Lesson 19 – Sweatshop Labor

Most people are unaware that many of the things they buy were made by citizens of third world countries who work in horrible working conditions in places called “sweatshops”. Some examples of terrible working conditions from the readings include:

• In a factory in China that makes Levi jeans, women sew for 12 hours a day for less than 12 cents an hour, with only 2 days off each month. Also, they receive no healthcare and no compensation for injury.

• In a factory in Vietnam that makes Nike tennis shoes, employees work for 65 hours each week, for less than $10 a week. Most of these employees suffer from respiratory problems caused by breathing in chemical fumes at work.

• In a factory in India, boys work 22 hour shifts sewing beads onto scarves, and are beaten if they make even a tiny mistake.

• In a factory in China which makes Christmas ornaments for Wal-Mart, employees work 95 hours a week without the proper safety equipment to protect them from the various paints, paint thinners, and solvents they were exposed to. Workers developed sores and rashes as a result, but received no medical treatment or compensation.

• A factory in Malaysia that makes shirts for Nike was caught engaging in human trafficking. The factory would find impoverished people in other countries, have them sign contracts of enslavement which they could not read, guaranteeing them that they would help them escape poverty. They would then steal their passports, and make them work them 65 hours a week in extremely unhealthy, dirty conditions for less than $6 a day.

• Factories in China which make ipads and iPhones for Apple employ impoverished teenagers for about 25 cents an hour, with forced overtime, in dangerous working conditions. As a result, many workers have committed suicide, fights have broken out, and in one instance, an explosion killed two workers.

The questions we will ask in this lesson are: (1) Is it morally permissible for individuals to purchase items that were made in sweatshops? (2) Are businesses morally obligated to avoid making use of sweatshop labor?
1. **Why We SHOULD NOT Boycott Sweatshop Labor:** There is no doubt that the conditions in sweatshops are unfortunate, and ought to be improved. But some economists argue that this is not a reason to avoid sweatshop labor. Sweatshop labor, they claim, is actually GOOD for the world. Here are some reasons cited to support this claim:

(1) **Sweatshop Labor Is Better Than The Alternative:** We must not forget that those who work in sweatshops CHOSE to work there. In light of this, it must be the case that sweatshops were the BEST alternative. The fact is that, for most sweatshop workers, the other options are far worse (e.g., starvation, even worse conditions on farms in their home towns, or even prostitution). As such, we should not consider sweatshops to be a bad thing, since without them, many people in third world countries would be faced with something even worse.

(2) **Boycotting Sweatshop Labor Could Result In Something Worse:** When we boycott sweatshops, or when governments enforce regulations in order to end sweatshop labor, a common result is that the sweatshop factory SHUTS DOWN. As a result, many of the sweatshop workers—whom we were trying to SAVE with our efforts—are actually faced with something much worse: No work at all. For instance, see this story about Nokuthula Masango who was left worse off than before after regulations forced the factory she was working at to shut down.

(3) **Something Is Better Than Nothing:** By outsourcing labor to impoverished countries, the U.S. is actually contributing SOME amount of wealth to those economies. While the conditions there might be poor by American standards, something is better than nothing.

(4) **Sweatshops Are A Natural Part Of Industrialization:** Sweatshops were actually common at one time throughout the United States and Europe (as recently as the late 1800’s). This was during the “Industrial Revolution” and it is the process by which we BECAME an industrialized nation with high work standards. Some economists argue that, by bringing labor to non-industrialized countries, we are actually bringing WEALTH INTO those countries, and helping them to become industrialized so that one day these countries will have enough wealth to achieve the standards that we have here in the U.S.

(5) **Businesses Which Do Not Use Sweatshops Will Fail:** Often it is the case that businesses which do not make use of sweatshops will fail. Not using sweatshops will mean turning to more expensive labor. In return, this will mean that they will need to sell their products at higher prices in order for profits to remain the
same. However, most people are simply NOT WILLING to pay a few dollars more for items like food, clothing, shoes, and electronics—especially when there are OTHER companies who are still out there producing similar items for LOWER prices (because those companies ARE using sweatshop labor). So, businesses often fear that, if they do not make use of the cheapest labor they can find, they will lose customers, and eventually go out of business altogether. Simply put, for most businesses, avoiding sweatshop labor is simply not an economically viable option.

(6) **The Sacrifice of Avoiding Sweatshop Labor Is Too Great:** Buying products that are not produced in sweatshops is MORE EXPENSIVE. After all, the primary motive behind sweatshop labor is to mass-produce items more CHEAPLY. For many Americans, choosing to buy the more expensive products that were not produced in sweatshops is simply not an option, economically. Many of us are just trying to make ends meet—and if it is a choice between clothing and feeding our children, or contributing to sweatshop labor, the choice is obvious: We will clothe and feed our children.

**2. Why we SHOULD Boycott Sweatshop Labor:** On the opposing side of the issue, many believe that we DO have an obligation to avoid the use of sweatshop labor.

(1) **“Better Than The Alternative” Is No Excuse:** The fact that something is “better than the alternative” does NOT make it morally permissible. Consider: Imagine that you were about to be sold to a torturing slave-driver, Fred, who would torture and beat you 7 days a week. Then, Barney comes in and says, “I’ll take them off your hands. At MY place, I only torture and beat people for SIX days a week!” When asked how Barney can morally justify his behavior, he says, “Beating these people for 6 days a week is morally permissible. After all, it’s better than the alternative!”

Whether or not something that we contribute to is “better than the alternative” is not what matters, morally. To assess the morality of an action, that action must be judged on its OWN merits—and NOT in comparison to what others are doing. For instance, if a student is caught cheating and says, “Hey, I only cheated on HALF the assignments. Everyone else cheated on EVERYTHING!”—this does not make the cheating morally justified. So, the question is, is sweatshop labor in and of itself WRONG? And the obvious answer is, “Yes.”
(2) **“Consent” Is Not Valid:** We might think that the workers have “consented” to what they are doing, and so it is therefore morally justified to make them work in such awful conditions. But, have these workers TRULY consented? Well, in SOME cases they DEFINITELY have NOT consented—as evidenced by the video on human trafficking where sweatshop laborers were basically bought and sold as slaves. But, what about in non-trafficking cases?

Well, in order for consent to be VALID, there needs to be some reasonable, viable alternative. For instance, this is why a contract signed under “duress” (e.g., at gunpoint) is invalid. You have not really “consented” to signing a contract if you or your family is being held at gunpoint and you are being forced to do it. The reason is that the ALTERNATIVE is not reasonable. The alternative is to DIE (or watch your family die).

So, what we must really ask here is, have these workers REALLY consented to working in these conditions? Is their consent VALID? Well, as the previous objection stated, there are NOT really very many reasonable alternatives to working at sweatshops. The other options are typically to either work much harder on farms out in the hot sun rather than indoors, or to be a trash-picker scavenging trash dumps in the hot sun for even lower wages, or perhaps even prostitution. But, when ALL of the options are awful, “choosing” one of them is not really a choice and does not count as consent.

For instance, imagine if I asked you, “Which do you want: I saw off your arm, I whip you for an hour, or I punch you in the face?” You’d probably respond, “Um...I guess I’ll take the punch in the face...” Now, would it make sense if I then said, “So, it is morally PERMISSIBLE for me to punch you in the face because you CONSENTED to it just now!”? No. Of course I would not be morally justified in punching you. You have not really consented to being punched. There were simply no reasonable alternatives to pick from. Now, if I asked you, “Would you rather I did NONE of those three things?” of course you’d say, “YES!” Similarly, if we were to ask a sweatshop labor, “Would you rather not be ANY of these things: A prostitute, a trash-picker, or a sweatshop laborer?” of COURSE they would say “YES!” also. In light of the fact that the alternatives to sweatshop labor are not reasonable, we cannot say that anyone truly “consents” to working at a sweatshop.

(3) **Sweatshops Are Not Necessary For Industrialization:** While it is true that The U.S. and Europe did at one point have many sweatshops, and this DID help those countries to move forward and become industrialized, this is not a
NECESSARY stage in the process of industrialization for countries today. Since we now DO have the technology to make working conditions safer, cleaner, and healthier (and since there is also now a greater moral awareness of the problem), we DO presently have the tools and the knowledge of how to do without sweatshop labor.

Also, it is not really TRUE that sweatshops are alleviating poverty in developing countries. As it stands now, sweatshop laborers are caught in an endless cycle of poverty with no end in sight. Their wages are so low, that they are just barely able to scrape by, and so are not saving up the wealth which will help them to climb out of their situation. Their children grow up with just as little, just as impoverished as their parents—and so THEY TOO inevitably wind up as sweatshop laborers. Simply put, they are not making enough to GET OUT of poverty. Some have even argued that sweatshops have in general DECREASED the quality of life since they were introduced in developing countries.

Avoiding Sweatshops Need Not Be Expensive: While it IS the case that products NOT produced in sweatshops will be more expensive, the increase in cost would not actually be that great. First, for instance, a $25 sweatshirt made in a sweatshop would only cost about a dollar more if the sweatshop worker’s wages were DOUBLED.

Second, it is possible to be conscientious about one’s purchases, and not spend much more money. One could buy second-hand clothing, for instance, or in general try to buy things that were made in the U.S.A. While “Made in the U.S.A.” is not a GUARANTEE that something was not made in a sweatshop, the likelihood that it WAS is much lower than if the item says, e.g., ”Made in China”. Regarding food, one of the best things one can do is buy locally. The chances that food imported from developing countries was produced or harvested by mis-treated workers is very high—especially for things like bananas or coffee. In general, with a little research, it is quite possible to live on the same budget without contributing to sweatshop labor.

In conclusion, a couple of quotes from the readings nicely sums up the position that contributing to sweatshop labor is immoral:

First, “No one should have to work 17-hour days just so Americans can save a few dollars on clothes.” (pg 11) Second, when we buy the products of sweatshop labor such as iPhones, what are we saying with our actions? It seems that we are saying, “That’s bad, but not as bad as me not having this phone.” Is this the outlook we should be taking?
**Topic Suggestion: Sweatshops #1:** Many people cannot AFFORD to avoid purchasing products that were produced in sweatshops. So, for many, the choice is between feeding and clothing our children by buying sweatshop products, or else going hungry by boycotting sweatshop labor. In this situation, the choice seems obvious to many: We will feed and clothe our children in whatever way we can—even if this means that we must contribute to human abuse in sweatshops in order to do so. Question: Is this the right decision? What are the moral obligations of someone who cannot AFFORD the more expensive non-sweatshop-produced items? What should someone in this position DO about the issue of sweatshop labor?

**Topic Suggestion: Sweatshops #2:** Consider the claims about consent in the lecture notes. The claim is that, in order for consent to be VALID, there must be a reasonable alternative. For instance, if I say, “Do you agree to let me punch you in the face?” while holding your family at gunpoint, and you say “Yes”, you have not truly consented to me punching you. Your consent is not VALID because the alternative was not reasonable; namely, watching your family die. Now ask: Do you think that sweatshop workers have given VALID consent to working at sweatshops? For most, the alternatives are starvation, prostitution, or even more grueling labor conditions on a farm, or in a junkyard, working even longer hours in the hot sun for even less pay.

In light of your answer (of whether or not most sweatshop laborers CONSENT to working in poor sweatshop conditions), do you think it is permissible to treat them the way sweatshop owners do? Why or why not?

**Topic Suggestion: Sweatshops #3:** In light of the point that boycotting sweatshop labor is BAD because this often leads to sweatshops shutting down, where employees are left with alternatives which are EVEN WORSE than working in a sweatshop, ask: What should we DO about sweatshop labor? What CAN we do? On a large scale level, if you were in a position to make a decision about what to do about our global economy, and sweatshops, what would you recommend? On an individual level, what might you recommend to the average American citizen regarding how to handle the issue of sweatshop labor?