

Debate: Sweatshop Labor (Friday, 11/8)

The Question

Many of the products that we buy were made in “sweatshops”; i.e., factories or warehouses with grueling work conditions that would be considered unethical (and illegal) in the United States. For instance, in Bangladesh, the majority of the 3.5 million garment factory workers work up to 14 hours a day, 7 days a week, in cramped, unsafe conditions—all for less than \$100 a month. ([Here](#)’s one woman’s story.)

Our clothing, shoes, and toys are primarily made in sweatshops in countries like Bangladesh, China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Mexico, and sold by companies like Old Navy, Tommy Hilfiger, Abercrombie & Fitch, Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Forever 21, Hollister, H&M, Adidas, Nike, and Wal-Mart, just to name a few. Cocoa farms in countries like Ghana and the Ivory Coast are also a major culprit, so companies such as Hershey and Nestle also sell products originating from poor working conditions. Other culprits include coffee and bananas.

Arguably, Apple products are the result of sweatshop labor as well—though perhaps not as bad as the conditions described above. For instance, [this man](#) describes his job putting screws into iPhone 7’s in a factory in China for 12 hours a day, 6 days a week, for \$450 a month (less than \$1.50/hour).

We might even include the work conditions in Amazon fulfillment warehouses as falling below the minimum moral standard of acceptability. For instance, consider [this piece](#) from John Oliver.

So, what are our individual moral obligations with respect to this issue? For instance, should we boycott companies which make use of sweatshop labor?

Boycotting Sweatshops: A Good Idea? The argument in favor of boycotting is simple: The work conditions in sweatshops are unethical. (This is, for instance, why we banned such conditions here in the United States.) If no one purchased sweatshop products, sweatshops would cease to exist. It is our purchases of the products of sweatshop labor which supports it and perpetuates it. Furthermore, your purchase signals an implicit moral endorsement of such practices. We ought not support, perpetuate, or morally endorse the unethical practices of sweatshops. Therefore, we are morally obligated to refrain from purchasing such products. We ought instead to actively seek out and support ‘fair trade’ products with our purchases.

Boycotting Sweatshops: A Bad Idea? Others disagree. After all, sweatshop workers have *chosen* to work in a sweatshop. So, stop for a second and think about the implications of this fact. As UC San Diego philosopher Matt Zwolinski notes ([here](#)), the implication is that, whatever the *other* options the sweatshop workers were facing, they must have been *worse* than working in a sweatshop. In that case, if we boycott sweatshops, and the sweatshops close down, those workers will be left only with options that the workers perceived to be *worse* than working in a sweatshop.

Furthermore, historically, sweatshops have been a necessary stepping stone in developing nations toward becoming a developed nation. For instance, working conditions were famously terrible during the Industrial Revolution, across Europe and the United States.

Finally, there is the problem of causal impotence. The problem is so large that, as a single individual, my purchases are merely a drop in a bucket. If I refrain from purchasing the products of sweatshop labor, the exact same amount of mistreatment in sweatshops will occur. Therefore, I have no moral reasons to alter my behavior, since my actions ultimately make no difference.

Your Task

Question: Do we have a moral obligation to refrain from purchasing products made in sweatshops?

You have been divided you into two groups. One group will argue that the answer to the above questions is “yes” (this group will argue *in favor of* boycotting sweatshops). The other group will argue that the answer is “no” (this group will argue *against* boycotting sweatshops).

Getting Started

Now that you have met your teammates, I encourage you to continue to email one another, exchange phone numbers, arrange to meet, etc.

You may want to do a bit of research before you begin, in order to familiarize yourself with some of the common reasons that each side gives in defense of their position.

What To Do

Opening statement: Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give an opening statement of 3-5 minutes. During this opening statement, you will present some argument or reasons for believing that your group has the correct answer to the questions above.

Response statement: After both teams give their opening statements, each group will be given a couple of minutes to brainstorm quietly, to agree on what your group will say in response to your opponents. Please elect one or more spokespersons from your group to give a 3 minute response statement. During this response statement, you will provide some reason or justification for believing that what the opposing group has just said is mistaken.

Open discussion: At the end, the two teams will be allowed some time to discuss the issue with one another informally, before I open discussion to the entire class for Q&A.

Format

Event	Time Allotment
Team “YES” opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team “NO” opening statement	3-5 minutes
Team “YES” brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team “YES” response statement	2-3 minutes
Team “NO” brainstorm session	2 minutes
Team “NO” response statement	2-3 minutes
Informal open discussion between teams	5 minutes
Informal Q&A between teams and class	25 minutes

Grading

This assignment is worth 10% of your grade. Half of this grade will be assigned by myself based on the performance of your team during the class debate. The other half of this grade will be based on peer assessment. You will be graded by the other members of your team in an anonymous survey following the debate. Here are some things I'll be looking for:

- Are the arguments that you present clear, carefully stated, and persuasive?
- Do you handle questions, criticisms, etc., clearly, carefully, and persuasively?
- Is it apparent that your team has put some careful thought and consideration into this issue?
- Do you function well as a *team*? (e.g., avoid contradicting, bickering with, or talking over your own teammates)