleague could be involved in such sordid affairs. The administrator, therefore, does not choose to remain ignorant about a morally important fact of which he is more or less aware; for, to make a choice, the administrator would have to be aware that an investigation into the allegation might reveal the colleague’s misconduct, but this is precisely what the administrator cannot entertain. The administrator’s case is therefore not one of affected ignorance if, following Moody-Adams, affected ignorance requires that one make a choice not to apprise oneself of facts about which he or she is ignorant (these matters correspond to Donald Rumsfeld’s “unknown unknowns”); such a person does not choose to be ignorant but simply is ignorant. Each type of factual ignorance leads to a particular normative conclusion 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. She should be censured for willfully maintaining her ignorance instead of scrupulously overseeing her staff’s activities and stipulating in advance that their methods be above board.3 Her self-cultivated ignorance is culpable. The university administrator, by contrast, does not cultivate his ignorance but simply is ignorant in that he has no suspicion that wrongdoing could be afoot. We might be inclined to be lenient on such a person because, unlike the CEO, 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. One might say the administrator should be aware of the possibility that there is substance to the allegations, and that he should, therefore, investigate them. Let us ask what light the foregoing sheds on consumers’ ignorance.

**Affected Ignorance and Consumers’ Behavior**

If it can be argued that consumers affect their ignorance of the injustices perpetrated in the production of the commodities they consume, their ignorance is culpable. By viewing the matter through the lens of affected ignorance, we direct attention toward some types of consumer but not others. Bracketed from the following analysis are, for instance, “moral backsliders.” A moral backslider (Hare, 1965) is an agent who knows the morally correct course of action but knowingly refrains from following it. He or she commits wrongdoing in awareness that his or her act is wrongful. In the realm of consumption, many people, I suspect, purchase commodities knowing full well that they are unethical. The consumer who said the following about his or her 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, Hibbert, & Smith, 2007, p. 92). The authors of
the study in which this response was given classify it under the heading of “appeal to higher loyalties,” though “being lazy” would seem to indicate little more than self-interest rather than any “higher” value. The consumer might be expressing a preference for being lazy, but he or she is not thereby making a recognizably moral argument with which he or she tries to justify his or her behavior. The consumer, I would argue, is not ignorant of his or her wrongdoing, and this obviates the need to ask whether his or her ignorance is culpable, as it does for all moral backsliders.

A second category of consumer bracketed from the following analysis consists of those who may be deemed morally ignorant in Buchanan’s terminology. Such people, to recall, have faulty moral judgment such that we say of them that they cannot make the moral judgments that most people are able to make. A study by the Marketing Society (2010), for instance, found that 20% of consumers “didn’t care [about] or weren’t interested” in environmental sustainability and did not consume according to environmental concerns. This is a moral deficiency (especially regarding our obligations to future generations and the environmental quality we bequeath to them). However, although there might be substantial numbers of such morally ignorant consumers, such cases take us away from the focus on factual ignorance. A discussion of moral ignorance would require that we examine what is meant when we say that a person cannot make correct moral judgments; if a person literally cannot make such judgments, the philosophical maxim “ought implies can” would have us believe that the person who is unable to judge ethical matters correctly is not culpable. This, though, is a discussion for a different occasion. For the purpose of this study, I am interested only in cases in which a consumer occupies a different epistemological position to that of backsliders or those who are morally ignorant. This epistemological position is marked out by the following two points. Consumers are

i. aware of the possibility of injustices surrounding commodities they consume;
ii. not sufficiently aware of the disturbing details to prevent them from purchasing them (cf. Smith, 1983, p. 546).

The backslider does not fulfill Condition (ii)—he is fully aware of the details of the commodities he purchases and he knows he ought not to purchase them. The person with deficient moral judgment does not fulfill Condition (i), for she does not recognize anything morally wrong about purchasing unethically produced commodities.

Let us consider a representative consumer whose consumption habits and ethical attitudes correspond to those of many consumers. The representative consumer buys groceries from large supermarket chains, brand-name clothing from multinational retailers, and non-sustainable furniture; she ignores fair-trade products and drives a car with 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?
b. Would it worry you if textile workers in southeast Asia were routinely exposed to unsafe working conditions?
c. Would it trouble you to know that major clothing retailers sourced textiles from factories in which school-aged 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 on their use?
f. Are you disturbed that rising sea levels, which result from climate change, poses a threat to the survival of many of the world’s species and of people in parts of the world?

Because she answers these questions affirmatively, this consumer manifests the gap between her consumption behavior and her ethical beliefs. Her acts of consumption are wrongful because they are implicated in harming others or perpetuating injustice. But before we judge her blameworthy, we must enquire to what extent she is ignorant of the matters mentioned in points (a) to (f), and whether her ignorance is culpable.

When probed further, our representative consumer reveals rudimentary awareness of ethical issues that pertain to certain business practices. She has not actively sought information about such matters but has been informed about them incidentally—through newspaper reports, television news items, or conversations with acquaintances. Beyond this rudimentary awareness, she takes no 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 change her consumption habits. Our representative consumers’ ignorance is akin to that of Moody-Adams’ CEO, for the consumer fulfills the awareness condition described in the section “Preliminaries and Caveats.” That is, she is 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; she has enough evidence to give rise to the suspicion that she might be contributing to injustice, but she has “insufficient evidence to warrant holding back from the contemplated act” (Smith, 1983, p. 546) of purchasing a particular commodity. The representative consumer’s ignorance is culpable.

The source of the representative consumer’s ignorance is, following Smith (1983), an objectionable psychological state that leads her to choose not to overcome or reduce her ignorance. This objectionable psychological state consists in willingness to risk the perpetuation of injustice through acts of unethical consumption based on ignorance; indifference to
this risk, then, is how one might best characterize this objectionable psychological state. The agent’s willingness to risk the perpetuation of injustice presupposes that she is aware of the risk but ignores it.

**Degrees of Culpability**

The representative consumer depicted above is culpably ignorant because she is indifferent to a risk, of which she is aware. This constitutes a culpably objectionable psychological state. This example constitutes our baseline for culpable ignorance, yet it is only the beginning of an analysis of culpability, for the situation of actual consumers deviates from that of our representative consumer in many ways. The ways in which their situation differs from that of the representative consumer can change their degree of culpability, as we shall now see.

One way of exploring degrees of culpability attributable to consumers is via the awareness condition, the fulfillment of which requires that consumers be aware of a risk that a morally undesirable state of affairs will arise or be perpetuated if they maintain their 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, p. 551) of the consumer’s state of ignorance. Two variables regarding this risk influence the degree of culpability of the consumer’s ignorance:

1. the magnitude of the risk;
2. the moral severity of the consequences, should the undesirable state of affairs actually ensue as a result of her act of consumption.

I postpone elucidation of Variable (2) until the next section in the discussion of the second moral precept for ethical consumption. Here I explore Variable (1).

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 and who has some awareness of the risk that he is thereby perpetuating working conditions in textile factories which he considers unjust. His unethical act of consumption “falls within the known risk” of his ignorance because the risk involved is self-evident: The conditions of production under which cheap clothing is manufactured in developing countries are widely known, and 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 filip, perhaps necessary, to the production of cheap clothing. In Michael Zimmerman’s (1997) words, there is a straightforward “cognitive connection” between the existence of cheap T-shirts in retail stores and the sort of pay and conditions which the workers who produce them suffer (p. 420). If a consumer were to plead that he had no inklings that purchasing these items were likely to perpetuate injustices, his words are unlikely to convince. This would lead us to say that the consumer *ought to have known* about the risk that buying cheap T-shirts, and the fact that he did not know (or claimed not to have known) does not absolve him. This is not, however, always the case, as a different example shows.

The pharmaceutical corporation Roche, which produces a drug called CellCept, presents such a case (Schrempp-Stirling, 2014). CellCept hinders the rejection of transplanted organs by their hosts. Roche’s development of this drug relied on the acquisition of organs taken from executed prisoners in China. Consider, in light of this, a person who receives treatment using a different product manufactured by Roche, for example, an intravenously administered antibacterial solution. We may say that consuming any Roche product is wrongful because it contributes to the profitability of a corporation that produces at least one commodity using unethical means. The consumer who purchases the antibacterial solution would, however, be absolved of the guilt associated with contributing to the profitability of Roche because the connection between the bacterial solution and CellCept is remote; we would not say that the consumer ought to know about this connection. Culpability would therefore stop with the corporation but not seep to the level of the consumer.

If we consider now consumers of CellCept itself, one feature of the case should make us wary of generalizing it to other commodities. CellCept is a potentially lifesaving drug for a patient undergoing organ transplantation. Consider a patient who knows about Roche’s use of executed prisoners’ organs in testing the drug. The ethical consumer must consider the effects of refusing to take such a drug. If there are few or only less effective alternatives to CellCept, the chance of losing one’s life as a result of organ rejection is a high moral cost of refusing to take the drug. A patient would justifiably hold the moral value of increasing her chance of post-transplant survival to be higher than the moral value of extricating herself from complicity in the use of executed prisoners’ organs. This would be an example of *moral weighing*, whereby a person weighs the wrongness of committing an immoral act (in this case consuming CellCept) against the moral gain to be had (increasing life expectancy by taking the drug). We might forgive a consumer of CellCept for holding the gain to be of higher moral value to herself than the immorality of being implicated in a commodity with an unethical biography. This is not a case of moral backsliding because the consumer does not, all things considered, believe that her consumption of the drug is wrong on account of the positive moral effects it is likely to have in prolonging her post-transplant life. Neither is it a case of ignorance, for the consumer has sufficient information about the product to make a sound ethical judgment.

CellCept may be described as a “high-stake” commodity. If the consumption of a particular commodity is likely to
have profound moral effects on the life of the consumer (in the case of CellCept, increasing the consumer’s life expectancy), that commodity is, for this consumer, of high stake. Other commodities involve a lower stake in the sense that the consequences of not purchasing them are of little or no moral consequence.5 If, for instance, I refrain from buying what I consider to be ethically dubious clothing made in Vietnam, my moral sacrifice is not great: By thus refraining, I will have to spend more money to pay for ethically sourced clothing, but for people of comfortable means, this is not a moral sacrifice. One consideration, then, in judging a consumer’s culpability concerns the moral sacrifice one would have to make if one were to refrain from consuming a particular commodity. In the case of CellCept, the sacrifice is potentially great; in the case of clothing it is usually not great.

In the previous example, I stated that, for people of comfortable means, the sacrifice involved in buying ethically sourced clothing is not great. But for the less well-to-do, the sacrifice can be high. Consider a not atypical U.S. resident who supports two dependents, works 40 hr per week, and earns US$8.50 per hour (above the minimum wage). If such a person works 52 weeks of the year, after paying social security, rent, health insurance, and the costs of a car, he or she will be left with a disposable income below US$3,000 per annum to support his or her family, or under US$3 per day per person (Stiglitz, 2012). Given his or her paltry income, buying ethically sourced clothing or fair-trade food might make this person unable to afford a winter coat for his or her children, to provide them with adequate calorific intake, or to treat them to 1 week’s vacation every other year. These items, which he or she would have to relinquish if he or she were to consume ethically, might, in light of the obligations he or she has toward his or her children, be of greater moral import to him or her than the plight of textile workers in Vietnam. Purchasing cheap, rather than ethically sourced, clothing allows this person to reserve part of his income to fulfill basic obligations to himself or herself or to those with whom he or she stands in a special ethical relationship, we are likely to absolve him or her of culpability for consuming unethically. If, for instance, I would be unable to nourish my children if I were to divert my paltry financial resources to ethical consumption, I would probably be declared blameless for doing so. Whatever our verdict, though, it should be noted that culpability in such cases is not a function of ignorance, for the consumer need not be ignorant of the relevant ethical implications. I might, that is, be forced by my meager means to buy unethically produced commodities in full knowledge of the harms I am perpetuating. But if the money I save by consuming such products allows me to nourish my family and stop its members from falling into chronic ill health, I might be justified in acting thus. I am thereby not necessarily ignorant of any causal impact of my deeds. If I am censured for taking this course of action, I will be castigated not because of my ignorance but because my moral weighing is deemed faulty.

**Precepts for Ethical Consumption**

Having outlined some variables that affect the degree of consumers’ culpability, we now issue practical precepts for ethical consumption:

**Precept 1:** Inform yourself first about those commodities the consumption of which, ceteris paribus, has the highest probability of giving rise to a moral wrong.

One’s ignorance about commodities is associated with a risk that we will buy commodities the production of which involves harm or injustice to innocent others. Consumers are often aware that they risk perpetuating injustices through their acts of consumption. But the magnitude of the risk involved will vary. For instance, 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 is high. It is plausible that a person is unaware of the connection between the suffering of animals and the ways in which they are farmed, especially for the production of low cost food. Like Moody-Adams’ CEO, one might not want to confront the details of animal farming, but one would have to be quite active in cultivating this ignorance, not least in the sense of putting thoughts about the lives of animals one eats to the back of one’s mind. A consumer of a Roche product, by contrast, is unlikely to be aware of a connection between purchasing, say, an antibacterial medication and the profitability of a corporation that uses ethically dubious methods to develop a different, ethically suspect, treatment, namely CellCept. The closeness of the cognitive
connection between purchasing cheap meat and harm to animals should lead her to prioritize the task of informing herself about the risk of consuming meat. The distant cognitive connection between Roche’s wrongdoing and the consumption of one of the corporation’s non-transplant-related products makes it a less obvious target for immediate investigation.

A second precept of ethical consumption concerns the severity of the moral consequences that might ensue from acts of consumption. 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 estimates (however roughly) the probability that $I_A$ and $I_B$ will be perpetuated by his acts of consumption to be $p(I_A)$ and $p(I_B)$, respectively. If $p(I_A) \approx p(I_B)$, the consumer is more culpable for his ignorance that leads to the purchase of $A$ if he deems $I_A$ to be greater than $I_B$. This, then, issues in the following precept, which returns us to variable (2) of the previous section:

**Precept 2:** Reduce your ignorance about those commodities the consumption of which, ceteris paribus, risks engendering or sustaining the most severe moral consequences.

Other things being equal, one’s degree of culpability for remaining ignorant about commodity $C$ and the pernicious effects associated with it is greater the more severe the moral consequences of purchasing $C$ are. Note, though, that Precepts 1 and 2 can pull a consumer’s investigations in opposite directions. Purchasing commodity $A$ in ignorance about its severe moral implications is worse than purchasing commodity $B$ that is associated with minor moral infractions. This should lead a consumer who abides by Precept 2 to investigate the ethical biography of commodity $A$ rather than $B$. But if the consumer estimates the risk of perpetuating injustice by consuming $A$ to be very small (and perhaps the consumer, as in the Roche case, is unaware of the risk), she is counseled by Precept 1 to investigate commodity $B$ if consuming $B$ carries a high probability of perpetuating the minor ethical misdemeanors associated with $B$’s production. The consumer who acts on Precepts 1 and 2 is, then, involved in a calculation in which the estimation of moral wrong and the estimation of its likelihood are to be balanced.

Precepts 1 and 2 must be augmented by a third that addresses the ease with which information about commodities can be gathered. Consider the following moral excuse that might be offered on behalf of consumers whose ignorance leads them to purchase unethically produced commodities:

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

This moral excuse casts doubt on the feasibility of subjecting all or even many of our consumption decisions to ethical scrutiny. Even the most ethical consumer will unwittingly purchase some ethically dubious commodities. The insurmountability of consumers’ ignorance regarding commodities, the moral excuse would have us believe, absolves them 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 & Attalla, 2001), for to delve into the ethical record of myriad corporations is no small task.

Of what, though, does the above moral excuse absolve consumers? It does not absolve them of culpability for their ignorance _tout court_, for although it might be impossible that a consumer inform herself about _every_ commodity, this does not warrant the inference that she is permitted to inform herself about _none_, or even about a good number of them. To argue otherwise would be a false generalization of the moral excuse. The impossibility of informing herself fully about every commodity does not mean that it is impossible (or even terribly difficult) for her to inform herself to some degree about some commodities. The question then becomes “About which, among the sea of commodities available, should a consumer inform herself so as to avoid the state of being culpably ignorant?” Precepts 1 and 2 give guidance on this, but we should add a further precept that pertains to the relative ease with which reliable information can be found which can strengthen or weaken the consumer’s suspicion about the unethical nature of a commodity. Thus we have the following:

**Precept 3:** Obtain information first about those commodities about which, ceteris paribus, reliable information is relatively easily gathered.

Precept 3 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 while being non-culpable for her remaining ignorance. For we have absolved the consumer of culpability for being ignorant about all available commodities. But at which point may she stop collecting further information about some of the commodities she purchases while being non-culpable for acts of consumption that implicate her in wrongdoing? The answer to this question depends on moral weighing. One suggestion for a rule of moral weighing 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, p. 231)

I call this the Singer criterion for moral action. One can apply it 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 a further precept:

**Precept 4:** Gather information about commodities you might consider purchasing up to the point at which the cost of further information gathering involves a moral sacrifice that outweighs the moral harm avoided by collecting more information.

Gathering information about commodities one might consume has two effects: It (a) reduces the risk that injustices associated with the production of those commodities will be perpetuated, and (b) imposes a cost on the consumer who gathers the information. The former effect is clearly moral—it puts the consumer into a position from which she can reduce injustice. The costs of gathering information (effect [b]) might be included in the moral deliberation of the consumer, but only if these costs are **morally** relevant. Whether these costs are moral depends on the particularities of the consumer’s situation, as the following examples indicate.

The costs of information gathering may be deemed morally relevant if the time the consumer spares himself by **not** gathering information about commodities is instead used in the pursuit of something of greater moral worth. Hence, if a consumer decides not to spend a further unit of time collecting information about the ethical characteristics of commodities, he relinquishes a moral gain, which 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 that is morally at least as valuable as the reduction in the risk that he purchases an ethically tainted commodity. So if I decide not to spend a further hour informing myself about the clothing I buy because that hour is better spent in pursuit of animal liberation, my culpability for remaining ignorant about the clothes I buy will be diminished (or extinguished) if the hour of activism for animal liberation movements is deemed to be morally more important than divesting myself of ignorance about clothing. Or, to return to the resident of the United States mentioned in the previous section, if researching the ethical characteristics of commodities reduces the time available to him for working overtime in his job, the moral cost, for example, being unable adequately to feed his family because of low income, might be held to be so high that it excuses him from the information-gathering exercise through which he would reduce his ignorance about commodities. If, however, one’s reason for not informing oneself further about the world of commodities is simply laziness or convenience, 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 these excuses are not moral excuses. 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 article has explored consumers’ ignorance about commodities they purchase and has asked under which conditions their ignorance makes them morally culpable. My focus has been on consumers who are factually, rather than morally, ignorant. That is, I have been concerned with consumers who are ignorant about the modes of production of the commodities they consume, but not with those consumers whose sense of right and wrong is defective. Through a re-working of Michele Moody-Adams’ concept of affected ignorance, I established the defining criterion for determining whether ignorance is culpable to reside in the awareness condition. To fulfill this condition, a consumer must be aware of a risk that her consumption of a given commodity will engender or help to sustain harms or injustices to others. This sets the lower bound to a consumer’s awareness if she is to fulfill the awareness condition. The awareness condition also sets an upper bound to the degree of awareness the consumer has about the commodities she consumes. The upper bound to the awareness condition means that the consumer is not permitted to have a degree of awareness extensive enough to prevent her from purchasing unethical commodities; neither can she be so well informed about the commodity in question that she purchases it in the knowledge that doing so is wrongful, for this would be a case of moral backsliding. The awareness condition thus constrains the consumer from two sides: She must have some awareness of the unethical nature of commodities, but not too much. Her awareness of the ethically dubious nature of commodities allows us to describe her as making a choice not to overcome her ignorance if she does not take steps to inform herself further about these commodities. From within the epistemological space carved out by the awareness condition, I have investigated consumers’ culpability for acts of consumption that inflict harm on others or perpetuate injustices.

To investigate consumers’ culpability, I depicted a representative consumer who fulfills the awareness condition and
whose ignorance is therefore culpable. Following that, a number of mitigating circumstances were enumerated, all of which lessened or annulled the consumer’s culpability. These include cases in which the harm arising from an act of unethical consumption falls outside the risk of the consumer’s ignorance. That is, for cases in which the risk is remote and in which, therefore, there is no obvious cognitive connection between the act of consumption and the harm that ensues, the consumer’s culpability is diminished. We do not expect consumers to be aware of distant or arcane connections between their consumption and the harms it causes. The remoteness or proximity of the risk that one will engender harm through one’s acts of consumption is a factor underlying the first precept of ethical consumption. The second factor that determines the degree of culpability concerns the severity of the moral consequences of consuming unethically as a result of one’s ignorance. Consideration of this factor lay at the basis of the second precept of ethical consumption, which counseled consumers to reduce their ignorance about those commodities the consumption of which lead to the most severe moral consequences. A third reason for absolving a consumer of culpability lies in the moral sacrifice involved in informing oneself about commodities. If overcoming one’s ignorance so that one can avoid purchasing ethically tainted commodities involves a moral sacrifice greater than the harm one is likely to arise by remaining ignorant, remaining ignorant is justified. Those of lower income are likely to have to sacrifice something of greater moral relevance when they seek information about commodities than those endowed with more income and wealth. The moral sacrifice of overcoming one’s ignorance about commodities is a factor underlying the third and fourth precepts for ethical consumption.

Although there are many circumstances that lessen the degree to which our ignorance may be deemed culpable, my argument suggests that we are less innocent than many will wish to admit when we make consumption decisions that cause harm or injustices to others. Significantly, to narrow the gap between our ethical attitudes and our behavior would require significant changes in behavior the attainment of which, to many, will seem 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.

Finally, the conceptual analysis contained in this article points to avenues of empirical research. Such research would be of an ethnographic nature or based on surveys. It would attempt to ascertain the prevalence of different types of attitudes among consumers. This would allow one to determine how many consumers are morally ignorant in the consumption decisions they make, how many are factually ignorant, and, among these, how many manifest a degree of ignorance that satisfies the awareness condition. Those whose ignorance does fall within these confines would be deemed culpable for their ignorance.

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1. The following interpretations of the CEO and university administrator are not the only possible interpretations, but they are plausible elucidations of Moody-Adams’ lapidary examples.
2. With different terminology, both Smith (1983) and Zimmerman (1997) recognize this condition.
3. For a discussion of willful ignorance, see Husak and Callender (1994).
4. On the concept of “moral weighing,” see Peacock (2011).
5. This point and the “low stake”/“high stake” terminology were suggested by a referee whom I thank for the suggestion.

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