The Ethical Consumer in a Material World

Abstract

We have all heard the environmental adage "think globally, act locally." At its heart it is an attempt to solve the problem of collective action, the disconnect between linking the impact of our everyday behaviors to the world around us. The intricacies of this deceptively simple slogan, however, become apparent when applied to day-to-day life. This is further complicated when you recognize that the environment is only one of the concerns that our consumerism raises and, like the environment, our global economy crosses all borders. The implications of our routine practices- where we shop, how much we drive, what we eat, where we live (just to name a few)- have ties to complicated, morally significant issues. Admittedly, many of these strings are long-reaching and tangled, but that should not be license to disregard them. In addition to these vast, complex problems in which our participation is clear but a course of action is not, we have another kind of dilemma. Some of these issues have been logically hashed out by philosophers and/or scientists, but with results that require a great deal of sacrifice. The common philosophical objections of "how do I know?" and "it's too demanding" are hard to answer with a high degree of satisfaction when our individual contributions, good or bad, are so minuscule in the overall equation. Not resolving these matters, though, seems to lead to a high level of complacency, if not complicity. This project is an attempt to put some of these factors into perspective and see if a model could be constructed in which an ethical consumer can be a person who recognizes their impact and works toward either a neutral or net positive individual effect on the world around them.