

[Download free pdf] Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age (Philosophy and the Global Context)

## Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age (Philosophy and the Global Context)

*David T. Schwartz*

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**David T. Schwartz : Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age (Philosophy and the Global Context)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Consuming Choices: Ethics in a Global Consumer Age (Philosophy and the Global Context):

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. not for wide audienceBy yarootkaIf you are not an ethicist/student, the book will just bother you. It is for professional interest, not just curiosity.8 of 8 people found the following review

helpful. See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil? Consumer ethics demands another approach. By R S Cobblestone Producers produce, and consumers consume. It's a weird dance as supply and demand tango to bring products to the marketplace. But sometimes, unwanted baggage comes with the products. That T-shirt with the well-known logo and the cute slogan? Does it make a difference if it was stitched together in China or Haiti by young women who work 60+ hours a week under conditions that would be illegal in the US? Does it make a difference if your hamburger was made from the parts of hundreds of cows, a combination of animals fattened on an artificial corn-based diet in a feedlot along with other cows worn out from producing milk day after day and now being discarded? Does it make a difference if a critical component of your cell phone, tantalum, produced from coltan ore, came from war-torn countries and helps support soldiers terrorizing the local populace? Philosopher David Schwartz, in his book "Consuming Choices: Ethics In A Global Consumer Age," argues that it does, or could. His general aim is "...to shed light on the question of whether consumers can have a moral obligation to boycott particular products" (p. ii). The US is a consumer society. Our economy runs on people buying things. When is the consumer responsible for "bad things" related to the production or use of this merchandise? "Might consumers themselves shoulder some culpability for unethical or immoral practices associated with products they purchase?" (p. 3). It's complicated. For some products, consumers know, or should know, that, for example, harm is being inflicted on other human beings. I would characterize "blood diamonds" in this category (Schwartz does not use this example). Buying products from a country that treats its workers poorly would be another. The production of certain seafoods, particularly farmed shrimp, in some countries displaces local inhabitants, contaminates drinking water, and ruins traditional fishing grounds or important fish production areas. Is the consumer culpable? On the other hand, because many of us are so distant from production sources, both geographically and because of the multifaceted nature of world manufacturing markets (your T-shirt could have come from energy-intensive cotton produced in Texas, then loomed in China with cheap labor, then stitched together in Honduras, and finally shipped back to... Texas), it is understandable that one may not understand this history. And what about society's tolerance of advertising directed toward children? Schwartz argues, "...[Y]oung children typically lack sufficient mental facilities to evaluate an advertisement rationally, making them especially vulnerable to emotional suggestion" (p. 29). This should apply to dangerous products (tobacco), bad foods (most of the foods advertised), and religion. Schwartz doesn't mention religion, but I feel it is very influential in affecting the behaviors, decisions, and values of children. Overall, this was a very readable volume. I was confused when Schwartz discussed the assignment of culpability for wrongdoing resulting in harm. He stated, "Assuming that the suffering of the slave laborers [in this example, producing clothes] in fact outweighs the pleasure of the consumers, we can then label the net suffering as  $x$  and claim that buying a single item of this clothing would translate into the assignment of  $1/x$  culpability for the collective wrongdoing. Similarly, buying two such products would generate  $2/x$  culpability, three products  $3/x$  culpability, and so forth" (p. 55). I've puzzled over this notation. I think it should be  $(1/N)x$ , where  $N$  is the total number of consumption events, and  $x$  is Schwartz's net suffering. So if there are one hundred shirts consumed, and you buy one, then your culpability would be  $(1/100)x$ , or one percent of the net suffering. If you consumed fifty, then your culpability would be  $(50/100)x$ , or fifty percent. I was particularly interested in Schwartz's comments on the effects of boycotts: "...[I]t seems plausible to assert that the effects of boycotts by individuals may sometimes be considerably larger than intuitive estimates would suggest. In fact, even if the effects of my particular boycott on actual production are vanishingly small, perhaps the more substantive difference actually comes from the influence my decision asserts on others, who in turn influence others, and so on" (p. 62). This would lead to the conclusion, Schwartz asserts, that "A boycott undertaken in silence cannot avail itself of the cascade or contagion effects, and so its impact seems inherently limited" (p. 62). Fundamentally, Schwartz argues, "... [I]n buying a product consumers become intentional participants in - and beneficiaries of - the methods used to produce it" (p. 85). Thus, we need to reconsider and probably alter our buying habits. How? Start by searching for information. Know what you are purchasing. Personally, I am a strong advocate of Seafood Watch, an organized effort to encourage consumers to understand the fishing methods used to produce seafood, and then to change those consumer habits based on this information. I think Schwartz would agree with this effort. The "best deal" is not necessarily the lowest price. This slim volume is a great introduction to the topic of consumer ethics. The challenge is to get people to hear this message. Like with boycotts, silence will make the effort more difficult.

Being a consumer is now integral to the human experience, something none of us can avoid. At the same time, many of the products that we buy come to us with histories steeped in highly unethical practices, such as worker exploitation, animal suffering, and environmental damage. Consuming Choices considers the ethical dimensions of consumer life by exploring several basic questions: Exactly what sorts of unethical practices are implicated in today's consumer products? Does moral culpability for these practices fall solely on the companies that perform them, or does it also fall upon consumers who purchase the products made with such practices? And most importantly, do consumers ever have moral obligations to avoid particular products? To answer, David T. Schwartz provides the most detailed philosophical exploration to date on consumer ethics. He utilizes historical and fictional examples to illustrate the types of wrongdoing currently implicated by consumer products in this age of globalization, offers a clear description

of the relevant moral theories and important ethical concepts, and provides concrete suggestions on how to be a more ethical consumer.

"I know of no other work that has examined the topic of consumer choice in such detail." ----James Sterba, University of Notre Dame  
"The signature ethical problem of the global consumer society is our responsibility for the unethical practices that lie behind the products we buy. David T. Schwartz probes this problem with well-chosen examples and clear ethical arguments. Consuming Choices is a book for teachers to discuss with their students and from which activists and consumers will also learn." --- Peter Singer, Decamp Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University  
"What are the moral obligations attaching to consumers? Since everyone is a consumer, Schwartz (Randolph College) claims, this is a question of universal significance. The author clearly traces the difficulties of applying consequentialist moral theory to actions where a single consumer seems ultimately invisible to market and production systems or easily hides behind the screen of anonymity--'If I didn't buy it (or do it) someone else would.' Although most of the book treats issues related to consequentialist moral theory, Schwartz's main argument is for moral complicity by all who engage in consumer activity. This draws on deontological ground, and the author adopts Christopher Kutz's notion that 'participants in a collective harm are accountable for the victim's suffering not because of the individual differences they make, but because their intentional participation in a collective endeavor directly links them to the consequences of that endeavor.' Schwartz's use of a broad set of examples, including the Dresden fire bombing, coco production using child slaves, and the dramatic increase in CEO pay, makes this book powerful and current. Summing Up: Highly recommended." ---Choice  
About the Author  
David T. Schwartz is professor of philosophy at Randolph College.