

## Ethical Consumerism

Maria often feels conflicted when she is making purchases—at clothing stores, at pharmacies, even at supermarkets—since she knows that many of the products she buys are manufactured by people working for low wages in poor, perhaps even dangerous, conditions. In extreme cases, these products may well be manufactured with the use of child labor. She worries that she is benefitting only because others are being exploited. At the same time, she realizes that often the jobs offered in such places are, despite being terrible, actually the best jobs available to people living in severely impoverished countries.

Although Maria wants to be a conscientious shopper, she does not have the time to research every purchase she makes. Even if she did, it isn't likely that information is available on every product for sale. Maria has no desire to support practices she finds unethical, but it seems downright unrealistic to expect her to avoid making purchases that contribute to them. On top of all that, she realizes that goods that are labeled "organic," "environmentally-friendly," or "Fair Trade" are generally more expensive than similar products without those specifications. Are the extra costs ones that she has a moral responsibility to bear?

Maria strives to be a good person—even if it is not always clear what that means. She genuinely doesn't want to live her life in a way that causes suffering for others. She wonders whether it is acceptable to buy products produced under such bad conditions; or perhaps it might even be required, in order to help those who, without the jobs, will suffer even more.

### STUDY QUESTIONS

- (1) What moral obligations do we have, if any, to consider how things are produced, and the effects of our purchasing them, in deciding what we buy?
- (2) Are we morally obligated to ensure that none of our actions are indirectly harmful to others?
- (3) Is it morally relevant that the factories producing the merchandise often offer better jobs (despite how bad they are) than other opportunities open to the workers?
- (4) Do we have a moral obligation to ensure that working conditions for everyone meet certain minimum conditions? If so, what conditions?

