

“Support your local”:
The Ethics of Consumption and the Coronavirus Pandemic

Sergio Genovesi

“Support your local”. We all already knew this sentence from our local bakeries, breweries and clothing shops, reminding us that if we want to keep having nice small businesses in our town we should avoid buying everything we need from big malls, online shops and multinational chains. This imperative concerning our ethics of consumption started spreading more than ever during the first lockdown phase of the Coronavirus crisis, supported by new and more persuasive evidence that our purchasing choices do have a tremendous impact on other people's lives.

There are two main facts showing the ethical charge of every single purchase we do:

1) Without customers, small businesses are witnessing a hard crisis that may lead them to quickly go bankrupt, even though states are trying to provide financial aid. Purchasing their products is not just a matter of shopping preferences. It has become an act of solidarity. Without our support, our neighbors and friends selling local products will literally go under, while big businesses have much greater chances of surviving the crisis. Buying a takeaway meal from a small restaurant at the corner instead of from a big fast-food chain or ordering a book from a small bookstore instead of from Amazon might make the difference between keeping a rich diversity of local businesses in your neighborhood and seeing them replaced by another big mall.

2) Many products, whose production is outsourced in other countries for a cheaper price, were no more available on the shelves of our shops. On the one hand, the supply of many goods went slower or even stopped in reason of the restrictions in crossing national borders. On the other hand, people started panic-buying the last stocks. This undeniable evidence of our dependence from the countries where the production is outsourced clearly shows the ethical responsibility behind the outsourcing choice: in order to get cheap products, we foster producers who care less about workers' rights and the environment. Every cheap buy is done at the cost of someone else's rights.

So what? These facts were known as well before the pandemics. However, the average consumer did not take them seriously or just ignored them. What is different now is their urgency: they cannot be ignored anymore since COVID-19 made it a matter of life or death. In times of crisis, people seemed to be finally ready to pay more for a not outsourced and made-by-locals product. That's not all: every purchase by a local store is celebrated as a good action

by the whole community, showing a connection between a change in our normativity and the target-switch of our social approval and disapproval.¹

The post-Corona scenarios might therefore be a kind of accelerationist promised land, where capitalism, brought to its extremes consequences, causes by itself a system collapse and an anti-capitalistic reconfiguration of norms and values.² In the present case, the Coronavirus would be the catalyst. Indeed, a certain kind of blind trust in the capitalist logic of consumption looks to have been undermined during the spread of the virus. Reporting the failure of a globalized economy in times of a pandemic, the media have increasingly shown the negative consequences of our consumerism on a world scale, from the climate crisis to the human rights violations, raising awareness among viewers. Thus, a new moral imperative has established itself: support your local, be good, respect workers' rights, do not pollute. Yet, we still live in a globalized society and we still want to go to Hawaii on holiday and eat avocados.

The Coronavirus offered to us a useful metaphor to describe the complex implications of our actions as consumers. During a pandemic in a globalized society, every person might inadvertently infect hundreds of people and be one of the rings of a causal chain that leads to the death of thousands of individuals on the other side of the earth. The most common immediate solution adopted to face this problem was breaking the chain of infection by imposing home quarantine and forbidding traveling (in Europe every country closed its borders, in Italy people weren't even allowed to leave their town). In the same way, in a globalized capitalistic economy, through every single purchase the consumer might unknowingly be a ring of a causal chain that leads, among other things, to work exploitation of children and adults. In this case, breaking the unfair production chains by planning every step of the production on a local level in a fair and environment-friendly way does not look like a possible scenario. Nowhere in the world there is a place with enough resources and skilled workers to produce a made-by-a-local Smartphone or laptop.

If we really want to stick to the “support your local” imperative in times of revision of our economical rules, we should then first ask ourselves who our locals are. Assuming that they are just our immediate neighbors, our friends or our fellow citizens would imply being ready to take responsibility only for the first immediate consequences of our behavior, rejecting all further implications. In this scenario, we would discharge accountability for buying goods whose production process harms people and the environment outside our local sphere since we are at least being nice to “our locals”. This is exactly the pre-corona scenario (and, of course, the pre-Fridays for Future, etc.).

After the pandemic, we are all witnesses of the fact that pausing globalization - together with its harmful production chains - has as a concrete result the scarcity of many goods that we buy on a daily basis. In this scenario, the question about “our locals” needs to be generalized and

¹ The direct connection between social disapproval and a new Corona-normativity has been highlighted by Werner Gephart in his Working Paper “Law and ‘Gemeinschaft’”, p. 14-15.

² Steven Shaviro, *No Speed Limits. Three Essays on Accelerationism*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2015

extended to all the people who are really affected by our consumeristic behavior. As Markus Gabriel suggested, this generalization is of such magnitude, that the moral question about the impact of our actions on our fellow human beings should get metaphysical,³ becoming a general matter of principle. If our consumption habits make *de facto* the global scale the smallest scale possible to satisfy our demand for good, every human being should be considered as a local. "Our local" would so become a more and more abstract character, getting even further that the Levinassian concept of The Other (*L'Autre*)⁴ or to the Christian idea of Neighbor (*thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself*, Matthew 22:39): "our local" is not only whoever we might meet in person, but everybody that might be concerned by the effects of our economic behavior - that is everybody.⁵

How is it possible to support everybody? If we see ourselves as the constitutive bricks of a bigger moral whole called society and we just equally share among us the moral responsibility imputable to our capitalistic system, no one of us will come out with a clean conscience. Being "supportive" would be basically made impossible by the fact that in a holistic system of interactions between consumers and producers we cannot independently determine the extent of the moral implications that derive from our actions as individuals. Indeed, these implications are always affected by the choices of other people and their impact on the market. Also the Thoreauan choice of quitting society and living in the woods - that is, the choice of having no locals to support or harm - would not redeem us. First of all, it is not a moral choice because it implies to stop undertaking moral actions rather than trying to do good - and that despite the awareness of the harm that society is causing to many people. Moreover, it is hardly imaginable that this choice can be generalized.

In a globalized market and society like the one we are living in, where the moral charge of an individual economical behavior is built through the interaction with many actors (let's call that "moral pandemic scenario"), supporting our fellow human beings is a complex task. Of course, our individual behavior alone cannot directly determine alone its *Wirkungsgeschichte*. However, every purchasing choice can indirectly affect many other chains of production and the sum of many purchasing choice which attempt to minimize their harmfulness may effect a change in the economic system, in society and in its norms and values.

In a moral pandemic scenario, we should look for general ethical guidelines that can be applied to our behavior towards our locals in the global village. Even though they were developed in a not globalized time, two Kantian imperatives may work for us. The first goes "*Sapere Aude*" (dare to know) and is advised in the essay *Was ist Aufklärung*.⁶ In current German the word

³ Markus Gabriel, "We need a metaphysical pandemic".

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, La Haye, Martinus Nijhoff, 1961.

⁵ The moral problem of the universalization of a "local" ethics is tackled by Werner Gephart in his Working paper "Law and 'Gemeinschaft'" (p. 6). As particularly relevant for the discussion, he mentions Benjamin Nelson's work on the concept of "brotherhood" (*The Idea of Usury. From Tribal Brotherhood to Universal Otherhood*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969) and Georg Simmel's essay on the "stranger" ("Exkurs über den Fremden", in: G. Simmel, *Soziologie, Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1983, pp. 509-512).

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, in: *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1784, H. 12, p. 481-494.

Aufklärung means both the cultural movement of Enlightenment and the act of clarifying and raising awareness. Considering this double meaning of the word, Markus Gabriel claimed that we need nowadays a new *Aufklärung*. Indeed, by identifying fake news, collecting true information and pondering the different moral weight of our purchasing choices, it is possible to make informed decisions and avoid buying goods that are particularly harmful to the globalized society.

The second imperative that should guide our decisions is the well-known second formulation of the categorical imperative: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end”.⁷ In other words, we should consider workers not only as rings of a productive chain but always as persons whose human rights and dignity should come first. Although our idea of human rights and human flourishing might change from time to time according to our knowledge about the world and our nature, the fact that by definition human rights are the same for all human beings - irrespective of their position in the production chain - still remains a constant that should constitute the foundation of our attitude toward the others.

The Coronavirus pandemic has shown to us in new ways how complex the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of our actions in a globalized society can be and how far away our behavior can affect other people. Our moral responsibility toward our fellow human beings cannot just be hidden from our sight outside our allegedly "local" bubble anymore since the consequences of our actions, which may well go round the world, manifestly affect us and our loved ones back home. Self-care and support for the locals can only be achieved by caring for everybody and leaving no one behind. This should not only happen in reason of egoistic self-preservation and production-aimed environmental safeguard, but rather for a moral reason, that is the recognition of the value of other individuals for their own sake.

Sergio Genovesi, M.A. is Research Associate at the Käte Hamburger Center for Advanced Study in the Humanities “Law as Culture” since 2019. Main research focuses on contemporary ontology, epistemology, aesthetics, and ethics of technology. He is now working on his PhD thesis which concerns the philosophy of events.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Grundleitung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [1781], English translation by J. Ellington: *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Indianapolis, Hackett Pub. Co, 1993, p. 36.