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Consumer Ethics, The Old Fashioned Way - Reflections on John Woolman's interaction with economics

I want to begin this presentation with a little “contemplative” exercise. So just get comfortable for a minute. If it helps, feel free to close your eyes. Now I want you to think about a purchase you made recently. A purchase of some kind of product.

Got it in your mind? OK. Now journey with me as I ask you a few questions about this product:

- First, think of the manufacturing process.
 - Are there parts in this product? Where did they come from?
 - What kinds of natural resources were used and what happened to creation in order to acquire them?
 - Were there different procedures used in the manufacturing of this product (chemical, mechanical, biological)? How do these procedures affect the lands or the people involved?
 - What about the harvesting, assembly, or packaging procedures? Who worked to get the product ready for delivery? What were their working conditions like?
- Now, think about the transportation of your product. How did it get to you?
 - What means brought the parts to assembly? What brought the assembled product to your purchasing place? What resources were used?
- Think about marketing. How did you learn about this product?
- And finally, your purchase itself. Where did you buy it? Who sold the product to you? What are their working conditions like?

OK. You can return now – Just to let you know. What you did in this little exercise is a very simplified version of what is known as Life-Cycle Assessment, where, as the editors of *Taking Stock of Industrial Ecology* describe, “we identify the impacts of a supply chain leading to the delivery of a product or

service.”¹ This identification of the social and environmental impact of goods and services plays an important role in what is known today as “consumer ethics.”

Think “fair trade.” Think “socially responsible business.” Ethical consumers “are concerned with the effects that a purchasing choice has, not only on themselves, but also on the external world around them.”² Union members boycott non-unionized companies with some view to their own benefit. So also with those “eat organic” out of concern for how the pesticides might harm them. Those who buy organic because of the effects of pesticides on wildlife, workers or soil, however, are making choices for the sake of others. The point of consumer ethics is that our purchasing choices are made with a view toward the world around us: other people, God’s creation, and so on. Drinking fair-trade coffee, investing in micro-loans, buying groceries from community-supported agriculture organizations, perhaps having future theological conferences in green buildings – these are all examples of what is discussed today as “consumer ethics.”

A few concepts must be grasped in order to conceive of consumption as *ethics*. First, we must understand economic *structures* and their relationships to “cause.” Daniel Finn, past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the Society of Christian Ethics, and the Association for Social Economics, writes of his book *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*: “The fundamental premise of this volume is that we can fully understand our *moral* responsibility as consumers in the market only if we recognize our *causal* role as consumers in the lives of distant others.”³ Finn perceives this role in terms of human participation in a structure of interdependent relationships. He states, “The price of coffee rises because of decisions that occur all along the chain of relations among positions: from plantation manager/coffee buyer to coffee shop waitress/customer.”⁴ A second and connected

1 Roland Clift and Angela Druckman eds., *Taking Stock of Industrial Ecology* (Cham etc.: Springer Open, 2016), Kindle edition, loc 200.

2 Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm, and Deidre Shaw, “Introduction” to Rob Harrison, Terry Newholm, and Deidre Shaw, *The Ethical Consumer* (London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 2.

3 Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy: How Buying Here Causes Injustice There* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019), 106. See also p. 160.

4 Finn, *Consumer Ethics*, 168. For a more complete look at the structure of interdependent economic relationships as it has developed from the 1980s into the new millenium, see Manuel Castells: *The Rise of the Network Society*, vol. 1 of his series, *The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture*, 2nd edition (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-

concept is the idea of structural *sin*. Ron Sider, in his *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, reminded evangelicals in 1978 what Biblical scholars had long known: that God judges not merely individuals but corporate entities.⁵ Facing consumer ethics brings us to cry out with Isaiah, “Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!” (Isaiah 6:5).

Our third concept is the notion of *complicity*. I am more “complicit” in a beating when I hand the assailant a club. I am still complicit, but less so, when I merely stand and watch. Albino Barrera, in his *Market Complicity and Christian Ethics*, identifies four levels of complicity in consumer behavior: benefiting and enabling wrongdoing, precipitating gratuitous accumulative harms, leaving severe pecuniary externalities unattended, and reinforcing injurious socioeconomic structures.⁶ Complicity, then, leads us to recognize a final concept, the possibility of a new *strategy*: exercising our consumer practices both with a view to values consistency, but perhaps also with a hope that our practice might influence others.

Globalization, increased awareness of worker or environmental impact (like the fire at the sweat-shop in Bangladesh), and a shift in market power toward consumers⁷ have all contributed to a growing interest in ethical consumer behavior in recent decades. *Ethical Consumer*, the pioneering magazine in the field, was founded in 1989 in the UK and by 2009 an app was developed (though later discontinued) to scan products and provide evaluations regarding the health, environmental, and social impact of their purchase. Today, groups like Bloomberg and Reuters provide Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) ratings and apps like Yelp are developing user-generated ethical reviews.

Blackwell, 2010).

5 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity*. 20th Anniversary Edition (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1997). Laura M. Hartman develops Sider’s perspective to structural sin (along with that of Francis of Assisi and John Woolman) in her *The Christian Consumer: Living Faithfully in a Fragile World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Finn, *Consumer Ethics*, 188-212.

6 Albino Barrera, *Market Complicity and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), Part II. Kindle Edition.

7 See “Introduction,” 4-5.

Recognized Standards, such as B-corporations, certified FairTrade and more are becoming commonly known.⁸

And yet consumer Ethics is not as new as you might think. John Chrysostom urged his congregants not to engage in trades that produced useless goods or luxuries. St. Elizabeth of Hungary often went hungry rather than partake of food and drink that were unjustly appropriated from peasants.⁹ Though I have not (yet) done the homework, I suspect that a number of other examples can be collected. Authors Terry Newholm, Sandra Newholm, and Deidre Shaw in their “History for Consumption Ethics” draw particular attention to the 1791 UK boycott against slave produced sugar. They recount that this boycott was inspired by another gentleman, American Quaker John Woolman.¹⁰ And that brings us to John Woolman, member of the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers. I will introduce Woolman’s life in the first person, weaving in language and quotes from his own *Journal*, one of my favorite devotional classics.¹¹

Greetings, friends. My name is John Woolman, and I have come all the way from New Jersey, to tell you something of my life. I was born in 1720 and from my childhood I was acquainted with the operations of divine love [QS 163]. After a season of youthful vanities I experienced merciful heavenly visitations and was made to bow down in spirit before the Lord. My understanding became more strengthened to distinguish the language of the pure Spirit which inwardly moves upon the heart and taught [me] to wait in our meetings in silence until I felt that rise which prepares the creature to stand like a trumpet through which the Lord speaks to his flock [QS 168]. Perhaps a key turning point for me

8 A nice introductory review can be found on the Wikipedia page for Ethical Consumerism (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ethical_consumerism).

9 Barrera, *Market Complicity*, loc. 152;

10 Terry Newholm, Sandra Newholm, and Deidre Shaw, “A History for Consumption Ethics,” *Business History* 57, no. 2 (2015): 293.

11 I first read Woolman’s *Journal* from the abridged version in the *Quaker Spirituality* volume of the Classics of Western Spirituality series (Douglas V. Steere, ed., *Quaker Spirituality: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), a volume which contains a number of other great Quaker classics. The complete and most carefully edited version of Woolman’s journal is that published in Phillips P. Moulton, ed. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond Indiana: Friends United Press, 1971).

was in 1742, when I was 22 years old. My employer, having a Negro woman, sold her and directed me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who bought her. Through weakness I gave way and wrote it, but at executing it, I was so afflicted in my mind that I said before my master and the Friend who purchased the woman that I believed slavery to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion [QS 169].

I endeavored to order my life in a plain way, working as a tailor and in other trades, for I saw that an humble man with the blessing of the Lord might live on a little (*Path 76* – undistracted). I gained respect from my local congregation and received their recommendation to visit other Meetings. This began a nearly twenty-five year journey of periodic visitations throughout the colonies. I took occasion to speak with both slaves and slave owners and to become acquainted with their conditions, often taking a Friend with me. The knowledge of our conduct toward the Negroes has deeply bowed my mind. Some who owned slaves were glad of our visits and in some places the way was more difficult. I often saw the necessity of keeping down to the root of where our concern proceeded, allowing the Lord to beget a spirit of sympathy and tenderness in me toward some who were grievously in the spirit of this world [VI. QS 191]. I wrote *Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes, A Plea for the Poor*, and other essays. I spoke not only about slavery, but also about oppression in factories and farms, and about our care for the natives of this land.

Ultimately my journeys took me to England. There I contracted smallpox and died in 1772. Soon after my death the Society of Friends gave up the practice of slave-keeping, decades before what you call the “abolition movement” gained strength.

So much for Woolman’s life. Now for Woolman’s consumer ethics. I will present what I have discovered reading Woolman’s *Journal* and other essays in terms of the four concepts I outlined above, though not in the same order:

First, sin. Woolman's own reflections on his "youthful vanities" along with discussions of the dangers of magic shows, frequenting public houses, wearing frivolous clothing, and the like identify him as associated with the eighteenth century "Quaker Reform," a movement both to purify within and to evangelize without.¹² Central to the problems of sin and the world, as Quaker reformers perceived it, was their attachment to wealth. As Ross Eiler summarizes, "Leading Quaker reformers viewed the levels of comfort and material wealth enjoyed by many Quakers as problematic – not inherently bad, yet somehow connected to the Society's perceived spiritual decline."¹³ I think John Woolman went even further. He blames the inordinate pursuit of wealth for a host of ills not only among the Society of Friends but in the world more generally: the mistreatment of animals, corruption of sailors, oppression, inequality, war, and more.¹⁴ All of this is in distinct contrast to those values John Woolman saw as the heart of what he calls the "government of Christ": good work, plain living, and compassion for others.¹⁵

Next, structure. As one who managed a retail shop, Woolman was aware of the life cycle of the products he bought and sold. For example Woolman recounts how he used to sell rum with little concern "save only that the rum might be used in moderation," but that "being further informed respecting the oppressions too greatly exercised" among slaves utilized in rum production, he decided to change his practice.¹⁶ He speaks of "tracing our claim" to home-born Negroes to the bottom,¹⁷ and in his *Plea for the Poor* Woolman speaks of the economic system that leads from the desire for wealth into war as a "chain where the end of one link encloses the end of another." He exhorts his readers:

12 On the Quaker reform generally see Jack D. Marietta, *The Reformation of American Quakerism, 1748-1783* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1989). On reform and evangelism, with particular sensitivity to Woolman's involvement, see Geoffrey Plank, "Quaker Reform and Evangelism in the Eighteenth Century," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 59, no. 2 (2014): 177-91.

13 The connection between reform and concern with wealth is treated in Ross E. Martinie Eiler, "Luxury, Capitalism, and the Quaker Reformation, 1737-1798," *Quaker History* 97, no. 1 (2008): 11-31.

14 See for example, Phillips P. Moulton, ed. *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond Indiana: Friends United Press, 1971) 183, 180, 120, 242, 252.

15 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 174. See also pp. 223, 205, 226, 259, 95, 241, 250, 201. See also James Proud, ed. *John Woolman and the Affairs of Truth: The Journalist's Essays, Epistles, and Ephemera* (San Francisco: Inner Light Books, 2010), 116–118.

16 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 156.

17 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 234.

“May we look upon our treasures and the furniture of our houses and the garments in which we array ourselves and try whether the seeds of war have any nourishment in these our possessions or not.”¹⁸

As you can see from this quote, Woolman was not only conscious of the life cycle of the products and services in his world, but because of that, he was also burdened by our own complicity in sinful systems (war, slavery, the plight of natives, the suffering of animals, and more). Thus he cautions that “the trading in, or frequent use of, any produce known to be raised under such lamentable oppression hath appeared to be a subject which may yet more require the serious consideration of the humble followers of Christ.”¹⁹ Likewise in his *Considerations on Keeping Negroes Part Second*, after recounting some of the cruelties involved in procuring slaves, he laments, “and we make ourselves parties and fellow-helpers in them. . . . Although the first and most striking part of the scene is done at a great distance and by other hands, yet every one who is acquainted with the circumstances, and notwithstanding joins in it for the sake of gain only, must in the nature of things be chargeable with the others.”²⁰

Awareness of complicity, then leads us to consider strategy. What do we do in light of what we know? On the one hand Woolman was just trying to restore traditional principles of Quaker discipline: we review our behavior as communities and individuals in light of the concerns God has brought to our attention (Quakers would talk about the “Queries” presented to each Meeting). Yet, as Geoffrey Plank observes,

by applying those moral practices to a new range of social issues, they were on their way

toward discovering a new approach to politics. Eventually they would come to believe that they

18 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 255. See also pp. 54-55, 91, 178-79; Proud, *Affairs of Truth*, 198; Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman’s Path to the Peacable Kingdom: A Quaker in the British Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 119-120. See also Woolman’s reflections on the historical chain leading to the plight of native tribes in Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 128-29.

19 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 157.

20 Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 231-32. See also his reference to tradesmen being “entangled” in the process his *Plea for the Poor* (Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 239), and his comparison of wrongful merchandizing with buying goods from a thief in his *Considerations on the True Harmony of Mankind*, in Proud, *Affairs of Truth*, 157-58.

could exert influence more pervasively and extensively than any government could, just be keeping an eye on the global implications of their daily conduct.²¹

Woolman, aware of the range of tactics used by Christians in socio-political engagement,²² chose to respond to the situations of his day by ordering his economic habits very intentionally. He stopped selling goods produced by the slave trade or which were implicated with violence (a choice which endangered his business as a retailer). He requested not to eat with silver utensils. He changed the way he dressed. He refused to ride in carriages where the animals were mistreated. While on the one hand attention to lifestyle reflected traditional values, Woolman and his Friends, in their setting and circumstances were beginning to discover, as Plank states “that they could help effect change by performing demonstrative gestures.”²³ Here we see not only the purely *ethical* aspect of Woolman’s practice, but also the *political* dimensions of Woolman’s consumer ethic: recognizing that purchasers were not merely passive consumers, but were active participants in the market, able to shape the system itself through their purchasing habits.

John Woolman practiced “consumer ethics” before we called it that. He consciously chose his economic practices as a response to complicity in harmful structures. Yet, living when he did, Woolman’s example is not really able to help us identify the precise links in the globalized economic chains of today. Did some of you notice when you did your meditation how often you just “didn’t know” the links? Don’t worry. It’s normal. It actually requires a bit of homework when it comes to noticing complicity and discovering appropriate contemporary responses. With regards to consumer complicity I have been exploring an outline of three functions of our purchasing behavior. Perhaps it might be a helpful starting point:

21 Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, 120.

22 See Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 75-76.

23 Geoffrey Plank, *John Woolman’s Path*, 170.

- First, by our particular *purchases* of goods and services, consumers [less knowingly] contribute to the economic demand for the goods and services (I call them **products**) produced in contexts of oppression.
- Second, by our purchasing *habits* consumers support those companies (I call them **producers**) that meet demands [a little more knowingly] by negotiating prices and suppliers and such that deliver products and services in the context of oppression.
- Finally, by our *life* consumers reinforce (or re-educate) the values, sentiments, relationships and practices (I call them **principles**) that govern the manufacture, distribution, and use of goods and services manufactured, delivered, or used in contexts of oppression.

More importantly than my own brief comments here is the fact that Christians are now publishing valuable contributions to this exploration.²⁴ I have been developing my own approach to responses for the past few years under the heading of “fasting from oppression.” What is fasting from oppression? Avoiding our participation in the products, the producers, or the principles that bring gain to some at the expense of harm to others.²⁵

Yet there is one aspect of our contemporary practice of consumer ethics, where I think Woolman provides much-needed wisdom. You see, John Woolman was not only an activist, but a mystic. He speaks much of hearing God’s voice within, of “going deep,” of examining one’s heart.²⁶ Woolman’s “going wide” into the issues of slavery, war, native rights was rooted in his practice of “going deep.” So, with that in mind, let us close with a second contemplative exercise, one that in my forthcoming book *Deep and Wide: Reflections on Monasticism(s) and Socio-political Engagement* call political self-examination:

24 See especially Daniel K. Finn, *Consumer Ethics in a Global Economy*; Laura M. Hartman, *The Christian Consumer*; Albino Barrera, *Market Complicity and Christian Ethics*.

25 See Evan B. Howard, “Fasting from Oppression: A Christian Response to Socio-Economic Powers, a talk I gave for the Society of Vineyard Scholars and available at <https://spiritualityshoppe.org/fastening-from-oppression-a-christian-response-to-socio-economic-powers/>.

26 See for example Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 105, 111, 112.

Once again, get comfortable. Return again to your thoughts of that one purchase, that one product. Spend some time just “being with” it. What does this element look like? What sounds are associated with it? Any smells? How do you feel when you imagine this product?

Then, try to recall (or to think anew) the system or systems within which this product has its life cycle. Imagine the resources, the product development, the transportation and marketing, and so on. Just hold it all in your mind.

Now, try to bring God into the picture. What might Jesus think about this product? What might Jesus think about this process? What are God’s concerns for our economic habits, for *this* purchase?

Next, bring your purchase, your God, and you all together. Try to go deep. Let the Holy Spirit speak. What motives, what hopes, what inner voices are present in this purchase? How do they reflect your relationship with God more generally? How does this purchase reveal your own relationship with the world, the flesh, the devil?

Finally, we offer ourselves to God. In the words of John Woolman, “Lord, let us be about Your business. Let us be careful to have our minds redeemed from the love of wealth. Let no temporal concerns entangle our affections or hinder us from diligently following the dictates of Truth.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.²⁷

27 See Moulton, *Journal and Major Essays*, 95.