

***The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*, by T. M. Devinney, P. Auger, and G. M. Eckhardt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. Paperback, 258 pp., ISBN: 978-0-5217-4755-4**

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Consumer research studies and surveys promisingly conclude that consumers are aware of the ethical, social, and environmental side effects of production and consumption, and intend to include ethical, social, and environmental aspects in their purchasing decisions. The reality is different though, as only a very small fraction of consumers actually buy ethically. Fair trade is a niche market only. Given these controversial findings, it is at no surprise that research in ethical consumption has gained interest. However, research on how to foster ethical consumption is still rather understudied (Anderson and Hansen 2004; Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008).

One of the latest contributions to ethical consumption is Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt's book *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer*. The authors present work of more than ten years. The book is well written and structured. They first discuss the concept of the ethical consumer at the macro and micro levels before moving to the presentation of the results of their own quantitative and qualitative empirical studies about consumer behavior. At the end of the book the authors combine their conceptual and empirical discussions and outline how to foster ethical consumption.

The title already indicates the authors' main thesis: the ethical consumer is a myth—a heroic figure which does not (cannot) exist but which consumers strive to become but never will. Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt conclude “the ethical consumer is perhaps doomed to fail despite the nobility of the cause” (4). This is both a provocative and sad conclusion. Even though the authors provide support through their empirical studies, I still have hope that the ethical consumer is not a myth. I agree with Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt that the ethical consumer does not exist yet, but, as suggested by Caruana and Crane (2008), we might be able to create the ethical consumer in the future.

The book is rich in significant findings regarding ethical consumption and consumer behavior. The conceptual discussion about consumer social responsibility versus corporate social responsibility as well as the findings of the authors' own empirical studies are worth singling out in this review.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Consumer Social Responsibility (C_NSR)

Early in the book, the authors introduce the concept of consumer social responsibility (C_NSR) from their prior work. While they criticize the term “ethical” as being too broad, too loose for operationalization, and too moralistic, they argue for C_NSR, which they define as “the conscious and deliberate choice to make certain consumption choices based on personal and moral beliefs” (9). C_NSR is to be understood as one component of purchase decision.

In the second chapter, the authors introduce an intriguing relationship between corporate social responsibility (CSR) and C_NSR : the two concepts go hand in hand, i.e., they coexist, coevolve, and need each other. C_NSR can only exist with CSR: “corporate activity can provide consumers with the context in which they can reveal values, desires, and needs” (16). However, a bit later the authors stress that CSR also needs C_NSR . “CSR without C_NSR will imply redistribution of value but without the real possibility of the creation of new value! CSR without C_NSR will amount to little more than operational taxation and regulation. It will not fundamentally alter the nature of the value equation, as that equation will be driven, at its very core, by what consumers do and do not value” (27). This is certainly a stimulating proposition. Without a doubt a very important relationship exists between CSR and ethical consumption (C_NSR). Corporations (and scholars) look for such a relationship, i.e., the business case for CSR. Responsible corporations outperform less responsible corporations because the responsible consumer prefers to buy ethical products from responsible corporations. Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt go beyond the profit motivation, and argue that CSR with C_NSR can create total societal value.

If we agree that CSR can only really add value and make a sustainable change with C_NSR , then this underlines the importance of the existence (or creation) of an ethical consumer. Given this discussion, the authors’ thesis of the myth of the ethical consumer is even more discouraging. How can societal value be created without an ethical consumer?

Ethical Consumption—Measurement And Reality

As said at the beginning of this review, research on ethical consumption reveals contradicting findings. Consumers indicate in surveys that they care about ethical and environmental issues, and claim to integrate these in their purchasing decision. The actual buying behavior is different, however, as only a very small fraction of consumers engage in ethical consumption. This discrepancy between consumer intention and buying behavior is referred to as the intention-behavior gap. In the second half of their book Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt provide some explanation for the intention-behavior gap by highlighting methodological flaws in previous research and present findings of their own studies.

Their studies provide a lot of intriguing insights into consumer behavior. A few are highlighted here. Their research reveals that there are no clear characteristics that can be ascribed to an ethical or social consumer. Neither demographic characteristics, nor cultural aspects can help in predicting whether consumers consider social aspects in their purchasing decisions. Additionally, the authors find that even though a consumer might care for certain social issues in one product group, the consumer might not be that sensitive to other social issues in another product group. This leads Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt to conclude that consumers are “schizophrenic” (107).

Also, the authors’ studies reveal that information about ethical and environmental issues related to a product have no effect on purchasing decisions: “Increasing the salience by providing information does not disproportionately influence choice, nor

does providing additional information about the meaning of the social feature” (87). Nevertheless, the authors agree that consumers are aware of ethical and sustainable issues related to production and consumption. They present evidence that consumers are more concerned with social and ethical issues, which are closely linked to them such as local crime, public safety, food, and health. Consumers relate less to child labor or bad working conditions in distant factories in developing countries.

Combining their conceptual and empirical discussion Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt end their book with some suggestions how to enhance C_NSR , consumer social responsibility. Their recommendations include a focus on behavior instead of reasoning, avoiding a trade-off between the social and functional aspects of products, and helping consumers to learn from and remember their social purchases.

Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt accomplish a tremendous task and provide us with a lot of intriguing findings to digest. Their book contributes considerably to the literature on ethical consumption. Their findings are extremely relevant for future research on ethical consumption and need further elaboration. If it is true that consumers care more about issues that are close to them, then there might be a way to bring ethical issues such as child labor, conflict minerals, and environmental degradation so close to consumers that they start caring so much about them and change their purchasing behavior.

So perhaps the ethical consumer is not as mythical as assumed. After all, some of the findings in *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* actually indicate that there is hope that the ethical consumer can exist. I think that Devinney, Auger, and Eckhardt can be more positive regarding the potential to create an ethical consumer. The market for ethical products is growing (McGoldrick and Freestone 2008; Davies, Lee, and Ahonkai 2012) and some recent research has shown that consumers can be motivated to engage in ethical consumption behavior through the creation of social norms (Goldstein, Cialdini, and Griskevicius 2008). Irrespective of whether one believes in the existence of the ethical consumer, *The Myth of the Ethical Consumer* is an important book for scholars in consumer research and corporate social responsibility.

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