Exercising moral agency in the contexts of objective reality: toward an integrated account of ethical consumption.

Abstract

This paper engages with two contrasting approaches to conceptualising and studying consumer behaviour that appear to dominate existing research on consumption. On one hand, agency-focused perspectives take an individual consumer to be the primary author of practice and a basic unit of analysis. On the other hand, socio-centric paradigms focus on the social roots of consumption activities and the wider societal contexts in which they take place. The need to provide a more balanced view of consumption phenomena has been acknowledged, yet not adequately acted upon. This paper begins to fill this gap through relevant theoretical and empirical contributions. First, we provide a critical review of the dominant theoretical perspectives on consumption in general and ethical consumption in particular, highlight their key ontological assumptions and explain how they preclude a fuller understanding of the ways in which consumer practices are moulded and shaped. Taking a critical realist approach, we then present the findings from qualitative analysis of consumers' ethical food practices to empirically demonstrate the role of human agency and social structure in creating and shaping ethical consumption. Thus, by means of theoretical analysis and empirical research this paper responds to the call for a more comprehensive understanding of consumption and provides a consolidated account of consumer behaviour which acknowledges and explains the complex ensemble of individual and systemic powers in which consumer practices are contained.

Keywords: consumer research, ethical consumption, agency, structure, consumer behaviour

Introduction

From the 1980s onwards there has been a considerable increase in the scholarly attention to the subject of consumption. Various approaches to consumer behaviour have evolved which place the focus of conceptual and analytical concern at different locations along the structure-agency spectrum depending on whether society or individual is seen as the ultimate author and source of consumption practices. At one end of this spectrum are theoretical views that take the consumer to be the prime mover of practices and chief focus of scientific investigation, while on the other side are socio-centric approaches within which consumers are conceived of as merely bearers of practices, and the interest shifts towards the social roots of consumption behaviour and the wider societal contexts in which it takes place (Warde, 2005). Empirical research informed by either of these two perspectives inevitably leads to a one-dimensional view of consumption: it either reduces its social aspect to an aggregate of individual actions, or dissolves the consuming agent in society and reduces his decisions to structural imperatives and systemic prescriptions. The recognition of the need to surpass the apparent limitations of one-sided approaches to consumption has been growing among social theorists over the past years. Sassatelli (2007, p. 107) has urged consumer studies to "overcome that moralistic swing of the pendulum which (…) either celebrates consumption as a free and liberating act, or denigrates it as a dominated and subjugated act". Likewise, Halkier (2010, p. 14) recommends "the complexity position" which acknowledges the everyday complexities of consumption and "seeks to unfold both agency capacities and the social conditioning of ordinary consumers". Johnston (2007, p. 233) specifically presses for a dialectic approach to ethical consumption that "recognizes that meaning and agency are present in consumption decisions but takes seriously the structural conditions shaping consumer agency". Although the willingness to move away from the simplicity of one-sided views on consumption and develop a multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomenon is apparently growing, reframing consumption along the suggested lines is far from a fait accompli. Firstly, while quite a few authors have theorized an integrated perspective, little academic effort has gone into putting the theory into practice, and the lack of empirical research exploring how both agency and structure manifest themselves in consumption persists. It is also problematic that many commentators continue to place hope in theories of practice to steer research toward a balanced approach to consumer behavior (e.g. Halkier,

2010; Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007; Spaargaren, 2011). Illustrative is Warde's (2015, p. 129) conclusion derived at the end of a comprehensive review of more than four decades of sociological research on consumption:

From a sociological point of view, it is much better to unseat the dominant model of the sovereign consumer and replace it with a conception of the socially conditioned actor, a social self, embedded in normative and institutional contexts and considered a bearer of practices.

Yet, we argue that the questions of both structure and agency should remain on the agenda of consumer research if a long-sought understanding of the nuanced complexity of consumption is to be achieved. It is this position that informs this paper, which seeks to acknowledge and analyse the complex and continuous relationship between agency and structure as they transpire in ethical consumption. This paper makes important contributions as it responds to the call for a refined understanding of consumer behaviour both theoretically and empirically. We begin by offering a critical review of the dominant theoretical perspectives on consumption, explain their core ontological and methodological assumptions and, in light of this analysis, argue for the need to develop a unified account of consumer behaviour which would match the complementary strengths and weaknesses of the agency-focused and socio-centric approaches. We rely on a critical realist theory expounded in the work of Archer (2000, 2007) as a suitable framework for achieving this aim. In the second half of the paper, we integrate our theoretical arguments with empirical research. Drawing upon the findings from a qualitative study with self-perceived ethical food consumers, we provide evidence of the embeddedness of consumer practices in wider societal contexts and demonstrate how ethical choices are always exercised within social, cultural and economic possibilities and constraints. Next, we reveal and explore individuals' capacity to actively interact with, creatively respond to and reflexively negotiate structural conditions, both constraining and habilitating, in a pursuit of their ethical consumer commitments. By exposing ethical food consumption as a product of an on-going interaction between agency and structure, this paper begins to correct the imbalances underlying the prevalent understandings of consumer behaviour and encourages an acknowledgment of the complex ensemble of individual and systemic powers influencing consumption.

Conceptualising and studying consumer behaviour: lessons from the past, directions for the future

Over the past few decades, the tensions between divergent views on the drivers of consumption behaviour have generated a range of theoretical perspectives. There are agency-focused frameworks, among which highly influential has been the theorisation of consumers as identity-seeking individuals engaged in a continuous process of constructing a coherent self through creative appropriation of commodities and goods. In such accounts, reflexivity has been singled out as the key property that allows highly individualised subjects to attempt to solve the problem of self-identity, that is to "produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (Beck, 1994, p. 13) in a society where one has "no choice but to choose how to be and how to act" (Giddens, 1994, p. 75) and where consumption becomes the major medium in which the reflexive project of the self emerges and unfolds (see Giddens, 1991, pp. 52-55). Consumer Culture Theory has inspired extensive analysis that illuminates the role of consumption in identity creation and communication and is founded upon the model of an expressive, freely choosing individual reflexively engaging with mythic and symbolic resources circulating within the post-modern marketplace (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Concomitantly, the figure of a reflexive, identity-seeking consumer has made its entrance into the literature on ethical consumer behaviour. Studies highlighting the links between ethical consumption and individual identities include Shaw and Shiu's (2003) enquiry into the factors influencing ethical choices, Newholm's (2005) research on consumer engagement in responsible shopping, Shaw's (2007) investigation of boycotting behaviour and Cherrier's (2006) study on consumer use of eco-friendly shopping bags. Further, sociological research started to supply commentary on the potential of ethical consumption to not only tell "the story of who we are" (Gabriel and Lang, 2006, p. 94), but to also fulfil the "fantasy of what we wish to be like" (Gabriel and Lang, 2006, p. 94). The idea of ethical shopping as a way of "moral selving" (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 29), i.e. cultivation of a better self through ethical choices, reverberates in Kozinets and Handelman's (1998) study highlighting the powerful "individualizing" and "morally transforming" potential of boycotting behaviour as well as Moisander and Pesonen's (2002) discussion of the ways in which individuals re-invent themselves as ethical subjects through the practice of green living. Another stream of research offers interpretations of ethical consumption through Veblen's (1899) lens, i.e. as a form of "conspicuous consumption" aimed at projecting a higher social, cultural

or moral status through appropriation and display of commodities that denote a certain level of financial capital, education, knowledge and moral qualities (Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Barnett et al., 2005).

What unites the above perspectives is that they acknowledge individuals as active agents and prime authors of consumption practices. Adams (2003) defines such an approach as "the extended reflexivity thesis" (p. 222) characterised by the attribution of "a heightened, transforming level of reflexivity" (p. 221) to consuming agents engaged in continuous reflexive self-production. The key contested feature of this thesis lies in its portrayal of reflexivity as a context-transcendent power, and identity as a project free from determination by external forces. Both assumptions have been subject to unsympathetic scrutiny in the academic literature. Archer (2007), for example, is highly critical of the belief in unbounded reflexivity symptomatic of late-modernist accounts of selfhood. Likewise, Tucker warns that "[a] strong self which heroically creates narratives of personal development in uncertain times . . . gives short shrift to the structural and cultural factors still at work in fashioning the self" (1998, p. 208) and Adams (2003, p. 224) explicitly argues against the idea of context-transcendent reflexivity of a self-creating individual: "in imagining an unbounded reflexivity, it overlooks many crucial factors in identity formation, and misjudges somewhat the nature of the current age".

Rational choice theory (RCT) denotes another agency-focused framework that has been widely applied in consumer research and that has spilled over into the subject area of ethical consumption. Whilst sometimes classified as an offshoot of the extended reflexivity thesis (see Adams, 2003), rational choice perspectives differ in terms of the key goals and properties ascribed to consuming agents. From the viewpoint of RCT, consumer engagement in ethical practices is best construed as a form of self-pleasing behaviour on the part of rational individuals who do good not in order to be good but rather to feel good about themselves, i.e. in a rationality-driven pursuit of their own self-interest. An example of this line of thinking is Kate Soper's (2007, 2008) notion of alternative hedonism which lays emphasis on the self-satisfying dimension of ethical consumption – the "sensual pleasures of consuming differently" (Soper, 2008, p. 577). A range of recent accounts of ethical consumer behaviour tuned in to the alternative hedonism thesis and attempted to bring to the surface the self-interest underlying individuals' adoption of ethical practices. Arvola et al.'s (2008, p. 445) study of organic shoppers reports a connection between "positive self-enhancing feelings of "doing the right

thing" anticipated by consumers and their intentions to buy organic. John, Klein and Smith's (2002) research points out the "clean hand motivation" as a major driver of consumer boycotts. Cherrier (2006), Shaw (2007) and Lekakis (2013) add more empirical evidence of the role of the "feel-good" factor in inciting ethical consumer activities.   The model of a social actor as a consistently rational and preference-driven chooser has a number of built-in ontological presuppositions that render the rational choice approach ill-suited for explicating human behaviour, including in the sphere of consumption. Firstly, the representation of human morality as merely a part of the cost-benefit analysis of a narrowly self-interested actor who prefers that course of action which, alongside other utilities, also brings higher emotional rewards (Becker, 1996) leaves no room to accommodate such widespread sociocultural phenomena as altruism, benevolence and free giving. The idea of agential actions being pre-defined by a set of preferences that "are assumed to be given, current, complete, consistent and determining" (Archer, 2000, p. 68) takes an unbearable toll on the essential human properties of normativity, emotionality and reflexivity: we are left with a subject whose emotions rest untriggered, normativity remains unexercised, and the workings of the mind are reduced to the calculations of losses and gains (Archer, 2007). The rational choice framing of consumer decisions sits uneasily with claims about the inherently moral and value-laden nature of consumption reverberating in the works of various authors (see Miller, 1998). RCT's flat rejection of altruism becomes undeniably problematic when applied to ethical consumer behaviour which implies at least a degree of interest-free and self-sacrificing morality, as evinced by a growing number of people willingly foregoing their own convenience, leisure time and material interests out of concern for the fate of "the other" - humans, animals or the planet (think of those who give up their cars for the benefit of the environment, spend yet another Sunday digging vegetable patches in a persistent effort to "grow their own", or pay significant price premiums for fair trade goods). It is difficult to see how such behaviours can be reconciled with RCT's ontological assumptions of social atomism and individualistic, "rational-acquisitive reflexivity" (Donati and Archer, 2015, p. 278). These behaviours, we argue, can only spring from an inter-subjective relational social ontology wherein agents are construed not as isolated individuals, but as parts of a system of interdependence, characterized by a growing interaction, reciprocity and relationality (Donati and Archer, 2015). Likewise, reflexivity that engenders ethical actions cannot be merely

individual; rather, it is relational, for it "reflects on the outcomes of social networks as products of relations rather than of individual acts" (Donati and Archer, 2015, p. 278).

An attempt has been made by rational choice theorists to explain away acts of charity, benevolence and goodwill by rethinking the individual without conceding rationality as her dominant property. The refined model is that of a tripartite being consisting of a superior rational actor; a normative man introduced as a source of the sense of cooperation arising when common good is at stake; and an emotional man called upon when the expression of solidarity and collective action is needed for the sake of social stability or change (Flam, 2000). Archer (2000) has spared us the task of exposing the ontological flaws of this model, which essentially incorporates features of the social context into the individual: distribution of economic resources is narrowed down to personal budgets; social solidarity is explained away as merely an expression of a subjective preference to team up; and subscription to social norms is construed as a rational pursuit of self-interest rather than a manifestation of morally binding duties. "Can the social context really be disaggregated in this way?" (Archer, 2000, p. 67) and "in what recognisable sense are we still talking about "the individual" when he or she has now been burdened with so many inalienable features of social reality?" (Archer, 2000, p. 67) are the ontological puzzles that RCT's revised model of a human subject leaves unsolved.

Finally, rational choice framework rests on the same assumptions about the role of individual agency in shaping consumption as those implied in agency-focused accounts, i.e. that consumers are active and teleological decision-makers operating in highly individualistic and free-choice social environments. The limitless rationality assumed in RCT parallels post-modernist belief in unbounded reflexivity and leads to the same view of consumption choices as subject to absolute control by consuming agents – identity-concerned and meaning-seeking individuals in one case; preference-driven and utility-maximizing actors in the other. Both approaches are conceptually and analytically flawed in that they abstract subjects from the social contexts in which consumption takes place and which represent crucial determinants of consumer behaviour. A growing recognition of the need to redress this bias has laid the basis for a body of literature that centres around the opposite end of the spectrum of theoretical perspectives on consumer behaviour. Purporting to correct the imbalances underlying the agency-focused, choice-based models

of consumption, it targets the social roots of consumption activities and draws attention to a wide range of social relations, interactions and processes in which consumer practices are embedded. Practice-based approach has arguably been the most influential among such theoretical developments. Since the beginning of the XXI century practice theories have been informing empirical work on sustainable consumption drawing attention to the use of environmentally problematic commodities such as energy and water in the course of reproduction of mundane, taken-for-granted, symbolically inconspicuous practices and routines (e.g. Evans, 2011; Shove, 2003). Two major practice-theoretical programmes for sustainable consumption, as identified by Welch and Warde (2015), are those developed by Spaargaren (2011) and Shove (2003). While Spaargaren situates individual consumers within social structures through the concept of environmental power, i.e. the capacity of citizen-consumers to reduce the environmental impact of consumption/production practices controlled by other social actors, Shove (2003) goes as far as to completely remove individual meanings and actions from the research agenda for sustainable consumption and focuses on the relation between institutions, infrastructures and technologies on the one hand, and social conventions, understandings and practices on the other.

As Welch and Warde (2015) note, different versions of practice theory are united by the intent to "undermine the traditional individual-nonindividual divide by availing themselves of features of both sides" (Schatzki, 2001, p. 14). However, the perspective creates more ontological problems than it solves. By refusing to draw a distinction between agential and structural properties, practice theories fall prey to what Archer (2007) terms "central conflation", an approach that relates structure and agency at the expense of their ontological and analytical integrity and thus precludes understanding of how and with what consequences their interaction occurs. In its stronger version, practice-based perspective shifts towards the "downward conflation": here it presupposes an ontology in which practices are the source of both social order, for they are "not merely "sites" of interaction but are, instead, ordering and orchestrating entities in their own right" (Shove and Walker, 2010, p. 471), and individuality, since "[i]t is practices that "produce" and co-constitute individuals ... not the other way round" (Spaargaren, 2013, p. 233). Such view of reality conflicts with the relational, inter-dependent and inter-subjective social ontology, whose relational character implies that structure cannot override agency (Donati, 2010), and whose inter-subjectivity gives rise to ethical and moral

intentions and actions which themselves play an important part in structuring our societies (Berman, 2002).

The assumption of the ontological inferiority of individuals reverberates through the accounts of authors attempting to understand ethical consumption by dispensing with the concept of a consumer as an intentional agent and ethical shopping as a consumer-driven phenomenon. Barnett and colleagues (2010), for example, highlight various social, political and market forces that create and sustain ethical consumerism by encouraging and enabling the enactment of ethical consumer subjectivities through deliberate strategies (e.g. campaigning) and technologies (e.g. labelling). Their argument resonates with Clarke et al.'s (2007, p. 239) discussion of local shopping as a practice in which "the exercise of "choice" is shaped by systems of collective provisioning over which consumers have little direct influence" and is buttressed by Wheeler's (2012) work highlighting the role of the systems of collective provision in ensuring consumer engagement with fair trade. Coming from a similar angle, Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007, p. 469) focus on "the ways consumers and consumer roles are framed in interactive processes in markets, governance structures, and everyday life".

On the whole, socio-centric perspectives are clearly juxtaposed against explanations of consumer behaviour in terms of an individual actor. In a battle against the "orthodoxy of the "active consumer" in the social sciences" (Trentmann, 2006, p. 3), their proponents erase the image of an ethical consumer as an agent of active choice and ethical practices as expressions of individual liberty of conscience and thought. The social practice framework in which, as Warde (2005, p. 146) admits, "the concept of "the consumer" (…) evaporates" does not allow for the exploration of the phenomenon of ethical consumption at the individual level and hence precludes an insight into the world of subjective meanings surrounding ethical consumer decisions. Likewise, the idea of ethical choices as little more than externally orchestrated enactments of ethical consumer subjectivities imposed upon individuals by strategically oriented actors leads to the dismissal of consumers as key agents in the consumption process and neglects their role in creating and steering ethical consumption.

The above review demonstrates that existing research on ethical consumption is tied up with the dominant theoretical frameworks in which consumer is presented as either an agent of free choice or a passive bearer of socially defined practices. The key reason for the ineffectiveness of this body of work in producing a comprehensive account of ethical consumption as an

individual and social phenomenon has been the tendency to leave out of sight the full spectrum of forces and powers at work in creating and shaping consumer practices. On the one hand, agency-focused perspectives have achieved noticeable progress in offering an enhanced understanding of the subjective motives and meanings attached to ethical consumer choices, but neither an adequate account nor even an explicit acknowledgment of the contexts in which these choices are made and the external factors that determine them has ensued. The rational choice framework has also been found guilty of neglecting key aspects of the ontological composition of the individual - reflexivity, emotionality, normativity - and of social reality - relationality, inter-subjectivity and interdependence. On the other hand, socio-centric approaches have encouraged recognition of the social underpinnings of consumer behaviour and the embeddedness of individual choices in the social and material organisation of life, while appearing to overlook the ways in which consumer agency and subjectivity interact with and respond to the social order. They therefore fall short of effectively accounting for aspects of individual engagement with ethical consumption and adequately explaining the variations in its understandings and performances among the consuming agents. Thus, applied in isolation, neither agency-focused perspectives nor socio-centric paradigms prove sufficient for enabling consumer research to approach a much-needed understanding of the individual and socio-structural factors that create and determine consumption. This, we argue, can only be achieved through rethinking consumer acts as ones where a complex interweaving of agential and structural properties and capacities occurs. From this viewpoint, a critical realist perspective provides an effective means of conceptualising and studying consumer behaviour as it necessitates an acknowledgement of the ontological integrity of both agency and structure, and encourages an exploration of their contributions to personal and social outcomes. Archer's (2007) work incorporating reflexivity into a critical realist conception of human activity is particularly suitable for explaining the causal efficacy of individual consumers in relation to their surrounding contexts. The concept of reflexivity leads one to dispense with "the portfolio model" (Hindess, 1990) of the human subject wherein individuals' actions are guided by desires, preferences and beliefs derived from a pre-given and supposedly stable portfolio - the ontology shared by the agency-focused approaches, whether based upon the expressive or the rational consumer. Nor is reflexivity compatible with the assumption of the ontological supremacy of social meanings, competencies and

routines, which practice theorists consider "the primary source of desire, knowledge and judgment" (Warde, 2005, p. 145). Finally, the realist view of social reality as inter-subjective, inter-dependent and inter-relational (Donati and Archer, 2015) and individuals as inherently reflexive and normative beings whose relationship to the world is one of concern (Archer, 2007) successfully accommodates human emotionality and normativity - the two stumbling blocks that the rational choice theorist fails to negotiate. By conferring ontological status on the unobservable, yet real entities and processes that profoundly affect agential actions, i.e. emotions, concerns and reflexive deliberations, a critical realist framework allows us to effectively account for the altruistic and selfless aspects of ethical consumer behaviour.

In the following two sections, we analyse the first-person accounts from self-perceived ethical consumers to explore the relationship between agency and structure as they manifest themselves in ethical consumption. The data on which this paper draws comes from a qualitative study investigating the relationship between ethical consumer practices and identities. A mixture of participant observation and in-depth interviews with ten ethical food consumers (four males and six females between 29 and 64 years old) from Northern England was used to explore how individuals develop, actualise and sustain ethical consumer identities through the practice of ethical eating. This paper draws primarily on the data collected via one-to-one interviews, which ranged in length from two to five hours and were designed to solicit first-person accounts of the participants' "ethical food stories", i.e. their experiences of becoming and being ethical food consumers, as well as their perceptions of the relationship between consumption, morality and self-image. Hermeneutic analysis of these accounts generated rich insights into the lives and minds of the respondents. In this paper, we focus on the participants' experiences as ethical food consumers in which the relationship between agency and structures becomes manifest.

Contextualising consumer practices

In this section, we engage with the postulates of the agency-focused perspectives on consumer behaviour. In particular, we challenge the assumption of agential capacity to freely choose and reflexively (or rationally) appropriate regardless of the wider cultural, economic and political contexts. By drawing on the accounts of self-perceived ethical consumers, we reveal the embeddedness of consumer behaviour within the structural forces of

market and social systems. Our analysis is informed by and extends the arguments of those commentators who oppose the existing tendency to neglect the "social embeddeddness" of human reflexivity and overemphasise the freedom of choice at the expense of acknowledging the role of the structure in shaping the self and its practices. Cherrier, for example, has problematised the idea of an ethical consumer who "self-creates through will, operates freely in its own construction, and consciously chooses elements in the marketplace that meet its need for a meaningful or authentic identity" (2007, p. 322). Barnett et al. highlight that "the material and socio-cultural resources required for engaging in self-consciously ethical consumption are differentially available" (2005, p. 41) and emphasise the important role of systemic measures, structural provisions and practical devices in turning consumer "oughts into cans" (2005, p. 31). In the following quote, Sassatelli sums up the argument (2007, p. 106):

The ongoing constitution of a personal style draws on commodities whose trajectories consumers can never fully control and it is negotiated within various contexts, institutions and relations which both habilitate and constrain subjects.

In our analysis, we demonstrate the frailty of the agency-focused framework empirically by highlighting how the respondents' ability to engage in ethical eating and actualise desired consumer subjectivities is contingent upon the specific structural conditions that continuously shape their situations and opportunities. The embeddedness of ethical consumption in objective reality becomes manifest as soon as a person makes his or her first attempt at adopting an alternative diet. A review of the participants' experiences as aspiring ethical food consumers is helpful for bringing out the force of this argument. Lucy's (48, female, vegan) attempts at going vegan span more than two decades – the possibility of enacting her ideal vision of ethical eating has for a long time been precluded by the practical difficulty of sustaining a plant-based diet in an overwhelmingly meat-eating environment: "this is back in the 1990, and it was not easy, and the sort of food that you got in health food shops was pretty horrible". Even more revealing is Lucy's commentary on the ways in which her opportunities to make ethical choices changed depending on the social contexts in which she found herself at different points in life: "it was just really hard, particularly in Moscow, there was nothing in the shops apart from bread and jam"; "Sophia was easy for food, really easy, the fruit and veg at the market were lovely"; "I didn't eat so well in Paris because

the monks did not really understand vegetarianism". Presently, when lack of meatless options or unresponsive social environment no longer obstructs Lucy's ethical food commitments, her ability to exercise her consumer agency continues to depend on the practical opportunities to do so. "What annoys me", shares Lucy, "is unclear labelling. I wish they'd labelled things more clearly in situations where I am eating out, like through work when they have a buffet or something, and they don't label things, and they don't tell me what I can eat, what I can't eat". Other participants provide more examples of a key role of social contexts in determining their opportunities for engaging in ethical consumption and the ease with which they are able to do so. Elucidating is Manasi's (31, female, vegetarian) comparison of the extent of practical effort and commitment that she felt was required to sustain a plant-based diet in the "meat and potatoes land" of Midwestern America versus vegetarian-oriented India: "over here [America] it feels like you have to seek out vegetarian food options, over there [India] you have to seek out meat". Her other remark reiterates the claim about the contextual dependency of ethical consumption: "knowing your farmer is a wonderful thing if you are lucky enough to live in a place where you can do that". These comments resonate with Lila (34, female, vegan), whose experiences as a socially situated consuming agent are remarkably similar to those of Manasi. Lila's allegiance to veganism was easily accommodated in her native Israel, where vegan options are well integrated into the local food and socio-cultural landscape: "most common street food that you get in Israel is vegan: its either hummus or falafel in pita bread, and that's vegan, so that was ok and just completely normative". In the UK, certain forms of ethical consumption, such as local, became more challenging to fulfil due to structural limitations: "some things you just can't buy in the local shops", justifies Lila her involuntary visits to supermarkets. Lila's experience parallels that of Joe (29, male, vegan and environmentalist), whose practice of ethical shopping was thrown into confusion upon moving to a new city, where the absence of fresh food markets meant that more of his grocery shopping had to be done at big supermarket chains. Likewise, accessibility of products with desired qualities has always been critical to David's (34, male, vegetarian and environmentalist) ability to pursue ethical eating. Back in his native Scotland, the lack of shops selling environmentally friendly produce was a major restraint to David's ethical commitments: "we had to go to Glasgow to get different things, but you can't go and get your weekly shopping in an hour bus drive away", he explains. This practical constraint was itself rooted in the particular socio-cultural environment

prevailing in David's hometown: "it does not have a very much diversity of people there, so even if you opened a shop selling different things, there were not many customers for it".

The ease with which the subjects were able to pursue ethical lifestyles at different points in time was also strongly affected by the social networks, groups and institutional relations of which they were a part. Lila highlights the enabling influence of a "lefty" work environment in which she could freely envision and enact an alternative consumer subjectivity: "it was a fairly progressive environment and people were very open to different ideas". Conversely, engaging in desired behaviours becomes much more challenging when it requires transgression of the particular ways of thinking and acting that dominate within a given social context. In the words of Joe, "it's very easy to be vegan, if you are hanging around all of those animal rightsy people. But when you are out of that sphere, I think it becomes much harder". The participants' comments resonate with the literature emphasising the socio-cultural embeddedness of ethical consumption. In a study exploring individuals' adoption of environmental beliefs, Hards (2011) describes how climate change activists deliberately retract from their green identities when those clash with the social world. The examples quoted above offer further support to Hards' (2011, p. 33) conclusion that "without conducive social networks it may be hard to reject dominant norms, or envision alternative forms of normality". Solveig (29, female, vegan) offers another revealing example of the role of socio-cultural contexts in facilitating as well as restraining consumer engagement in ethical practices. Factors influencing Solveig's ability to eat ethically at different stages in life include accommodating university context: "it was fairly easy to stay vegetarian, the university cafeterias all had vegetarian options"; vegetarian-oriented environment in which she lived during her studies in Sheffield: "because you have a lot of people of Indian and Pakistani heritage, so a lot of the supermarkets offer really broad variety of fancy vegetables and legumes"; and the Green Party's rise to power and concomitant increase in environmental awareness and availability of green products in her native Germany: "I think Green Party government raised a lot of awareness for ethical food production and consumption, so the variety of food offered everywhere and just the consciousness and awareness of people changed". Most recently, sustaining a vegan diet became more straightforward for Solveig due to the rise of the Internet, social media platforms and online communities, on which she relies for information: "god bless the Internet - I would have died without having access to vegan

recipes", news: "when Oreos turned vegan I found that on one of these groups", as well as knowledge sharing and support: "sometimes just giving people tips - there is Leeds vegan group, for example". In the context of the key argument of this paper, noteworthy is Solveig's acknowledgment of her privileged position as a member of an advanced western society and her appreciation of the inaccessibility of ethical lifestyles to the people whose objective conditions are different from her own:

For me it is an ethical obligation not to harm where I don't have to harm (…) but, of course, that is me, because I live in a western society where I can just go to a supermarket and buy fresh food and stuff everywhere.

On the other hand, Solveig accentuated the structural limits of her consumer agency when describing how the absence of fresh food markets close to home makes shopping at conventional supermarkets a more frequent activity than she would have preferred; how UK supermarkets' security measures prevent her from dumpster diving which she used to practice in Germany; and how her aspirations as an ethical consumer are constrained by the forces of global capitalism: "I would like to consume more products from smaller independent companies, but it is really tricky because you have three or four really big companies that produce soya products and it is very hard to avoid that". On the whole, the participants realised that their opportunities for making ethical food choices are contained within the actual political, economic and business realities. This was evident in the subjects' commentaries on the challenge of accommodating diverse ethical concerns in one shopping basket: "I remember Morrison's used to do bananas – you could get fair trade bananas and you could get organic bananas, but you could not get together, and I remember thinking – should I get fair trade, should I get organic?" (Maggi, 62, female, vegan). Similar tensions in attempting to exercise moral agency within the commercial realities of the global food industry were highlighted by Lila: "do you support a chain and get your fair trade bananas or do you want to just support your local shops and get those other bananas which may not be fair?" and Joe: "am I letting down the local business or am I exploiting foreign farmers through using the local business?" Here we would be remiss not to reiterate the inadequacy of choice theorists' framing of consumer behaviour founded on the assumption of rational self-interest. As participants' comments make clear, ethical choice often involves handling difficult moral dilemmas rooted in concerns for the other - a predicament that can only arise before normative, morally conscious agents who are part of an inter-dependent, inter-subjective reality and bearers of relational,

other-regarding reflexivity. Overall, the participants' experiences demonstrate that consumer choice is characterised by ubiquitous contextual embeddedness and that multiple systemic factors affect individuals' opportunities to be ethical in consumption. More broadly, they suggest that objective contexts in which agents are placed determine, to a large extent, their ability to pursue desired consumption behaviours and their concomitant costs. This section thus provides support to those arguing for the need to avoid "over-exaggerating the reflexive and self-conscious sensibilities" (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, p. 256) of consuming agents and "take into consideration the context of context" (Askegaard and Linnet, 2011, p. 381) in examining consumption processes. In taking a more context-conscious approach to ethical consumption, our analysis makes a modest but important contribution to what Adams and Raisborough's (2010) define as "the contextualisation project" – a necessary step toward a fuller and more balanced account of consumer behaviour.

Reinstating consumer agency

Having demonstrated the contextual embeddedness of ethical consumption and the limits of agential freedom to make morally desirable choices, we turn to the other side of the agency-structure equation. Here we argue that while Jacobsen and Dulsrud's (2007, p. 469) appeal to reject the belief in the active consumer as "a universal entity, available across nations and time" is clearly justified, this should not lead the field to dispense with the concept of agency altogether, or completely deny consumers the liberty of thought, conscience and choice, or reduce consumer decisions to involuntary effects of systemic pressures. The view of ethical consumption as merely an expression of norms and ideas dominating the surrounding moral, political and cultural discourses, we contend, requires significantly greater degrees of conformity in the understandings and practices of consumption ethics than those demonstrated by the ethical consumers of this and other studies (e.g. Adams and Raisborough, 2010; Barnett et al., 2005). Our analysis of the respondents' accounts highlights the varied enactments of consumption ethics and demonstrates individuals' ability to negotiate objective enablements and constraints to their ethical projects. This evidence feeds into the literature on consumption that negates the idea of consumer choices as "inculcated responses explicable only by reference to more objective social forces" (Soper, 2007, p. 217) and recognises ethical consumers as "pluralistic, heterogeneous, and multiskilled ethical persons" (Cherrier,

2007, p. 322). As evidence in the preceding section suggests, unaccommodating socio-cultural contexts can present a significant impediment to consumer pursuit of ethical practices. Thus, adopting and sustaining non-mainstream eating behaviours in traditional food environments requires human agency and ability to question and transgress the dominant social order. Such have been the experiences of Lucy and Solveig, whose agential capacities enabled them to commit to what was considered a radically alternative diet within the conventional meat-eating familial and socio-cultural contexts. The participants manifest the capacity to actively advance their principles of ethical eating against objective constraints, such as lack of choices with desirable ethical qualities. Solveig, for example, negotiates meat-focused events by bringing her own food: "I would bring vegan burgers or sausages so that I would have something to put on the barbecue". The same approach has been adopted by Lucy, who ensures she stays social without sacrificing her vegan lifestyle: "usually if I go out on a social occasion I take something with me that I can eat"; and Lila, who maintained a habit of bringing her own food to dine on with colleagues during night shifts at work: "I kind of coped, I brought my own packed dinner with me". Lila's case provides a telling illustration of the role of consumer agency in shaping ethical consumption. In an effort to opt out of the supermarket practice of packing products "with three layers of nylon and plastic", Lila joined a community group that buys foodstuffs in bulk: "I don't feel so guilty about all this packaging because I have just one big 5 kg bag of something, I don't have to buy a new lentil bag every month". Taking her environmental concerns further still, she has actively participated in defining the packaging practices of her food suppliers: "we changed our farmers several times (…) it was like, can you just pack it with a little less plastic, and can we return the boxes, and can you reuse them…" Joe offers yet another example of the causal efficacy of consuming agents. As an undergraduate student, he was faced with the need to defend his commitment to veganism against the lack of meatless options at the university canteen: "I remember having to fight for that for a bit, for that special treatment". Mary (64, female, environmentalist) adds more evidence to support the view of consumers as active agents willing and able to negotiate structural barriers and constraints. In the following comment Mary describes how, upon moving to Scotland to take up a new job, she started to actively shape her food provisioning practices thus demonstrating capacity to take responsibility in consumption and enact change in her immediate food environment:

I found it pretty limited what you could buy, I couldn't get the food I would have normally eaten (…) I set up and started digging out a vegetable bed at the back of a tiny unit that we were working in.

To take another example from the data, prohibitive cost of ethical products has been commonly singled out as one of the key factors restraining the subjects' ability to participate in ethical consumption. However, while concerns over limited food budgets undoubtedly place constraints on the contents of their shopping baskets, the respondents actively explore opportunities to practice ethical eating in the ways that do not command a premium price. For example, Joe continuously experiments with vegan recipes in search of the most cost-effective weekly menu; Darren (36, male, vegan) organised an allotment collective to grow organic food for personal consumption and charity; and Lila joined a buying group to purchase fair trade and organic foodstuffs in bulk at a more affordable price. Those who for various reasons, such as convenience or lack of alternatives, do most of their grocery shopping in supermarkets, demonstrate equal resourcefulness in finding ways to exercise moral agency at no extra cost. Maggi ensures an on-going supply of ethical products by seeking out special offers and deals – once a bargain is found, she places a bulk order that usually lasts until the next promotion is offered in-store. David remains a regular patron of the upscale Waitrose, where the reduced price section is his constant source of otherwise unaffordable goods. "Waitrose is not expensive, you can have expensive things if you want them, or – not", he says, revealing the potential for active choice and resourceful approach to food provisioning. These examples showcase how through creativity and skilful use of resources individuals manage to push the boundaries of what is accessible or available to them in their given contexts. This evidence underwrites the realist assumption of an inherently fluid, transformable reality which changes in response to agents' continuous attempts to adapt the surrounding environment to their concerns, desires and needs. On larger temporal and spatial scales, this is reflected in the progressive expansion of ethical goods into mainstream food outlets and increased social awareness of and accommodation to ethical consumption, which over the past several decades has moved from the fringes of consumer society to its very core in some contexts.   The evidence of consumers' ability to actively pursue and promote desired forms of consumption undermines the idea of the socially constructed and governed consumer, for the manner in which the participants overcome objective constraints to their ethical food commitments presupposes human agency and capacity to evaluate and respond to social structure. In light of this

evidence agential reflexivity regains its place in consumption activities, for it is the capacity for reflexive deliberations that enables individuals to continuously assess their social contexts and adjust their practices in accordance with the constant flux of objective enablements and constraints (Archer, 2000). The following comment from Mary is an example of such reflexive musings:

I have noticed that there is much more of world food cooking going (...) and I started to think - well, my diet shifted that way and I am eating a lot more imported foods and not as much basic English food. And I am thinking - this is going to be affecting world food trade, and people in developing countries, and food growth patterns, and climate change, and all sorts of things. I am thinking – I might have a look at that in my own diet, think about that a bit.

This quote demonstrates how Mary's approach to ethical consumption is underpinned by relational reflexivity operating within an inter-subjective, inter-dependent social reality. It suggests not only that she stays alert to the ways in which changing economic and socio-cultural landscapes affect her diet, but that she also repeatedly re-assesses the ethical implications of her consumption decisions and continuously reviews the consistency between her moral principles and her eating habits. In the same vein, Lila describes how her food choices change along with the changes in the spatial and informational contexts of her ethical commitments:

For about a decade I refused to have processed food in my house, and then I read something about super-ethical company that is the most ethical company in Europe (…) and I looked at the ingredients and it looked fine, and I thought - my kids are going to be delighted with this processed soya sausages.

Like Mary's, Lila's food practices undergo incessant transformation "because the situation changes as well and I learn more things all the time". Manasi offers another example of an incessantly evolving project of ethical eating:

You have to change with the times and you have to change with the environment around you (…) when my parents were growing up nobody knew what was going on the farms, nobody knew how many pesticides were being used, there was no information, but now that there is information, you can make better choices.

Not only do these accounts reveal the reflexive effort involved in ethical consumption, but they also underscore its continuous nature problematized by some authors. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007), for example, maintain that a bulk of ethical consumer choices, far from being an outcome of reflexive deliberations,

result from consumers' use of heuristics such as opting for ethical brands and labels which provide mental shortcuts to better purchase decisions. The "ideological allure of simple choices", these authors argue, steers consumers away from reflexive approach to navigating the complexity of ethical consumption and make them rely on the simplifying search strategies to achieve the feelings of "confidence in outcomes, direct participatory involvement, and personal engagement" (Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007, p. 150). Adams and Raisborough's (2010, p. 265) assessment of the moral discourse around fair trade echoes the argument: "the common cultural equation of Fairtrade with 'doing good' might suspend the requirement for reflexive effort otherwise involved in negotiating through the complex demands noted above". While it is hardly contestable that people tend to develop routines for maintaining what they have adopted as their preferred lifestyles, the respondents' accounts suggest that a continuous reflexive monitoring of one's behaviour and actions is an integral part of ethical consumption. Our conclusion finds support in the accounts of fair trade consumers from Adams and Raisborough's study (2010), who too feel that being an ethical consumer requires you to "question your every action" (p. 264) and be "ethically effective by thinking of the bigger picture at all times" (p. 262). The evidence of consumers' ability and propensity to reflexively review their moral commitments and modify their behaviours accordingly belies both choice theorists' model of a rationality-driven agent whose ways are pre-defined by a set of fixed and unchanging interests and the image of the passive, unreflexive consumer whose consumption is governed solely by objective social forces. The reflexive capacity to continuously monitor and revise their practices is indispensable to ethically conscious consumers because, being a moral project, ethical consumption is not liable to normative routinisation: "since the aim is to determine upon the course of the right action, then "good" is always the enemy of "best" (Archer, 2007, p. 301). The respondents' attitudes align with this point, as best revealed in the comments from Maggi: "I think it is probably an on-going kind of struggle… struggle of what's best" and David: "the idea of what you think is right to be is constantly moving, constantly changing layer upon layer upon layer". These remarks parallel the findings of Adams and Raisborough's study underscoring how consumers' ethical activity is "increasingly complicated over the years and requires a constant review and reappraisal of (…) attitudes and values" (2010, p. 262). Crucially, however, it is not that ethical consumption is completely immune to routinisation, but that such routines, when and if allowed to form, are constantly

challenged and disturbed by the on-going changes in objective reality to which ethically minded consumers, as our findings suggest, try to stay mentally and morally awake. In light of the above discussion, the inadequacy of socio-centric perspectives for providing a comprehensive and balanced account of ethical consumer behaviour becomes apparent. Social practice theories that construe consumer activities as "a routinized type of behaviour" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249) are misfit for exploring ethical consumption as a reflexive pursuit of active and creative agents. The evidence presented in this section testifies against the perspectives that tend to homogenise the varied understandings, meanings and reflections involved in consumption practices of morally concerned individuals. The diversity in consumers' ways of practicing food ethics, from dumpster diving and growing your own to hunting for bargains at grocery stores, and their creativity in negotiating structural barriers, from prohibitive cultural contexts to hefty price tags attached to green goods, calls for an acknowledgement of human agency alongside the social force.

Conclusion

This paper fills a gap in existing research on ethical consumption by accounting for the phenomenon in a way that acknowledges the contextual embeddedness of consumer choice and the role of human agency in defining consumption processes and their outcomes. By showing that "ethical consumption practices are neither a response to rigid and authoritarian rules imposed on persons nor a pure product of voluntary and rational consumers" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 331), we sought to affirm the role of structural objectivity (the enabling and constraining properties of objective reality) and agential subjectivity (human capacity for reflexivity, creativity and intentionality) in creating and shaping ethical consumption. Within this account, reflexivity has been framed as a fundamental human property that enables ethical consumers to continuously monitor the self and its contexts and negotiate structural enablements and constraints emerging on their pathways. Our discussion of reflexivity serves the purpose of emphasising the role of agents in steering consumption processes. Presumably, the different modes in which reflexivity may be exercised (see Archer, 2007) do not affect its function as a key instrument that empowers consuming agents to devise, monitor and revise their ethical practices in light of the constantly changing subjective and objective conditions. What is crucial, however, is that this paper places agential reflexivity - inherently fallible, but corrigible - not outside, but within the boundaries of the particular

societal contexts in which it is exercised by consumers and argues for the need to acknowledge the role of structure in shaping individuals' ideas about how they can best realise their vision of food ethics. Supporting the call for a more context-conscious understanding of reflexivity (see Adams and Raisborough, 2008), we construe ethical consumption as a structurally conditioned, yet reflexive practice of socially situated, yet active and intentional agents. Ultimately, what needs to be acknowledged is that consumption is shaped by a wide range of societal forces and personal motivations, and that agential powers and structural influences are not mutually exclusive - in fact, it is precisely because multiple systemic factors produce continuous effects on consumer behaviour that ethical practices need to be reflexively monitored and actively sustained by consuming agents. It is such recognition, we argue, that will allow putting the figure of an individual consumer - decentred if not altogether displaced by the sceptics - back to the foreground in the story about ethical consumption whilst avoiding replicating the caricature portraits of consumers as freely choosing, all-knowing actors with unrestricted reflexive or rational capacities. This study makes an important contribution to this project through promoting a more balanced view of consumption which, far from presenting consumer decisions as "acts of sovereignty over the world and things" (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 106), nevertheless leaves room for "the life of the mind, for personal decision and responsibility" (Sayer, 2011, p. 13).

The empirical analysis presented in the paper allows us to anchor abstract claims about the nature of individuals and social reality to an important aspect of contemporary existence, consumption. Our findings highlight that the processes of change for agents and structure unfold in closely interrelated ways: the evolution of ethical consumer practices occurs in social contexts which themselves change as a result of the actions and choices of consuming agents. This suggests that analysis of consumption phenomena needs to move both upward towards a more extensive view of social structures and downward towards a more nuanced grasp of the motivations and actions of individual agents. Through examining the morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 2000) underlying the formation and transformation of consuming agents and their social contexts, which we have elaborated in this paper, future research can progress towards a fundamentally historical understanding of consumption phenomena.

We argue strongly for the benefits of critical realism for developing a more nuanced and comprehensive

perspective on ethical consumption and consumer behaviour more broadly. Our empirical examples focus on a range of ethical consumer practices (e.g. vegetarianism, eating local, shopping for fair trade and organic); as such, the study addresses a limited scope in consumption studies. We encourage the field to engage with a critical realist framework which, as this paper suggests, has high potential to steer consumption studies towards a more inclusive understanding of consumer behaviour.

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