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'This bag provides 185 school meals': Ethical commodities and the quantification of good

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Introduction

> When I came back from my travels, eager to rally my peers to get involved in the fight to end childhood hunger, I knew that I wanted to create a unique way to activate people – something that didn't require writing a big check or attending a fancy gala. I wanted to create something that felt accessible and solution oriented. And then I had the aha-moment for the first FEED bag, which I designed to resemble the sacs of food I saw being delivered by the UN. As part of the design, there was a number represented on each bag, which signified the number of meals donated with each purchase. The decision to create a bag, and not a different product, was one grounded in both accessibility and functionality (everyone carries a bag) and design (a clear connection to the cause). Nine years later, FEED has provided over 94 million meals through the sale of numbered bags and accessories.
>
> – Lauren Bush Lauren, CEO and co-founder of FEED Project (*The Journal,* 2016)

The expansion of late capital 'into hitherto uncommodified areas', as Fredric Jameson (1984: 78) states, recognizes that all aspects of daily life become subsumed under the economic rationalization of exchange-value. As demonstrated by Lauren Bush Lauren – one among many other socially-conscious entrepreneurs – even systemic problems such as poverty and hunger become seemingly solvable through commodification and its appendage of quantifiable and individualized giving. Hence, 'this bag provides 185 school meals' simultaneously represents the quantification of capitalist 'good' in the most palpable way, while also ultimately placing the responsibility of fighting childhood hunger on individual ethical consumers to buy the bag (who may then subsequently be measured according to their consumption of ethical products and brands). This is a different and more emotionally charged manifestation of capitalist measurability, expanding beyond the more traditional calculation of surplus-value and the production of value. Whereas Marx (1990) sees value determined by socially necessary labor-time and manifested in exchange-value, the ethical commodity adds an additional dimension to the exchangeability of commodities through its symbolic use (and symbolic value) as the arbiter of 'good'. It further constructs new affective social relations not between the laborer and the capitalist, but rather between the ethical brand, the consumer-giver, and the imagined 'person in need'.

FEED Project is not alone in the measuring of good: TOMS Shoes abides by its trademarked 'One for One' model with each product purchased resulting in the giving of a like-product. BOBS, a brand by Skechers, initially mimicked the TOMS 'One for One' model with the selling and subsequent giving of shoes to kids in need. It now also partners with Best Friends Animal Society, an American non-profit organization that seeks to save all rescue animals and eradicate the need to euthanize in kill-shelters. The eyewear company, Warby Parker, relies on the slogan: 'For every pair purchased, a pair is distributed to someone in need' (Warby Parker, 2017). Like FEED Project, a smaller company, Half-United, also seeks to produce 'Fashion that Feeds' and links its various commodities such as the $36 'Giving Back is the New Black' T-shirt to '7 meals for children in need', 'result[ing] in lots of hugs and high fives' (Half United, 2017). Even Walgreens measures its giving – albeit in a less holistic way – with its yearly 'Get a Shot. Give a Shot' campaign: 'Get a flu shot or any other vaccine at Walgreens and help provide a lifesaving vaccine to a child in a developing country' (Walgreens, 2017). The Walgreens campaign has 'provide[d] more than 20 million lifesaving vaccines to children in need around the world' (*ibid.*).

These formations of capital go beyond mere corporate donations and instead embed giving into the very framework of the business structure. Within this note, I am most interested in considering the particular logic(s) of quantification within ethical capitalism as well as the elisions that occur with this quantification wherein giving appears as an objective numerical truth realized through the formula of *commodity x bought = commodity y given.* I ask, then, what remains unmeasured or immeasurable? Throughout this note, I argue that the sort of quantification and measurement that occurs within ethical capitalism is troubling, especially with regards to its oversimplification of complex and historically situated crises and forms of oppression that are reduced to numerical and individualized solutions. Hunger, thus, is rendered not as a systemic problem – one connected to inequality, poverty, environmental conditions, precarious labor, conflict, colonialism, or even capitalism – but rather as single meals served exclusively to children. This metric of giving may initially seem to counter the cold calculability of capitalism through emotional appeals, but in fact extends its logics through the naturalized impact of 'good' and socially conscious entrepreneurialism. In a recent interview with *Forbes,* Lauren Bush Lauren discussed the need for businesses to have this 'extra layer' of a socially-conscious mission to get 'authentic traction' with consumers (Drewry, 2018). This note, then, proceeds by first describing the logic of ethical capitalism, as situated within neoliberal rationality and subjectivity, and its 'break' (if one could call it that) with hegemonic global capitalism today. I then turn to evaluating in more detail the quantification of 'good' through FEED Project as well as TOMS Shoes and their correlating material and theoretical (im)measurabilities.

The logic of ethical capitalism: Beyond capital

> Don't get me wrong. We're all dyed-in-the wool capitalists. But we also believe that companies should be managed for the simultaneous benefit of all stakeholders – including employees, vendors, customers, the environment, and our communities – and should have a positive net impact on the world. And guess what? The success of The Container Store and these remarkable companies reveals a surprising irony: Not making profit your number one priority actually makes you a lot more profitable.

– Kip Tindell, Chairman and CEO of The Container Store (Tindell, 2014: 8)

Crucial to the framing of the ethical capitalism is that it encapsulates a new vision for privatized industries that moves *beyond* profit maximization as the paramount goal, instead stating that profit merely enables the achievement of the goal par excellence – that of an ethical mission. The transcendence of a profit maximization model occurs most readily through a shifting rhetoric that frames business terms such as 'wealth', 'value', and 'success' in moral terms while also appealing to the rationality of 'dyed-in-the wool capitalists' and new modes of value creation. For instance, founder of TOMS Shoes and author of *Start something that matters,* Blake Mycoskie (2012: 19), writes about the changing definition of success: 'Increasingly, the quest for success is not the same as the quest for status and money. The definition has broadened to include contributing something to the world and living and working on one's own terms'. This new articulation of success within the private sector is echoed throughout other discourses of and about ethical capitalism. For instance, John Mackey, founder of Whole Foods Market, situates this new capitalism against the more short-sighted capitalism of the contemporary moment, which lacks 'higher purpose' and 'consciousness' (Mackey and Sisodia, 2013). Along with Raj Sisodia, Mackey started the Conscious Capitalism™ movement, to which many companies and business leaders have joined.

Ultimately, private sector businesses must turn a profit, regardless of size, and a precarious teetering between morality and the accumulation of capital ensues. To weigh public benefit or higher purpose *too* heavily means that a company may be unable to turn a profit or reinvest that profit in the expansion of the business. To weigh profit maximization too strongly means that a company may sacrifice its higher purpose or, worse, be ousted as unethical by concerned consumers. In this way, the focus on 'good' proffers a seeming authenticity that fails to be found in the standard multinational corporation. Corporate espousals of social responsibility or ethical capitalist 'do goodism' now appear throughout the business landscape with magazines such as *Time, Forbes,* and *The Wall Street Journal* forewarning companies that they 'can't afford' to *not* be socially responsible (Knowledge@Wharton, 2012). Even the World Economic Forum held a panel in 2014 entitled, 'Ethical Capitalism – Worth a Try?'

Situated as a corrective for the seemingly reckless damage done by unchecked capitalism, ethical capitalism and its various iterations market themselves as the next evolution in capitalism, instilling a commitment to social need, environmental sustainability, and humanitarian welfare alongside the desire for profits and liberalizing markets. Each business articulates its ethics differently – there is no unified understanding of 'good' – but each primarily believes in the power of markets to solve these societal problems. In the case of ethical capitalism, it encourages a new regime of good governance guided by the moral authority of the private sector, which reproduces 'obedient citizens' as individual ethical-economic agents – entrepreneurs and consumers whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for 'self-care' as well as their concern for the well-being of others (Brown, 2015: 17). The oversight of this system of ethics is no longer the welfare state or even necessarily longstanding philanthropic foundations, but rather businesses themselves as well as their self-regulatory agencies.

Despite its discourses of consciousness and making the world a better place, ethical capitalism is primarily driven by market liberalization, neoliberal rationality, and the economization of social needs and public benefit. In *The new prophets of capital,* Nicole Aschoff discusses the ongoing crises of capitalism, from massive income inequality, the persistence of poverty, financial meltdowns, and ecological ruin. In this moment of crisis,

> a new generation of storytellers has emerged to tell us what's wrong with society and how to fix it. The most powerful of these storytellers aren't poor or working people, they are the super-elite. The loudest critics of capitalism these days are people like Bill Gates, who decries poverty and inequality, and Sheryl Sandberg, who laments persistent gender divides, but they are not calling for an end to capitalism. Instead, they are part of a chorus of new elite voices calling for a different kind of capitalism. (2015: 9)

These new 'prophets' of capitalism give off the appearance of authentic leadership and many have developed celebrity and cult-like status, effectively becoming the gatekeepers for how societies define and enact 'good' through the private sector. In the case of Lauren Bush Lauren, she is the niece of George W. Bush, granddaughter of George H.W. Bush, and married to the son of fashion-icon and billionaire Ralph Lauren. Prior to starting FEED Project, Bush Lauren was a model, appearing on the cover of numerous fashion magazines. Her platform for sharing a cause was already well-established and she became a student spokeswoman for the UN World Food Programme at the age of 19, which eventually lead her to start FEED Project. Other celebrities, too, often become honorary ambassadors through legitimate inter-governmental organizations, such as UN World Food Programme, UNHCR, and/or UNICEF. Not all celebrities, however, go on to establish *for-profit* companies with the purpose of then continuing such work.

Regarding philanthrocapitalism – a sister cause to ethical capitalism – Carol Thompson (2018) asserts that philanthrocapitalist rule centers around a belief that financial wealth somehow equates to expertise. Furthermore, this expertise often becomes confused with collective interests, and therefore allows the expertise of the philanthropic organization to be prioritized over collective and democratic input. Many ethical companies appear more like a non-profit organization or an educational institution wherein they state 'facts' that support their formula for giving. For instance, FEED Project organizes its 'Our Giving' web-page into 'The Challenge', 'The Facts', and 'The Solution'. The facts account for the very real existence of hunger: '795 million people in the world are affected by hunger' (FEED Project, 'Our giving'). The solution, then, includes giving school meals because it 'empowers [children] to break out of the cycle of poverty they were born into, and allows them to grow, learn, and thrive' (*ibid.*). TOMS Shoes abides by a similar logic to its poverty alleviation efforts: with shoes, children will go to school and an education will allow them to 'lift' themselves out of poverty. This language of self-help (with the support of social entrepreneurs and ethical consumers) is pervasive and fails to recognize the complexity of poverty. Or, when one is then unable to lift him/herself out of poverty, the failure is easily derided as a *personal* failure of a meritocratic regime rather than an institutional failure.

Corporations, however, do not follow-up on their giving (or very rarely); these measurements – meals or shoes given – stand in for a quantitative chipping-away at systemic issues without taking into account the quality of the efforts. TOMS Shoes has, in fact, received wide criticism for its 'One for One' model of giving, being questioned as a 'doomed vanity project' (Poulos, 2012). Investigations especially concentrate on the company's 'shoe drops', which risk detrimentally impacting local economies through massive amounts of commodified aid. For example, a 2014 study emerging from economists at the University of San Francisco tested 970 households in El Salvador with the conclusion that with modest evidence donated shoes may have 'negative impacts on local shoe markets' (Wydick et al., 2014: 249). Further, shoe drops appear to take place in isolated communities without access to wider community or regional needs. Amy Costello (2013), a journalist and former Africa correspondent for PRI's *The World*, criticizes TOMS and other 'do gooders' for their simplified and profit-seeking 'good', but also commends the company as it responds to criticism – particularly about labor practices. Despite attempts to also impact communities through job creation with TOMS Shoes factories, an important question remains about the TOMS model: '[Are] consumer products what an impoverished community needs?' (*ibid.*). With both Costello and the USF study, the underlying assumption is that donations – commodified aid – is not advantageous to developing communities and instead these places need longer term economic development and infrastructure.

While ethical capitalism articulates the need for a capitalist evolution towards 'higher purpose', this purpose focuses on the mission of the company and its leaders. Whatever that mission is – whether to eradicate poverty, hunger, or AIDS for example – ultimately is subjected to the power of the market and the whims of capital. Those causes which receive the most attention are easily branded. As this section's opening quote from The Container Store's Kip Tindell emphasizes, by shifting a company's mission away from a strict adherence to profit maximization, a company may actually become 'a lot more profitable' (Tindell, 2014: 8). What is done with that extra profit? Does it become reinvested in the expansion of capital, or does it benefit the appendage of giving to those in need? For many companies, the maximization of their profits ensures their value to competitors, investment firms, and multinational corporations. Rather than radically transforming the inequities of the capitalist system, what we see instead is the ways in which ethical brands contribute to a diverse corporate portfolio – indeed creating new value – with these ethical brands cashing in on a company that is not only ethically sound, but fiscally sound as well. These niche companies and brands add ethical legitimacy and diversity to the multinational corporation portfolio. In 2011, Coca-Cola purchased the remaining 55% of the mission-driven company Honest Tea, which prides itself on honest and fairly-traded ingredients, turning Bethesda-based founder Seth Goldman, who retains a 5% share, into a 'deca-millionaire' (Geller, 2011). Coca-Cola purchased the first 40% of the company in February 2008 for $43 million. In September 2013, Method, a popular environmentally-friendly soap company, was sold to Belgian company Ecover for an 'undisclosed price', and created 'what they claim is now the largest green cleaning company in the world, with revenue "north of $200 million"' (Kurtz, 2013). Other acquisitions include Ben & Jerry's, now part of Unilever, Tom's of Maine, acquired by Colgate-Palmolive, and Burt's Bees, bought by Clorox in 2007 (Einstein, 2012). Most recently, in the summer of 2017, Amazon bought Whole Foods Market for $13.7 billion. TOMS Shoes, it should be noted, sold half of the company to Bain Capital in 2014 with founder Blake Mycoskie retaining the other half of the company. Although these examples solidify claims about the ubiquity of ethical capitalism, they also reinforce the tenuous relationship between consciousness and capitalism. As made clear with corporate buy-outs and consolidation, ethical brands 'mark yet one more step of the real subsumption of values and passions under the logic of capital' (Arvidsson, 2014: 119).

The (im)measurability of good

While the quantification of 'good' most directly measures the *giving* of commodities to communities in need, it further substantiates a company's fiscal success in that giving is explicitly linked to the sales of commodities. Near its 10-year anniversary in 2017, FEED Project finally reached 100 million meals given, but it sees these numbers as more than just meals: '100 million opportunities for kids to be kids – to learn, play, grow and thrive. 100 million reasons for those kids to go to school every day and get the education they deserve. 100 million times over the last 10 years that a FEED purchase has changed a life' (FEED Project, '100 million meals'). But what is lost in these attempts at measurability and quantification? The answer, in short, is contextualization, and a subjective understanding of the complex and historically-situated crises that continue to result in massive epidemics of hunger, poverty, disease, and access to resources. Even when companies appear to go beyond the numbers, they do this in ways that ultimately reinforce the legitimacy and objectivity of numbers – what Theodore Porter (1995) deems 'trust in numbers'.

To celebrate 100 million meals served, FEED Project features 'real stories by the numbers', meaning stories of individual children receiving meals as told primarily through numerical information:

> Meet Stephen – Nairobi, Kenya
>
> 1,080 / 100,000,000
>
> *'I want to be a lawyer. To do that, I know I need to concentrate hard in class and finish school with good grades.'*
>
> 1,080: Number of free school meals Stephen has received
>
> 12: Stephen's age
>
> 8: Number of family members Stephen lives with, including his 6 siblings
>
> 6: Number of years Stephen has been receiving WFP school meals
>
> *'If I wasn't getting school meals, I don't think I would eat during the day – just whatever there was at home at night. I like the school meals because they help me do better in class'.* (FEED Project, '100 million meals')

A correlating photograph shows that Stephen is more than his numbers, as he makes eye-contact with the camera, smiling, while he sits at a desk in his school uniform surrounded by his peers and holding a pencil (*ibid.*). Other stories follow a similar formula: Mathilde from Mozambique, who has received 900 meals and walks 2 hours to school every day; Patrick, a 5-year old from Kenskoff, Haiti, who has received 180 free school meals and walks 5 'steep and mountainous kilometers' with his siblings to arrive to school (*ibid.*). Trusting in the numbers provides consumer-spectators with what seems like objective information about the children receiving meals thanks to the sale of FEED Project products, but these 'stories' are also highly affective, detailing snippets of information about the child meant to tug at the heartstrings of spectators through quotes, a single photograph per child, and numbers. Alongside these stories, consumer-spectators are able to 'Shop the Highest Giving Bags', such as the $278 Beaded Kenya Bag that provides 185 school meals to one child in Kenya over the course of one year or the 'soft brown leather' Harriet Tote, which for $198 provides 100 school meals (FEED Project, 'Harriet tote'). As for the Kenya Bag, further details do not describe the 1 year/ 185 meals rationale, nor how the child is chosen, his/her location, or if the child comes from the same community where the bag is crafted (it is one of few FEED Project bags that accounts for labor, which I address in the conclusion). The number of meals given is not only incorporated into the product description, but also is printed *on* the bag so that the consumer may quantify and render visible his/her ethics for others to see. In addition to asking what is lost in ethical capitalist measurability, it is also worth asking what is gained, and for whom? Certainly, a hungry child cares less about the number of 'meals' he or she is guaranteed, but rather about the *quality* of care and its impacts on everyday life. Measuring social impact matters a great deal, however, to companies that must answer to investors, stakeholders, and boards of directors with necessary metrics that demonstrate clear performance measures and accountability. Similarly, these measurements illustrate a company's social and financial efficacy for consumers – meals given simultaneously showcase the company's ethics while also denoting its brand popularity (and sales). But measuring social impact in the case of both FEED Project and TOMS Shoes is not holistic. A simple metric of giving obscures considerations for labor, environmental impact, quality of life for those given products, and so forth.

To date, TOMS Shoes has given more than 75 million pairs of shoes to children in need. But, like any capitalist enterprise, TOMS has expanded its line of commodities as well as its giving. Through its eyewear, TOMS has contributed to restoring sight to more than 500 thousand people. Through TOMS Roasting Company coffee, it has helped provide over 450,000 weeks of safe drinking water to people in need with each bag of coffee sold equating to 140 liters of safe water. Through the sale of its bags, TOMS has supported safe-birthing facilities to 175,000 mothers. Finally, through the sale of the TOMS High Road Backpack, each purchase provides 'the training of school staff and crisis counselors to help prevent and respond to instances of bullying' (TOMS Shoes, 'Preventing bullying'). Oddly enough, this is the only moment where the company does *not* quantify its good. There is no ticker counting the number of items given on the company website as with shoes, sight, water, and safe births. While the company is willing to quantify the number of shoes given – which assumes a number of shoes needed (perhaps faultily) – the company is unwilling to quantify instances of bullying, or even the training of staff and counselors. Instead, a statistic reads: 'Nearly 1 out of every 3 students, ages 12-18 in the United States, reports being bullied' (*ibid*.). While the giving of shoes, sight, water, and safe births most often occurs in exotic far away locales such as developing countries, the bullying of youth for TOMS is a distinctly American problem. It is possibly close to home for its consumers, whereas the need for shoes, sight, water, and safe birthing facilities most likely is not for the consumer of TOMS Shoes, with the average shoe costing approximately $46. While both FEED Project and TOMS Shoes give in the United States, it is not a focus of either company. Similarly, neither company engages in *the politics* of need, which would require addressing the root causes of need.

Conclusions

What is lost within the quantification of 'good' is not only the contextualization of need as located in particular geographies, ideologies, and configurations of power, but also we lose politics and civic engagement when it is rendered most simplistically as an exchange-value. Economization abstracts these complexities, morphing them into purchasable commodities and reinforces the myth that the solution to ongoing crises is best found *within* capitalism and *through* entrepreneurialism and consumption. These neoliberal utopian desires are perhaps authentic in their concern for distant others, but fail to imagine – or choose to ignore – the ways in which politics and justice-oriented solutions could better remedy these inequalities.

In conclusion, I find it helpful to return to Marx and the significance of social relations as a marker of power between those with access to capital and those 'in need'. Ethical capitalism relies upon discourses of solidarity and a shared universal humanity, but fails to recognize its own positionality as agent of capitalist expansion and alienation. It humanizes those 'in need' (numerically, at least), while continuing to veil its own impacts that do not fit within its narrative of giving – environments that are destroyed due to deforestation, communities that are at risk because of pollution stemming from unsustainable factory practices, the risks to specific people at the sites of production and, importantly, waste. With regards to labor, efforts exist to 'de-fetishize' these relationships, reliant upon subverting the Marxian commodity fetish by making visible the social relations of production that Marx argues is veiled through the commodity's exchangeability (Binkley and Littler, 2008). While these practices are especially prevalent with fair-trade, emerging companies such as Everlane (2017) also attempt to be transparent with production ('ethical factories' and 'radical transparency'). Thus, while labor *should* feature more prominently in the disclosed 'good' of an ethical company, it often remains hidden, with consumer's attention instead being directed to the dazzling array of good through 'giving'. For instance, TOMS Shoes says very little about the conditions of production; it has previously said it attempts at 'fair-trade' but does not disclose labor in any substantial or transparent way. FEED Project states that its products are produced using fair-labor and when possible, use environmentally-friendly materials. It has worked with various cooperatives in 'Colombia, Guatemala, Haiti, India, Kenya, El Salvador, and Peru' (FEED Project, 'About'). *If* consumers care about labor, they can then shop accordingly: 'explore our work with artisans', which, when clicked on the website, takes the potential consumer to the $278 'Beaded Kenya Bag', which 'provides 185 school meals in Kenya' (FEED Project, 'Beaded Kenya bag'). Perhaps worth noting, the bag has increased in price from $250 to $278 in the several months between my initial submission of this note and its revisions (with no additional meals given).

So where does this leave the measurability of 'good?' In conclusion, I suggest that the measuring of 'good' is just as problematic as the measuring of capitalist organization in that it only accounts for part of the story. Instead, it seemingly absolves capitalism and market liberalization by way of easily economized 'good'. This formation of measurability strives to make objective and simple that which is subjective and complex. It fails to account for the complex, structural, and historical reasons for the persistence of inequality, poverty, disease, and ecological decay, giving consumers easily digestible consumptive action to make the world a better place. But I also want to conclude more optimistically, looking towards the future of the measurability of 'good'. If corporations continue to quantify their giving, then it requires that consumers, scholars, journalists, and humanitarian-activists demythologize the seemingly objectivity – they must go beyond the numbers. Furthermore, consumers who *really* care about hunger or poverty, should think about the *value* of their money: is it better to donate to a well-researched and effective organization rather than buy a new pair of shoes? Is it more effective to engage politically rather than economically with some of the issues that can be connected to inequality, poverty, and hunger? I say this not to diminish the material benefit of a meal, for instance, but to insist that consumers, entrepreneurs, and citizens need to do more; we cannot leave the needs of this world to the subjective whims of markets and for-profit companies.

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