

**Ethical consumption as a Subjective Life Project:
Reflexive Construction of an Ethical Self in the
Contexts of Objective Reality**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is his own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to all those who believe in a better life and are brave enough to pursue it.

Acknowledgements

This thesis culminates the research journey which began long before the official start of my PhD. It was conceived in 2011 in a conversation with Farida Vis, my then MA supervisor, who was soon to become my academic mentor, my first co-researcher and co-author, as well as a friend. Her encouragement of my very first attempts at understanding the social world, her appraisal of my potential to pursue an academic career, and her role in providing me with exceptional opportunities to live it out have been crucial in leading me to set out on what proved to be the most enriching journey I have ever undertaken. Farida, I have kept you in mind all along the way and I am hopeful that you will feel proud for what I have achieved – this would never have happened without you.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I explore and interpret ethical food consumption as a site of formation, negotiation, and articulation of individuals' personal and social identities. Drawing on Margaret Archer's conceptualization of reflexivity as an essential human property and identity as a unique constellation of ultimate concerns about the world and our relationships with it, I develop an account of ethical consumer practices as subjective, reflexive, and intentional projects of morally concerned agents through which they attain their desired self-concepts and engage with corresponding social roles.

By exploring the origins of the participants' concerns over food ethics and tracing the evolution of their dietary commitments, I yield an understanding of how people develop ethical consumers identities as well as how they negotiate their moral food projects within the constantly changing objective conditions and subjective circumstances. Coming from a critical realist perspective, I examine the ways in which agency and structure interact to give rise to idiosyncratic ethical consumer practices and pursuits, the role that both agential and structural properties and powers play in shaping individuals' engagement in ethical food consumption, and how both the continuities and inconsistencies of subjective ethical food commitments might be explained, thus aiming toward a more comprehensive social theory about the underlying causal mechanisms and generative principles of ethical consumer practices and identities.

In doing so, I seek to put critical pressure on the conceptual fallacies and methodological biases that reside in the field of consumer research and, in counterbalance, point to a more integrated and balanced approach to studying, understanding, and explaining consumer behaviour in general and ethical consumer practices in particular. I contribute to larger theoretical debates on the relationships between consumption activities and the construction of individual identities as well as the interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity in human practices and behaviours.

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Introduction

This study is based on personal life and food stories of nine self-defined ethical consumers. The entire research process, which involved dozens of shopping trips and around 30 hours of in-depth interviews, was not just about meeting people from all walks of life and going shopping with them, visiting quirky food stores and discovering products I have never heard of, looking into subjects' food baskets and getting the low-down on their eating habits and needs. It was about learning people's personal beliefs and most private concerns, observing the art of managing the fine balance between one's ethical commitments and the exigencies of life, witnessing decision-making, revealing contradictions, and discovering the diversity of moral worldviews and ways to enact them. It is these experiences and the knowledge derived from them that I rely upon in fulfilling the key task of this thesis, that is to construe ethical consumption as a moral project, an identity-centred practice, and a means of achieving and displaying a distinct moral character. My key aim was, by soliciting first-hand accounts of morally inspired food practices and interpreting them in relation to individuals' inner and outer selves, to explore and better understand the process of emergence and the conditions of development of ethical consumer identities. Guided by Archer's concept of identity as a unique constellation of our ultimate concerns about the world, I began my investigation of ethical consumer practices by grounding them in the particular system of moral values and beliefs that subjects derive from their socio-cultural milieu and develop over the life course. I set myself the task of uncovering the underlying mechanisms that enable me to explain how identity-defining concerns over food ethics emerge, evolve, and translate into ethical food commitments which come to shape people's courses of action up to the most mundane decisions, such as the choice of ingredients for a weeknight dinner. In interpreting ethical consumption as a subjective moral project through which people address matters of importance to them, I pursue the ambition "to do justice to this relation of concern, to lay normativity, and to the fact that we are sentient beings who can flourish or suffer" (Sayer, 2011, p. 3) depending on how objects of our ultimate concerns are faring. As Sayer (2011, p. 2), I am convinced that the notion of concerns is the one that enables social analysis to produce the most comprehensive and fair account of human practices:

Concepts such as “preferences”, “self-interest” or “values” fail to do justice to such matters, particularly with regard to their social character and connection to events and social relations, and their emotional force. Similarly, concepts such as convention, habit, discourses, socialisation, reciprocity, exchange, discipline, power and a host of others are useful for external description but can easily allow us to miss people’s first person evaluative relation to the world and the force of their evaluations.

Thus, in choosing the notion of concerns as my conceptual beacon, I intended to steer away from “bland accounts of social life, in which it is difficult to assess the import of things for people” (Sayer, 2011, p. 6). To the contrary, through an exploration of subjective meanings attached to individual practices of ethical consumption I wanted to showcase “the power of personal identity to shape our lives around what we care about and commit ourselves to” (Archer, 2000, p. 355).

Yet, as the project unfolded, it has become critical to acknowledge and investigate the variety of ways in which the formation and evolution of individuals as ethical consumers is shaped not only by their intrinsic human properties and abilities, but also by the powers of external reality in which they are placed and with which they inevitably, ceaselessly, and simultaneously interact. My analysis of the participants’ narratives brought out the force of the argument that our relations with the environment in the natural world along with our interactions with objects in the practical order and other subjects in the social realm represent crucial constituents of our personal make up without which “we would not be recognisably human” (Archer, 2000, p. 215). This has enabled me to see that it is only by acknowledging the key role of both agential subjectivity and structural objectivity in shaping which courses of action individuals may pursue and hence what kind of persons they will become, that I can achieve a true understanding of how - through which inner workings and under which external conditions - subjects evolve into persons with particular moral concerns and dietary commitments thus developing the identity of an ethical consumer. While duly acknowledging the active agency of individual consumers and joining Archer (2007, p. 6) in rejecting the logic of “social hydraulics”, which establishes the ascendancy of social powers over human subjectivity, I find it essential to “allow for a milder form of objective “social conditioning” (Archer, 2007, p. 10) of ethical consumption. Consequently, I have come to balance my original focus on the intrinsic capacity of human beings to actively and consciously shape their lives around ultimate concerns and desired identities with a pronounced emphasis on the embeddedness of agential actions and choices in the objective reality, whose properties can both promote as well

as constrain individuals' ability to fulfil their ethical food commitments and live out their moral selves. By construing ethical consumption as a site wherein a continuous interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity unfolds, I justified the centrality of the concept of reflexivity to the theoretical framework underpinning my research, while locating reflexivity in the space where incessant mediation between agency and structure occurs to enable successful realisation and ensure continuity of agential food commitments enabled me to secure the appropriate theoretical grounds on which the indispensability of human reflexivity to the formation and development of ethical consumer identities can be convincingly claimed.

Through the above refinements, which have been an integral part of my sociological pursuit, I have been able to achieve a clear vision of my main research goal and the key steps toward it. Exploring ethical consumer identities is an intellectual puzzle and a compound research exercise which poses the need to discern, acknowledge, and analyse each of the different phases - as elusively demarcated as they are - which individuals go through as they progress toward a desired moral image, as well as the key forces - agential powers and structural influences - that inspire, enable, and shape this complex and intricate process during every step of the way.

My key research aims are thus as follows:

- To uncover the generative mechanism behind human concerns over the ethics of consumption; to demonstrate and analyse the relationships between moral concerns, ethical food practices, and individual identities
- To explore how, once embraced, ethical consumer identity is preserved and sustained by the individuals in the constantly changing objective contexts and subjective circumstances
- To establish and analyse the connections between personal and social identities and reveal the generative mechanism that explains how the social identity of an ethical consumer emerges and evolves through agential interactions with the social world
- To showcase ethical consumption as a site of a continuous interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity and demonstrate the central role of human reflexivity as a mediating force between the two

I will fulfil these aims by following Sayer's (2010) methodological appeal, i.e. to explore the relationship between the abstract - theoretical concepts, ideas, and

constructs - and the concrete – objects, events, and circumstances so that to achieve an understanding of the mechanisms, structures, and causal relations that explain the phenomenon under study. In accordance with this prescription, I will anchor my key abstract concepts, i.e. ultimate concerns, reflexivity, and identity, upon the concrete experiences, practices, and acts of self-defined ethical consumers and in doing so uncover the generative powers that bring ethical consumer practices and identities into being and the specific conditions upon which this causal relationship is contingent. Accomplishing this research mission would not have been possible without nine individuals who have generously shared their personal life and food stories granting me a rare insight into the private workings of the minds of morally concerned and ethically committed individuals. Relying on the participants’ revelations about the most intimate aspects of their lives and minute details of their consumption practices, I will uncover the deep connections between human concerns, emotional and mental capacities on the one hand and agential projects and commitments on the other, and bring them together as essential elements in the necessarily reflexive, because internally inspired but externally conditioned, process of becoming and being an ethical food consumer.

Outline of the thesis

The thesis opens with Chapter 1, in which I lay out the overarching theoretical framework of my research, present and discuss its key explanatory concepts, and outline its ontological underpinnings. I argue for the critical realist conception of the world as an approach that offers solid ontological and epistemological ground on which an exploration of ethical consumption as a practice in which the essential powers of structures and agents combine to produce particular individual and social outcomes can unfold and successfully reach its goals.

In Chapter 2, I position my research vis-à-vis the extensive literature on consumption in general and ethical consumption in particular. I provide a critical review of existent studies of consumer practices and challenge their ontological and epistemological assumptions which, as I argue, are standing in the way of developing a comprehensive, yet balanced view on the generative mechanisms of consumer behaviour. Having exposed the biases and misconceptions informing the dominant approaches to studying consumption, I will proceed to show how, through the consolidation of agency-focused and socio-centric perspectives on human behaviour, this thesis will offer a more integrated and nuanced understanding of the subjective

motives and objective drivers of consumer practices and identities.

In Chapter 3, I provide an outline of my epistemological position and methodological approach to data production and analysis. I begin by clarifying the relationships between my ontological and epistemological frameworks and proceed to discuss the two qualitative tools that I deployed to achieve my research aims: in-depth interviews and direct observations. The chapter also considers the epistemological and methodological challenges I encountered during the research process and indicates both the benefits as well as inevitable limitations of my chosen research strategies and techniques.

Chapter 4 introduces the ethical consumers of my research by means of individual vignettes - short biographies intended to demonstrate the range of personalities constituting my study sample and help the readers to locate the specific empirical examples that I will refer to throughout the research account in the contexts of the subjects' lives and distinct personalities.

In Chapters 5, 6 and 7 I reveal and discuss my findings on the relationships between ethical consumer practices and identities. Since, however desirable, space precludes reproducing complete stories of all my study subjects, and because different participant accounts can most effectively be used as representations of particular key themes, I will be moving between the respondents' narratives making selective use of the data and providing glimpses of life stories conveyed in the interviews so that to develop a compelling argument and achieve the specific goals that each chapter will pose.

Thus, Chapter 5 spotlights one particular participant, Lucy, whose story I will present in all its richness and complexity in order to lay the foundations on which my account of ethical consumer practices and identities can begin to unfold. By exploring the origins of Lucy's concerns over the moral aspects of consumption and tracing the evolution of her dietary commitments, I aim to illuminate the agential pathway toward an ethical consumer identity, that is the emotional and cognitive workings of the mind through which individuals come to define their subjective relationship to the objective world as one of a moral obligation to pursue an ethical life.

In Chapter 6, while not losing sight of Lucy's evolvment as an ethical food consumer, I provide more space for other participants to share their experiences and contribute to the argument. Building upon their accounts, I examine the complex ways in which morally concerned individuals continuously negotiate their relationships with

objective reality in order to successfully carry their ethical food commitments through the changing scenes of life. Through the collective voice of the ethical consumers of my research, I aim to achieve a rich and nuanced picture of ethical consumption as an identity-defining moral project that needs to be continuously and actively sustained by reflexive, creative, and self-aware agents.

In Chapter 7, I will demonstrate that ethical consumption as an identity-centred practice extends beyond individuals' self-image and involves their performances in the social realm. This time, I will build the discussion around two specific participant cases – that of Lucy, with whom by that point we will have become closely familiar, and Solveig, whose contrasting account will enable me to most tellingly and convincingly illustrate my argument. Through a revealing juxtaposition of Lucy's and Solveig's experiences of enacting the social identity of an ethical consumer, I will reveal the connections between people's ultimate concerns and social identities and demonstrate the all-important role of agential capacity to reflexively negotiate their relationships with the social world in producing a social subject out of an individual's inner self.

Combined together, these three chapters will provide an integrated account of the process of becoming and being an ethical food consumer. As Archer notes, "since subjects can and do offer the pieces of information needed, the task (...) need not call upon depth psychology or detective work but is more like doing a jigsaw" (2007, p. 232). In the same way, from each participant story I will select crucial pieces of information - snapshots of the different life stages, developments, and isolated experiences which have been key to the subjects' evolution as ethical consumers and which, considered together, will allow to create a complete picture of this gradual and intricate process. In recounting the participants' narratives, I do not intend to reconstruct their life stories in a biographically chronological order; rather, consistent with the key research questions, my goal is to reveal the generative forces and powers - both inherent in agents as well as those that emerge in the outside world - that incite and condition the development of ethical consumer identities. Yet, at the end of this research journey one important story will have been told: a story of an ethical food consumer – a human being with subjectively defined moral principles, values, and concerns; an active agent in possession of intrinsic properties and capacities and in pursuit of a reflexively devised life project; and a social actor embedded in the objective world and continuously interacting with it – an image in which any one of the participants of my research should be able to recognise him- or herself. This story, in which the leading

parts will be assigned not to the individuals but to ideas – those of ultimate concerns, reflexivity, and identity, as well as broader concepts of agential subjectivity and structural objectivity, will take us from the concrete realm of individual experiences back to the higher levels of abstraction where a truly deep understanding of the mechanisms that explain the development of ethical consumer practices and identities can be achieved. To set the stage for this account and render it meaningful, it is first of all essential to outline the theoretical, conceptual, and philosophical foundations underpinning this study.

Chapter 1

Setting the Conceptual Lens

This thesis seeks to place ethical food consumption within the broad framework of reflexivity and, more specifically, reflexive construction of identity. In this chapter I provide the reasons for applying this particular approach to the study of individual ethical food practices, present the theoretical framework of the research and its key explanatory concepts, namely ultimate concerns and reflexivity, and, finally, outline the ontological assumptions which informed the study conceptually and guided its empirical implementation. Before this account can begin to unfold, clarification is called for regarding the essential notions and terms on which both my theoretical framework and discussion of the empirical findings rest.

1.1 Clarification of concepts and terms

The key concept around which my entire research account revolves is, of course, “ethical consumption” itself. Ethical consumption is a term used to describe the phenomenon for which many other terms exist and are used in the academic, media, and public discourses, such as ethical consumerism, green consumerism, responsible consumption, political consumption, political consumerism, critical consumerism, and so on. In this thesis, I will refer to all of these as ethical consumption. While I appreciate that “ethical” is a contested notion, all of my research participants self-identified in this way. When I first set off on my research journey, I was guided by the idea of ethical consumption as a range of consumption practices and choices informed by individuals’ morals, that is their understanding of what is right or wrong with respect to the surrounding contexts, which usually include natural environment, animal welfare, and human rights. As my fieldwork progressed, significant variations between the subjects’ understandings of what ethical consumption or ethical in general means have been revealed. Not only did this discrepancy not undermine the consistency of my research or invalidate its conceptual framework, but it actually proved a critical finding

which has informed many of the theoretical arguments and constructs that will be presented in this study. Participants' divergent and at times even contrasting perspectives on what the greatest good is and how to achieve it have shown the inadequacy of the view of individual morality as something inherent, universal, and fixed. Consequently, addressing the questions of how moral values emerge, develop, and come to define the minutiae of people's daily existence, such as the choice of food, as well as how they get challenged, reconsidered, negotiated, and overturned has become crucial to fulfilling the aims of the project. Moreover, while the prevalent definitions of ethical consumption are linked to market contexts and shopping practices (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007), such as Micheletti's definition of political consumerism as "actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices" (2003, p. 2), my research has clearly shown that ethical consumption encompasses a wide range of more subtle practices and activities that cannot be reduced to purchasing ethical products in the marketplace. Devinney, Auger and Eckhardt go as far as to claim that "the notion of ethical consumerism is too broad in its definition, too loose in its operationalisation, and too moralistic in its stance to be anything other than a myth" (2010, p. 9). Whilst I agree that ethical consumption is not a definitive concept, I conceive of it as a real, multidimensional, and complex phenomenon which accommodates multiple interpretations and meanings and is presented by a variety of practices, acts, and activities situated in the contexts of objective reality. From this viewpoint, I find Barnett et al.'s (2005, p. 29) definition of ethical consumption as "any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment to distant or absent others is an important dimension of the meaning of activity of the actors involved" more accommodating. Yet, an important correction needs to be made: the authors' pronounced emphasis on *distant* or *absent* others as the key focus of commitment is not only unneeded but altogether mistaken since, as other studies have shown and as my own research findings suggest, ethical commitments are just as likely to be oriented towards those that are "closer to home". Thus, local consumption is increasingly being framed and celebrated as the most ethical purchasing choice which, according to Adams and Raisborough, "works to disrupt any formulation linking the 'good choices' here with the livelihood of a producer 'over there' – 'distant or absent others'" (2010, p. 271). Further, while a sense of responsibility in front of the poor and suffering resounded through the participants' accounts, for some protecting the feelings of those who are closest, such as family and

friends, was the most obvious moral priority and the major part of the commitment to ethical living. With this in mind, I prefer to think of ethical consumption as "any practice of consumption in which explicitly registering commitment to others is an important dimension of the meaning of activity of the actors involved - a refined version of Barnett et al.'s definition which seems to me sufficiently precise without being suffocatingly prescriptive.

Another important term that re-emerges throughout the thesis is "moral". In the context of this research, the words "morality" and "moral" are meant to refer to the principles of right and wrong behaviour or, to introduce a more formal definition, to "the internalized norms, values, principles and attitudes we live by in relation to other people" (Lindseth and Norberg, 2004, p. 145). This is a requisite clarification, for morality proved to be one of the core concepts in this research – the contested issue of right and wrong was raised unprompted and discussed extensively by all of the interviewees. It is also important to note that, albeit philosophers commonly draw distinctions of various degrees of sharpness between morality and ethics (one perspective suggests that "ethics is the science of the philosophy of morals, and morals is the practice or enactment of ethics" (Puri and Treasaden, 2009, p. 1223), my research subjects used the words "moral" and "ethical" interchangeably. Given that for the participants of my study the meanings of morals and ethics clearly overlap and following Andrew Sayer's example, I chose to avoid the unhelpfully restrictive and often confusing ways of distinguishing between the two notions and use them synonymously "to cover all the things that others have associated with either term" (Sayer, 2011, p. 17).

When talking about subjective meanings, I, as Creswell does, use the term "meaning" to refer to "intention, cognition, affect, belief, evaluation, and anything else that could be encompassed in what is broadly termed the "participants' perspective" (2012, p. 137-138), which I treat as ontologically subjective, but objectively *real* mental processes and phenomena.

Finally, in relation to my use of the word "mind", I deem it essential to guard against the narrow interpretation of the term as referring exclusively to human faculty of rationality or reason. Instead, I use it in its broader and, notably, primary sense to mean "the element of a person that enables them to be aware of the world and their experiences, to *think, and to feel*; the faculty of *consciousness and thought*" (Oxford Dictionaries online, 2016, my italics). By outlining these nuances of meaning, I

aim to prepare and encourage the readers of my work to welcome the particular account of human beings and their inherent properties and capacities.

1.2 Theoretical framework: toward reflexive social agents

It is not that “the unexamined life is not worth living”, but rather that it is unliveable (Archer, 2000, p. 220)

In this section I draw on Archer's (2007) conceptualisation of human reflexivity and personal identity to explain how agential capacity for reflexive deliberations can help to account for individual practices of ethical consumption and interpret subjective food commitments as identity-related projects of morally concerned individuals.

Archer construes reflexivity as an essential human property that is ontologically real, causally efficacious, and consequential for societal outcomes. In the context of identity, it might be helpful to think of reflexivity as “the act of an individual subject directing awareness towards itself; reflecting upon its own practices, preferences and even the process of reflection itself” (Adams and Raisborough, 2008, p. 1168). More generally, it represents “a generative ability for internal deliberation upon external reality” (Archer 2003, p. 20) which arises out of our inescapable involvement in the world and, more specifically, our relationships with its three different orders – natural, practical, and discursive. Our continuous interactions with outside reality present us with various worries and cares with each of the three realms giving rise to a distinct type of concerns which, due to the very nature of human life, we can neither sidestep nor ignore. As Archer argues, “all persons have to confront the natural world and (...) their embodiment ineluctably confers on them concerns about their physical well-being” (2000, p. 198). Likewise, “performative concerns are unavoidably part of our inevitable practical engagement with the world of material culture” (Archer, 2000, p. 198), and, finally, “participation in the social realm entails concerns about self-worth which cannot be evaded in this discursive environment” (Archer, 2000, p. 198). Subjects become alert to concerns by emotional reactions that matters and situations of non-difference provoke in individuals thereby urging them to take an appropriate action in response to the concern. In Archer's terms, emotions represent “commentaries upon human concerns”

with each type of concern generating a correspondingly different cluster of emotions specific to the situation we confront and having particular imports for it (Archer, 2004). The role that emotions are assigned to play in relation to concerns is far from trivial; in fact, Archer holds human emotionality to be "central to the things we care about and to the act of caring itself" (Archer, 2000, p. 194) – the argument that will be brought back into focus later in the thesis and substantiated by my account of the generative principles of ethical food practices and identities. The idea of emotionality is of particular relevance to the matter of my research for it reveals the connections between concerns and reflexivity and explains the inner forces that bring concerns under the scrutiny of our reflexive powers and under the spotlight in our internal conversations. This is because reflexivity as an emergent property of human beings arises precisely out of the inescapable necessity of all individuals to simultaneously confront the three orders of the world, address different concerns arising from them, and attend to their emotional imports. Since none of our concerns can simply be put aside, we are faced with a pressing need to achieve “a liveable balance within our trinity of inescapable concerns” (Archer, 2000, p. 221), i.e. to ensure that our relationships with the practical, natural, and social orders are both satisfying and sustainable. The ideal equilibrium between three different sets of concerns that often burden subjects’ with conflicting demands cannot be achieved by simply settling our lives by first-order affective reactions – instead, it calls for elaboration of emotionality beyond initial responses or biologically prescribed standards and its re-evaluation in light of our other pressing concerns. This emotional elaboration occurs during reflexive conversations - internal self-dialogues in which people continuously engage in order to achieve and sustain a satisfactory balance between their competing concerns. Through such self-talk, agents discern concerns to which they feel emotionally attracted and which they consider worthwhile living through, evaluate and prioritise them in terms of their moral worth and practical feasibility, and, finally, embrace particular matters as their ultimate concerns - those that they deem to be most important, with which they feel they can live, and which they are prepared to turn into long-term commitments. Thus, the overarching aim of the internal conversation is for individuals to “work out their own *modus vivendi* within the three orders” (Archer, 2000, p. 220) and achieve a morally fulfilling and practically possible way of living.

This entire process of internal self-talk is summed up by Archer (2007) in the following formula: <Concerns → Projects → Practices> which represents the key

landmarks in the agential journey from concerns to commitments. In this way, paved by an essential human property of reflexivity, not only do individuals define their relationships with the outer world, but they also get to understand themselves, their values, desires, and goals, and thereby achieve unique personal identities. This is because our concerns, that is what we choose to care about most in life, define what kind of persons we are: “which precise balance we strike between our concerns, and what precisely figures amongst an individual’s concerns is what gives us our strict identity as particular persons” (Archer, 2000, p. 221). Thus, it is during our internal conversations in which we reflexively review and prioritise our concerns that we come to acquire our distinct personal identities:

It is these acts of ordering and rejection - integration and separation - that create a self out of the raw materials of inner life (...) We have constituted ourselves by identifying the self as the being-with-these-concerns. The self and its reflexive awareness have been continuous throughout the conversation, but on its completion the self has attained a strict personal identity through its unique pattern of commitments (Archer, 2000, p. 241)

People’s identity-defining concerns translate into practices through the “projects” that they reflexively design in order to address issues of most importance to them. These subjective projects must be fine-tuned to the natural, practical, and socio-cultural contexts in which people are placed and from which they pursue their commitments. The constant need to reflexively negotiate the enabling and constraining properties of external reality highlights the interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity. It also affirms the everlasting nature of internal conversation – the need for reflexive deliberations never goes away because individuals have to continuously reassess their current commitments against their changing subjective states and objective circumstances.

Applied to the phenomenon of ethical consumption, the above account of human reflexivity provides for a conceptualization of ethical food practices as reflexive projects of morally committed individuals seeking to pursue their ultimate concerns from particular objective contexts. It guides an understanding of ethical consumption as a moral undertaking through which individuals reflexively forge out distinct identities out of the raw materials – primitive emotions and incipient concerns – of their rich and meaningful inner lives. To project Archer’s formula <Concerns → Projects → Practices> onto ethical consumption is to understand it as an identity-expressive moral commitment at which individuals reflexively arrive through the following steps in the

internal conversation with themselves: firstly, they define their ultimate moral concerns and in them and through them - their unique personal identities; secondly, they develop consumption projects in line with their subjective concerns and in tune with the given objective conditions; and, finally, they realise their moral food projects through appropriate shopping and eating practices. Every act of ethical consumption can then be construed as a material outcome of a particular consumption strategy, subjectively conceived and reflexively developed by an active and self-aware agent, and a practical manifestation of the moral concerns in which his or her identity is expressed.

While the specific model of social action that informs my perspective on ethical consumer behaviour, i.e. Concerns → Projects → Actions, may superficially resemble the process of rational decision-making performed by a goal-oriented actor, it is fundamentally different from the rational choice approach in that it denotes a reflexive process which is emotion-driven and value-motivated. Admittedly, this reflexive process is informed by both emotions as well as reason, since ethically inspired individuals will have to assess their potential consumption commitments both in terms of their emotional appeal as well as contextual feasibility, and agential decision as to whether or not to pursue a particular food project is inevitably contingent on their ability and preparedness to pay its associated costs. Such reflexive conversation of a morally concerned agent, however, is light years away from a cost-benefit analysis of a preference-driven actor - the rationality that is being exercised is not instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*) of an utility-seeking actor, but is value-rationality (*Wertrationalität*) of a subject who treats values as ends in themselves, as Archer (2004) explains. The emotional and normative dimensions of our reflexive conversation, she argues, cannot be reduced to value-stripped rationalisations, for they are about the things that we care about most deeply in our lives: “right judgment stands in opposition to motivation by self-interest, idleness, self-aggrandisement, convenience and so forth” (Archer, 2007, p. 300). Hence, there is an unbridgeable gap between the image of a preference-driven rational actor and Archer’s concept of a human being whose relationship to the world is one of concern. While preferences represent a vehicle for achieving a specific goal (since whenever a rational agent acts on his preferences he does so in order to advance his personal wellbeing), commitments are not means to some further ends but ends in themselves: “someone does not forgo a blood transfusion in order to be a Jehovah’s Witness: the forgoing is an expression of being one” (Archer, 2000, p. 86). This expressive aspect of the relationships between means and goals is

what is notably lacking in the rational actor, whose behaviour is expressive solely of his preference schedule and whose means are nothing more but a rationally selected instrument for achieving a desired end (Archer, 2000, p. 86). In contrast, Archer proposes an agent whose commitments are valuable in their own right for they are not “means to (...) flourishing but its constituents” (Hollis, 1989, p. 174 cited in Archer, 2000, p. 79). Unlike rational preferences, these commitments are inherently affective since the ability to develop and pursue concerns beyond our own self-interest requires deep emotional involvement:

What this implies is that Weber’s *Wetrationalitat*, far from being expelled from a disenchanted world, remains part of our lifeworld, which cannot be reduced to the bargain-hunter’s bazaar (Archer, 2000, p. 79).

It is this pronounced emphasis on emotionality and normativity that distinguishes Archer’s approach to explaining human behaviour and that makes it well-equipped for providing an effective account of ethical consumption. The relationship between subjects’ emotions, concerns, and moral food practices can be neatly construed through conceptual lens offered by Archer, who holds emotionality to be “central to the things we care about and to the act of caring itself” (Archer, 2000, p. 194) and regards human emotions as the source of the “shoving power to achieve any ends at all” (Archer, 2000, p. 225). However, while Archer’s idea of human emotionality allows to reveal the drivers behind the transformation of subjects’ concerns over food ethics into concrete consumption practices, what also needs to be understood and explained is how, where, and why these concerns actually originate. As Haidt (2012, p. 109) remarks,

Our minds have the potential to become righteous about many different concerns, and only a few of these concerns are activated during childhood. Other potential concerns are left undeveloped and unconnected to the web of shared meanings and values that become our adult moral matrix.

In the context of this thesis, the question to be answered is how exactly, i.e. through which internal processes and under which external influences, individuals develop concerns over the moral aspects of consumption. My quest for an account that can comprehensively address this critical issue brings me to Coff’s (2006) theory of food ethics which offers a potential explanation of the generative mechanism behind people’s concerns over the moral implications of their consumption practices. To begin with, Coff makes an important distinction between short-range food ethics, i.e. the ones

that apply to people's immediate geographical and temporal contexts, and long-range ethics - those which exceed the boundaries of one's "here and now" (2006, p.107). The modern food system in which the distance between consumption and production processes is growing further and further apart both spatially and temporally and in which the implications of people's diets extend far beyond their local surroundings calls for the latter type. However, the ethics of distance are problematic since the lack of first-hand experience of food production renders consumers oblivious to the consequences of their choices thus precluding ethical considerations on their part. According to Coff, consumers can only engage in the ethics of distance through the ethics of closeness: for subjects to fully appreciate the implications of their consumption practices, they must experience the production "in the local and in the present" (Kemp, 1997, p. 99 cited in Coff, 2006, p. 99). Such experiences can be obtained either personally, e.g. by visiting a farm, or vicariously - from second-hand accounts. Both scenarios allow for a partial, "glimpsed" experience of food production which, according to Coff, is absolutely central to the ethical action: direct or mediated exposure to production practices renders consumers capable of extending their sense of food ethics over longer distances in space and in time. This becomes possible since personal experiences turn the production history into a narrative, a "hi-story" (Coff, 2006, p. 100) that gets inscribed into consumers' own biographies. This narrative consists of the information about manufacturing processes, animal welfare, environmental issues, labour conditions, and so on and can be articulated through anything that awakens consumers' minds to the production history. The food itself becomes "a silent document" (Coff, 2006, p. 133) – a reference to and constant reminder of the spatially and temporally absent conditions of its production. Such bringing of the absent into the present is precisely what enables the extension of people's ethical considerations beyond their immediate contexts. Coff's theory finds support in the literature: the idea of "glimpsed experiences" is echoed by McDonald (2000) who, in a study of the process of becoming vegan, talks about "catalytic experiences", i.e. the events and circumstances through which subjects got introduced to the issue of animal cruelty and which have been key to their decision to go vegan.

In Coff's account, I discern allusions to the idea of commodity fetishism (Marx, 1976) - a condition which alienates consumers from the "true understanding of our relations with others, and with nature" (Pepper, 1996, p. 89) by concealing the social, environmental, and historical relations involved in the production of goods. Hudson and

Hudson (2003, p. 417) provide an eloquent summary of the idea which echoes Coff's description of the growing estrangement between contemporary consumers and global food industry:

Under commodity capitalism, the social, environmental, and historical relations that go into the production of a commodity are hidden. When a person wanders through the grocery store or shopping mall, what they see are the characteristics of the commodities themselves—the attractiveness of the packaging, the cut of the fabric, perhaps the lifestyle associations stapled on by marketing departments, and, of course, the price. In this sense, the commodity has a life of its own, completely divorced from the process by which it was created. It becomes not a result of production on which people have worked under a wide variety of more or less acceptable conditions but an entity unto itself, with characteristics of its own.

Glimpsed experiences, which in Coff's view are key to consumers' sense of food ethics, can thus be construed as a means to counter commodity fetishism by revealing "the world of meaning" behind a product, the "world beyond the commodity fetish" (Goodman, DuPuis and Goodman, 2012, p. 43). Insights into food production, whether direct or mediated, reveal the social and environmental relations invested in a product turning it from a fetishized commodity into a meaningful object of consumption. In doing so, they revive consumers' sense of responsibility for social and environmental consequences of their food choices and instigate commitments to more ethical foodways. Coff's account constitutes an important element in my theoretical framework for it offers a potentially compelling answer to a key research question concerning the origins of consumers' concerns over food ethics.

Finally, as any agential project, ethical food commitments need to be reconciled with individuals' subjective conditions and accommodated to the objective circumstances. Ethical consumption as a human practice offers a telling illustration of the complex ways in which agential enterprises are embedded in the different contexts of external reality, for it involves and affects individuals' relationships with all the three orders of the world. In the natural realm, body-environment relationship is a necessary one given a direct link between food and health and can represent either an enablement or a significant constraint to a person's decision to pursue a particular diet. In the practical sphere, being a responsible food consumer requires certain competence and skills, from acquiring and keeping up with essential knowledge and information to mastering cooking, gardening, etc. Lastly, in the social order, ethical consumers face the need to accommodate their dietary needs to their socio-cultural milieu and reconcile the requirements of their moral food projects with the responsibilities and obligations

arising from various positions and roles that they assume in their social life. The deep embeddedness of food practices in the objective reality exposes ethical consumption as a site wherein both agential subjectivity and structural objectivity manifest their distinct properties and causal powers. In light of this, Archer's conceptualisation of human reflexivity as a mediating force between agents and structure seems prerequisite if the ability of ethical consumers to successfully sustain their moral commitments through on-going creative negotiation of objective enablements and constraints is to be understood and explained. However, it is important to make one final step toward making a convincing case for the reflexivity as a guiding force behind agential projects and practices, i.e. to establish a social ontology that will correspond to and support the conceptual framework on which this study relies.

1.3 Ontological framework: toward a stratified social reality

In the previous section, I have outlined the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning my study. I have introduced the notion of reflexivity as a key explanatory concept which will guide my research toward fulfilling its key objective, i.e. to explore and understand the generative mechanism behind ethical consumer practices and identities. Relying on Archer's theoretical ideas, I have described how our inescapable and concurrent interactions with practical, natural, and social orders of reality generate concerns related to our physical wellbeing, performative achievements, and sense of self-worth all of which require being attended to, although with different intensity at different times. I have presented a particular view on human emotions as commentaries upon people's concerns emergent in the three spheres of life. I have then provided an account of the process of emotional elaboration that human beings reflexively perform in a ceaseless inner dialogue about the satisfaction of their ultimate concerns and realisation of their life projects. These theoretical constructs are the main building blocks of this thesis which give me grounds to argue that the concept of reflexivity holds enough explanatory potential to account for the intricate ways in which ethical consumers come to embrace ethical food consumption as their ultimate commitment thus attaining specific identities and becoming the unique moral characters that they are. Consistently, the question as to what fuels agential ability to design and implement consumption projects intended to address their moral concerns calls for no

better explanation than that provided by the notion of reflexivity.

It is well beyond the scope of this thesis to delve into the philosophy of mind and make a case for the indispensability of reflexivity to the functioning of social subjects and the very existence of society as a whole. I have been spared this task by Archer, who has argued compellingly that all humans have to engage in internal self-dialogues and elaborate upon their emotionality to achieve a liveable balance between their various concerns and find a satisfying way to be (for an extensive discussion and defence of reflexivity as an essential human property and “a transcendently necessary condition for the workings of any society” see Archer, 2007, p. 31). Thus, ontologically, it is my key premise that “a subjective mental world of personal experiences exists” (Popper, 1972, p. 136), and that all human beings possess “a generative ability for internal deliberation upon external reality” (Archer, 2003, p. 20), i.e. that they engage in private deliberations about themselves, their concerns, desires, intentions, and their relationships with the objective contexts in which they are involuntarily placed. Following Archer, I conceptualise such reflexive deliberations as “the mental activity which, in private, leads to self-knowledge: about what to do, what to think and what to say” (2003, p. 26). The idea of reflexivity that I advance in my thesis does not, however, intend to portray social agents as all-seeing and all-knowing actors whose reflexive capacities grant them full discursive penetration of both the subjective self and its objective context. Reflexivity that claims complete understanding of the self and its relationship to the world has been justly called into question by different theorists and on various grounds. In an article on the production of situated knowledge, Gillian Rose (1994) summarises some of the arguments against full agential knowledgeability. Elaborating upon Gibson-Graham’s (1994, p. 206) problematisation of the idea of herself as “a centred and knowing subject who is present to myself and can be spoken for”, Rose portrays a self as “un-centred, un-certain, not entirely present, not fully representable: this is not a self that can be revealed by a process of self-reflection”. Presenting identity as relational, that is grounded in one’s sense of being different from the others, she asserts the impossibility of fully knowing one’s “otherness” which, in turn, subverts the possibility of fully knowing oneself. Further, drawing on Kobayashi’s (1994) negation of essentialism in conceptualising people’s identities, she construes reflexivity as a process of self-construction rather than self-discovery: “if the process of reflexivity changes what is being reflected upon, then there is no ‘transparent’ self waiting to be revealed” (Rose, 1994, p. 313).

None of the above arguments, however, can be used to undermine the model of reflexivity developed by Archer and weaved into my theoretical framework. Kobayashi's point, in fact, is in unison with Archer's idea of human reflexivity as the force behind the process of personal morphogenesis, i.e. subjects' development into individuals with unique constellations of concerns - reflexively discerned, evaluated, and embraced - and in pursuit of particular projects - reflexively conceived, developed, and sustained - through which agential identities evolve. Further, neither Archer's approach, nor my application thereof in the actual research, presume "a sort of reflexivity that assumes a transparently knowable self separate from its transparently knowable context" (Rose, 1994, p. 314). The demand to recognize reflexivity as an essential human property is not a demand to affirm its claims for a full understanding of either one's inner self, or the external world, or the relationships between them. In fact, Archer is eager to admit that human knowledge is incomplete, partial, and specific as "subjects do not and cannot know everything that is going on" (2007, p. 23), that individual experiences represent only "that which is accessible to actors at any given time in its incompleteness and distortion and replete with its blind spots of ignorance" (1998, p. 369), and that every agential enterprise hence inevitably runs the risk of unacknowledged conditions, misinterpreted situations, and faulty conclusions – people often realise that they have got their priorities wrong, or that their chosen commitments are, in fact, unsustainable in their given contexts, or that they come at too high a cost (Archer, 2007). Yet, the failure of absolute reflexivity - unlimited, unmitigated and unconstrained - does not suggest the failure of reflexivity as an essential human property and central force that mediates between the subjects and the objective world in which they live and act for, unless agents exercise their property of reflexivity to design personal projects and implement them within the given circumstances, the potential of social structures to enable or constrain their actions remains inactivated and unexercised. It is this argument that leads to the contention that "how people reflexively deliberate upon what to do in the light of their personal concerns has to form *a* part of a mediatory account" (Archer, 2003, p. 15). From this viewpoint, it does not matter that "agents can only know themselves and their circumstances under their own descriptions, which are fallible, as is all our knowledge" (Archer, 2003, p. 15). The fallibility of agential conclusions does not invalidate their role in shaping people's courses of action, and the contribution of human reflexivity to particular social outcomes does not depend on whether agents' subjective evaluation of their objective circumstances is right or wrong.

What matters is that it is through such reflexive deliberations that individuals arrive at a specific perception of how it would be best to pursue their desired projects from the particular contexts in which they are placed. As Archer contends, “a social influence can itself be immune to what people think about it, and yet what they make of it reflexively can profoundly influence what they do about it” (2003, p. 20). Thus, the impossibility of attaining full knowledge of one’s inner self and its external circumstances does not discredit our reflexive potential: it invalidates neither agential ability to engage in reflexive deliberations, nor their intrinsic propensity to do so. What is required is a “situated understanding of reflexivity” (Adams and Raisborough, 2008, p. 1169) as agents’ capacity to deliberate upon their circumstances and contexts while simultaneously being conditioned by them. The aim of such reflexivity is not to produce an omniscient actor, but to enable individuals to reflexively discern and define their ultimate concerns, to evaluate and progressively monitor their commitments in relation to their subjective concerns and objective conditions, and to recognise, assess, and negotiate the properties of the structure to achieve a satisfying way to live and to be. This is not to suggest that agential conclusions about themselves and their relationships with the world are complete, unerring, or immutable, but it is to suggest that individual actions and practices are always and necessarily a consequence of the interplay between agents and structure which reflexivity enables and propels. While, admittedly, subjects cannot and do not know everything, what they can and do do is continuously reflect upon themselves and their circumstances and repeatedly negotiate their relationships with objective reality in an attempt to see their projects through. In the inevitable fallibility of human judgment lie possibilities for the progressive evolution of subjects’ knowledge of the outer world and their inner selves – a key to agential ability to achieve and maintain a fulfilling life - always and necessarily through reflexive examination and monitoring of the self, its concerns, and commitments in relation to the objective reality in which they are placed.

It is such concept of reflexivity that will guide my account of the ways in which individuals reflexively develop into ethical consumers - in their own idiosyncratic ways and under given objective circumstances. However, before this account can begin to unfold, it is essential to lay the theoretical ground from which the concept of reflexivity can emerge and on which it can flourish. This means clearing the way from the ontological presuppositions and assumptions with which reflexivity as an essential human property and a mediatory force between people and the external world cannot

co-exist. This cleared space needs to be filled with a model of social reality that is able to accommodate human agents as bearers of distinct causal powers and active contributors to both their own make-up as persons as well as the constitution of the social world in which they live and act. To this end, it is necessary to address some of the most long-standing questions within social theory, that is, the relationship between structure and agency, the personal and the social, the objective and the subjective. I consider this to be central to my entire research enterprise for, in setting out to investigate individual practices of ethical consumption, I follow Slater's appeal (1997, p. 172-173):

How can we investigate the social meaning of things, needs and uses without reducing them either to omnipotent social structures (semiotic codes, grids of social classification generated by the social order itself, the structures of commercial capitalism) or regarding them as socially unconstrained, indeterminate, open, as a space of self-determined activity so free that it looks increasingly like the space of the sovereign liberal consumer?

I am preoccupied with a similar task, that is how to construe ethical consumption practices as intentional and conscious projects of reflexive agents while also duly acknowledging their inevitable conditioning by the structural and cultural properties of objective reality. First and foremost, it is essential to delineate the ontology of both social structure and human agency, for it is only from that basis that an understanding of their essential properties and the interplay between them can be attempted and achieved. As Archer rightly notes, "how structures are variously held to influence agents is dependent upon what "structure" and "agency" are held to be (2003, p. 1). In sociological theory, it has been common to ascribe ontological supremacy to either structure or agency thereby denying the other element any essential properties and, consequently, the capacity to exert causal powers. This produces two opposing, but equally deficient ontological models of social reality: the one with the downward conflation which sees "the "parts" dominate the "people"" (Archer, 2000, p. 1), and the one with the upward conflation which allows "the "people" to orchestrate the "parts"" (Archer, 2000, p. 1). Finally, the third way to relate structure and agency has been by attempting to transcend the antinomy between these two dimensions of the social reality through an outright rejection of their ontological dualism. Bourdieu's (1984) idea of habitus and Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration are examples of the theoretical approaches that understand structure and agency as mutually constituting and hence integral to and inseparable from each other. Its proponents fall into the trap of the

“central conflationism” (Archer, 2000, p. 6) – an ontologically fallacious perspective that relates structure and agency “at the cost of their analytical integrity, disabling the capacity to capture either” (Maton, 2008, p. 61). The major implication of construing structures and agents as ontologically indivisible is the conflation of their distinct properties and powers which, in turn, precludes the possibility of any form of meaningful interaction between them. Such a theoretical approach renders it impossible to even attempt to understand either how structural properties impinge upon agents or how agents use their causal powers to mediate the effects of the structure, for all these powers and properties are held to be inseparable and indistinguishable from each other.

Upwards, downwards, and central conflation represent three models of social reality none of which offers a sound theoretical framework to guide an analysis of individual ethical food practices and meet the specific aims of this research for, in Bhaskar’s words, “on Model I there are actions but no conditions; on Model II conditions but no actions; on Model; III no distinction between the two” (2010, p. 77). What is needed is an ontological model that neither reduces social reality to just one dimension of the individual versus social dichotomy, nor blends structure and agency into “an amalgam whose properties and powers are completely interdependent and ineluctably intertwined” (Archer, 2007, p. 41). I approach the complexity of social reality from the critical realist perspective that conceives of structure and agency as two separate strata of social reality. Specifically, I rely on Archer’s account in which agents are granted personal emergent properties - self-awareness, reflexivity, personal identity - that have a distinct ontology which is “both objectively real and *subjective* in nature” (Archer, 2003, p. 36, my emphasis). This is because reflexive conversations - as well as thoughts, desires, intentions, and identities emerging from them - exist only when and as experienced by people and are “ineluctably tied to the subject” (Archer, 2003, p. 37). This subjective or, to use Searle’s (1998, p. 42) term, “first-person” ontology of reflexive deliberations is preserved unless the agent decides to break the privacy of his or her internal conversation by sharing its workings with someone else (Archer, 2003). Structure, on the other hand, is held to pertain to a different level of reality and possess properties of a different kind, such as distribution of resources, interests, roles, doctrines, ideologies, etc. These properties have an objective ontology since they represent a part of the socio-cultural system which is pre-existent to and relatively autonomous from individuals. These postulates – pre-existence of social forms and causal efficacy of agents - represent the key ontological points of departure in Archer’s (1995, p. 5)

approach to conceptualising social change and are united in the concept of morphogenesis:

The 'morpho' element is an acknowledgement that society has no pre-set form or preferred state: the 'genetic' part is a recognition that it takes its shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities.

Underlying the process of morphogenesis is the principle of emergence stating that on the basis of existing properties new properties emerge over time – a cycle of continuous change which spares neither structure: “society is characteristically transformable; it has no immutable form or even preferred state. It is like nothing but itself, and what precisely it is like at any time depends upon human doings and their consequences” (Archer, 1995, p. 1), nor agents: “neither are we immutable as social agents, for what we are and what we do as social beings are also affected by the society in which we live and by our very efforts to transform it” (Archer, 1995, p. 1). Archer conceptualises morphogenesis as an unceasing set of cycles: structural conditioning => social interaction => structural elaboration (Archer, 1995, p. 16), during which the genesis and development of agents occur in the contexts which are neither of their making nor choosing (structural conditioning), while at the same time the activities and practices of socially situated agents change and transform the structure (social interaction and structural elaboration). Archer’s understanding of social change is essentially temporal: “temporality is not an option but a necessity” (1998, p. 375), she claims, for “structural properties were neither the creation of contemporary actors nor are ontologically reducible to ‘material existents’ (raw resources) and dependent upon current acts of human instantiation (rule governed) for all their current effects” (1995, p. 138); it is fundamentally historical, for it allows to distinguish events, situated in space and in time, which “initiate or constitute ruptures, mutations, or generally transformations of social forms” (Bhaskar, 2010, p. 60); and it is deeply permeating, for it applies at all levels, or strata, of social reality - from social systems to personal identities. Archer’s theory of morphogenesis aligns well with Bhaskar’s (2010) transformational model of social activity which too contends that because social structure is pre-existent and “irreducible to the doings of contemporary actors” (Archer, 1998, p. 359),

(...) it is no longer true to say that human agents *create* it. Rather we must say; they *reproduce* or *transform* it. That is to say, if society is already made, then any concrete human

praxis or, if you like, act of objectivation, can only modify it; and the totality of such acts *sustain or change* it” (Bhaskar, 2010, p. 60, emphasis in original).

In both approaches, human activity is seen as “consisting in the transformation by efficient (intentional) agency of pre-given material (natural and social) causes” (Bhaskar, 2010, p. 92). Thus, precursory structural properties supply and define contexts from which people pursue their subjective projects and hence have the potential to impinge upon individuals and shape their courses of action. At the same time, agential properties have causal efficacy towards structural influences and provide individuals with the capacity for reflexive “reinterpretations, modifications, transgressions” (Slater, 1997, p. 148) of the dominant social forms. Depending on how exactly subjects respond to structural influences, they may either reproduce or transform the social order thus inducing the processes of morphostasis or morphogenesis (see Archer, 1995; 1998). The objectivity of social structures and the subjectivity of agents are “two causal powers that are irreducibly different in kind and make relatively autonomous contributions to social outcomes” (Archer, 2003, p. 1-2).

Archer’s principle of analytical dualism, that is “distinguishing pre-conditions from present activities” (1998, p. 368), along with her conceptualisation of both structure and agency as inherently transformable provides essential theoretical ground and methodological toolkit for developing a more comprehensive grasp of social structures, a more nuanced understanding of individual action, and, crucially, an exploration of their interaction and its outcomes *over time*. What is particularly important in relation to the aims of this project is Archer’s application of the concepts of morphostasis and morphogenesis not just to the social order, but to the agents as well. Personal emergent properties, of which reflexivity is the key, play a critical role not only in giving rise to morphostasis or morphogenesis of the structure, but they also have causal efficacy toward agents themselves who, through continuous rounds of reflexive deliberations upon their values, concerns, projects and ways of their realisation, shape themselves as particular persons. Every agential decision about following a specific course of action or, to the contrary, changing its direction, becomes part of his personal morphogenesis or morphostasis. This is precisely the aim that my study purports to achieve - to investigate how, in an attempt to address their ultimate concerns, agents embark on and pursue “subjectively, because reflexively” (Archer, 2003, p. 16) designed projects representing their personal morphostasis or morphogenesis as unique

individuals and how, through reflexive mediation of structural opportunities and constraints that emerge on their way, they ultimately attain the desired ethical consumer identities. Archer's ontological model is crucial to achieving this objective, for it is only such conception of social reality that is based on a clear separation between agents and structure and, moreover, their endowment with different kinds of properties and causal powers that presupposes a continuous interaction between the two strata of reality and calls for an examination of its causes, conditions, and outcomes. To analyse this interaction means to acknowledge and investigate both the ways in which structural and cultural properties bear upon subjects as well as how subjects, from the positions and situations "which are not of their making yet which condition much of what they can make of them" (Archer, 1998, p. 375), exercise their causal powers and respond to the structure to reproduce or transform it. By embracing the realist social ontology with its central tenet that "the causal power of social forms is mediated through social agency" (Bhaskar, 1979, p. 26) while also elaborating on it by introducing the concepts of reflexivity and internal conversation to elucidate how exactly this mediatory process occurs, Archer develops a theory of social reality that allows to achieve this crucial task.

Explaining the nature of interaction between structures and agents is key to understanding how exactly the notion of reflexivity makes its entry into the study's theoretical framework and what role it plays in the shaping and moulding of the social reality. The first part of the story, that is how structural properties affect agents' actions, can be decoded through the social realist concepts of "enablements" and "constraints" – the causal powers of the structural and cultural properties which have the potential to either facilitate or inhibit agents' preferred courses of action. What distinguishes Archer's conceptualisation of enablements and constraints is an emphasis on agential powers as being just as indispensable to the process of social conditioning as the structural properties themselves. As she highlights, the enabling or constraining potential of objective circumstances can only reveal itself in relation to a particular "agential enterprise", or "project" (Archer, 2003, p. 6), since "constraints require something to constrain, and enablements something to enable" (Archer, 2003, p. 4). Because such projects are a product of human capacity to reflexively design specific courses of action in order to achieve desired outcomes (for we have already rejected the models of reality where a social subject is not "the producer and has no conscious mastery" (Archer, 2000, p. 42) over his choices and acts), then it follows that the activation of structural enablements and constraints is itself contingent on the human

property of reflexivity and requires its deliberate exercise by an active agent. Thus, social conditioning is “a process that involves both objective impingement and subjective reception” (Archer, 2003, p. 5).

The indispensability of reflexivity for the activation of the causal powers of the structure leads Archer to posit that no form of social conditioning can be completely void of the contributions of agential subjectivity. It manifests itself in individuals’ idiosyncratic responses to the structural influences based on their subjective evaluation of the objective circumstances in relation to the projects they wish to advance. Moreover, reflexivity enables agents not only to recognise, but to also foresee the objective forces that could be activated were they to pursue a particular pathway. Consequently, constraints and enablements can exert their causal powers on agential choice of actions through mere anticipation: the perceived ease of implementing the desired project may encourage subjects to go ahead with it, while the expectation of difficulties, to the contrary, may prevent them from attempting to realise it. The freedom of agents to pursue their chosen ways is limited and depends on the strength of particular constraints and enablements (and I would add, their nature, since the kind of sacrifices people are prepared to make varies significantly from person to person) that they face. Yet, reflexivity enables humans to not only acknowledge the constraining or enabling properties of their objective circumstances, but to also creatively respond to, that is counteract, accommodate, or circumvent their influences:

The effect of these structural and cultural causal powers is at the mercy of two open systems; the world and its contingencies and human agency’s reflexive acuity, creativity and capacity for commitment (Archer, 2003, p. 7).

These agential mental powers, and reflexivity in particular, are held to play a key role in the process of mediation between the causal powers of the structure on the one hand and social actors on the other. It seems obvious indeed that it is always and necessarily the case that “agential subjectivity reflects upon social objectivity” (Archer, 2003, p. 133) and never the other way around, since self-consciousness and capacity for reflexive deliberations pertain exclusively to people, whereas structure is invariably non-reflexive and operates in an automatic way (Archer, 2003).

By contending that social enablements and constraints only become active and powerful when entering into a relationship with agential projects (which are, of course, a manifestation of and testimony to human properties and capacities), and by introducing reflexivity as a mediatory force between the two, Archer essentially

accomplishes the goal of relating the structure and agency, the objective and the subjective, the social and the personal in the way that avoids both the pitfalls of reductionism as well as the fallacy of conflationist approaches. Her model keeps subjects separate from their circumstances thereby enabling an acknowledgement of the essential properties of individuals as well as those of the structure. It highlights the embeddedness of human practices in the social, practical, and natural orders of the world, and recognises the power of external reality to shape agential courses of action. At the same time, Archer emphasises the capacity of human reflexivity to mediate between people's subjectively defined commitments and objective structural opportunities and constraints that they inevitably face on their way. It is because reflexivity plays this mediating role that the outcome – each person's unique life choices and actions – will never be merely a passive reflection of social reality (Archer, 2007).

The strong focus on agential properties and due acknowledgement of their ontological integrity and causal efficacy is what distinguishes Archer's account from other approaches to agency and the role of human subjectivity in shaping both individual practices as well as the entire social order. Specifically, it compares favourably to Bourdieu's idea of habitus and social practice theory – two conceptual lenses that are commonly applied to the studies of consumer patterns and practices despite being incapable to provide adequate space to accommodate either individual subjectivity or agential capacity of human beings. Practice-based approach construes personal values as mere derivatives of the dominant social discourses, which are held to be the sole prime determinants of subjects' performance of practices. This idea reduces human beings to their sociality and deprives them of their essential property of personal identity, defined precisely by what people value and care about most in life (Archer, 2000). Bourdieu's theory is fundamentally flawed in a similar way – while purporting to build the bridge between the personal and the social, it ends up stripping human subjectivity of its ontological footing, since the personal is ultimately defined through the social...

Persons, at their most personal, are essentially the personification of exigencies actually or potentially inscribed in the structure of the field or, more precisely, in the position occupied within this field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 44)

...and the individual is always related back to the common:

Personal style . . . is never more than a deviation in relation to the style of a period or

class so that it relates back to the common style not only by its conformity . . . but also by the difference (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 86).

Such merging of the personal and the social leads to Goffman's (1959) view that personhood can never be developed or understood outside of the social world – the perspective that throws us right back into the ontological trap of conflating agential and structural manifestations. This is why I find any model of social reality in which people or their agential manifestations are seen as an integral part of the structure theoretically deficient and practically inept for the kind of research objectives that this thesis aims to achieve. Such approach denies humans, among other capacities, their essential property of reflexivity, since the ability of individuals “to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa” (Archer, 2007, p. 4) calls for a clear differentiation between agents (the deliberating subjects) and their objective circumstances (the objects of deliberation). Not only does the loss of reflexivity leave us with social subjects who are deprived of awareness of the self, their own interests, values and goals, their objective circumstances and, ultimately, the ability to reflexively choose their courses of action; to surrender human capacity for reflexive deliberation also means that “the potential of such reflexivity for mediating the influence of structure upon agency is lost in advance” (Archer, 2003, p. 2). This is particularly the case with Bourdieu's logic of practice, which replaces conscious deliberation on the part of social actors with non-reflexive workings of habitus and intentional actions by goal-oriented individuals with intuitive “feel for the game”, thus essentially depriving subjects of their agential powers to challenge and transform the social order. Indeed, how can agents become aware of their dispositions and induce disjunctions between habitus and the field, if habitus is developed tacitly and subconsciously through socialisation and experiences, and “principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 75)? Further, if habitus functions to ensure the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures, if, by default, “social agents (...) come to gravitate towards those social fields (and positions within those fields) that best match their dispositions and to try to avoid those fields that involve a field–habitus clash” (Maton, 2008, p. 58), then how do people come to challenge the social order? As Sayer contends, habitus “makes it impossible to understand how anyone could react against and resist at least some parts of their habitat”

(2005, p. 31). All in all, the theory of habitus, which “assumes an exaggerated continuity in the socialisation of personal identities” (Archer, 2007, p. 48) to the point of denying agents awareness of their dispositions and capacity to reflexively choose their courses of action, ultimately leaves us with the “world where behaviour has its causes, but actors are not allowed their reasons” (Jenkins, 2002, p. 97). In contrast, Archer’s perspective does not reduce individuals’ subjective dispositions, values, and beliefs to merely a product of semi-unconscious embodiment of social structures and facts in the way that Bourdieu’s notion of habitus does. Instead, it treats individuals as conscious masters of their practices

who pursue the situational logic of “opportunity” (...) who, even if they come from the old *héritiers*, are highly aware that they must reflexively select, suppress and supplement features from their inherited repertoire of routines” and who develop the practices that “entail creative, reflexive thought about what courses of action do constitute mastery in and of the new context” (Archer, 2007, p. 49).

For Archer, unlike for the exponents of the social practice theory, “the subjective agent is the ultimate and effective cause of social practice “(Archer, 2003, p. 134). It is this concept of an agent - the one which accords individuals responsibility for and mastery over their actions - that the practice of ethical consumption calls for. Reflexivity, intentionality, awareness of the self and one’s ultimate concerns, values, and goals, which are more than internalised social discourses and facts, are essential human properties that any individual practice of ethical consumption is a manifestation of. To make ethical food practice a life-long commitment, an agent must reflexively discern and embrace his ultimate concerns, design a particular project to address them, and confront and negotiate the forces of external reality in order to see his commitment through. This is why Archer’s social ontology, which accords human reflexivity the primary responsibility for mediating between structure and agency, provides a springboard for a theoretically sound analysis of ethical consumer practices and identities. It is reflexivity that enables individuals to attain the desired personalities by furthering self-knowledge and awareness of their ultimate values and concerns. It is reflexivity that fuels humans’ ability to actively, consciously, and intentionally design projects to address their subjective concerns and realise them under the given circumstances. It is this reflexive capacity that “enables us to be the authors of our own projects in society” (Archer, 2003, p. 34) and hence answers for the idiosyncrasies of individuals’ ethical food practices, the sheer variety of which being exactly what makes

investigating them worthwhile and interesting.

Archer's conceptualisation of reflexivity thus illuminates why "consumption practices are neither passively structured, nor "inevitably conformist" (Slater, 1997, p. 148). It allows to postulate that ethical consumer practices are a result of the interplay between agential subjectivity (manifest through subjectively defined values, commitments, and concerns) and structural objectivity (the properties of various contexts from which people pursue their projects) which is fuelled by human capacity to actively, consciously, and reflexively negotiate between the two. Moreover, it provides a theoretical groundwork needed to demonstrate how through idiosyncratic interpretation and enactment of practices subjects are able to challenge and transform the social order, which "is not just reflected but constituted and certainly changed through practices" (Slater, 1997, p. 152). Thereby, it manages to "integrate structures and agents in a single story" (Hollis and Smith, 1994, p. 250) while keeping them separate, hence enabling the production of a single yet bilateral account of their interplay necessitated by the a-synchronicity of structural properties and agential experiences (Archer, 1998). This is crucial, since

... we cannot account for any outcome unless we understand the agent's project in relation to her social context. And we cannot understand her project without entering into her reflexive deliberations about her personal concerns in conjunction with the objective social context that she confronts (Archer, 2003, p. 131).

Likewise, I found it impossible to understand individuals' ethical food practices and identities without considering the objective contexts in which they formed and developed, just as it proved impossible to understand people's subjective commitments without shedding light on reflexive deliberations behind them. It is for these reasons that I consider Archer's model of social reality ontologically and epistemically fit for enabling me, through a thorough analysis and interpretation of the participants' life and food stories, to accomplish the challenging task posed by Slater and taken up in this thesis, i.e. to explore the meaning of consumer practices, "things, needs and uses" (1997, p. 172) while accounting for the ways in which "structures and agents combine" (Archer, 2003, p. 8) to shape and define them. It is such an exploration of ethical consumption intending to cast light on the development of subjects' moral identities through particular food commitments while capturing the interplay between subjective and objective forces behind them that my research was ultimately aimed at and that this thesis will unfold.

Chapter 2

Explaining Consumer Behaviour: Toward an Integrated Account

An approach which integrates social influences and scope for reflexivity and responsibility can explain things which neither of these one-sided theories can (Sayer, 2011, p. 56)

In the previous chapter, I have presented the theoretical framework underpinning my study and delineated its social ontology. I have proposed a realist model of the world in which agents and structure are conceived of as two ontologically different strata of reality and accorded their own emergent properties and causal powers. Such ontological anchorage is crucial for my research if its key aim – to construe practices of ethical consumption as structurally conditioned, yet reflexively developed projects of socially situated, yet active, intentional, and conscious agents – is to be achieved. The critical premises of such social ontology, i.e. pre-existence of social forms and causal efficacy of agents, are, however, at odds with the presumptions built into some of the most widely used approaches to conceptualising and studying consumer behaviour in general and ethical consumer practices in particular. Since ethical consumption came to the fore of consumer research, numerous studies have attempted to explain the phenomenon by conceptualising it as a collective consumer action in pursuit of social and political progress. Boström and Klintman (2008), Clarke et al. (2007), Micheletti (2003) have all approached ethical consumption as a means of political engagement and a vehicle for social change thus laying emphasis on ethical consumers as political agents, citizens, and responsible members of society and exploring external manifestations of the “consumer self” and its effectiveness in enacting social change. Within this framework, the intent of ethical food practices has been viewed as focused predominantly on the practical goals of addressing the deficiencies of modern food system and attaining structural changes in the organization of food supply (Lefferts and Heinicke, 1996; Jacobsen and Dulstrud, 2007). Consequently, very few concerted efforts were directed at producing an effective account of the aspects of individual engagement, personal commitment, and subjective meanings invested in the practices of ethical consumption. A wide-ranging review of academic literature on fair-trade undertaken by Tallontire, Rentsendorj and Blowfield in 2001 identified a gap in the contemporary

understanding of the meanings of ethical purchases for individual consumers and the ways these meanings translate into actions highlighting the need for more explorations into this area. Since then, however, there has been an observable proliferation of research attempting to acknowledge and explore personal meanings, i.e. “the hidden or explicit purpose, motivation, intention, aspiration and expectation” (Cherrier, 2006, p. 517) attached to ethical consumers’ choices, practices, and experiences (e.g. Cherrier, 2006; Barnett et al., 2005). In this section, I will situate this burgeoning stream of literature vis-à-vis the dominant theoretical approaches to studying consumer behaviour that emerged and developed in the last several decades and whose core presuppositions have been informing empirical investigations of ethical consumer behaviour. I will critically review these perspectives to identify and expose their ontological and methodological biases that have been inhibiting a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of individual practices of ethical consumption and, building upon this critique, describe how by matching the complementary strengths and weaknesses of these contrasting approaches my account of ethical consumer experiences will help to advance such an understanding.

As Warde (1997) observes, from the 1980s onwards there has been a considerable increase in the scholarly attention to the subject of consumption. A theoretical view of consumer choices and activities as an outcome of material circumstances and reflection of class positions and social inequalities gave way to the new sociological understanding of consumption as shaped by a wide range of societal forces and personal motivations. Various perspectives have evolved which place the focus of conceptual and methodological concern at different locations along the structure-agency continuum depending on whether society or individual is seen as the ultimate author and key source of consumption practices. The tensions between divergent approaches to consumer agency, that is “the room for manoeuvre which social actors have when they act as consumers” (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 110) have since been fuelling academic debate about the engines of consumer behaviour. At one end of the spectrum are theoretical views that take consumer to be the prime mover of practice and chief focus of scientific investigation, while on the other side are socio-centric approaches within which the consumer is seen as “if not a dupe at least passive” (Warde, 2015, p. 120). Agency-centred perspectives further differ in terms of the key properties attributed to consuming agents and the main goals that consumer choices and activities are seen as geared towards. Highly influential has been the theorisation of consumers as

reflexive individuals engaged in a continuous process of constructing a coherent self through creative appropriation of a range of commodities and goods (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). The rise of the concepts of identity and reflexivity as a means of understanding consumption practices is linked to the unfolding of what has been termed a “post-traditional society” (Giddens, 1994) or “risk society” (Beck, 1992). It has been argued that the demise of the class structure as an organizing principle of social life has led to an intensifying process of informalization, described by Wouters (1986) as one of the most powerful social trends of the 1960-1970s and a prevailing condition of the 20th century. Expressed in the decline of moral, aesthetic, and social standards of behaviour (Warde, 1997), it has led to the state of social disembeddedness – the erosion of conventional ties of community, kinship, tradition, culture, and physical places and loss of connectedness between individuals in social environments (Barrera, 1986). In the absence of collective prescriptions for social conduct individual judgments have become key to attributing and maintaining social meaning (Wouters, 1986). As Sörbom (2003, p. 3 cited in Shaw, 2007, p. 143) describes it:

We have become released from collective and traditional authorities . . . it is now up to the individual to find whatever she or he perceives to be true – it can no longer be transferred from some higher power.

Against this backdrop, 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 (see Giddens, 1991, p. 52-55) emerges and unfolds:

Today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others via the goods and practices that they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances, thereby creating and sustaining a “self-identity” (Warde, 1997, p. 68).

The view of consumption as an arena of reflexive self-production and consumers as active agents continuously negotiating their identities through a complex variety of consumption choices has penetrated into sociological thinking about individual food practices. Associations between what people eat and their personal and social identities have been claimed (Fischler, 1988; Warde, 1997; Lang and Heasman, 2004) and exemplified in research: Warde’s (1997) study of culinary recipes in popular women’s magazines, Goodman’s (2004) analysis of the contemporary nature of fair trade, and

Diner's (2001) investigation of food practices of three distinct migrant groups in America all finely argue for the symbolic role and identity-enhancing potential of food. Further, consumer reflexivity has been summoned and introduced into the accounts of post-traditional societies to compensate for the "decline in "the spirit of discipline" (Warde, 1997, p. 13) in the sphere of consumption, including that of food. It has been argued that in the world where people are no longer embedded in traditional social contexts and no longer belong to familiar collectivities, "food selection and intake are increasingly a matter of individual, not social, decisions" (Fischler, 1980, p. 948). In the absence of "social and cultural framework of eating habits" (Fischler, 1980, p. 944), individuals lack reassurance about their dietary behaviour:

Denied is the sense of comfort and security that can be derived from knowing that our tastes and preferences, even in the humble field of food, are endorsed and shared by others, whom we respect and with whom we consider we belong (Warde, 1997, p. 173)

In such conditions individual reflexivity takes over from traditions to provide guidelines for appropriate food choices and eating behaviour – a reflexive food consumer, that is the one exhibiting a "broader sense of agency in the realm of consumption choices, reflected in knowledge-seeking, evaluation, and discernment" (Guthman, 2002, p. 299), emerges. Another social factor claimed to be responsible for accelerating the transformation of individuals from passive consumers into increasingly reflexive agents is the proliferation of new kinds of risks, created by the modern welfare society and left to increasingly self-dependent people to negotiate and deal with (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991) - a societal imprint that can be easily applied to the current food environment where safety scandals (of which salmonella in eggs in 1988, the Alar scare in 1989, BSE in 1996, E-coli outbreak in 2011, and the horsemeat scandal in 2013 are the most illustrative examples) and unprecedented advances in production technologies ceaselessly fuel public thinking about food in terms of danger and risk. The profile of "a discerning food consumer" (Murdoch and Miele, 1999, p. 469) - the one who plays an active role in the organization of food supply, as defined by DuPuis (2000) - has been further rising against the backdrop of mounting evidence and growing recognition of the adverse effects of the modern food system on our physical, societal, economic, and environmental wellbeing (Lang, Barling and Caraher, 2009; Fraj and Martinez, 2007). Concomitantly, studies began to appear suggesting that consumers are increasingly incorporating reflexivity in their daily food decisions and practices (Arvola et al., 2008;

Hilton, 2004; Torjusen et al., 2001). As Hilton notes, “there is evidence to suggest that an increasing number of consumers are beginning to think more closely and more often about the basis of their own comfort” (2004, p. 119).

Consequently, the figure of a reflexive consumer has made its entrance into sociological research on ethical consumption (see, for example, Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Cherrier, 2006; Gabriel and Lang, 2006; Barnett et al., 2005; Micheletti, 2003; Halkier, 2001). This, coupled with a sustained focus on the symbolic meaning and potential of goods and continuous academic efforts to get a better grasp of the deeper motives behind individual consumption decisions, has generated attempts at interpreting ethical practices in terms of identity investments and reflexive self-production. Thus, Shaw’s (2007, p. 141) investigation of boycotting behaviour describes a group of consumers for whom an alternative approach to consumption was an important way of “marking your own identity”. Shaw and Shiu’s (2003) earlier enquiry into the factors influencing ethical choice as well as Newholm’s (2005) study of ethical consumers both argue for the integrity of personal identity to be an important motive behind consumer engagement in responsible shopping. Taking the identity theme further still, sociological research started to supply commentary on the potential of ethical consumption to serve not only as a tool for self-construction, but also as a mechanism of self-control whereby “individuals in the act of constructing and reconstructing their own biographies monitor their own behaviour and thereby, at least half-consciously, discipline themselves with a view to self-improvement” (Warde, 1997, p. 93). While still focused on consumption as a means of actualization of individual identities, this perspective tunes in with the argument that “life politics goes beyond the simple politicization of a personal agenda” and “covers more than selfishness or self-indulgence” (Kim, 2012, p. 149) and shifts the spotlight from a consumer’s self-centred self to a consumer’s self-governed self – a binary used by Lekakis (2013) to distinguish between the neoliberal self-indulgent consumer and the citizen-consumer who actively manages his political and social participation. The quintessence of the argument is summarised in the concept of “moral selving”, devised by Barnett et al. (2005, p. 29) to describe the process of individuals’ creation and display of different forms of selfhood through engagement with alternative consumption practices which, authors argue, represents an essential dimension of ethical consumption.

A body of empirical research buttresses this idea of ethical consumption as a moralizing strategy. Thus, in a study on consumer engagement in boycotts Kozinets and

Handelman (1998, n/p) highlight the powerful “individualizing” and “morally transforming” potential of ethical shopping behaviour. By engaging in ethical consumption, authors argue, individuals can materialize their “ideal self” through the activation of such values as compassion, care, reciprocity, responsibility, etc. These findings are echoed by Moisander and Pesonen (2002) who examine and describe how green consumerism enables individuals to manifest their personal ethics and moral agency and in doing so re-invent themselves as ethical subjects as opposed to the dominant materialistic consumers. They interpret consumer engagement in environmentalism through a Foucauldian lens, that is as a mode of self-formation, and approach the moral aspects of ethical consumerism as “an aesthetic of existence”, or as “arts of existence” (Darier, 1999) that involve “a permanent questioning and reinventing of the self” (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002, p. 330). Ethical consumer choices are thus presented as elements in the “politics of the self” geared at the formation of the individual as a moral subject. Similarly, based on her investigation of consumer use of eco-friendly shopping bags, Cherrier contends that ethical practices contribute to the formation and actualisation of desired identities – for her participants, carrying a reusable bag was a way to self-identify as “a recycler, a green voter, an environmentally conscious consumer or an ethical citizen” (2006, p. 520). These studies offer an empirical record of the potential of ethical consumption not only to tell “the story of who we are”, but also to fulfil the “fantasy of what we wish to be like” (Gabriel and Lang, 2006, p. 94). Such interpretation clearly presupposes consumer agency that manifests itself in the ability of individuals to resist and refuse materialist subjectivities imposed by the dominant consumer culture and imagine, create, and promote alternative forms of individuality.

Another stream of research exploring the relationships between ethical practices and consumer identities has drawn out lessons for understanding ethical consumer behaviour from the argument that “we use consumption symbolically not only to create and sustain the self but also to locate us in society” (Wattanasuwan, 2005, p. 179). A growing number of studies offer interpretations of ethical shopping 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 confer particular qualities. The view of ethical consumption as a strategy for achieving social distinction rests on the assumption that being a reflexive consumer presupposes certain levels of financial and cultural capital. The argument has both been expressed in

the academic literature (e.g. Adams and Raisborough, 2008; Goodman, 2004) as well as supported by market reports which, despite somewhat discrepant findings, seem to suggest that the ethical goods market is dominated by consumers from the highest socio-economic groups (Key Note, 2012; Tallontire et al., 2001). In addition, Veblen's original view of expensiveness as the key product characteristic that provides the impression of social superiority has been re-thought to argue that "class is not just a matter of money" (Warde, 1997, p. 175) and other symbols can offer channels for social distinction. The idea of materialization of meanings and values in goods and commodities is not new and has been well articulated, for example, in Miller's (2014) study of the role of The Bon Marche department store in the French bourgeois culture. In his research, Miller describes how important cultural values of bourgeoisie, such as respectability, found material expression in a variety of goods from furnishings to clothing - "goods made these values concrete and gave them a "reality all their own", to borrow McCracken's (1988, p. 26) interpretation of Miller's findings. This argument further raises the profile of ethical consumption as a strategy for status enhancement. In line with it, academic attention has turned to the potential of ethical choices to stand as a proxy for personal traits such as kindness, compassion, selflessness, etc., that are independent of financial success but, as Jaeger (2004) argues, can bring high status rewards. Barnett et al. (2005) and Allison (2009) both argue that in demonstrating commitment to products that symbolize and convey particular values, such as responsibility, solidarity, reciprocity, and care, ethical consumers are engaging in the construction and management of their social image. Micro-level research further exposes the association between products and values and the status-enhancing effect ensuing from it. The following quote from a participant of Shaw et al.'s (2005, p. 190) study of ethical shoppers encapsulates the argument:

If you're putting Cafedirect [Cafedirect is a brand of fair trade coffee in the UK] in your trolley and driving around with it then you're saying to other people I'm clever enough to know the difference between this and Nescafe.

Further, Kozinets and Handelman's (1998, n/p) research on boycotts highlights the morally transforming potential of boycotting behaviour which consumers tap into in order to define "a personal morality that has "evolved" beyond hedonistic commercial interests". In unison with this are findings of Cherrier's (2006) study of green shopping bag users revealing consumer perceptions of re-usable grocery bags as a manifestation

of environmental awareness and concerns. This adds another line of empirical evidence to the argument that ethical choices can be used as a means of self-production as well as self-representation - “bulletin boards for internal messages and billboards for external ones”, in the words of McCracken (1988, p. 136). Such perspective on consumer behaviour rests on a number of important assumptions. Firstly, it reflects a shift in focus from the features and attributes of commodities to their symbolic meaning and, particularly, identity value, i.e. the potential to create and communicate consumer self-concept (Warde, 1997). More importantly, it relies on the model of a reflexive, interpretative, and purposeful consumer and thus acknowledges individuals as active agents of choice and prime authors of consumption practices. Moreover, it spotlights reflexivity as the key driving force of consumer choice, “implying that conscious and intentional decisions steer consumption behavior and explain its sense and direction” (Warde, 2015). Adams (2003) defines such approach as “the extended reflexivity thesis” (p. 222) characterised by the attribution of “a heightened, transforming level of reflexivity” (p. 221) to consuming agents who are constantly engaged in their own reflexive production. The key contested features of this thesis lie in its neglect of the “social embeddedness” of reflexivity (Adams, 2003, p. 224) and overemphasis on the freedom of choice at the expense of acknowledging the role of the structure in shaping the self and its practices. This positioning of reflexivity outside rather than within the boundaries of particular cultural and social contexts in which it is exercised by an agent has steered a lot of well-founded criticism toward the postmodernist model of the consumer self. Thus, Archer (2007) is highly critical of the belief in an unbounded reflexivity, symptomatic of late-modernist accounts of selfhood, and the ways in which Giddens and his theoretical allies gloss over the complexities of agential relationships with the external world. Far from subverting the centrality of human reflexivity to the construction of self and organisation of social life, Archer’s argument nevertheless demands that the causal powers of the structure be acknowledged and their role in shaping agential answers to the questions of “What to do? How to act? Who to be?” (Giddens, 1991, p. 70) accounted for. While Archer too places “an extended process of reflexivity at the heart of modern identity” (Adams, 2003, p. 221), she rejects late modernists’ tendency to think of human reflexivity as an unconstrained force flowing freely in an unstructured environment and calls for an account of its relationship with objective reality. Her critique echoes Tucker’s warning 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 resonates with Adams' (2003, p. 224) caveat against the notion of identity as a reflexive project free from determination by external forces: "in imagining an unbounded reflexivity, it overlooks many crucial factors in identity formation, and misjudges somewhat the nature of the current age". Sassatelli (2007, p. 106) joins the criticism, calling for an acknowledgment that

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 a critical analysis of the conceptual fit between fair trade consumption and the idea of reflexive self-production, Adams and Raisborough (2008, p. 1169) highlight the poverty of the extended reflexivity thesis which precludes "an understanding of the specific and localized ways in which reflexivity emerges from a complex interface of socially and culturally stratified contexts, dynamic interpersonal relations and psychodynamics". They propose to replace the idea of context transcendent consumer reflexivity with a more situated understanding of ethical consumption as a reflexive practice which is contextually, that is socially, culturally, politically, and economically circumscribed. Adams and Raisborough's (2010) empirical study of the relationship between ethics and consumption as articulated in the daily lives of ordinary people demonstrates an attempt to fulfil the potential of "the contextualisation project" (p. 256) to avoid "over-exaggerating the reflexive and self-conscious sensibilities" (p. 256) of ethical consumers and recognise "the perhaps fragmented or heterogeneous aspects of ethical consumption practice" (p. 257) by situating consumer practices in the complexities of the everyday.

Another agency-centred approach that has been widely applied in research aimed at gaining a better understanding of consumer behaviour is the rational choice theory (RCT). Like the followers of the extended reflexivity thesis, the proponents of RCT adopt an individualist position both ontologically and methodologically, that is they understand social reality in terms of actions of agents and take individual to be the key focus of empirical investigation and a basic unit of analysis. RCT rests on the same assumptions about the role of individual agency in shaping consumer behaviour as those implied in Giddens', Beck's and similar accounts, i.e. that consumers are active and teleological decision-makers operating in a highly individualistic and free-choice social environment. The distinctive feature of RCT is its pronounced emphasis on rationality

as the key single property of human beings – the view encapsulated in the image of a consumer as a rational and dispassionate actor making choices “on the basis of deliberate, systematic calculation of the maximum extent to which the ends can be met by using the inevitably scarce means” (Chang, 2014, p. 20). The limitless rationality assumed in the RCT parallels post-modernist belief in an unbounded reflexivity and leads to the same view (and is hence liable to the same criticisms) 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. The rational choice framework, despite its empirical failings and ineffectiveness in providing adequate explanations of consumer behaviour (Levin and Milgrom, 2004), has spilled over into the subject area of ethical consumption to produce the readings of the phenomenon that move away from the notions of altruism, benevolence, and selflessness. From the viewpoint of RCT, consumer engagement in ethical practices is best construed as a form of self-pleasing behaviour on the part of an individual who does good not in order to *be* good but rather to *feel* good about him- or herself, i.e. in a rational pursuit of their own self-interest. An example of this line of thinking is Kate Soper’s (2007, 2008, 2009) notion of alternative hedonism which lays emphasis on the self-satisfying dimension of ethical consumption – the “sensual pleasures of consuming differently” (2008, p. 577), as Soper puts it. It is grounded in the idea that modern consumer society is bound to lead to the feelings of disaffection and dissatisfaction: “people are beginning to see the pleasures of affluence both as compromised by their negative effects and as pre-empting other enjoyments” (Soper, 2009, p. 4). Conversely, through engagement with practices of sustainable and ethical consumption, Soper argues, one can attain the material simplicity of life and in doing so reclaim the more subtle forms of hedonist pleasures lost in the dominant materialistic lifestyles. The ultimate rationale for consumer engagement in ethical practices therefore boils down to a pursuit of the life of pleasure, while reflexive engagement with environmental, social, and moral concerns is seen as a quest for “the self-massaging comfort of “doing good” (Lekakis, 2013, p. 78). From this perspective, ethical consumer choices are void of altruistic component and represent little more than acts of selfish behaviour arising out of a rational desire to do good if doing good ranks high on the list of a subject’s preferences. As Archer remarks,

Homo economicus can have a taste for philanthropy, in which case it is the task of his

reason to make him a well satisfied philanthropist, a cost-benefit effective benefactor and a philanthropic maximiser (2000, p. 54).

A range of recent accounts tuned in to the alternative hedonism thesis and attempted to bring to the surface the self-interest presumably underlying individuals' engagement in ethical practices. For example, 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. Similarly, for the subjects of John, Klein and Smith's (2002) research exploring the drivers behind boycotting behaviour the "clean hand motivation", i.e. the desire to feel good about themselves, was a major impetus for participating in boycotts. Cherrier's (2006) and Shaw's (2007) research add more empirical evidence of the role of the "feel-good" factor in inciting consumer engagement with ethical practices. In her book on the politics of fair trade consumption, Lekakis (2013, p. 78) too draws on the alternative hedonism thesis to construe consumer involvement in coffee activism as a pursuit of a morally satisfying "state of equilibrium between the self-centred self (the hedonistic consumer who seeks "the good life") and the self-governed self (the responsible, civically minded political consumer)".

Despite its wide application in consumption research, the utility-maximization approach to consumer choice has been subject to extensive criticism. RCT's interpretation of human normativity and morality as merely a part of the cost-benefit calculations of a sensible actor who prefers that course of action which, alongside other utilities, also brings higher emotional rewards (Becker, 1996 cited in Archer, 2000, p. 61) sits uneasy with the view of consumption as a value-laden, morally-charged practice which "always and inevitably raises issues of fairness, self vs group interests, and immediate vs delayed gratification" (Wilk, 2001, p. 246). The economic model of a man does not accommodate the simple fact that "people typically find within their activities both frustrations and satisfactions, anxieties and pleasures, not all of which are simple matters of calculation" (Warde, 2015, p. 121). Archer (2000) compiled a set of arguments, conceptual as well as methodological, which help to explain why the image of a self-pleasing rational chooser cannot be superimposed on the figure of an ethical consumer. To construe emotions as commensurable merchandise subject to a cost-benefit analysis, Archer argues, means to essentially commodify human affectivity and leave no room to accommodate such widespread sociocultural phenomena as altruism, morality, and social solidarity. Neither does seem convincing the version of a social

agent as a tripartite being consisting of a superior rational actor and two “assistants” - a normative man, introduced as a source of the sense of interdependence and cooperation with other social subjects which arises when common good is at stake, and an emotional man, held accountable for the expressions of solidarity and collective action needed for the reification or transformation of the social order - the rational choice theorists’ attempt to explain away acts of charity, benevolence, and goodwill without conceding rationality as a dominant human property.

The chain of rationality is not broken by the subsumption of action under normative expectations, because cultural dopery is avoided by asserting that the reasons for actions associated with a role, move an actor only when they are adopted as his own good reasons (Archer, 2000, p. 76)

Archer advances several compelling objections to this theoretical construct. Methodologically, such a multi-layered model of a social actor makes rational choice theorists’ pronounced focus on an individual as the key constituent of the social world and a basic unit of analysis difficult to sustain. Conceptually, it is hard to imagine how and by what forces these three separate inhabitants of a single human can be kept hermetically compartmentalised and, furthermore, harmoniously orchestrated so that they manifest themselves at appropriate places and times. Moreover and, perhaps, most importantly, there seems to be incorporation of the social contexts into those of the individuals: distribution of economic resources is narrowed down to personal budgets; normative obligations and duties are presented as a result of subjects’ recognition of the need to cooperate with others when their personal welfare depends on the common good; social solidarity is conceived of as stemming from a subjective preference to team up. Subscription to social norms and expectations is also explained away in terms of “public means to private ends” (Archer, 2000, p. 78), that is as a rational pursuit of self-interest rather than an expression of a morally binding duty. Archer (2000, p. 67) strongly resists such theoretical move:

On the one hand, 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? On the other hand, can the social context really be disaggregated in this way, such that solidarity and protest are purely interpersonal matters, normative beliefs are only what certain people hold in their own interests, and resource distributions are just what each of us has on personal deposit?

These presumptions of the rational choice theory are in a sharp disagreement with the ontological postulates of the realist model of the world which this thesis upholds and in which agents and their social conditions are kept distinctly separate from

each other. Equally disturbing is RCT's toll on the essential human properties and capacities, such as reflexivity and personal identity. Its proposed model of a social actor replaces reflexively active agents with subjects whose ways are pre-defined by a set of preferences that "are assumed to be given, current, complete, consistent and determining" (Archer, 2000, p. 68) and that "are ranked, are transitive, and do not depend on the presence or absence of essentially independent alternatives" (MacDonald, 2003, p. 552). The idea of pre-given rationality denies the role of human interactions with objective reality in making us who we are and subverts the intrinsic propensity of all humans to engage in continuous reflexive deliberations about their relationship to the world. Devoid of the need to actively and subjectively define their values and concerns, i.e. what matters to them and how to achieve it, subjects are left with their emotions untriggered, normativity unexercised, and the workings of the mind reduced to cost-benefit calculations. In Archer's model of a human being, which I adopt and defend, this inner emptiness is filled with rich and meaningful processes – reflexive conversations during which people deliberate about their relationships with the world and define what they want and can commit to in life. The image of a being whose relationship to the world is one of concern and who can flourish or suffer depending on how the objects of his commitment are faring (Sayer, 2011) successfully accommodates human emotionality and normativity – the two stumbling blocks which the exponents of the rational choice theory have failed to successfully negotiate. For as long as the rational actor model entails "a flat denial of altruism, of voluntary activities and, underlying both, of free-giving" (Archer, 2007, p. 322), it cannot be applied to the ethical consumption phenomenon which implies at least a degree of interest-free and self-sacrificing morality, as my analysis of ethical food practices will demonstrate in due time. Similarly, this model runs counter to the claims about inherently moral nature of consumption which reverberate in a range of micro-level studies of consumer behaviour, such as Miller's (2013) ethnographic research on shopping in North London. Contrary to the rational choice framing of consumer decisions, Miller asserts that even the most ordinary and routinized consumption involves complex negotiation of moral dilemmas and is best understood as a project about social relationships, particularly those of care, responsibility, and love. In a comparative study of the ethical wine industry in Australia and the UK, Starr (2011, p. 137) also comments on the limited potential of the rational choice model to explain consumer behaviour, which cannot be

reduced to “just the signaling of human demand”, and highlights the need to acknowledge that “consumers sometimes choose to relinquish their rational-sovereign, market-democratic role and make preference-decisions on non-market, even irrational grounds”. Starr’s another study (2009, p. 916), concerned with explaining the drivers behind the spread of ethical consumption, leads the author to the same conclusion:

People purchase and use products and resources according not only to the personal pleasures and values they provide, but also to ideas of what is right and good, versus wrong and bad, in a moral sense.

In a comprehensive review of the evolution of moral discourses around consumption during the last three centuries, Hilton (2004) draws a line under the above arguments asserting that consideration of morality is central to any understanding of human consumption in both the past as well as the present. Talking specifically about food consumption, the moral and ideological significance of food has been widely acknowledged in sociological literature (Warde, 1997; Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo, 1992; Murcott, 1983). In a study of people’s sources of culinary recipes, McKie and Wood (1992) highlight the cultural and social significance of recipes and their role in setting standards for how and what people should eat, what level of cooking skills they should possess, how the meals should be presented, etc. Likewise, Warde’s (1997) study of culinary columns in women’s magazines offers an elaborate discussion of the nuanced symbolism of food choices that reveals itself through the four moral categories, i.e. novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, convenience and care, which dominate the food discourse and provide moral framework for consumer decisions. The rationality assumption also has important epistemological implications – as “a useful fiction” that aids in the creation of hypotheses about the observable world” (MacDonald, 2003, p. 551), it firmly grounds RCT in the instrumentalist-empiricist epistemology. The dismissal of the ontological importance of unobservable yet real entities and processes that can be neither scientifically measured nor empirically tested, but that profoundly affect human behaviour, such as affective reactions, moral concerns, and non-material values, renders empiricism-based rational choice approach ill-suited for achieving a nuanced understanding of consumption or, in fact, any other social phenomenon.

Finally, the rational choice model has been widely dismissed not only for its overly rationalised image of social actors and inability to adequately accommodate

human emotionality and normativity and hence effectively account for the moral, altruistic, and selfless aspects of ethical or, for that matter, any form of consumption, but also for its neglect of the role of structure in determining consumer choices. The embeddedness of consumption in the contexts of external reality is the blind spot which rational choice theorists share with the proponents of the extended reflexivity thesis and its model of a consumer choosing freely and reflexively "how to be and how to act" (Giddens, 1994, p. 75). Both approaches embody a neoliberal notion of consumers as "knowledge-grounded subjects who make rational choices to maximize their interests and their quest for identity" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322). They take the agent out of the social contexts in which consumption acts and activities take place and which represent crucial determinants of consumer behaviour – a direct and inevitable consequence of methodological individualism and its key assumption that all social processes and outcomes can be reduced to the actions and interactions of individual actors. In ethical consumption, the model of a 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" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322) has been widely problematized, as has been the idea of a free and all-knowing actor summoned to tackle a range of global problems one purchase at a time - "Robin Hood comes to town, latté in hand" (Goodman, 2004, p. 896). The major criticism has been directed towards the assumption of consumers' limitless capacity to freely appropriate and reflexively negotiate regardless of the wider social, economic, and political systems that frame consumer actions and restrict their options (Hilton, 2004). In response, a more context-conscious approach to consumption practices has been promoted by many commentators on consumer behaviour. Thus, Stø et al. (2004) draw attention to the fact that consumption occurs not in a vacuum, but within certain contexts and frameworks created by businesses and political authorities. Askegaard and Linnet (2011, p. 381) also argue for the need to contextualize consumer experiences within structural forces of market and social systems: "there is a need to take into consideration the context of context".

This brings the discussion right to the other end of the spectrum of perspectives on the engines of consumption behaviour. Here we find socio-centric approaches that, in contrast to favouring individual consumer as an empowered agent and author (whether reflexive, interpretive, and meaning-seeking or rational, preference-driven, and goal-oriented) of consumption practices, target the social roots of consumer behaviour.

The practice approach is, perhaps, the most influential of the theoretical developments which aim to correct the imbalances underlying the agency-centred, choice-based models of consumption by drawing attention to a wide range of social relations, interactions, and processes in which consumer practices are embedded. In analyzing consumer behaviour, theories of practice focus on consumption as a form of social practices, defined as “durable social structure(s) made up of a configuration of elements, including: ideas, emotions, and meanings associated with the activity; mental and physical skills required to perform it; and materials and equipment needed” (Shove and Pantzar, 2005). Contrary to the extended reflexivity thesis, practice-based approach emphasizes “doing over thinking, the material over the symbolic, and the embodied practical competence over expressive virtuosity in the presentation of self” (Warde, 2014, p. 286). Further, it takes aims at the “market-democratic, sovereign consumer frame” (Starr, 2011, p. 137) and calls for an acknowledgement of “those aspects of consumption that are not reducible to individuals choosing what to buy or use on the basis of personal preference” (Warde, 2015, p. 119).

The key postulates of practice theories are highly consequential for how sociology conceptualizes and studies consumer behaviour and, more specifically, for how it understands consumer agency. Of particular interest to me, given my concern with revealing the underlying mechanism of ethical consumption, is the conceptualization of consumption as a moment in practice rather than a practice itself (Warde, 2005, p. 137) and individuals as carriers of various social practices rather than independent agents of choice. Within this theoretical paradigm, consumption is understood to be embedded in everyday practices, routines, and relationships centred around achieving other targets – it is, therefore, not the end goal and has no intrinsic value, but occurs *within* and *for the sake of* other activities (Warde, 2005). Consequently, consumer choices are conceived of as functional elements in social practices rather than as expressions of individuals’ wants, desires, and needs: “the logic of consumption is found not in the selection of items but in the practices within which they are utilized” (Warde, 2015, p. 118). Accordingly, a consuming agent is no longer taken to be a key unit of analysis; instead, scientific attention and empirical efforts are urged to focus on practices, their social constitutions, and contexts in which they take place:

Interest moves away from attitudes and behaviours of an active consumer and instead

concentrates on the “do-ability” of practical performances and how these negotiated and shaped by social and institutional contexts (Wheeler, 2012, p. 91).

Practice theories have quickly caught the wave of contemporary sociological thinking and become a large player in the field of consumer research. Since the beginning of the XXI century practice approach has 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 (Warde, 2015). In the latest review of consumer studies, Warde (2015) highlights some of the most significant examples of such research, such as Shove’s (2003a) investigation of the evolution and social meaning of domestic cleaning practices and Evans’ (2011) analysis of household food waste behaviour. Elizabeth Shove has been particularly influential in elaborating on the early theories of practice (Schatzki, 1996) and bringing them into sociological research on sustainable consumption. Shove’s social practice theory, developed in the landmark book “Comfort, Cleanliness and Convenience: the Social Organization of Normality” (2003b) and subsequent publications (see for example, Shove, 2010; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012), is claimed to provide a response to an increasingly pressing need to understand the nature of social change and apply this understanding to achieve desired behavioural shifts in the spheres of consumption and sustainability (Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012). It does so, authors argue, by revealing the dynamics of emergence, reproduction, and transformation of social practices in the course of the daily routines and analysing the ways in which individuals are recruited to become the carriers of practices.

The socio-centric approach also finds its followers among those who attempt to understand and explain ethical consumption by moving away from the concept of a consumer as an active agent of choice and the governor of the market and ethical shopping as a consumer-created and consumer-driven phenomenon. Thus, Barnett et al. reframe ethical consumption as “a function of a whole set of infrastructures that serve as the background for more explicit forms of conduct and interaction” (2005, p. 73). Retreating from the understanding of ethical consumption as brought about and demanded by increasingly reflexive consumers, they look for the identifiable drivers of responsible shopping behaviour in the wider social networks which work to generate desire for ethical goods and drive the transformation of ordinary consumers into the carriers of ethical consumption practices. Thinking about ethical consumption in terms

of power relations and drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, Barnett and colleagues (2010) situate the phenomenon within the systems of provisioning and background infrastructures and bring into the view various agents and actors who, while not ordinarily thought of as consumers, play a key role in the politicisation of consumption and recruitment of mainstream consumers into ethical practices. Jacobsen and Dulsrud (2007, p. 469), also responding to a call for an approach that takes account of "the ways consumers and consumer roles are framed in interactive processes in markets, governance structures, and everyday life", identify a wide range of strategically oriented actors who construct and govern ethical consumption, such as NGOs, charities, campaign groups and activists in pursuit of their own agenda, corporate sector seeking to open up and develop profitable markets, and governments looking for the ways to shed responsibilities for addressing environmental and societal challenges. Through deliberate strategies and techniques, these various actors and organizations work toward moralising consumption and mobilizing consumer's sense as a citizen and "the bearer of a variety of responsibilities" (Barnett et al., 2010, p. 41). By reframing consumer subjectivities to instill concerns over societal and environmental wellbeing, they cultivate individuals as ethical consumers acting in line with the principles of sustainability, ecological well-being, and respect for human rights. This process of "the governing of the consumer" relies on particular strategies, e.g. environmental awareness campaigns, and technologies, such as product labelling, intended to incite and enable ethical choices. The use of calculative techniques such as consumer surveys and polls reflects the ways in which knowledge is constructed and used to campaign for ethical consumption: statistics tracking the growth of ethical market are presented by activist groups and organizations to help in raising public awareness, exert pressure on manufacturers and suppliers, and recruit support of policy makers (Barnett et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). Further, many commentators argue for the important role of the rhetoric and semiotics of ethical goods' packaging and promotion materials in the production of a morally reflexive consumer. Thus, elaborating on Wright's (2004) analysis of newspaper advertising for a fair trade coffee brand, Adams and Raisborough comment on the potential of fair trade discourses to undermine "the commodity fetishist lynchpin of the consumer capitalist psychic economy" (2008, p. 1172) through the disclosure of exploitative relations of production. In an analysis of the role of organic food market in contributing to the rise of environmentalism, Allen and Kovach (2000) discuss how, by revealing information about food growing methods,

organic labelling helps to reduce the objectification of natural-social relationships and weaken commodity fetishism. Likewise, Bildtgård (2008) highlights the role of ethical labels as a symbolic device that transcends time and space to reconnect consumers with producers; Brown and Getz (2008, p. 1188) assert that ethical labels can offer “at least a partial antidote to the commodity fetish”; while DuPuis (2000) goes as far as to claim that reflexivity is turned on precisely on consumer’s reading of the label. Their arguments confute the view that:

The main mechanism for labels (or brands) to work is not to change or make up the mind of a consumer in a shop, but to confirm an earlier decision made outside the market place influence by marketing, the media and, crucially, civil processes (Zadek, Lingayah and Forstater, 1998, p. 35).

On the contrary, it is claimed that symbolically meaningful texts and images create morally charged narratives that become “translation devices” pulling individuals in the direction of more ethical food choices (Goodman, 2004, p. 902). For Goodman (2004), they are material and discursive means which propel the enactment of the “political ecological imaginary” – “a sense of moral economy that entreats moral connections and responsibilities all along the commodity network in the pursuit of alternative development” (p. 903). Goodman and Goodman’s (2001, p. 111) insight about fair trade conveys the point: “through [labels and discourses] ... fair trade networks seek to ‘lengthen’ across the spaces of consumption, to work against and translate actors from more conventional agrofood networks”. Similarly, Barnett et al. (2005, p. 23) highlight how the rhetoric and semiotics of ethical products’ packaging re-articulate moral dispositions that “enlist ordinary people into boarder projects of social change”. The ultimate rationale behind such governing of consumers is the governing of consumption, that is a deliberate and concerted effort “to regulate the informational and spatial contexts of consumer ‘choice’” (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 31) through a range of strategies, tools, and techniques intended to turn consumer “oughts into cans” (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 31). Importantly, recruiting individuals into practices of ethical consumption need not require creating and promoting particular consumer subjectivities, for it is “acts not identities or beliefs” (Clarke et al., 2007, p. 241) that the governing of consumption is concerned with (Barnett et al., 2010; Wheeler, 2012). The significance of ethical purchases, it is claimed, lies in the fact that they are “publicly observable acts” that can be “aggregated, measured, reported and represented in the public sphere” (Barnett et al., 2010, p. 59). Wheeler (2012) demonstrates this clearly by highlighting

the role of the systems of collective provision, from schools and workplaces to rail stations and entire towns committed to fair trade procurement, in ensuring consumer engagement with fair trade choices and, through this, creating and organizing fair trade consumption as a collective consumer action. In tune with this is Clarke et al.'s discussion of local shopping as a consumption practice which "indicates the degree to which the exercise of 'choice' is shaped by systems of collective provisioning over which consumers have little direct influence" (2007, p. 239). Trentmann's (2006) collection of essays offering historical analyses of the evolution of a consumer as a social subject also underscores the crucial role of national institutions in creating and refashioning consumer roles and identities in different social and economic contexts.

Socio-centric perspectives, such as those of Shove and Barnett et al., are clearly juxtaposed against explanations of consumer behaviour in terms of the individual actor. In a battle against the "orthodoxy of the "active consumer" in the social sciences" (Trentmann, 2006, p. 3), their proponents erase the model of an ethical consumer as an agent of conscious choice and ethical acts and activities as expressions of individual liberty of conscience and thought. In the practice approach, for example, not only are practices presented as "the principal steering device of consumption", but they are also taken to be "the primary source of desire, knowledge and judgment" (Warde, 2005, p. 145). Among the studies that expound this view of particular interest for this thesis is Hards' (2011) work drawing on the elements of the social practice theory to explain the process of formation and development of individual environmental values, i.e. "ethical, political and spiritual worldviews relating to the environment, and understandings of and relations with nature" (p. 26). Hards grounds her arguments in the practice-based understanding of values as essential components of social practices which form and develop not within persons, but through their continuous social interactions and, specifically, encounters with ideas circulating within society and commonly shared by its members. Importantly, these broadly shared meanings and understandings are argued to have a restricting impact on individuals' performance of practices, meaning that people enact any given practice in the ways that conform to the social ideas by which it is defined. This conceptual position can be challenged on several grounds. Firstly, when tracing the origins of individual environmental beliefs, Hards describes a variety of personal experiences ranging from tending animals to taking hallucinogenic mushrooms that have played a key role in triggering participants' concerns about environment. The obviously arbitrary nature of experiences from which the subjects of Hards' study

derived their environmental ethics speaks against the argument that values are neither individually developed nor personally possessed, but are mere expressions of broadly shared social ideas. Secondly, the claim that individual values are merely expressions of the norms and ideas dominating the surrounding ethical, political, and cultural discourses calls for significantly greater degrees of social conformity than those that any society can boast. Application of this argument to environmental beliefs is especially problematic due to the lack of consensus about what is good for the environment and how to achieve it. Although Hards exemplifies the relationship between ideas and practices by referring to “a broadly shared conception of what it means to live a low-carbon life” (2011, p. 26), the messages on how to shrink one’s carbon footprint circulating in the general public discourse are far from unambiguous. For instance, organic foodstuffs are commonly understood to have lower CO₂ footprint than conventionally grown produce. At the same time, warnings abound that the environmental benefits of organic goods shipped over lengthy distances are, to say the least, questionable, if not altogether outweighed by the negative impact. As Cherrier argues (2007, p. 322),

There cannot be, for example, a regime of truth about recycling when scientists disagree on the evidence, country representatives disagree on the outcomes, and commentators’ opinions change continuously (Volokh and Scarlett, 1997) (...) The pluralization of expert systems and greater access to information prompts multiple and often contradictory opinions about the “what” and “how” of ethical consumption (Beck, 1999) such that what seems good or ethical for one may not be so for another.

Given this “inability to know” (Beck, 1999, p. 131 cited in Cherrier, 2007, p. 322), an ethically minded person will have to exercise his own judgment as to which choices, out of those available to him, will bring the greater good. Depending on her personal values and concerns, she may either decide that investing in conventional but locally developed agriculture is a better way to support the environment or, alternatively, that buying organic produce from struggling growing communities in the developing world is morally justified. In either case, consumer engagements with practice will be dependent on subjectively defined values and commitments that may well have been developed prior to, independently from, and outside of the practice itself. As Cherrier (2007, p. 331) points out, “in a pluralistic and complex world, things that seem ethical to one person may not mirror the general stance on an issue”. Likewise, Adams and Raisborough’s (2010, p. 263) study of mainstream consumers concludes that the “fit between ethics and normative frameworks may not always be straightforward” with

participants' responses indicating that "different positions are available for occupation in response to such demands". Moreover, Hards' own findings serve to support the point: as she observes, for some climate change activists nature-related values were not the primary motive for engaging in environmental practices – instead, issues of social justice were the priority. Thus, participants' engagement with environmentalism was informed by their subjective concerns, that is what they considered to be the most significant issues to address and the most precious values to promote.

An important implication arising from this evidence is that consumer reflexivity regains its place in consumption acts and processes. This is critical, for as far as reflexivity is concerned, the proponents of social practice theory have largely denied its role in the creation, evolution, and transformation of consumption practices. Warde, for example, persists in the view that "consumption occurs often entirely without mind" (2005, p. 150). Others have taken a more loyal stance towards consumer reflexivity – thus, Wheeler contends that practice-based perspective accommodates both routines and reflexivity and provides enough room for consumer agency even in the context of systemic pressures and social governance: "the proliferation of information and discourses ascribing responsibility to consumers can create an occasion for agents to reflexively monitor and adjust their actions" (2012, p. 91). She attempts to guard the theory against a highly constrained image of consumption behavior which flows out of the practice-based understanding of social discourses as the key informants and determinants of consumer actions by highlighting that practices "are internally differentiated on many dimensions" (Warde, 2005, p. 138 cited in Wheeler, 2012, p. 89) and that their enactments are conditional upon "time, space, and social context" (Warde, 2005, p. 139 cited in Wheeler, 2012, p. 90). This, however, seems a rather feeble defense – firstly, what is left of humans' capacity to actively draw on their reflexive resources if reflexivity is only evoked when social conditions "create an occasion" and command agents to do so? Further, what possibilities are really left for individual subjectivity to contribute to the formation and evolution of practices if their meanings and forms are restricted by social organization and their internal variations arise solely due to the differing outer contexts? My objections are in tune with Soper's criticism of the practice-based approach for its portrayal of consumption as a "relatively unconscious form of life" (2009, p. 12) and individual choices as "inculcated responses explicable only by reference to more objective social forces" (2007, p. 217). This seems unsurprising given the theory's dismissal of a consumer as "the key agent in the politics

of consumption” (Barnett et al., 2005, p. 66) and its exclusive emphasis on the social organisation of consumption acts and activities. The social practice framework in which, as Warde admits, “the concept of “the consumer” (...) evaporates” (2005, p. 146), does not allow to explore the phenomenon of ethical consumption at the individual level and hence precludes an insight into the world of subjective meanings surrounding ethical consumer decisions. By taking socially shared practices as the fundamental unit of analysis, the theory inevitably limits its explanatory potential to meso-level processes, ignoring the multitude of micro-level issues that are critical for understanding patterns of consumption.

As the above review has shown, existing research on ethical consumption has rarely stepped out of the frameworks of the dominant theories of consumption in which consumer is presented as either an agent of free choice or a passive bearer of practice. Reproducing the core ontological and methodological presuppositions of these theoretical approaches, the vast majority of studies have focused on the role of either individual agency or social structures in creating and defining ethical consumption, thus achieving only partial understanding of the phenomenon and leaving important aspects and dimensions of ethical consumer practices and experiences unacknowledged and unexplored. The key reason of the failure of this body of work in producing an effective account of ethical consumption as an individual and social phenomenon has been the incapability to develop a theoretical approach that recognises the full spectrum of forces and powers shaping and moulding consumer practices. On the one hand, agency-centred perspectives have achieved noticeable progress in offering an enhanced understanding of the subjective motives and meanings attached to ethical consumer choices, but neither 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. On the other hand, practice-based approaches have encouraged recognition of the social underpinnings of ethical consumer behaviours and the embeddedness of individual choices in the social and material organisation of life, while staying oblivious to the ways in which consumer agency and individual subjectivity interact with and respond to the social order to either conform to or change it. They thus failed to account for aspects of individual engagement with ethical consumption and comprehensively explain the variations in its understandings and performances among the consuming agents. Inevitably, both approaches could only produce a distorted conception of ethical consumption: the first has reduced its social dimension to an aggregate of individual

actions, while the second has dissolved the consuming agent in society and reduced his decisions to structural imperatives and systemic prescriptions. As Soper describes,

Consumer behaviour that is treated as a matter of existential choice, through the one optic, is viewed through the other, as the altogether less voluntary effect of transcendent economic and social structures and their systemic pressures and forms of social governance (2007, p. 217)

Subsequently, there has been recognition among sociologists of the urgent need to overcome the apparent limitations of one-sided approaches to understanding consumer behavior and readdress the ontological and methodological assumptions of the dominant theoretical perspectives on consumption. Thus, 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”. Halkier (2010, p. 14) joins the call, advocating “the complexity position”, i.e. the one that acknowledges the everyday complexities of consumption and “seeks to unfold both agency capacities and the social conditioning of ordinary consumers”. In tune with them, Johnston (2007, p. 233) presses for a dialectic approach to ethical consumption that “helps us avoid naïve optimism, or determinist pessimistic accounts of consumer-focused projects for social justice and sustainability” and that “recognizes that meaning and agency are present in consumption decisions but takes seriously the structural conditions shaping consumer agency”. What remains problematic, however, is that too many sociologists continue to place hope in the theories of practice to steer consumption research toward a balanced perspective on consumer behavior (e.g. Spaargaren, 2011; Halkier, 2010; Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Sassatelli, 2007). Illustrative is Warde’s (2015, p. 129) unequivocal 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, it seems to me that merely replacing the shortsightedness of agency-centered perspectives with the partiality of practice-based approaches is not the way forward for consumer research if a much-needed recognition of the nuanced complexity of consumption is to be achieved. 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 individuals acts and decisions to involuntary effects of systemic pressures. As Sassatelli (2007, p. 54) remarks,

The classic dimensions of social analysis – social stratification, cultural classification, power, institutions, rituals, interaction, identity, collective action, professions, etc. – are all crucial in understanding the phenomenon of consumption.

Likewise, the biases implanted in the current understanding of ethical consumption by the dominant behavioural paradigms can only be redressed by rethinking the act of consumption as one where a complex interweaving of agential and structural powers emerges and unfolds. The questions of structure and agency should remain on the agenda of consumer research if a bilateral account of ethical consumption which matches the complementary strengths and weaknesses and integrates insights from both individual-focused and socio-centric approaches is to be achieved. Ultimately, what needs to be acknowledged is that “practices of consumption are meaningful for people even if they are not entirely free or always consequential; they are enclosed in mechanisms of power even if these are not deterministic” (Sassatelli, 2007, p. 107).

It is this position that informs the approach that I develop and pursue in this thesis, which seeks to acknowledge and analyse the complex and continuous relationships between consumer agency and social structures, specifically as they manifest themselves in ethical consumption practices. I will construe ethical consumption as an arena where human agency and individual subjectivity manifest themselves while highlighting how consumer practices are inevitably conducted within the context of social, cultural, and economic possibilities and constraints. In doing so, I will put the figure of an individual consumer - decentred if not altogether displaced by the sceptics - back to the foreground in the story about consumption whilst avoiding replicating the caricature portraits of consumers as all-knowing or purely rational actors. Reflecting well-established criticism of the extended reflexivity thesis and responding to a call for a more situated and embedded understanding of reflexivity, I aim to develop a socially attuned framework for understanding ethical food choices of morally concerned individuals in a pursuit of desired identities. I intend to produce a sociological account of ethical consumption that, 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) and thus provides an understanding of the subjective meanings, identity investments, and moral aspects of ethical consumer practices while reflecting the complex dynamics between human reflexivity and objective reality that individuals’ moral food projects are shaped and defined by.

Chapter 3

Studying Consumer Behavior: Toward a Realist Paradigm

Understanding consumer culture is a matter of social rather than textual analysis, not an enterprise of reading but rather of explaining and accounting (Slater, 1997, p. 148).

In this chapter, I provide an outline of my epistemological position and methodological approach to data production and analysis. I begin by clarifying the relationships between my ontological and epistemological frameworks and proceed to discuss two qualitative tools I deployed to elicit the subjective meanings underlying the respondents' ethical food practices: in-depth interviews and direct observations. The chapter also considers the epistemological and methodological challenges that I encountered during the research process and indicates both the benefits as well as inevitable limitations of my chosen research strategies and techniques.

3.1 Epistemological approach – toward the first-person perspective

Previously, I have outlined the ontological framework undergirding my study and discussed how the realist model of the world can help to pave the way toward a more nuanced understanding of ethical consumption by redressing the theoretical misconceptions and methodological biases that currently hold sway over sociological research on consumer behaviour. I would like to open this chapter by explaining how my ontological perspective aligns with my epistemological position and informs my methodological approach to generating and analysing the data, before providing a detailed outline of the research design.

Ontological, epistemological, and methodological paradigms are critical for the ways in which we conduct and assess research. Indeed, the specific conception of the world as consisting of two ontologically separate strata – causally efficacious agents and pre-existing social forms – has played a key role in determining the ways in which I designed and evaluated my research enquiry in an effort to ensure the valid pursuit of knowledge. The emphasis on non-conflationary theorising aimed at uncovering the

underlying causal mechanisms and generative principles of ethical consumer behaviour through an analysis of non-material entities and processes such as personal values, moral concerns, emotional reactions, and reflexive deliberations instantly ruled out empiricism as a philosophical paradigm that can aid in achieving the key aims of this project. Focused on empirical verification and testable predictions about concrete, readily observable, and easily measurable phenomena and seeking outcomes which are a product of formalised procedures and quantified processes (Goulding, 1999), empiricist approaches have nothing to contribute to our understanding of the actual processes of human emotionality and cognition, “which are unobservable and therefore viewed by instrumentalist-empiricists as outside the realm of science and empirical verification” (MacDonald, 2003, p. 554), but which are absolutely key to attaining a deeper comprehension of human behaviour. Concerned with the empirical content of theories, i.e. the accuracy and testability of their empirical predictions, rather than their general validity and potential to explain the underlying causal mechanisms of social phenomena (MacDonald, 2003), empiricism falls short of providing a valid means of exploring the drivers of individual behaviour, since no empirical test can measure or assess the subjective workings of the minds of individuals or their relationship to objective reality, for both are impossible to penetrate and explore merely “by direct perception of immediate facts, with no recourse to concepts” (Rand, 1963, p. 27). Moreover, value-free research as a golden principle of empiricist frameworks has been widely criticised and largely dismissed as not only an unattainable, but also undesirable pursuit which precludes an understanding of certain kinds of human experience, such as meaning making (Lavery, 2003). In consumer research specifically, Holbrook and Hirschman (1993 cited in Goulding, 2002, p. 33) highlight “the need to remind business scholars that those engaged in the humanities are human, and those engaged in the social sciences are social”.

Likewise, ethical consumption as a reflexive practice of affective, normative, evaluative human beings cannot be approached as a readily observable, empirical domain of enquiry where “the only relevant test of the validity of a hypothesis is comparison of its predictions with experience” (Friedman, 1953, p. 8-9). To the contrary, a valid account of ethical consumer behaviour, as that of any other social phenomenon, should acknowledge that “an appeal must be made to something non-observable” (Brown, 1982, p. 234) and that “the imperative to explain is sometimes an imperative to posit theoretical entities” (Brown, 1982, p. 234) which are more than “hand-maidens to

the larger goal of prediction” (MacDonald, 2003, p. 554). In defending reflexivity as an essential property of agents and internal conversation as an integral part of the private workings of the mind of human beings, this thesis essentially subscribes to the argument that all individuals have inner lives that are private, covert, and only available and knowable to their self-examination (Archer, 2003). The focus on immaterial, unobservable, and subjective entities and processes such as values, concerns, emotions, and reflexive deliberations calls for a method which acknowledges the subjective meaning of human experiences and actions and recognises that people’ inner processes and states cannot be deduced or learned simply from observing their external behaviour. These requirements provide the rationale for my choice and application of interpretivism as a methodological approach that is well suited to the nature and aims of the study. As a scientific method, interpretivism emphasises subjective understanding over objective knowledge and offers the potential to improve our comprehension of how people think, feel, and behave in given contexts (Marsh and Furlong, 2010). Interpretive paradigms, particularly phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, have affirmed their relevance to consumer research and are widely used in studies of consumer practices and identities (e.g. Ahuvia, 2005; Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994; Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989;). The value of interpretive analysis in consumer research lies in its ability to go beyond a narrow focus on consumer buying behaviours and bring to light the experiential and meaningful aspects of people’s consumption acts and activities. Holbrook and Hirschman (1993) highlight the importance of using interpretive approaches in analysing consumer behaviour, while McQuarrie and McIntyre (1990) and Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994) specifically argue for the adoption of phenomenological positions in consumer research. In a study of consumption experiences of married women, Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994) evidently demonstrate the potential of phenomenological analysis to provide valuable insights into consumer behaviour. While both phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology represent a way of researching social phenomena through subjective experiences of individuals and groups and are intended for studying human behaviour, experiences, and meanings (Kafle, 2013), phenomenological research tends to be largely descriptive and concentrates on the structure of experience, while hermeneutic perspective places a premium on interpretation and seeks to elucidate the meanings of experiences and their effects on both individuals and social forms (Laverly, 2003). Moreover, hermeneutic model of

understanding allows to contextualize “the meaning of particular life events (...) within a broader narrative of self-identity” (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994, p. 451). In an article discussing the application of hermeneutical framework in consumer research, Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994, p. 448) highlight how a hermeneutic interpretation

(...) explicates the personalized meanings by which consumers understand the characteristics of their (perceived) actual identities, ideal identities, and undesired identities (Markus and Wurf 1986) and the ways in which these identity perceptions (and their underlying meanings) are manifested in everyday consumption activities.

The approach, therefore, is able to support my pursuit of an understanding of the relationships between moral food practices and people’s identities and the ways in which these relationships manifest themselves in the subjective experiences of self-perceived ethical consumers. The pertinence of the hermeneutic framework to consumer research also ensues from its distinctive view on researcher’s “pre-understanding”, i.e. his or her prejudice and prejudgements (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). In contrast to other paradigms, including phenomenology, hermeneutics sees pre-understanding as what facilitates rather than hinders interpretation and “counsels us to capitalize more fully on [pre-]understanding rather than trying to put it aside when we take up our research” (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p. 57). In consumer studies, researchers’ pre-understanding derives both from their position as academics having theoretical knowledge about consumer behaviour as well as their first-hand experiences as consumers. The incorporation of hermeneutics in consumer research allows the researcher “to draw more consciously, critically, and powerfully on their own [pre-] understanding of the everyday phenomena that we study” (Arnold and Fischer, 1994, p. 66). This facilitates the task of the investigator which is to re-experience, recognize, and re-think what participants felt or thought (Bleicher, 1980) thereby achieving an understanding at intellectual, emotional, and moral levels (Betti, 1990). Thus, hermeneutic perspective resonates with the study’s emphasis on human reflexivity, affectivity, and normativity and thus offers an effective approach to exploring ethical consumption as a meaning-rich, emotion-inducing, and value-laden experience. As a scientific method, hermeneutic phenomenology accommodates the constants of qualitative research, i.e. comprehension, synthesising, and theorising (Morse, 1994). While focused on the subjective meanings, it is ultimately geared toward the development of a social theory through revealing the common structures of people’s experiences and is therefore well-

suiting for achieving the principal goal of this study, i.e. to identify and explain the causal mechanisms and generative principles of ethical consumption as a subjective project of morally concerned individuals.

As an epistemological approach, interpretivism successfully teams up with the critical realist ontology for both positions accept that many alternative perspectives on and valid accounts of a single phenomenon may exist and that “there is no possibility of attaining a single, “correct” understanding of the world, what Putnam (1999) describes as a “God’s eye view” that is independent of any particular viewpoint” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 5). As Maxwell notes, critical realists, while maintaining the view of objective reality as existing independently of our understandings of it, at the same time accept that these understandings are always and inevitably a product of people’s subjective perspectives and views: “all knowledge is thus “theory-laden”, but this does not contradict the existence of a real world to which this knowledge refers” (2012, p. vii). Such position, he argues, has been widely accepted as “a commonsense basis for social research” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 6). Frazer and Lacey (1993, p. 182) also defend the compatibility of the two philosophies:

Even if one is a realist at the ontological level, one could be an epistemological interpretivist . . . our knowledge of the real world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than straightforwardly representational.

In providing philosophical defence for the integration of ontological realism and epistemological interpretivism, I cannot hope to be more lucid than Barth in his anthropological research on indigenous communities of Papua New Guinea:

Like most of us, I assume that there is a real world out there — but that our representations of that world are constructions. People create and apply these constructions in a struggle to grasp the world, relate to it, and manipulate it through concepts, knowledge, and acts. In the process, reality impinges; and the events that occur consequently are not predicated on the cultural system of representations employed by the people, although they may largely be interpretable within it (1987, p. 87)

The realist ontology of this research, therefore, successfully accommodates my epistemological position that the data I am interested in is contained within the perspectives of those being studied, i.e. self-defined ethical food consumers. In fact, the subjective ontology of reflexive conversations defended in this thesis calls for a recognition of what Archer (2003, p. 46) refers to as a “first-person perspective”, i.e. that only individuals themselves have unconstrained and unmediated access to their rich

and meaningful inner lives. The “first-person perspective”, in turn, automatically assumes the “first-person authority”, i.e. that individuals’ self-investigation and self-understanding always have an epistemic privilege over any third person’s analysis. As Archer (2003) contends, one can only access - always indirectly and in no other way than by means of interpretation - the inner repositories of individuals’ authentic self-knowledge by soliciting people’s subjective accounts of their deeds and examining the reflexive workings behind them. The declared emphasis on the subjective ideas, understandings, and meanings surrounding ethical consumption does not pose a threat to its ontological status as a real social phenomenon. Firstly, accepting the epistemological privilege of individuals’ own narratives does not mean “substituting how agents take things to be for how they really are” (Archer, 2003, p. 15). To assert that human reflexivity plays a central role in the process of mediation between agents and their objective circumstances does not mean elevating people’s subjective ideas and perceptions about the world over the actual reality: “the ontological status of something real is not impugned by allowing that it can be valued differently by different subjects” (Archer, 2003, p. 140). Neither does my reliance on subjective accounts means reducing social reality, or my study of a particular domain of agential practices, to the individuals’ ideas and perceptions of it. I recognise and appreciate the distinction between the ontological realm of what exists and the empirical domain of what can be experienced and observed thus safeguarding my research from the epistemic fallacy of reducing the questions of ontology to those of epistemology. As Spencer (2000, n/p) notes, the study of reality and, more specifically, social practices, cannot be limited to understanding individuals’ conceptualisations of their actions, for “there remain ontological questions about society since much of society lies outside the realm of thought itself”, i.e. there are all sorts of other factors in people’s experiences that need to be acknowledged and made intelligible. This is a crucial point to recognise if this study, or any social research for that matter, is to go beyond merely providing descriptive narratives of agential experiences of the social reality and, instead, capture the dynamic processes that contribute to the shaping of this reality over time.

3.2 Detailed research design

3.2.1 Research ethics

This research project was reviewed and approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Leeds. During every step of the research process, from approaching and recruiting participants to handling personal data, I was guided by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Policy. All respondents received electronic and paper forms (Appendix A) outlining the details and conditions of the research process to ensure that they understood the nature of the study and their right to withdraw from the project at any time. I assured the participants that their identities would be protected through the use of self-chosen pseudonyms and anonymisation of sensitive details, and that all personal data relating to them would be destroyed in a secure manner when no longer required. Prior to the start of the fieldwork, I requested the respondents' signed consent for the following: to take written notes during the observations, to audio record the interviews, to transcribe the interview data verbatim, to include anonymised data and interview excerpts in the thesis as well as any future academic publications and conference papers that may result from the research.

3.2.2 Selecting participants - a targeted approach

When describing the process of choosing the research participants, I accentuate the qualitative nature of my study by using the term "selection" rather than "sampling", which, as many have noted, is better suited for the description of quantitative survey designs (Emmel, 2013; Maxwell, 2008; Stake, 1995). This might be considered as convenience approach to participant recruitment which in usual textbook terms is regarded as less rigorous (Patton, 2001). However, selecting participants from my personal network was not a necessity that arose due to lack of interest in the study, but an expression of a more targeted recruitment strategy seeking information-rich, but also accessible cases. Maxwell defines targeting respondents who "are most accessible and conducive to gaining the understandings you seek" (2012, p. 94) as a justified and valid approach that is sensitive to "the real conditions that will influence how data will be collected and the ability of these data to answer your research questions" (2012, p. 94) and takes into account "the realities of access, cost, time, and difficulty" (2012, p. 94). So, for instance, I had responses from ethical consumers based in cities other than Leeds, such as Manchester, Sheffield, and York, and while it would have been desirable to

cover a larger geographical area to ensure a more diverse range of participants, factors such as travel times and costs ruled out these opportunities. This was not a result of a less rigorous approach to research, but an unavoidable effect of what Emmel refers to as external powers bearing on the recruitment process: “there is invariably an element of constrained choice in the sampling choices we can make” (2013, p. 77). At the same time, my decisions about how and where to find prospective research participants are far from contingent – they are theory-laden and informed by the particular theoretical assumptions which frame my research. Distributing flyers in specific locations, such as health food shops, vegetarian and vegan cafes and restaurants, and ecological housing developments was considered a legitimate way to access ethical consumers because, drawing on Archer’s insights that “subjects acquire their personal identities through the constellation of concerns that they endorse” (2012, p. 22) and that “it is not possible to have a genuine concern and to do nothing about it” (2007, p. 231), I assumed that self-identities of ethical consumers must be tied to concerns about the implications of their lifestyle choices and that these concerns must translate into concrete actions – decisions about where to buy groceries, where to eat, and where to live. These are not just random and ungrounded assumptions, but a manifestation of the internal powers, i.e. the ideas, concepts and theories chosen or developed by the researcher, which inevitably affect participant recruitment (Emmel, 2013). In reflecting upon and discussing the internal and external powers of my approach to selecting ethical consumers, I aimed to reveal the “causal processes that govern the salient features of the sample” (Emmel, 2013, p. 78) – an essential element of a realist approach to research design and conduct.

Overall, nine self-defined ethical consumers were selected to take part in the study. Using a small number of respondents is a general guideline in qualitative and, particularly, hermeneutic phenomenological research (Creswell, 2012). Polkinghorne (1989) specifies a range of 5-25 respondents, Dukes (1984) recommends focusing on three to ten subjects, while Boyd (2001) considers two to ten participants to be sufficient. Such small numbers are justified by the purpose of qualitative research which is not to yield generalizable findings but to focus on “information-rich” cases – those “from which one can learn a great deal about matters of importance” (Patton, 2001, p. 242). From this viewpoint, the empirical data generated by my nine participants proved exceptionally nuanced, multi-layered, and rich and, in fact, the desired level of depth and detail in the analysis and interpretation of the respondents’ accounts would have been hard to achieve with a larger number of interviewees. Ultimately, I am in

agreement with those who contend that “sample size is not the issue, but how researchers convince their audiences with the cases they are able to collect given the resources available to them” (Emmel, 2013, p. 1).

3.2.3 Data production: the rationale, limitations and benefits of chosen research methods

In line with my anti-empiricist approach to sociological enquiry, I abandon the use of the term “data collection” when describing the research process. As opposed to upholding the inherently empiricist assumption that social “facts” are lying about waiting for the researcher to spot them” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 154), I conceive of the process of generating empirical data in qualitative research as “data production” implying that “information gathered by the researcher is produced in a social process of giving meaning to the social world” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 154). This is not to support the social constructionist view of reality as contrived by social agents or forces, but to emphasize that the researcher’s knowledge is “produced through repeated practices of imagining and constituting “data” (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002, p. 154).

As a scientific approach, hermeneutic phenomenology is non-prescriptive in relation to methods of data production and allows the use of various research techniques (van Manen, 1997). However, my focus on the agential meaning-making around ethical food practices and acknowledgment of its subjective ontology necessitates the use of in-depth interviews as a research strategy that can provide a desired insight into the inner worlds of the respondents and cast light on the reflexive work behind their consumption commitments. Following Archer (2003, p. 22) in negating the possibility of “exteriorising our interiority” implying that “everything inner can be read from its public behavioural manifestations”, I maintain that it is only by giving voice to the individuals, recognising the authority of their first-person accounts, and acknowledging the epistemic prerogative of the investigated over the investigator that one can hope to bring to light the subjects’ “inner self” and approach the underlying meanings of their actions, practices, and experiences. I rely on personal accounts as “an important means and product of inquiry because these stories treat the human being and his/her mind as invaluable to understanding and explaining social behaviour” (Orbuch, 1997, p. 468). Thus, my choice of in-depth interviews as the main research method ensues directly from my recognition of reflexivity as an essential human property which plays a key

role in shaping agential decisions and actions. In contradistinction, approaches that deny agents self-awareness and responsibility for their own life courses, such as Bourdieu's theory of habitus, render subjects' accounts of their practices worthless, for how can a person give an explanation for the acts that "are the product of a modus operandi of which he is not the producer and has no conscious mastery?" (Archer, 2000, p. 42). Such perspectives, therefore, make in-depth interviewing unfit for penetrating the meaning making of social actors for they invite subjects "to reflect verbally upon matters that are inaccessible, because unconscious, and ineffable, because embodied rather than discursive" (Archer, 2000, p. 43). Conversely, my epistemological position in relation to this study stipulates that "we have to take the agent very seriously indeed because he or she is a crucial source of self-knowledge" (Archer, 2003, p. 33). This contention has been key to my choice of in-depth interviewing as the main strategy for generating data. At the same time, I guard against what Atkinson and Silverman (1997, p. 304) criticise as a naïve and simplistic treatment of interviews as a "uniquely privileged means of access to biographically grounded experiences and meaning of social actors" by reflecting upon and recognising the inevitable limitations of the interviewing method and, wherever possible, mitigating their effects on the final research account.

3.2.3.1 Interviews

Interviewing strategy. My primary method of data production was qualitative interviews integrating a life-history approach with elements of in-depth phenomenological interviewing. Such combination of strategies has been previously used in consumer studies and proved to serve well the researcher's objectives (see, for example, Fournier's (1998) study of consumers' relationships with brands). Life history interviews have a focus on participants' biographies and require interviewees to reflexively draw connections between their past, present, and future. They are informed by respondents' subjective perceptions and interpretations of their lived experiences and, therefore, align with the interpretive perspective and intentions of phenomenological research (Belk, 2007, p. 160). I inquired into the participants' biographies in order to understand how and under which internal impetuses and external circumstances their ethical consumer commitments and, concomitantly, subjectivities have developed and analyse the ensemble of objective and subjective factors that played a key role in determining the trajectories of their social and personal identities. I compliment the

focus on the respondents' life stories with a phenomenological emphasis on the subjective meanings of their ethical consumer practices and experiences for their inner and outer self. My overall concern, therefore, is with the meanings of the participants' ethical food commitments in relation to their actual and desired identities pursued in particular social conditions and personal circumstances.

All interviews were conducted within a time frame of two to four weeks after completion of observations, which was my complementary data production technique. I aimed to allow myself a sufficient amount of time to review the observational and field notes and build a tentative mental portrait of each participant based on what I had already learned about him or her as a means of ensuring an effective interview process. I deliberately avoided having more than one interview in one day or combining interview encounters with any other type of fieldwork, keeping in mind that one-to-one interviewing is an intense process (Gray, 1995) that can be very demanding for both respondents and researcher (Hesse-Biber, 2007). All interviews were arranged to take place at public venues, either in coffee shops or at my university department. Due to trustful relationships established with the participants during extensive prior communication, I found it very easy to establish rapport in the interviews and conduct conversations in a relaxed and friendly environment. I explained to the respondents that I would like them to begin by recounting their life story and that I would ask some follow-up questions which they are under no obligation to answer, should they not wish to. Finally, I asked the participants to confirm their permission to be tape-recorded.

Interview guides. The interviews were designed to generate two types of information: first-person descriptions of the development of the respondents' ethical consumption commitments within the larger narrative of their lives with a focus on the objective contexts and personal circumstances in which this process unfolded; 2) the subjects' understandings and interpretations of the meaning of their ethical food practices in relation to their inner and social self. Accordingly, I began each interview by asking the respondents to recount their life story focusing on a particular aspect of it, i.e. the evolution of their ethical food commitments, and followed up with questions inviting the interviewees to reflect on the meanings of their ethical consumption practices and experiences. At the end of the interview, I asked questions from a tailored list of discussion prompts based on what I had previously learned about the respondent from observations and prior communication. In conducting the interviews, I aimed to adhere to the principle of emergent dialogue which ascribes to the respondents the

leading role in setting the direction and steering the course of the conversation (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990). While closely following the lines of the narratives told by the respondents, I tried, as much as possible, to preserve the conversation in the realm of the relevant themes and elicit stories describing the formation and evolution of the subjects' ethical concerns and commitments and the contexts in which this process took place. Such interviewing strategy enabled me to give voice to the participants while maintaining focus on their experiences of ethical consumption and their meanings in terms of the subjects' relationship with the self; this has allowed me to achieve effective in-depth interviewing.

Data transcription. The interviews varied in duration from one to five hours, but generally lasted for around two and a half hours. I transcribed all interview data verbatim myself in order to facilitate the analysis of data by increasing the level of closeness between the interpreter and the text (Halcomb and Davidson, 2006) and to enable the use of the respondents' own terms as a means to increase the validity of interpretation (Maxwell, 2012). All interview transcripts were stored on the secure university network, in password-protected files and under pseudonyms. Print copies of transcripts, which I used for the purposes of analysis, were kept in a locked drawer at my university department. Although the use of verbatim quotations in academic texts is sometimes advised against (Corden and Sainsbury, 2006), I decided not to edit excerpts from participants' narratives as a means of giving the voice to the respondents and in order to reiterate the emphasis on their subjective interpretations and meanings.

The limitations of the interview method. The use of interviews as a key strategy for eliciting data which, as I argued, only agents can claim knowledge about, presents significant challenges that need to be explicitly acknowledged and carefully considered. The life-history approach is inherently problematic for, as Archer (2003, p. 31-32) notes, when we ask people to recall and account for something from their past,

... we are asking for attentive retrospection. This is not like taking a second *look* at a filed photograph; it is much more like police procedure where witnesses are asked to recall "any detail, however trivial".

This raises several concerns. Firstly, the question arises as to whether and to what extent we may expect people to retain memories and impressions of past experiences, which at the time might have gone unnoticed, and reproduce them at the investigator's request with the precision needed to inform an accurate analysis?

Secondly, even if it is possible for a person to revive past events and imagine experiencing them again, can he also reanimate the same mental and emotional states that he once lived through? Has Lila, one of the most self-reflexive participants of my research, succeeded in “*trying to go back to my younger self and see how it felt then*” or has she failed in her effort, proving that “the life of the mind is fundamentally Heraclitan, for it never descends twice into the same stream” (Archer, 2003, p. 60)? Thirdly, if James (1950, p. 234) is right that “experience is remoulding us every moment, and our mental reaction on every given thing is really a resultant of our experience of the whole world up to date”, does it then follow that whatever a person makes of his past decisions and actions can never be held as a true reflection of his former self, since our interpretation of any given moment from the past is always and inevitably refracted by all our subsequent experiences? Lawler (2008) holds precisely this view, arguing that “significance is conferred on earlier events by what comes later” (p.16), and that in telling their life stories people always engage in “memoro-politics” – a process by which the past is interpreted in the light of the knowledge and understanding of the subject’s “present” (p. 18). As she contends, “it is not simply that memories are unreliable (although it is): the point is that memories are themselves social products. What we remember depends on the social context” (Lawler, 2008, p. 17). Steedman (1986, p. 5) conveys the same point – of note is her description of how memory makes the current self through the interpretation of the past:

We all return to memories and dreams... again and again; the story we tell of our life is reshaped around them. But the point does not lie there, back in the past, back in the lost time at which they happened; the only point lies in interpretation. The past is re-used through the agency of social information, and that interpretation of it can only be made with what people know of a social world and their place within it.

It is noteworthy that the inherent fallibility of human memory and the traps involved in relying on people’s accounts of the past were recognised by my participants. Lila, for instance, expressed doubts in relation to her mother’s account of Lila’s childhood: “*I am not sure if it is true because sometimes people kind of re-write memories to fit their ideas*”, she said, unwittingly fuelling my concerns over the reliability of her own narrative.

Finally, if the overarching goal of my research can only be fulfilled by gaining knowledge that is being kept in the sole possession of the participants, how can I ascertain the truthfulness of their accounts and ensure that no important facts, details,

and subjects' feelings about them have been deliberately or inadvertently misrepresented or withheld? Is it possible to rely on a person's narration of the past to understand his way toward his present self if, as Goodson and Sikes (2001, p. 6) contend, life stories are always "lives interpreted and made textual" and inevitably present only "a partial, selective commentary on lived experience" and if, as Goffman (1959) famously suggested, people are actors engaged in a incessant process of impression management and presentation of self?

These methodological hurdles, while demanding most careful consideration, need not stand on the way of a rigorous sociological enquiry or prevent attempts at gaining a genuine understanding of the inner worlds and lives of human beings. Upon deep reflection, neither the inevitable limitations of retrospective interviewing nor my concern with the knowledge that cannot be directly accessed or ascertained should create barriers to fulfilling the goals of the study. In the context of this research, I am in agreement with Lawler (2008) that, ultimately, it does not matter whether participants' life stories are objective accounts of facts and events (and as Biesta et al. (2001) are emphatic, they never are) for their value lies in *how* the authors use them to create a particular identity. Even untruthful, the life story "speaks a different kind of truth about its author", Lawler (2008, p. 26) argues, drawing on Haraway's understanding of narratives:

Stories are not 'fictions' in the sense of being 'made up'. Rather, narratives are devices to produce certain kinds of meaning. I try to use stories to tell what I think is the truth – a located, embodied, contingent and therefore *real* truth (1997, p. 230, my emphasis)

What this position opens up is the view of a person's self "as made up through making a *story* out of a *life*" (Lawler, 2008, p. 11), that is "through a series of creative acts in which she interprets and reinterprets her memories and experiences, articulated within narrative" (Lawler, 2008, p. 12). This perspective has important methodological implications. Firstly, it underscores that focus of life history research is not on the lives themselves, but rather "text of lives" (Freeman, 1998, p. 7 cited in Goodson and Sikes, 2001, p. 16). Further, it presupposes a particular way of understanding the relationships between individuals' self-narratives and their identities, i.e. seeing identity as being produced during the storytelling "through assembling various memories, experiences, episodes, etc. within narrative" (Lawler, 2008, p. 11) rather than treating the narrative as a reflection of identity development independent of the act of storytelling. Thus, it is

“not that autobiography (the telling of a life) reflects a pre-given identity: rather, identities are produced through the autobiographical work in which all of us engage every day” (Lawler, 2008, p. 13). This perspective informs the approach that I take in relation to my participants’ life stories: I treat them as compilations of episodes, each being a reflection of the respondents’ particular concerns and the ways in which these concerns played out in their lives, the conflicts and struggles they generated and the directions in which they steered their courses of action. These episodes are not randomly chosen, they “have a place in the plot and so they produce the narrative” (Lawler, 2008, p. 12); together, they constitute a life story which is “always the same story in the end, that is the individual’s account of how she got to be the way she is” (Steedman, 1986, p. 132). Inevitably, of course, the narration of the life story relies on the *current* interpretation of past experiences and events and hence “the “now” is (...) always present in one’s story of the past” (Biesta et al., 2011, p. 9). Understanding and taking into account the present contexts from which individuals reconstruct, interpret, and recount their biographies, therefore, is not only the study’s key research objective, but also a methodological imperative dictated by my intention to explore the evolution of the participants’ identities through the telling of their lives.

3.2.3.2 Direct observations

I designed direct observations to serve as a complimentary research method to assist in the process of data production. My original plan was to accompany the respondents on their weekly grocery shopping and observe their shopping activities, choices, and behaviours. However, this plan was later adjusted to accommodate the variety of ethical consumer practices, shopping routines, and ways of food provisioning that have been revealed in the course of the fieldwork, and while most of the observational trips focused on grocery shopping, they also included visits to allotments, sustainable communities and co-housing developments, charity shops, and even a virtual experience such as online shopping. The number, frequency, and destinations of trips were negotiated with each respondent on an individual basis. Such responsiveness to the demands that the actual research context places on the study design and openness to renegotiating relationships with participants is a crucial component of the critical realist approach to planning and carrying out qualitative research (Maxwell, 2012).

Informal conversations that occurred naturally during observations proved an important source of information contributing to my understanding of the phenomenon

and people under study, in line with methodological literature (e.g. Patton, 2001). I chose not to audiotape these conversations to allow for a less formal interaction as well as due to the likelihood of high levels of background noise and frequent interruptions, but notes were taken of any cues arising from participants' physical and verbal behaviour. As soon as possible after each trip, I reviewed the notes and made essential clarifications for the ease of use at a later stage. Such observational and field notes are considered an effective way to retain gathered data in qualitative research (Lofland and Lofland, 1999). I approached observations as an opportunity for discerning important issues and themes to be further explored and elaborated upon via in-depth interviews. Thus, careful revision and analysis of all relevant data generated in the course of the observations constituted an integral part of my preparation for the formal interview with each participant.

In adopting a multi-method approach, I was guided by the literature suggesting that drawing on different sources of evidence is a powerful strategy that can increase the credibility of the research account and enhance confidence in the validity of the findings (Denscombe, 2014; Bryman, 2008). It was my aim to use triangulation, i.e. combine interviews and observations as mutually reinforcing qualitative techniques (Patton, 2001) in order to illuminate the respondents' consumption practices from different perspectives and secure an opportunity for the corroboration of their accounts, thereby reducing the uncertainty of my interpretations and enhancing the validity of my conclusions. However, as my understanding of the nature of the knowledge I was seeking progressed and my focus on the real but unobservable phenomena and processes heightened, and as key strengths and limitations of my chosen research strategies started to manifest themselves in the course of the fieldwork, the real value of observations as a research technique in the context of my study became evident. Thus, I never used the data yielded from observational trips to verify or contest participants' narratives. Firstly, as I argued above, their truthfulness is thought to be of little consequence for understanding the respondents' accounts of their ethical food commitments and interpreting them in relation to their identities. Secondly, such use of observations would subvert the study's appeal to "something non-observable" (Brown, 1982, p. 234) and its focus on the immaterial, invisible, and impalpable phenomena such as reflexive transactions between human emotions, concerns, and commitments. As a research method, observations could offer no valid means of penetrating the subjective meanings, considerations, and intentions, both fulfilled and unrealised,

behind consumer choices and acts. It is only by listening to the participants' stories that I have been able to penetrate beyond what could be learned from simply observing their shopping behaviours and purchase decisions. Thus, I have found that similar or even identical consumer practices may be inspired by different moral values, manifest different ethical concerns, and reflect different structural circumstances; that seemingly value-laden consumer acts and choices may be completely void of ethical motives; and that the most deeply held moral principles may never manifest themselves in behaviour due to the subjective conditions and objective circumstances that prevent individuals from acting on their beliefs. While of no benefit as a means of comparison and contrast, observations proved absolutely critical in enabling me to approach the standards of rigour of interpretive and, more specifically, hermeneutic phenomenological research. One of the key methodological prescriptions of hermeneutic phenomenology is that individuals' experiences must be related to and understood in light of the specific "life worlds" in which they arise (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1990). The aim of the researcher, therefore, is to approximate the research process to the studied experience as it is lived. Direct observations of participants' ethical activities, from shopping for ethically labelled products in supermarkets and health shops to digging over an allotment site, have been key to enabling me to better understand the contexts in which ethical food choices were made and ethical consumption activities took place, and thus achieve the needed level of closeness to the real experiences of ethical consumers *as they were being lived*. Each of these observations provided a direct insight into the ways in which the subjects lived through the experience of acting as an ethical food consumer and brought their consumer agency into play with their moral concerns. They have also presented an opportunity for participants to talk about their ethical consumer experiences while simultaneously creating and living through them, thus providing for a better "involvement of the researcher in the world of the research participants and their stories" (van Manen, 1997 cited in Kafle, 2013, p. 196). Through "bathing in the experience as it occurs" (Grbich, 2007, p. 88), I have been able to observe the diverse forms and subtle nuances of ethical consumer activities which played an important role in enhancing my frame of reference, i.e. the background knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study - a key determinant of the quality and credibility of hermeneutic phenomenological research (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994).

Furthermore, spending time with the participants prior to formal interviews has laid the foundations for developing rapport and reducing the distance between the

researcher and the researched. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) indicate the importance of the amount of time spent and the frequency of encounters with respondents as a key factor contributing to productive and trustful research relationships. Through extensive communication with my respondents, I managed to build the level of trust that is needed for individuals to feel comfortable to share their life stories with an outside person. Interviewees' comments highlight the level of openness and trust that characterised my relationship with the participants: "*I will tell you anything*", responded Maggi to my request to provide as much detail about her life as she feels comfortable with; "*this is quite personal, but I don't mind telling you*", said Mary when discussing her personal family circumstances. This "environment of safety and trust" (Laverty, 2003, p. 19) established through prior communication during observational trips allowed me to fully harness the potential of my primary research method, in-depth interviews, to achieve the desired depth and breadth of information and access the reflexive workings and subjective meanings underlying the participants' ethical food commitments. Retrospectively, what was meant to serve as a complimentary data collection technique and a tool for corroboration of findings proved to be an essential means of ensuring the quality, credibility, and trustworthiness of my research. Through this methodological experience, I have come to recognise the value of a realist approach to assessing research methods, i.e. not "as context-independent criteria for quality" (Creswell, 2012, p. 148), but "as a means of obtaining evidence that can deal with plausible threats to validity of the study's interpretations and conclusions" (Creswell, 2012, p. 148). I will further elaborate on the issues of validity in the relevant section of the chapter.

3.3 Researcher positionality

3.3.1 Understanding and negotiating my subjectivity

Both critical realism and hermeneutic phenomenology underscore the role of the researcher as a co-producer of information and the inevitable effects of researcher subjectivity, i.e. his or her experiences, beliefs, values, and personal characteristics, on the analysis and interpretation of data. Critical realist approach to research design demands that the researcher's identity and perspectives be taken into account (Maxwell, 2012); likewise, hermeneutic phenomenological tradition requires the researcher to

accept the impossibility of “bracketing”, i.e. suspending “all previous ontological judgment about the situation in an attempt to gain access to the common-sense knowledge and practical reasoning used by the group under study” (Goulding, 1999, p. 863). In consumer studies more specifically, Wallendorf and Brucks (1993) and Gould (1995) reject the notions of objectivity and distance and call for an acknowledgement of the part that researcher subjectivity plays in shaping both the process and conclusions of research. Accordingly, it was my aim as an investigator to recognise my subjectivity, make implicit assumptions explicit, and identify the potential “interpretive influences” (Lavery, 2003, p. 24) on my research account thereby enhancing its credibility. However, while sharing the view that “rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher, we should set about understanding them” (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 16), I found it challenging to work out “how, specifically, one becomes aware of this subjectivity and its consequences, and how one uses this subjectivity productively in the research” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 98). Following methodological prescriptions, I engaged in reflexive self-analysis and writing which involved describing, exploring, and explaining my assumptions, feelings, and beliefs about the phenomena and people under study. The result of this on-going introspective exercise has been extensive notes, what Maxwell (2012) refers to as “researcher identity memos” and Preissle (2008) calls “subjectivity statements”. Some of these notes I used solely for personal reflection, while others were published on my online blog (www.ediblematters.wordpress.com) where I have been continuously documenting the progress of my study and concomitant evolution of my academic and personal knowledge of the research subject. This “public account of the self” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 89) offers evidence of my incessant reflexive effort to “explore and embrace the role of subjectivity” (Tolman and Brydon-Miller, 2001, p. 5) and effectively incorporate it into my research design and conduct. It testifies to my persistent efforts to go beyond mere *private* reflections on my relationship to the research and with the researched and, as Denscombe (2014) emphatically prescribes, to present them publicly in order to support the study conclusions and outcomes. From this viewpoint, every weekly post published on my blog, “open to public scrutiny and amenable to evaluation” (Denscombe, 2014, p. 284), contributed to my accountability and transparency as a researcher, an analyst, and a writer. To borrow from Johnstone (2007, p. 113), this reflexive record enhances the legitimacy of my research “by establishing a vantage point for critically assessing the researchers themselves, their integrity, their decisions

on questions of research design, strategy, methods and theoretical framework and the data that result”.

Finally, in the field I engaged with and negotiated my subjectivity by making it an integral component of my communication with the participants, an essential constituent of the process of listening and understanding their narratives (Maxwell, 2012). Like Tolman and Brydon-Miller, I made a conscious effort to “bring myself knowingly into the process of listening, learning from my own thoughts and feelings in response to what [a participant] is saying in her story” (2001, p. 132) and in doing so, improve “my ability to stay clear about what my own ideas and feelings are and how they do or do not line up with [participants’] words, thus avoiding “bias” or imposing my story over [theirs]” (2001, p. 132). By maintaining such reflexive consciousness, I was able to stay more attuned to the effects of my subjectivity on my interpretation and representation of the respondents’ experiences, concerns, and identities and thereby enhance my accountability and transparency as the author of the research.

3.3.2 Research relationships: situating myself in relation to the ethical consumers of my research

Engaging with the literature addressing the relationships between researcher and researched was an essential step in the process of designing this study. In setting out on the fieldwork, I was aware of the importance of establishing rapport with respondents for the successful accomplishment of the research goals. In practice, however, building a harmonious relationship with the study subjects and achieving a sense of trust to allow for the free flow of information (Spradley, 1979) involved more than managing my position as a researcher and interviewer. Upon the very first contacts with the ethical consumers of my research, I recognised the need to reflect upon my moral positionality, i.e. who I am and what my position is in relation to the phenomenon under study, and engage with - perhaps, even bring under control - the participants’ perceptions of me as an individual and a person of certain principles and beliefs. I was first prompted to think about the ways in which the participants’ view of my personal stance on ethical consumption may affect our research relationships by a prospective respondent who, in the process of negotiating her participation in my study via email, requested that I refrain from sending her files and forms as Microsoft Word Documents as she was boycotting the corporation on ethical grounds. Despite that this lady did not eventually become my research subject, our communication has been very important in terms of

revealing how the participants could bring their ethical identity and consumer agency into our relationships and how my handling of these sensitive issues could affect the research process and its outcomes. These considerations became increasingly prominent in the course of the fieldwork, of which casual conversations and meetings with participants have been a significant part. Somewhat unexpectedly, I found that the respondents often approached and potentially even assessed me in exactly the same way as I approached and assessed them, that is as an emotional, reflexive, and evaluative human being whose relationship to the world is one of concern. Given the focus of my study, some of the participants assumed that I identified as an ethical consumer and pursued moral food commitments myself. In reality, despite that over the last couple of years under the inevitable influence of my research and as the result of continuous engagement with the subject I have become increasingly mindful about the implications of my personal consumption style, I have never explicitly committed or actively engaged with any practices of consumption that could be defined as ethical and cannot, therefore, claim an ethical consumer identity. I initially assumed that this difference could contribute to the distance between me and my participants, undermine the relationship of trust, and inhibit an open dialogue thereby posing a threat to the validity of my research account. I have, however, responded to Maxwell's appeal that researchers "need to avoid assuming that solidarity is necessarily a matter of similarity, and to be prepared to recognise the actual processes through which difference can contribute to relationship" (2012, p. 102). In my case, honesty about my own consumer position contributed to my pursuit of symmetric and reciprocal research relationships – those which "reflect a more responsible ethical stance and are likely to yield deeper data and better social science" (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, pp. 137-138). Besides, acknowledging my lack of engagement with ethical consumption was not merely a matter of being honest with those whom I expected to be honest with me, it was also a means of ensuring a comfortable space between me and my participants and avoid the "danger" of "too much rapport" (Seidman, 1998, pp. 80-82). By highlighting that my interest in ethical consumption was of academic as opposed to personal nature, I was able to subtly accentuate my role as a researcher and attain a balanced relationship needed for ensuring credible research (Seidman, 1998). At the same time, I strove to prevent potential clashes between my participants' ethical commitments and my lack of such by making a conscious effort, wherever possible, to ensure that my personal lifestyle and consumption choices do not disrupt the environment of comfort, safety,

and trust that I managed to establish. For instance, I deliberately refrained from wearing leather shoes, having regular milk with my coffee, or exposing branded items such as the iPhone or Macbook when meeting with the participants so that not to disturb their feelings or inhibit an open discussion. This called for not only emotional sensitivity, but also careful considerations of a more practical sort, such as my dress code, and required me to engage with the “whole webs of signification (...) built up around apparently tiny clues” (Gray, 1995, p. 162), up to the choice of an e-mail attachment format, which could be scrutinized, assessed, and interpreted by my ethically minded participants. This deliberate effort ensued from my recognition that “the relationships that the researcher created with the participants in the research are *real phenomena*; they shape the context within which the research is conducted, and have a profound influence on the research and its results” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 100, my emphasis). In hindsight, managing research relationships has been a highly reflexive and emotionally demanding experience which has triggered my sense of presence in the research process as a person and not merely as a detached investigator. Staying attuned to the effects of my subjectivity on the research conduct and engaging with my positionality in relation to the participants have been key elements of my approach to enhancing the validity of my research account.

3.4 Data analysis

I approached the transcription of interviews as the first stage of data analysis. While transcribing the participants’ narratives, I made notes on the relevant concepts, recurrent patterns, and dominant themes. In this way, I compiled a summary sheet for each interview transcript to be added to the respective “ethical consumer case” – a comprehensive profile of each of the respondents which I had been building throughout the research process. Each such case consisted of the background information about the participant, detailed observational and field notes, verbatim transcription of the formal interview, and any other documents and materials that provided insight into the respondent’s ethical consumption concerns, practices, and experiences (Joe’s case folder, for instance, included excerpts from his personal journal containing a reflexive account of his shopping and eating practices which he generously shared with me). From these documents, textual data for analysis and interpretation ensued. While

hermeneutic phenomenological tradition emphasizes that the process of textual interpretation is irreducible to a set of methodological procedures (Gadamer et al., 2004; van Manen, 1997) and thus none is offered, scholars (Arnold and Fischer, 1994; Laverly, 2003; Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994) suggest that the data be analysed through a hermeneutic circle – a series of iterations between the parts and the whole of the texts. In a study of the sociocultural meanings underlying consumer experiences, Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994) provide detailed methodological guidelines for the application of hermeneutic phenomenology to the research process, emphasising that a thorough analysis should aim at the thematic interpretation of the data through hermeneutic endeavour, that is an iterative reading of the text and on-going revisions of prior interpretations in light of the constantly developing understanding of the relationships between the text as a whole and its parts. Authors distinguish between intra-textual movements, whose aim is to achieve an understanding of the text as a whole, and inter-textual iterations, which seek to establish distinctions and similarities across different texts. The purpose of this strategy of interpretation is through each subsequent reading of the text to elicit a broader range of essential meanings until an integrated understanding and a coherent interpretation of the text is achieved (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994), at which point the hermeneutic cycle may stop (Kvale, 1996). Guided by these prescriptions, I conducted the analysis by engaging in iterative readings of the participants’ ethical food stories, focusing on the flow of events and looking for their antecedents, consequences, and interdependencies. My analysis strategy did not involve coding of data as I wanted to avoid what Maxwell refers to as “context-stripping” (2012, p. 115), i.e. neglecting the contextual relationships within which different data segments originally belong and which are usually lost as the result of the categorizing analysis. Concerned with the actual contexts in which the phenomena and processes of interest emerged and unfolded, I sought to preserve the diverse and complex contextual ties and relations and hence refrained from segmenting participants’ narratives into discrete and decontextualized data units. As Atkinson, I was interested in “reading episodes and passages at greater length, with a correspondingly different attitude toward the act of reading and hence of analysis. Rather than constructing my account like a patchwork quilt, I [felt] more like working with the whole cloth” (1992, p. 460). For the same reasons, that is to avoid cutting up “the whole cloth” of the participants’ stories, I did not rely on any computer software that is often used to facilitate and organise data analysis. Instead, I used printed copies of interview

transcripts and notes and a highlighter pen - the old paper-and-pencil method which I found not only an effective, but also a more satisfying way of immersing myself in the data and connecting with the participants' stories on both mental and physical levels. In the words of Saldaña (2012, p. 22),

There is something to be said for a large area of desk or table space with multiple pages or strips of paper spread out to see the smaller pieces of the larger puzzle – a literal perspective not always possible on a computer's monitor screen.

A small number of participants enabled me to avoid categorising the data without losing the ability to compare and find connections between different interviews and reveal patterns and commonalities in the subjects' accounts. I moved back and forth across different ethical consumer cases to highlight similarities and differences in the participants' experiences first at the level of concrete, but moving further beyond the explicit physical and mental phenomena described in the data to discern subtler conceptual processes captured in it. The analysis was geared towards comprehension, synthesising, and theorising and involved continuous revisions of the previously achieved understandings and tentatively drawn conclusions. The hermeneutic circle continued until the data was rendered meaningful and turned into credible evidence to which I could bring my theoretical constructions in order to develop a social theory about common structures and underlying mechanisms of ethical consumption practices.

3.5 Assessing the validity of research: a realist approach

Maintaining the continuity of my philosophical position, I adopt a realist approach to assessing the quality of my research. Arguing from a realist perspective, Maxwell rejects the procedure-based approach to validity indicating that validity “pertains to the accounts or conclusions reached by using a particular method in a particular context for a particular purpose, not to the method itself” (2012, p. 130). Neither can judgements of validity be applied to data for, as Hammersley and Atkinson point out, “data in themselves cannot be valid or invalid; what is at issue are the inferences drawn from them” (2007, p. 223). Assessing the validity of research, therefore, is a matter of evaluating the credibility and trustworthiness of the understandings and conclusions reached by the researcher. From this point of view, “understanding is a more fundamental concept for qualitative researchers than validity”

(Maxwell, 2012, p. 133). To apply the notion of validity to researcher's interpretations and understandings, Maxwell emphasises, is not to suggest that "only one correct, "objective" understanding" (2012, p. 133) of the phenomena under study has the right to exist, but to indicate the importance of assessing the relationship between the research account and the things that it claims to account for.

Given the nature of my study, of primary concern is its interpretative validity, that is the degree to which its conclusions are based on the comprehension of the phenomena under study from the perspective of those being studied, rather than that of the researcher: "accounts of meaning must be based initially on the conceptual framework of the people whose meaning is in question", argues Maxwell (2012, p. 138). Addressing threats to interpretive validity is challenging because the inner workings of people's minds can be neither directly observed nor straightforwardly accessed, and researcher's understanding thereof is inherently "a matter of inference" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 138) from respondents' own accounts and behaviours. Moreover, as Maxwell points out, judgements of interpretative validity pertain as much to participants' conscious concepts as to their unconscious motives, values, and beliefs, and it is the task of the investigator to reveal, understand, and interpret not only actions, feelings, and beliefs which participants acknowledge as their own, but also those that they might be unaware or oblivious of. Thus, while acknowledging that all understandings are inevitably partial, fallible, and incomplete, and that absolute certainty is impossible to achieve, I sought to maximize the degree of legitimacy of my analysis and the trustworthiness of my conclusions by adhering, as much as possible, to the standards of rigour of qualitative and, more specifically, hermeneutic phenomenological research. As a methodological approach, hermeneutic phenomenology offers potential to mitigate the validity threats to researcher's interpretations through a set of guidelines for gaining access to the life worlds of those being studied and developing an understanding from participants' perspectives. In line with a realist perspective, hermeneutic phenomenology considers comprehension a prerequisite to credible interpretation and theorising. Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1994, p. 441) are emphatic that a hermeneutic study should start with a thorough background research on the subject of interest, while van Manen (1997) considers researcher's orientation to the phenomenon under study to be central to an effective hermeneutic analysis. The hermeneutic approach instructs the researcher to attain comprehension by identifying and reflecting on her own experiences of the phenomenon, gaining experiential descriptions of it from the study subjects, and

engaging with relevant literature to enhance understanding and refine conclusions (Goulding, 1999). In keeping with these prescriptions, I began my pursuit of the highest possible degree of comprehension by engaging in self-reflection aimed at the revision of my personal experiences of ethical consumption and with ethical consumers. This effort yielded sparse results due to my very limited prior exposure to ethical consumption as a social phenomenon and ethical consumers as a personality type – a gap which I attribute to the specifics of the socio-cultural environment, informational context, and consumption opportunities prevailing in Azerbaijan, the country where I was born, raised, and spent almost my entire life. This has presented a challenge on my way toward producing a rich and trustworthy research account given the hermeneutics' acute emphasis on the "interpretative orientation" or "frame of reference" (Thompson, Pollio and Locander, 1994, p. 441) of the researcher as a key determinant of the quality of interpretation and credibility of research findings. I have addressed this potential weakness in a number of ways, all intended to enhance the scope of my contextual knowledge and understanding of ethical consumption and ethical consumers. Thus, throughout the research process I have continually engaged with the topical issues and debates dominating both academic and general public discourse on ethical consumption; subscribed to a range of ethical consumer magazines and newsletters; and maintained an online blog documenting the evolution of my apprehension of the phenomenon as well as the progress of my research. Along with theoretical understanding, I was also actively developing my experiential knowledge of ethical consumption. Particularly, I found it necessary to obtain a more specific idea about ethical products available on the market, the range of issues they address and the types of moral concerns that they speak to. Thus, I started to buy ethical foods (on an occasional basis) to have a direct experience of searching for, identifying, and choosing between products with ethical credentials. In the process of getting familiar with the ethical foods market, I have compiled a list of the ethical labelling schemes that appear to dominate the UK food market; this gave me an understanding of the types of ethical labels that the UK consumers are likely to come in contact with as well as the kinds of ethical concerns they promote.

Finally, in building my frame of reference I actively used observations as an opportunity to immerse myself into the life worlds of ethical consumers and learn about their practices, experiences, and behaviours. Not only has this improved my understanding of the phenomenon of interest, but it also allowed to mitigate the validity

threats inherent in my primary research method, i.e. interviews. As Maxwell (2012) highlights, relying on insights gained from a brief and limited interaction during the interviewing process to make inferences about the rest of the respondent's actions, feelings, and thoughts inevitably raises concerns about internal generalizability, that is the investigator's ability to project conclusions about processes studied onto those that remained outside the interview situation. From this viewpoint, observations provided me with an opportunity to gain enhanced insight into the participants' attitudes, characters, and behaviours and reveal aspects of their ethical consumer practices and identities that were not expressed or exposed in the interviews, thereby enhancing the validity of my research account.

3.6 Conclusion

The burden of this chapter has been to provide an overview of the methodological approach adopted in the thesis, outline its specific research strategies and techniques and situate them in the context of my epistemological perspective and the purposes of the study. In it, I have explained the rationale behind my research design and indicated the ways in which it enabled me to achieve the goals of the project. I have reflected on the benefits and limitations of my chosen research methods, both according to textbooks and, most importantly, in terms of how they played out in practice and affected the outcomes of the study, and described and explained the practical steps that I was required to take in order to harness the potential as well as mitigate the weaknesses of my approach to generating and analysing the data. In designing this study, I was guided by the claim that the first requirement of social research is "fidelity to the phenomenon under study, not to any particular set of methodological principles" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 7). Thus, while my methodological procedures were consistently oriented toward the standards of rigour of scientific enquiry in general and qualitative research in particular, I approached the research design as "a "do-it-yourself" rather than "off-the-shelf" process" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 76). Reminded by Sandelowski (1954, p. 56) that "rules of method serve us, but only to a certain point, after which they may enslave us", I tried to preserve the "art in science" by adjusting methodological prescriptions to the demands of the actual research context rather than

“simply proceeding along a predesigned path” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 103), and exploring the potential of established techniques to serve new purposes and offer enhanced benefits. For instance, I observed the phenomenological principle of respondent-led interviewing only as far as it did not interfere with my pursuit of the knowledge needed for achieving the goals of the study. Also, I found that the principle of data triangulation was neither applicable to nor of concern for my study given its philosophical and epistemological underpinnings and research aims. Instead of relying on observations for the purpose of data verification, I used them as a source of opportunities for establishing rapport and laying the basis for an open, honest, and trustful relationship with my participants. These relationships have themselves become an integral component of my chosen methods of data production and essential part of the overall study design, as prescribed by a realist approach (Maxwell, 2012). Moreover, I harnessed the potential of observations to address potential validity threats to my research account through developing the frame of reference that I brought to the data and improving the internal generalisability of my interpretations and conclusions. Hence, my approach to the techniques and procedures deployed in the study is that of a realist researcher who assesses her methods “in terms of the actual context and purpose of their use” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 148) and the ways they have contributed to a valid research account. Further, in performing data analysis, I refrained from subjecting the texts to the commonly prescribed categorizing procedures, such as coding, which I perceived as too mechanical, reductive and, most importantly, destructive for the valuable connections between data and their context which I considered critical to understanding the respondents’ accounts. Thus, the process of analysis has been “primarily an interpretive act” rather than “a precise science” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 4) and was aimed at achieving a complex, systemic view of the ensemble of the underlying processes and mechanisms captured in the data. Most importantly, at every step of the research process I have maintained commitment to an anti-empiricist approach to social enquiry – this has been evident in my sustained focus on the non-material processes informing the ethical consumption phenomenon rather than its directly observable and measurable manifestations; in my genuine concern with explaining the underlying generative principles of ethical consumer practices and identities rather than producing empirically testable predictions thereof; and my persistent pursuit of this knowledge through an interpretative analysis of the subjective workings of the minds of the participants rather than a direct perception of their inevitably limited behavioural expressions.

The outcome of the above described research process is a small-scale study of ethical consumer practices and identities. Its empirical findings are based on qualitative in-depth interviews with nine self-defined ethical consumers ~~and direct observations of their ethical consumption activities and pursuits~~. While my selection of participants reflects a range of differently positioned subjects and various forms of ethical consumption, this research is not representative of all individuals who may self-identify as ethical consumers and does not generate what Yin (1993) calls “statistical generalisations”. As any qualitative research, the purpose of this study was “not to generalize but rather to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of some aspect of human experience through the intensive study of particular cases” (Polit and Beck, 2010, p. 1451). The value of this thesis lies in its potential to drive social theory, to promote an understanding of ethical consumption which goes beyond the concrete level of particular actions of individual agents and extends to the level of conceptual relations, theoretical mechanisms, and causal processes underlying this complex social phenomenon. This theory is a means to what Yin (1993) calls “analytic” and Seale (1999) refers to as “theoretical” generalization – that which enables making projections about the driving factors, contextual effects and likely outcomes from one ethical consumer case to others. As Muys (2009, p. 43), drawing on Stake, puts it:

The full and thorough knowledge of the particular is also a form of generalization, not in the sense of scientific induction but as a naturalistic generalization that is arrived at by recognizing the similarities of objects and issues in and out of context.

The value of this research, therefore, is not in its capacity to “enumerate frequencies”, but in its potential “to expand and generalize theories” (Yin, 2009, p. 15). By demonstrating that the concept of reflexivity can be applied to open up a new perspective on ethical consumption, I enhanced the applicability of an existing theory and showcased its capacity to explain a specific social phenomenon, reveal its further aspects, and enrich our current understanding of it. Not only does thesis shows that moral concerns and reflexive capacities of social agents generate subjective commitments to ethical consumption, but it explains *how* exactly they do so, thus fulfilling an essential task of a realist research, i.e. to go beyond mere description and interpretation to engage with causality and achieve *explanation* of the phenomenon under study. Admittedly, this explanation only invokes a particular set of structures and powers which generate and define ethical consumer practices and identities. As Brown (2014) points out, realist researchers are limited in their ability to uncover and grasp the

totality of the complex system of myriad of discrete structures and powers that determine the causes of emergence and shape the conditions of existence of social events, forms, and activities. In synthesizing the results of my analysis of local and specific ethical consumer cases into a unified social theory about the generative mechanisms of individuals' ethical concerns and identities, I am inevitably constrained by the very specificity and locality of these cases. The particular contexts from which the participants understood their lives and constructed their narratives and in which I as a researcher accessed and interpreted them automatically limit the reach of my scientific enquiry and draw boundaries around what I was able to reveal, explore, and invoke in my explanation. Yet, this context-specific research endeavour is, undoubtedly, a worthwhile undertaking for, as Brown (2014, p. 118) notes, "we are never going to find out about the system as a whole without local and specific enquiry". The investigation of local and specific cases, Brown acknowledges, enables realist researchers to hypothesize specific underlying structures and reproduce real causes or conditions of social phenomena – the key goal of my research which, as I hope, by the end of this thesis will have been achieved.

Chapter 4

Introducing the Ethical Consumers to My Research

Previously, I have outlined the ontological and epistemological presuppositions in which my study is grounded. By highlighting distinct properties and causal powers of both structure and agency and their role in determining social outcomes, I have justified the indispensability of a stratified model of social reality for guiding the analysis and achieving an understanding of the complex interplay of subjective and objective influences which shape and mould individual practices of ethical consumption. I have introduced the concept of reflexivity which forms the core of my theoretical framework and holds the key explanatory power for ethical consumption as an identity-concerned project of active, creative, and self-conscious agents. It is now time, following Sayer's (2010) methodological appeal, to relate these abstract theoretical notions to the concrete – the experiences, decisions, and practices of self-defined ethical consumers – in order to explain the generative mechanism which produce ethical consumer commitments and identities as well as the subjective and objective factors that determine them all along.

When presenting the story of an ethical food consumer in this thesis, I take a specific position toward my audience. In trying to fulfill yet another of Andrew Sayer's methodological prescriptions, I intend and hope to be able to overcome the tendency of social researchers to treat readers "more as fellow spectators of social life than as possible co-participants" (2011, p. 11), that is to describe and explain social issues and processes through third person accounts of other people's behaviour without explicitly asking or even tacitly encouraging readers to assess presented portrayals in light of their personal life experiences. Since my study focuses on the issues that are near and dear to the heart of every human being (for no one can possibly live a life without ever considering the questions of morality, ethics, and the right way to be and act), I find the urge to follow Sayer's appeal to "address the readers as fellow participants in life" (2011, p. 11) particularly justified. I therefore want to invite my readers to step out of the position of detached observers and, as I walk them through the life stories of nine ethical food consumers, reflect back on their own experiences and feelings – as emotional beings, as moral characters, and as humans constantly facing the challenge of

achieving and maintaining a satisfying life. To be able to assess my account of the subjects' inner processes and their outward manifestations, one does not have to be or even try to put himself in the shoes of an ethical food consumer. To identify with the participants of my study and comprehend their moral pursuits, it is sufficient to understand yourself as a person whose relationship to the world is one of concern. For any of us, this should not be a difficult task for we all have our own worries and cares which, whether we wish it or not, incessantly feed into our deliberations about what to do with our life, steering us towards certain courses of action and away from the others. A certain amount of self-reflection is all it takes for a person to discern the presence – or absence – of particular concerns in every deliberate action she takes or refrains from taking. The moment one starts seeing her own behaviour in terms of a wider picture of her concerns, it suddenly becomes very easy to understand someone else's decisions, choices, and actions, and it does not matter in the least that the reader's subjective concerns and those of the person whose practices I am trying to render meaningful may be about completely different things. Regardless of which domain of life our concerns belong to, the effects they exert on us – human beings – remain the same: they stir up our emotions which make us aware of the things that we care about and value most; they provoke reflexive deliberations through which we define our ultimate concerns and devise ways to address them; and they prompt us to continuously monitor the course of our life to ensure the fit between our chosen moral projects, subjective concerns, and objective circumstances. Thus, having recognised themselves as humans whose emotional and mental wellbeing is dependent on the state of the things they truly care about and having projected this image onto the ethical consumers of my research, the readers of this thesis should have no difficulty in following my account of individuals' ethical food commitments and understanding the ways in which they shape subjects' personal identities and social lives.

Despite not being able to present complete narratives of all participant of my research, I feel it is necessary to introduce each of the interviewees and give a glimpse of their personal characters and life stories. The identity of the respondents is protected through the use of pseudonyms, all of which except one (Lucy) were chosen by the participants themselves. In four out of nine participant cases, however, I adhere to the expressed desire of the respondents to use their real first names (Darren, David, Maggi, and Joe). The participants' age at the time of the first meeting is given. By introducing the ethical consumers of my research through short vignettes, I aim to set the

background for the forthcoming analysis and discussion of the empirical evidence, provide the readers with an opportunity to see unique individuals behind the data, and duly acknowledge all those who have contributed to my study and made the ambitious undertaking of illuminating the inner worlds and minds of ethical food consumers possible and, I hope, successful.

Vignette 1: Lucy

Lucy is one of the self-selected participants of my study. She learned about my research from the promotional flyer which she picked up at one of the ethical grocery stores in town. Our communication included two separate shopping trips to Sainsbury's and Waitrose and a two-and-a-half hour interview.

Lucy is 48 years old and works in the field of career guidance and occupational therapy. She is university educated and tends to identify with middle class. Lucy shares responsibility for food provision with her husband who also takes care of most of the cooking, which has always been a burden for Lucy. She grew up in a suburban area as the youngest of five children. Her family's diet was a mix of convenience foods - "*stuff from cans and packets*" - during weekdays and traditional English meals served at weekends when her working mother had time to cook from scratch. Lucy was raised in a household full of pets and has developed an affinity with animals at a very young age. Her idea of food ethics has been, and still is, centred around animal life and welfare. It doesn't take Lucy long to pinpoint the origins of her moral concerns - she links them firmly to her personal experiences with animals which had very tangible implications for how she went on about her diet. At the age of 12, she proclaimed herself a vegetarian on moral grounds and has been sustaining a meatless diet ever since. Three years ago, she took her moral project to the next level by going vegan. It is her strong commitment to cruelty-free consumption that informs Lucy's self-identification as an ethical consumer. At the same time, she admits that over recent years she has become less rigid in her pursuit of ethical foodways, with concerns over health increasingly impinging upon her dietary principles. For Lucy, ethical consumption means "*just that I thought through it carefully and it fits with my conscience*", the principle of not doing harm being the key moral benchmark against which she evaluates her consumption decisions and acts.

Vignette 2: Jason

Jason is one of the participants whom I invited to take part in my research having learned about his engagement in ethical consumption, specifically his pursuit of organic farming and strong preference for organic foods. In total, I met Jason on five separate occasions which included two informal meetings during which we discussed the food culture of his home country, his farming pursuits, his dietary preferences and tastes; two shopping trips to Morrison's – Jason's usual destination for grocery shopping; and a formal interview which took around one hour to complete.

Jason is 31 years old and currently pursuing a doctoral research project on a sustainability-related subject. Being an overseas student in England, he lives in a rented accommodation and is responsible for his own food provisioning and cooking. Jason refused to define himself in terms of class as it seemed an alien concept to him, although his level of education and material circumstances would suggest belonging to the middle class. He grew up in a traditional household with his mother being responsible for preparing family meals, which Jason described as always fresh, nutritious, and healthy. Surrounded by small-scale holdings, Jason's family had easy access to locally grown, organic, seasonal produce, although questions of food ethics have never been explicitly raised in the house. Despite not being a self-recruited participant, Jason self-identifies as an ethical consumer who, in his view, "*is someone who takes into account a range of different issues such as, for example, responsibility*". His project of ethical consumption is centred on commitment to organic, seasonal, and local produce, preservation of endangered species, and selective fair-trade purchases, but, consistent with Jason's view of ethical consumerism as "*not the action of just eating*" but "*the whole life attitude*", extends beyond provision and consumption of food and involves waste management practices, such as recycling. Jason considers availability of products with desired qualities and convenience to be major impediments on the way toward more responsible consumption.

Vignette 3: David

I knew David from my network of academic acquaintances and invited him to take part in my study. A committed vegetarian with strong environmental values and a

long-held interest in sustainability, he seemed - and proved - a perfect participant. I met David on multiple occasions, but our formal interaction consisted of three shopping trips to various locations, including Waitrose and Sainsbury's as well as independent international food stores, and two separate two-and-a-half hour interviews.

David is 33 years old and currently pursuing a doctoral degree in the field of sustainability. He expressed difficulty in defining his social position – his background is working class, but his educational and occupation trajectory as well as cultural capital suggest middle-class belonging. He has recently moved in with his girlfriend – a life-long vegetarian and environmentalist. They usually do grocery shopping together, but food preparation is almost exclusively David's responsibility – a passionate and competent cook, he finds cooking a highly enjoyable and rewarding activity. David is a vegetarian, an avid supporter of organic and local agriculture, and is interested in fair-trade. He is highly knowledgeable about the specifics of global food production and consumption and their environmental and societal repercussions; his food practices are well informed and well thought through. At the core of his moral food project are concerns over the environment, climate change, and social justice. David's commitment to a meat-free diet has purely environmentalist underpinnings which distinguishes him from other vegetarian and vegan subjects of my study for whom killing animals is morally wrong. For David, being an ethical food consumer means "*making a deliberate, conscious decision to do what you think is good and always in opposition to what you think is bad*". At various points in life, David's ethical pursuits were constrained by time, money, and availability of preferred options which he perceives as major barriers to consumer engagement in ethical consumption.

Vignette 4: Darren

Darren is a self-selected participant who got interested in my research after seeing a promotional poster at the local community centre. I met him multiple times, including several informal meetings, a visit to his allotment site, two shopping trips to international grocery stores, and a formal interview which lasted around two hours.

Darren is a 36 years old vegan and animal rights activist. He earns his living through various pursuits, such as distribution of herbal teas. Darren defines himself as lower class due to his family background, material circumstances, and occupational status. At the same time, he is university educated to an undergraduate degree, well-read

in philosophy and sociology, and has extensive knowledge about issues of food production. Previously married, he is now divorced, lives on his own and does all shopping and cooking himself. Darren grew up in a single parent household and was raised on a mix of traditional African-Caribbean cooking and ready meals. Meat was an essential part of his family's diet and it was not until quite later in life that Darren developed concerns over animal welfare and life. His moral food project evolved progressively from pescetarianism, to vegetarianism, and, finally, to veganism. Currently, his food choices are determined by a commitment to cruelty-free consumption which does not permit any products of animal origin. He is aware of and supports organic and fair-trade, but can rarely afford to buy any of these premium-priced products. His ethical pursuits extend beyond personal consumption - he is a founder of a charitable organization promoting vegan lifestyle, manages an allotment collective to grow food for the homeless, regularly organizes vegan cooking events to feed the hungry, and gives public speeches to promote cruelty-free living. For Darren, ethical consumption means "*not causing suffering*", and he perceives himself as an ethical consumer because he is "*not taking part in animal abuse, suffering*". He thinks that habit - "*mental slavery*" in his words - is a major obstacle to be overcome on the way toward more ethical foodways.

Vignette 5: Mary

Mary learned about my research through a newsletter of one of the co-housing groups that had kindly agreed to advertise my project among their members. With Mary, we have been on three shopping trips mainly to independent grocery stores and health food shops, but also conventional supermarkets such as Sainsbury's. We met separately for a formal interview which lasted around two hours.

Mary is 64 years old. She has an MSc in environmental technology and has held various positions at universities, including distance teaching and research in environmental sustainability. She is currently retired, but remains a keen volunteer for environmentally oriented organizations, such as the Wildlife Trust. She lives alone and takes care of her food provisioning and preparation. She defines herself as middle class, although recognizes the fuzziness of the concept. Mary grew up on a farm, in close proximity to nature and wildlife, and became involved in food growing and animal rearing activities at an early age. Her family's diet consisted of freshly cooked,

wholesome meals in the spirit of traditional British cooking. Mary's moral food project is inspired by concerns over environmental wellbeing, biodiversity, and issues of social justice, hence she actively seeks out organic, locally grown, and fairly traded produce. Mary has never been vegan or vegetarian, but over the last years she has made a conscious effort to reduce her meat intake – this refinement of her ethical food practice is informed by growing awareness of the negative environmental and ethical impacts of intensive meat production, especially those related to climate change and animal welfare. She can therefore be described as a “vegetarian-oriented” (Janda and Trocchia, 2001) person – the one who displays a tendency to prefer vegetarian solutions over meat-based meals. For Mary, ethical consumption means *“being aware of the impact on other people and other living organisms on the planet of the decisions you make and the things you consume, and try to create the least impact – negative impact - as you can in the process – socially, environmentally, ecologically”*. She self-defines as an ethical food consumer because most of her food purchases, although admittedly not all of them, *“are with an awareness and some consideration of this effect on people and the planet”*. She cites lack of clear information and money as major barriers to switching to more responsibly modes of consumption.

Vignette 6: Maggi

Maggi is another self-recruited participant. As Mary, she learned about my study from a newsletter of a co-housing community of which she is a friend. I had a chance to develop a very close rapport with Maggi through extensive face-to-face as well as email communication, including three separate visits to various co-housing sites, four shopping trips, and a two-hour long interview.

Maggi is 62 years old and currently retired. She is university educated, has had a long career as a social worker, and perceives herself to be middle class. Both her children have by now moved out of the family home leaving Maggi responsible for managing her own foodways. She grew up in a family which followed traditional British cooking and regarded meat as an essential component of a “proper” meal. Since Maggi was a child, she has felt deep compassion for animals which started to materialise into a commitment to cruelty-free consumption once she began an independent life as a university student. Maggi transitioned to vegetarianism in her twenties, but found it difficult to sustain her moral food project at certain points in life,

such as during pregnancy and breastfeeding or while living with meat-eating partners. For the last several years, however, Maggi has been a strict vegan and currently finds no obstacles to her pursuit of ethical consumption. She shops as much in health food stores as at conventional supermarkets, where her main destinations are fresh produce aisles and sections with alternative foodstuffs, such as organic and dairy-free. Her ideal food choice is vegan, organic, local, and fair-trade, but prohibitive costs make certain compromises inevitable. Maggi admits to feeling proud for the way she consumes, but also conscious of and guilty about less ethical choices that she can't always avoid, such as imported products or plastic packaging. One of the major challenges Maggi faces as an ethical food consumer is social occasions and family gatherings where meat-based dishes usually form the centre of the meal. Price is also a key factor influencing Maggi's ability to fulfil her moral food project in a comprehensive and consistent manner. For Maggi, ethical consumption means *"not exploiting people, not exploiting animals, that's healthy, that's sustainable, and it's in terms of simple living"*. She considers herself an ethical food consumer because, as she says, *"I care about what I eat"*. Expressions such as *"I ought to"*, *"I should"* appeared frequently in Maggi's narrative suggesting a strong sense of moral obligation and responsibility for her choices and actions.

Vignette 7: Joe

Joe learned about my research from his fellow Green Party member and expressed interest in taking part in the project. Apart from two pre-planned shopping trips and a two-and-a-half hour formal interview, we also met casually on several occasions and established a good rapport. Joe shared with me his personal journal on food and shopping where he catalogued his efforts to make better consumption decisions. This has offered me a unique insight into Joe's most private deliberations about his consumption practices and life in general, enabling me to create a reliable account of his evolution as an ethical food consumer.

Joe is 29 years old and works in a call centre at a bank. He is university educated, well-read, and has an interest in philosophy, politics, and social issues. He is an active Green Party member, a committed environmentalist, and a convinced animal rights activist. He does not have a very clear class identity, but associates himself more with

lower middle class. He lives with an omnivorous friend with whom they share the kitchen and the fridge, but each of them follows his own food practices. Joe was born and raised as a vegan / vegetarian and has never knowingly eaten meat except after losing a bet to a friend. During his life, he transitioned back and forth between veganism and vegetarianism depending on the circumstances and opportunities that he faced at different points in time. He constantly makes a conscious effort to sustain a strictly vegan diet, but finds himself compromising due to social influences, lack of affordable choices, and temptation. Joe's commitment to a meat-free diet is informed as much by moral considerations as environmental concerns. His food practices are a part of the larger project of ethical living which includes conscious effort to reduce his personal carbon footprint, support local economies, promote human rights and fair trade, and defend animal welfare. In his view, habit and lack of motivation and support are major barriers to changing one's foodways. He defines ethical consumption as "*the purchasing and utilisation of food stuffs where your primary consideration is not taste or nutritional value, but wider moral principles*". He feels very strongly about his identity of an ethical consumer, which he believes is "*definitely*" who he is since ethical implications of his food choices is, as he says, "*what I think about first*".

Vignette 8: Solveig

Solveig is one of the subjects whom I invited to take part in my study upon learning about her ethical food commitments, i.e. her vegan lifestyle. I observed Solveig's shopping on three separate occasions which included two trips to conventional supermarkets and a visit to a charity shop. Our formal interview lasted for over two hours.

Solveig is a 29-year-old doctoral student who does not express affiliation to any class membership. Originally from Germany, she moved to England several years ago where she now lives with her husband. Together, they are responsible for maintaining a vegan household - although Solveig's husband is a meat-eater himself, he is very supportive of his partner's ethical commitments and does not mind cooking and eating vegan food at home. Solveig grew up in a household where the tradition of baking fresh sourdough bread every morning was still practiced and cooking meals from scratch was an essential part of the family's daily routine. Coming from a conventional German background, Solving was brought up on a meat-based diet surrounded by

people for whom the idea of vegetarianism was an alien concept. Yet, having grown up with pets, she developed emotional attachment to and sympathy for animals at a very young age. When Solveig was nine years old, she saw a documentary exposing the practices of industrial meat production and, profoundly moved by it, decided to abandon meat eating. She has been an on-and-off vegetarian until several years ago when, under the influence of several factors, she decided to go vegan. Currently, Solveig's foodways are guided by the moral principle of not doing harm which in practice translates into avoiding products of animal origin, including dairy, eggs, and leather. However, she does not draw a conclusive line in terms of what is acceptable to eat and is willing to make compromises when her personal interests, e.g. health, or consideration for other people's feelings demand so. Solveig would like to support local agriculture and independent producers, but is limited in her opportunities to do so – time resources and convenience are the key factors constraining Solveig's ethical ambitions. She is an opponent of the throw-away society – she buys most of her clothes from second-hand charity shops, condemns food waste and supports freeganism, which she used to practice on a regular basis back in her native Germany. For Solveig, ethical consumption means “*do no harm or do as little harm as possible*” and her self-perception as an ethical consumer is informed by a continuous effort to live in consistence with this principle.

Vignette 9: Lila

I came to know Lila through one of my research participants, Maggi, with whom we paid several visits to a developing co-housing site managed by Lila and her husband. A committed vegan of 20 years, an environmentalist, a defender of animal rights, and a fair trade supporter, Lila perfectly fit my research focus. She is the only participant with whom I did not go shopping, reason being that food provisioning in Lila's household is organised in a different way. Although Lila patronises two independent ethical grocery shops, she does not have an established shopping routine and relies predominantly on alternative ways of sourcing food. Together with her husband, Lila is involved in a buying group that sources organic and fair-trade products from trusted suppliers at wholesale prices. The family also subscribes to a vegetable box scheme which provides by-weekly deliveries of seasonal organic vegetables and fruits. Lila is strongly opposed to the global food business, hence her exceptionally rare visits to mainstream

supermarkets and chain stores. Since conventional grocery shopping does not constitute a significant part of Lila's consumption routine and because visits to physical shops are infrequent and almost always spontaneous, I had to find another opportunity to get an insight into Lila's food purchasing behaviour. Such opportunity was provided by Lila and her husband who kindly invited me to join them in the discussion of their next order with the buying group. As Lila scrolled through the pages of an online catalogue, she and her husband exchange views on different products revealing the complex interweaving of family needs and requirements, personal preferences and tastes, and ethical considerations and concerns. At the end of this process, a list of products was compiled and agreed upon which I also got a copy of. Thus, not only did I have a chance to directly observe Lila make her food purchase decisions, but I also got a first-hand insight into the negotiations and reasoning behind them. In addition to this observation, I also met Lila on several other occasions, including a co-housing community event and a formal interview.

Lila is 34 years old. She is university educated, works as an editor, and has recently started a PhD on a sustainability-related topic. She defines herself as middle class, although she only became familiar with the concept upon moving to England. Together with her husband, they raise two kids. Although her husband and his son from the first marriage are both meat eaters, the household is kept almost entirely vegan, reflecting Lila's life-long avoidance of animal products. Her moral food project extends beyond commitment to cruelty-free consumption and accommodates concerns over the environment, animal rights, and social justice. Lila's food choices are almost exclusively organic and fair-trade; wherever possible, she prefers to buy local, seasonal, and unpackaged produce. For Lila, ethical consumption means "*mindful consumption*", and while she perceives herself as a mindful consumer, she is at the same time conscious of the inevitable compromises and inconsistencies in her ethical practices. She perceives habit and lack of reliable information to be major inhibitors to individual transition to ethical foodways.

The above vignettes provide the backdrop against which the analysis and discussion of my research findings can begin to unfold, paving the way towards illuminating the central questions and achieving the key aims of the study.

Chapter 5

Moral Concerns, Emotional Commentaries, and Reflexive Conversations: Toward an Ethical Consumer Identity

The best way to study ethical consumer identity is to observe how it forms gradually; considering identity as a construction, a process never completed, and always evolving offers an opportunity to learn about ethical consumers as consumers in transition

(Cherrier, 2007, p. 332)

This chapter represents our first stop on the tour of the private and social lives of self-perceived ethical consumers. In it, I will describe and analyse how, it is through which inner processes and under which external influences, individuals achieve the distinct identity of an ethical consumer. Accomplishing this goal is a multi-step process requiring an in-depth investigation of each of the series of phases through which individuals go as they evolve as persons with particular moral concerns and develop into consumers with specific ethical food commitments. Having set off on this research journey, I will first explore the origins of the participants' concerns over the moral aspects of consumption by analysing their subjective experiences of the objective reality around them and investigating the role of those experiences in triggering the affective and cognitive processes through which subjects came to define their ultimate concerns. I will demonstrate the key role of emotions in alerting people to particular moral concerns and propelling them into corresponding consumption practices, whilst also highlighting the place of cognition and reason in the development of individuals' sense of food ethics. I will rely on the concept of reflexive conversation to explain how human emotionality comes into play with reason and, building upon the empirical evidence from my research, argue for the key role of reflexivity in enabling agents to elaborate their subjective experiences of external reality and thereby determine what objective things and circumstances represent their ultimate concerns and how they can live them out. In constructing this account, I will emphasise the central role of both agential subjectivity as well as structural objectivity in forging out ethical consumer identities during subjects' reflexive conversations with themselves. Finally, I will argue that by embracing concerns over food ethics and engaging in subjectively devised moral food

projects, individuals decide not only “how to act, but who to be” (Giddens, 1991, p. 81), that is they define their unique moral characters and achieve the identity of an ethical consumer. I will draw on the participants’ self-narratives to exemplify the relationships between subjects’ moral food practices and identities thereby highlighting ethical consumption as a site where continuous formation and re-formation of individual identities occurs. Thus, the overarching aim of this chapter is to reveal, describe, and analyse the generative mechanism that accounts for the evolution of agential concerns over food ethics and paves subjects’ way toward the practices of ethical consumption through which their identities are reflected and defined. I chose Lucy’s case to take centre stage in this part of the data analysis due to the richness of content and representativeness of the themes with which this chapter is concerned. To this centrepiece insights gleaned from the remaining eight participant accounts will be added as essential building blocks of the argument carefully chosen so that to offer the most telling illustrations of the points developed and claims made. They may take us to the moment when the subjects got acquainted with the idea of ethical consumption for the first time, or when they realized that animal welfare, environmental wellbeing, or social justice were among their most valued things in life, or when they decided to address their ultimate concerns through specific consumption practices. All of these glimpses of the participants’ stories will serve to explain how, by actively and reflexively embracing consumption ethics as their ultimate concern and devising particular food projects through which to address them, individuals develop the identity of an ethical consumer.

Out of the different aspects and elements that constitute individuals’ experiences of becoming and being an ethical consumer, embracing food ethics as their ultimate concern comes first and foremost. The question about the origins of subjective concerns over the moral aspects of consumption turns the spotlight on the participants’ earliest memories of their relationships with food and the familial and wider social contexts in which they developed. In fact, when tracing the origins of people’s values and beliefs, family settings seem to be an obvious first calling point. Indeed, for some of the subjects familial contexts played a critical role in inspiring pro-ethical attitudes. Thus, David identifies the roots of his environmentalism in the politicised atmosphere that prevailed in the family house and his parents’ outspoken views on a range of political and social issues:

I was raised that way, that was just what I was thought to be normal, so when I got to about 17-18, it is a natural thing, it gets included really, if you are worried about

politics, if you are worried about social justice, you are automatically worried about the environment, it just seemed a natural choice...

In unison with David, Mary refers to her family as a source of “*political, environmental awareness background stuff*” and, specifically, her father whose political views set the moral tone for the future: “*he was very left-wing, so we were very involved with community stuff and support for the miners and political stuff, so right from the start I had a certain value system, if you like*”. Joe’s formation as an advocate for animal rights and a committed vegan had also been predefined by his parents’ moral practices and beliefs: “*I was raised on a strict vegan diet, my parents were vegan, my younger siblings were all vegan (...) that was just the norm for me to be on a vegan diet*”. Yet, for our key character, Lucy, familial foodways seem to have played little role in the development of her sense of consumption ethics. Overall, she was brought up in the conventional food culture where meat was considered an important part of the diet and the idea of vegetarianism was very far from widespread. Thus, neither Lucy’s family, nor her early social environment can be cited as a source of her concerns over non-human life. In an attempt to identify their origins, Lucy evokes her childhood experiences with animals as a strong influence - retrospectively, she feels that she has always been “*soft on animals*”. This long-standing affection for animals appears to be common among ethical consumers: in her study of practicing vegans, McDonald (2000) comments on the participants’ self-description as “*animal people*”. This sentiment is echoed by my research subjects many of whom have been brought up with pets or in close proximity to wildlife. Mary, for instance, has vivid memories of being close with nature and animals: “*I spent my childhood climbing trees and being in the countryside with animals*” and the emotional rewards and bonding arising from those experiences: “*I’ve always been fascinated by, happy with, absorbed by wildlife and animals and plants*”. Likewise, Darren recollects his childhood feelings of passion for animals: “*I was fascinated with animals*”. Maggi remembers being very passionate about all living things and particularly sensitive to their suffering: “*I felt sort of compassion to animals and closer to nature I think, you know, if I found injured bird or animals*”. This emotional pain - a commentary upon Maggi’s concern over animal life and welfare developed at a very young age – extended to food consumption: “*I can always remember as a child looking at the Sunday joint and feeling sad that it was like eating animals*”. For some participants, however, the feelings of sympathetic pity for animals

were what McDonald (2000) refers to as “compartmentalised” compassion, i.e. where a person fails to make a connection between pets and other animals and, consequently, the food that they eat. Solveig admits to exactly this kind of obliviousness when describing her relationships with pets: *“I did not really see them as the same kind of creature as pork on your plate (...) I just did not see the fact that it’s just cultural difference between eating pork and not eating a dog”*. Lucy’s affective attitude towards companion animals, however, was of a different kind. She remembers that the house was always full of pets but, unlike most children who would be thrilled to have 35 rabbits in the family’s winter garage, Lucy experienced very different feelings: *“I felt trapped and I kind of identified with all these animals that were in cages, and I thought it’s wrong”*. Archer’s account of emotions as commentaries upon human concerns offers a useful theoretical lens through which to construe Lucy’s distinct affective response. As Archer explains, emotions are relational, i.e. they arise in relation to something, “and that something is our own concerns which make a situation a matter of non-difference to a person” (2000, p. 195). Thus, Lucy’s intense emotional reaction - a bout of sadness and empathy with caged animals – can be decoded as the earliest of the streams of emotional commentaries that the evolving concern over animal life will yet supply during the course of her life. As a 5-year-old child, Lucy lacked the reflexive capacity to interpret her emotions as a signal of a particular moral concern; yet, the affective import of the situation was strong enough to provoke an attempt to address it. She remembers turning into a little animal liberator: letting her friend’s hamster out of the cage on one occasion, opening her sister’s birdcage to set the budgies free on another – actions that caused a lot of distress to the pet owners but seemed totally just and justified to herself.

The crucial links between human emotions, concerns, and actions manifest themselves equally clearly in the accounts of other participants. Thus, it was intense emotional reaction to news about environmental disasters that alerted Mary to her incipient concerns over nature, made her realise their affective appeal, and provoked an urge to act upon them: *“[It] made me think what else should I do, and I wanted to do something about environmental issues, it became more my passion”*. Joe offers another telling illustration of the ways in which human emotions and concerns link up to incite agential action. For him, a job in the banking industry became a source of profound personal dissatisfaction: *“I became very unhappy with the direction my life was going in”*. The growing feeling of disaffection experienced by Joe was an emotional

commentary upon his deep-seated concern over the right way to live: *“I knew in my gut it was – or felt in my gut - that it was wrong working for the bank”*. This affective reaction to an increasingly unrewarding lifestyle propelled Joe into specific actions: he quit his job at a bank, joined the Green Party, and resumed the vegan diet – all as part of a comprehensive effort to address his concerns over ethical living: *“that was the prompt to go back to that trying to be a bit more ethical...”*. These examples reveal the direct relationship between human emotions, concerns, and actions defended in the literature. Thus, Sayer (2011, p. 37), echoing Oakley (1992), contends that “emotions involve desire and concern to produce or prevent change; they incline us to act in some way, though we may override such inclinations”. Archer (2007, p. 231) illuminates the relationship in a similar way:

It is not possible to have a genuine concern and to do nothing about it. (...) When normal people express concern at all – as opposed to sympathy or empathy, both of which are compatible with remaining a bystander – it is usually accompanied by an attempt to do something about it.

The ethical consumers of my research echo the argument with remarkable precision: *“I care about these things and I can’t care about them, and think about them, and know about them without enacting that”*, asserts Mary; *“People who say they do care and do nothing - they don’t really care, that’s not caring. It’s got to be linked to action if it’s a genuine thing”*, agrees with her Joe, as does Lila:

If you have some ideas that you really believe in, it only means something if you manifest these ideas in your life, in your lifestyle, and if you just have them as your precious ideas and you go out to the world and you do something completely different, it means your life don’t really represent your ideas and you are not being honest.

The force of Archer’s argument becomes increasingly evident as we continue to follow Lucy on her ethical food journey. Her moral concerns became more articulate when she, under the influence of provocative literature and protest music, developed an acute interest in politics, religion, and the meaning of life. This was also the time when her socio-cultural environment expanded immensely as she moved from a Church of England school to a bigger school attended by children from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. Exposure to alternative outlooks led Lucy to challenge the traditional worldview she was brought up with and, especially, the Christian idea of man’s dominion over animals which contrasted sharply with deep respect for animal life and commitment to non-violence advocated in Hinduism. At the age of 12, she was

introduced to the idea of vegetarianism through a radio interview with Chrissie Hynde – a rock star and a committed animal rights activist. Shortly thereafter, Lucy declared herself a vegetarian. This decision was underpinned by emotionality – strong aversion to animal cruelty – as well as reflexive work of comparing and contrasting different worldviews, questioning the accepted, and exploring alternative ways of thinking and acting. It is the emotions, however, that have been central to the intensification of Lucy’s moral concerns and the evolution of her ethical food commitments. She identifies the roots of her affective and physical revulsion at the mere idea of eating meat in a specific experience - a school trip to a model animal farm. Just as when she was a little child, Lucy was profoundly shaken by the vision of captivated animals - she remembers being particularly “*freaked out*” upon seeing a sow separated from her litter by iron bars. Here is how Lucy describes her feelings in response to this experience: “*I was so shocked, it gave me nightmares. It was absolutely appalling*”. This intense affective reaction reaffirmed the emotional import of Lucy’s concerns over animal life and reinforced her commitment to a cruelty-free diet: “*I knew then I’d made the right decision*”. The next emotional wave of comparable magnitude washed over Lucy three decades later and instigated her transition to veganism. It occurred during Lucy’s visit to Switzerland, where she was deeply upset by a vision of little calves locked away on a highland dairy farm. She recollects:

This was in a French speaking area of Switzerland, up in the highlands where they have a lot of cheese and milk and little dairy cattle – all very beautiful, bells around the neck, you know, it’s idyllic, Alpine scenery - really, really beautiful. But, unfortunately, everyday we’d walk past these calves who’d been separated from their mom, every day, and they were crying, they were just protesting against that fate, and it upset me so much, I still feel tears when I think about it.

Profoundly moved by this picture, Lucy felt the same bout of sadness and urge to liberate the captivated animals as she did when she was a 5-year-old child: “*And I was thinking looking at them, “if I could get in there, unlock it, I would*”. This experience and the intense emotionality aroused by it played a critical role in Lucy’s unequivocal decision to go vegan: “*And I just couldn’t eat the milk or the cheese, I couldn’t do it. And I haven’t been able to since*”. This specific episode and its high emotional relevance explain why, despite that Lucy had been long aware that her ultimate concerns would be most adequately addressed by a vegan diet, she only recently made this commitment. Admittedly, several factors have been key to Lucy’s

ability to refine her moral food project, and the increased availability of suitable food options and relevant information played a non-trivial role in rendering veganism a feasible undertaking. However, the critical factor which was missing from Lucy's previous attempts at veganism and which eventually gave her a necessary impetus to take her ethical practice onto a whole new level was the profound emotional involvement with the object of concern. The following excerpt from the interview conveys this point:

- I've tried being vegan a few times before this time. This time it's worked because of those calves that were looking at me sympathetically. So now it's worked, now I just could not drink milk, I could not do it.

- But what was different before?

- I suppose I hadn't got that emotional revulsion. I have to have that gut reaction and just think - no.

This idea of "gut reaction" (which, I contend, is the emotional commentary upon Lucy's ultimate concern) is like a thread running through the entire interview, tying together Lucy's reflections on what matters to her and why. Thus, when discussing organic, local, and fair trade, she once again refers to emotions - or rather absence thereof - as a major reason for excluding these products from the list of her ultimate concerns and consumption priorities. Although Lucy is aware of and sympathises with the moral cause behind the products, she does not feel emotionally involved with them:

I can see it's important, you know, I am not denying it's important, but, you know, I don't feel a rush of horror from eating something that's from Kenya in the same way as I would over eating sheep's eyeballs.

The absence of negative emotional response - "a rush of horror" in Lucy's words - to non-fair trade or imported foods suggests that Lucy has not embraced environmental or social issues implicated in the production and consumption of food as her ultimate concerns. Admittedly, certain practical constraints would also have to be negotiated had she done so - particularly, her limited food budget. However, before material costs of such moral food project could even be assessed, relevant concerns must have been discerned, recorded, and logged into Lucy's moral register which in the absence of emotional involvement simply did not occur. The explanatory potential of this argument extends to Lucy's relationships with her body and, specifically, her neglectful attitude to health:

I think there has to be a really strong emotional reason for me not to do something. It's like healthy food – yes, I know what's healthy and what isn't, but I did not stop smoking because it was unhealthy, I stopped smoking because I could not afford to. I could not feel sort of surge of revulsion from a cigarette, you know. There has to be a real kind of moral horror attached to it.

Thus, due to low emotional appeal concerns over health failed to supply the necessary stimulus for Lucy to give up the harmful habit. Instead, the affective import of material concerns, which could be neither neglected nor dismissed, forced Lucy to reconsider her lifestyle in order to overcome financial difficulties. Similarly, David cited the lack of emotional involvement as a key reason for why he had never considered going vegan: *“I just don't feel bad enough about it, I just don't feel bad about milk and cheese, I really don't”*. In tune with him, Mary justifies her consumption of meat by the absence of affective response to animal killing: *“I think for a lot of vegetarians - the ones I came across - it was an emotional response about not killing animals, and I am okay about killing animals, actually”*. It is because concerns over animal life do not have the potential to solicit negative emotional reactions from David or Mary that they have both settled for vegetarianism as a sufficiently satisfying moral commitment.

So far, Archer's account of the relationships between human emotions, concerns, and practices provided an effective conceptual guide to understanding the development of the participants' ethical food commitments. What requires further explanation, however, is how concerns over food ethics develop and become a defining part of individuals' morality in the first place. Going back to Lucy's case, what needs to be explored is how and why concerns over animal life came to acquire such intense emotional import so as to become an integral element of Lucy's personal moral matrix and the ultimate guide to her eating practices. She herself does not seem mistaken in locating the roots of her ethical concerns in specific life experiences – tending to caged pets, visiting animal and dairy farms. Yet, it calls for further explanation how exactly these experiences fed into Lucy's morality and in which ways they contributed to her deep-rooted emotional aversion - “the moral horror” - to meat and dairy. This important issue becomes clearer in light of Coff's (2006) theory which resonates with my research findings and offers a compelling theoretical blueprint of the participants' experiences. For Lucy, the visions of caged pets, a pig behind the iron bars, calves in chains and *“ankle deep in their own muck”* offered a first-hand experience of the animals' pitiful

life conditions and a glimpse into the disagreeable practices of meat and milk production. Animals' misery, to which Lucy had become an eyewitness, got inscribed into her own biography – “*I felt trapped and I kind of identified with all these animals that were in cages*”. Moreover, it became attached to food products – the meat and the dairy - which Lucy will never be able to put on her dining plate again. This account offers a potential explanation of how Lucy became so acutely sensitised to the issues of animal welfare and so deeply averse to meat and dairy products. Yet, a crucial aspect seems to be missing from it. In his account of how “glimpsed experiences” of food production awaken individuals to the implications of their consumption practices, Coff (2006) seems to construe such exposures purely as a source of knowledge and information which, when accessed and interpreted by the subjects, incite them to ethical actions. However, he overlooks the all-important affective aspect of subjects' experiences, which not only supply factual knowledge, but also stimulate deep emotional responses. In fact, McDonald (2000, p.10) too underscores the emotional dimension of ethics-inducing encounters: “emotions seem to have been one of the major defining characteristics of the more memorable catalytic experiences”. The reason for this, I contend, is because the narrative into which the production history transforms consists not only of the information about manufacturing conditions and processes, but also of the feelings that people bring in. Food products, in their turn, become not merely “silent documents”, but also emotional anchors: not only do they remind individuals of what they've learned through their experiences, but they also acquire the capacity to revive the emotions that arose in response. Consider the following quote again:

Everyday we'd walk past these calves who'd been separated from their mom, every day, and they were crying, they were just protesting against that fate, and it upset my so much, I still feel tears when I think about it. And I just couldn't eat the milk or the cheese, I couldn't do it.

It illustrates that, firstly, Lucy's recollections of the event are deeply infused with emotions, and, secondly, that this affective reaction is the ultimate reason why she could never contemplate eating dairy again. The encounter with the calves was, as she notes, central to her irrevocable transition to a dairy-free diet. Yet, the significance of this experience was not in its informative content - Lucy had been long aware of the specifics of dairy production and its toll on animal lives - but in its affective dimension. It is not the information she learned, but the emotions she felt (i.e. not the experience

itself, but the emotional commentary upon it) that provided the driving force for a radical change in Lucy's foodways. Her memories are not just factual accounts of the experience, but depositories of emotions whose intensity has not faded over the years. The "gut reaction" and the "rush of horror" which Lucy consistently cites as the main reasons behind her inability to eat animal products are a resounding echo of her initial affective response to the upsetting experiences. This response echoes back every time she faces the idea of eating dairy or meat, which for Lucy became the embodiments of animal suffering: "*If someone was offering me a bacon sandwich, I'd immediately think of that*". The inextricable relationships between human experiences, emotions, and concerns are also evident in Lucy's rather tepid attitude towards environmental issues and, more specifically, organic foods: "*I suppose if I was a gardener, I'd be more bothered, you know, if I was growing my own food (...) It does not get me emotionally in the same way as, you know, animals*". Thus, in the absence of first-hand experiences of nature and food growing, Lucy failed to develop emotional connection with the cause for organic foods - a necessary impetus for acting on the concern. In contrast, Mary has been involved in farming from an early age: helping to tend plants and animals first on her aunt's holding and later as a volunteer on a nearby farm – the experiences through which she developed a deep interest in agriculture and was sensitized to concerns over environmental sustainability, ecological balance, and biodiversity. Her strong preference for free-range meat is informed by a first-hand insight into the practices of intensive livestock production which instigated her awareness of and sympathy with the feelings of animals: "*I've been to an abattoir, I know what abattoirs are like, I know that for animals it is an intense period of fear and I am not entirely happy about that*". This evidence aligns with research literature suggesting that direct experiences of nature and engagement in nature-related activities play a significant role in the formation of individual environmental values. Hards (2011) identifies personal involvement in the "eco-regulatory practices", such as tending animals or a garden, as a major factor in the development of nature-respecting values. Not only does my research confirm this relationship, but my interpretation of the subjects' experiences through the concept of emotions as commentaries upon human concerns allows us to actually understand its generative principles.

At the same time, my findings suggest that different experiences may provoke emotional involvement on the part of the individual, and direct exposure to or involvement in relevant practices is not the only way to create affective links between

consumers and the objects of concern. For Darren, for example, emotional engagement occurred through a very specific experience – an incident with meat paste which got stuck in his teeth causing serious pain and discomfort. Continuous pain that Darren experienced during the next several days sensitised him to the suffering of others: “*so then you link that to the wider world, to others, you think about people – what about their pain, other people’s pain and other animals’ pain, and these things link, connect...*”. By projecting his physical pain onto other sentient beings Darren was able to feel their suffering as his own or, in Coff’s terms, gained a “glimpsed experience” of their throes. Through an understanding and sharing of animals’ struggles and aches came profound sympathy for them and an urgent desire “*to eliminate the suffering of those who are in the most pain*”. This internal emphatic response fed into Darren’s ongoing deliberations about food ethics and gave the final impulse to turning vegetarianism into his ultimate moral commitment: “*along with the pain, and the concern for the animals, and contradictions with other forms of meat-eating in other cultures, you know, all that came together*”. The emotional involvement achieved through a physical experience made Darren see himself and the objects of his concern, i.e. non-human animals, tied together in one single story wherein he was implicated in and responsible for animal suffering through his particular consumption choices and acts. Further, Lila’s approach to justifying their commitment to veganism to her 4-year-old daughter is a telling demonstration of Coff’s theory put in practice. Let us consider how she explained the family’s food restrictions to the little girl:

I used to explain like, you know, this milk was taken from a cow and there is actually a calf waiting for this milk, and it is not having it because you want to have it – does it look fair to you?

Without realising it, Lila followed Coff’s prescription for how to incite an individual’s sense of food ethics: she turned the history of milk production into a story, a narrative that could be cognitively assessed and emotionally absorbed by a little child. It provided her daughter with an indirect – because from a second-hand account - insight into how milk is produced and what the implications of those practices are. By making the little girl realise that anyone who chooses to drink milk is taking it away from a calf, Lila engaged her emotionality – “*that’s really sad*”, was her daughter’s affective response - and inspired her sense of responsibility for the animals’ happiness.

Against the backdrop of this evidence, I want to elaborate on Coff’s account of

the ways in which individuals engage with ethics-inducing experiences. I suggest that there is a two-way relationship: not only do consumers internalise “glimpsed” experiences and make them part of their own biographies, but they also develop a view of themselves as participants in the narratives produced by the situations of concern. Through a deep emotional connection with the matters of concern, individuals acquire the sense of responsibility for them. Thus, not only did stories of animal cruelty get inscribed into Lucy’s own life record, but she also felt herself implicated in them and hence faced with the choice – to either partake in the exploitation of animals by consuming dairy or avoid contributing to animal suffering by giving it up. It is this profound emotional bonding that generates the sense of responsibility for one’s consumption decisions, prompts individuals to develop ethical considerations and bring them to bear upon their food practices. Identity theorists cast light on this intricate inner process: thus, Steedman (1986) contends that identification with others is central to the process of identity production - we forge our identities, she argues, by putting ourselves into other people’s stories, interpreting, reinterpreting, and making them a part of our own biography. More specifically, identification with the pain and suffering of others - the “empathetic understanding” (Lawler, 2008, p. 24) - is argued to be particularly consequential for individuals’ formation as ethical subjects. Lawler (2008) elucidates the relationship: “in this case, instead of empathy, there is an *appropriation* of the pain of others” (p. 14) and proceeds to make the crucial point: “we behave ethically because we can imagine ourselves in others’ stories” (p. 24). The power of this theoretical argument manifests itself in the practical reality, e.g. the well-documented ineffectiveness of information-based approaches to changing patterns of consumer behaviour (Barnett et al., 2005) and the increased popularity of advertisements that feature close-up images of real producers and growers and share their personal stories in order to emotionally involve consumers - achieve the “gut reaction”, as Lucy would put it – and sensitise them to concerns over food ethics. In light of this account, claims about the potential of labels, images, and texts imbued with moral messages and symbolic meanings to induce consumers’ reflexivity and incite their sense of food ethics take on a new significance. The apparent parallels between the concepts of the “ethics of care” capable of engaging the problems of distant parts of the world (Smith, 1998), political ecological imaginary with its “expansive “spatial dynamics of concern” (Goodman, 2004, p. 906), and long-range, or distance, ethics (Coff, 2006) make it more

understandable how exactly semiotic devices help to enact the “globalising reflexivity” which brings distant places and people “into the world of concern (and pocketbooks) of Northern consumers” (Goodman, 2004, p. 893). Like glimpsed experiences, discursive and visual narratives that “veritably shout to consumers about the socio-natural relations under which they [the products] were produced” (Bryant and Goodman, 2004, p. 348) engage consumers in the ethics of distance by bridging the gap between consumption and production ends of the food supply chain. By disclosing problematic social and environmental relations underpinning food production they reveal “the world of meaning” behind products, the “world beyond the commodity fetish” (Goodman, Dupuis and Goodman, 2012, p. 43) and in doing so revive consumers’ sense of personal responsibility for the implications of their shopping and eating practices.

Superficially, one may be tempted to follow the many commentators (Wheeler, 2012; Barnett et al., 2010; Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007) who have discerned in this scenario a passive, “constructed” and “governed” consumer whose ethical choices are merely a part of the system of “transnational moral economy” (Goodman, 2004) into which she had been drawn by deliberately designed and strategically disseminated discourses of which she is neither a master, nor even a co-producer, but only a slave. On reflection, however, there is an important caveat: when arguing for the potential of morally charged texts, images, and visions to foster a sense of food ethics, it is critical not to assume a kind of self-energizing and self-extracting symbolic power which sucks consumers into the “global moral economy” irrespective of whether, how, and with what outcomes individuals interact with and make sense of the supplied materials. To the contrary, those can only become a potent source of symbolic meanings in the presence of a consumer willing and being able to engage with and appropriate them. As Adams and Raisborough (2010, p. 258) note,

Studies of ethical consumption campaigning may well point to the ‘generation of narrative frames in which mundane activities like shopping can be re-inscribed as forms of public-minded, citizenly engagement’ (Clarke et al. 2007b: 242) but analyses of people’s own accounts of their consumption practices suggests that such re-inscription is not wholly manageable or predictable (Newholm, 2005).

This is because ethical discourses and narratives do not simply produce “a green consumer as a subject” (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002, p. 330) out of a cultural dope or impose the ethically minded consumer role model on unsuspecting individuals, but, instead, “energize consumers to be morally reflexive” (Goodman, 2004, p. 896), i.e.

engage them into reflexive conversations about their life practices and courses of action, “about ourselves, any aspect of our environment and, above all, about the relationship between them” (Archer, 2007, p. 63). Depending on the outcome of these internal deliberations, glimpsed experiences may not only incite, but also alleviate consumers’ concerns over the moral implications of their eating practices. For Solveig, for example, a direct insight into small-scale meat production obtained during a week-long visit to an animal farm resulted in the appeasement of concerns over animal suffering:

Because it was so small-scale, and because it was so personal, and because you could actually see that the people cared about the animals while they were alive, I was completely fine with it.

This indicates that subjective emotional responses play the key role in determining the impact of individuals’ experiences on their sense of food ethics and, subsequently, consumption practices. Thus, for Lucy visits to an animal farm and a Swiss pasture were infused with intense negative emotions in response to animal suffering, hence her decision to withdraw from consumption of meat and dairy. In contrast, Solveig’s insight into production practices on a small-scale animal farm has assuaged her ethical concerns to the extent that she felt comfortable eating meat products again. With respect to these examples, the difference between the participants’ experiences could be justly pointed out – indeed, whilst Lucy came face to face with animal suffering, Solveig encountered respectfully treated and well-tended livestock. However, I contend that it is not the objective circumstances, but the agents’ subjective emotional perception and interpretation thereof that should be held responsible for the differing outcomes: we know from life experience that not every person would be equally disturbed by the vision of calves on an Alpine pasture and, similarly, not every vegetarian would so readily warm towards meat, no matter how humanely produced.

In making this claim, I assert the indispensability of emotions in triggering agential concerns over the morality of consumption and in inducing commitment to ethical diets. At the same time, it is important not to overlook the role of information and reason in individuals’ subscription to and engagement with the practices of ethical consumption. As my research demonstrates, cognitive factors, such as factual and conceptual knowledge obtained through education, media, or social interactions, have the potential to contribute to the evolution of subjects’ moral concerns and food projects. Thus, Lucy’s commitment to cruelty-free foodways was not only driven by her

profound emotional involvement with the objects and circumstances of concern, but it was also underpinned and informed by the factual knowledge about them. The bout of compassion which Lucy felt at seeing a sow behind the iron bars was grounded in her understanding of pigs as intelligent animals capable of suffering. Similarly, through learning about food nutrients and, specifically, animal protein, Lucy realised the inefficiency of industrial meat production and, based on this knowledge, came to morally condemn it: *“all these people in the world are starving and we are feeding cows instead of people, you know, that did not make any sense to me”*. Likewise, Maggi’s moral concerns expanded and intensified as her awareness of the animal welfare issues was rising in parallel with the growth in the amount of publicly available information about factory farming:

(...) that’s become more talked about, and that kind of knowledge and information is around more over the years. It’s become more important for me (...), I suppose, with the realisation about animal welfare and that milk and eggs as well were cruel, the whole production process was.

In a similar vein, Joe’s commitment to a plant-based diet, initially little more than a customary practice, gained new meaning through his learning about the larger socio-environmental impacts of global consumption: *“I was like – oh, isn’t capitalism terrible, and it’s destroying the planet and the environment, and such a big thing I can do to combat this would be to go vegan again”*. Following the expansion of his horizons through education, knowledge, and social interactions Joe came to review the underpinnings of his food practices and, eventually, embraced them as a much more conscious, intentional, and reflexive ethical commitment:

I think the real difference was being at a college studying sociology, and I did philosophy and ethics as well, and then living with my aunt who was kind of very into it and that was a big part of her identity, and that very much changed my reasons behind it.

Likewise, David first started to reflexively and practically probe ethical consumption upon getting introduced to a hippie culture, while for Darren religious and philosophical teachings and later on scientific knowledge have become important triggers of his sense of food ethics. At school, interactions with children from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds who followed particular food customs prompted Darren to question and ponder over different dietary rules and prescriptions: *“that informs your ethics, you are trying to make sense out of these different patterns and*

contradictions". For Mary, the news about the Torrey Canyon oil spill and media coverage of the rising environmental movements such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth were, as she notes, one of the biggest influences on the formation of her value system: "I became a lot more aware of the environmental issues". This growing awareness was, to use Mary's own phrase, "*part of the gestalt*" – the cognitive, emotional, and normative sources that were driving Mary's progression towards moral concerns over social and environmental implications of the global food system. Mary's current commitment to fair-trade and the emotional satisfaction derived from it also have a cognitive underpinning:

Because I do know, having read, you know, having studied about these issues a lot more, I am aware of just how much the livelihood of people in developing countries is dependent on growing cash crops and how much fair trade enables them to live better, and it just feels fairer.

What this evidence clearly points to is that the development of individuals' sense of food ethics and dietary commitments occurs through interaction between emotionality and cognition. In a psychological study on moralisation of eating practices, Rozin, Markwith and Stoess (1997) too distinguish between affective (e.g. experiences of animal slaughter) and cognitive (exposure to information about animal welfare issues) factors that may encourage ethical consumer practices. In the field of sociology, this argument is underpinned by McDonald's study on vegans underscoring the co-constituting nature of the cognitive and affective aspects of catalytic experiences that enabled the subjects "to immediately *comprehend, as well as feel*, the consequences of the new knowledge of animal abuse" (2000, p. 9, my italics). However, McDonald's interpretation of her research findings does not go as far as to explain the mechanism that brings human emotions into play with reason in the process of individuals' subscription to food ethics. Elaborating on Archer's (2000), I contend that this mechanism is reflexive conversation during which agents deliberate and elaborate upon their subjective experiences of objective reality and in doing so come to discern and embrace particular objects, circumstances, and events as their ultimate moral concerns. It is because reflexive conversations are, amongst other things, about our concerns, and the objects of our concerns are separate from our affective responses to them (i.e. emotions emerge in relation to something that has its own ontological worth independent from our affectivity) that our internal self-dialogues are always infused with both emotions and reason. In Archer's words, since our concerns involve "both an

external ‘object’ and a subjective commitment, the outcome itself will be a blend of logos and pathos” (2000, p. 231). In tune with Archer, Sayer (2011, p. 39) contends that “keeping feelings separate from thoughts, echoing the body-mind dualism, is absurd; both are responses to the world and our concerns”. Indeed, as we have seen, it is both Lucy’s subjective emotional response to factory farming and her knowledge of its objective features that fed into the reflexive conversation through which she came to embrace veganism as her ultimate moral commitment. Likewise, a combination of logos and pathos has been fuelling Darren’s continuous reflexive deliberations about the morally right way to consume. Instigated by intense emotional response to animal suffering (provoked by the above-mentioned accident with the meat pasty), his reflexive conversation was further informed by scientific knowledge: “*there is enough evidence to suggest that we are supposed to be like herbivores (...) medical evidence shows that as well*”; philosophical teachings: “*I read a book (...) it had a lot of facts and arguments in for vegetarianism (...) so that was quite enlightening*”; and insights gleaned from religious texts: “*I’d look at things at the Bible, religions, what you can eat what you can’t eat*”. For David, appealing to logos and pathos in the process of soul-searching was a way to work out his purpose in life and embrace environmentalism as his ultimate moral commitment. On the one hand, logos played a critical role in David’s conclusion underpinned by a particular ontology of the world:

I decided that there is this kind of hierarchy which is similar to the way that ecological economists think about the Earth as a system. So you have the Universe, and you have the Earth, and inside the Earth you have life, and inside life you have society. If you are going to choose which one to start with, you know, you go as high up the chain as you can, and I decided then just because of that simple logic that the thing I am going to care about is the environment.

At the same time, defining his ultimate concerns would not have been possible without pathos for, undoubtedly, David did not just arbitrarily “decide” what to care about in life – to the contrary, concerns over environment had been previously logged into David’s moral register due to their emotional import and appeal. In Joe’s case, rational underpinnings for commitment to veganism were supplied by the parents:

The argument that I was always given for being vegetarian or vegan when I was young was an animal welfare one, so it was just - we don’t eat animals, we don’t eat meat because you kill the animal.

Yet, as Joe admits, the reason why he has so readily internalised concerns over animal life and allowed them to define his consumption practices is because of their emotional appeal, manifest in his unequivocal passion for animals:

I remember always being very much into animals, and liking animals, and collecting a file of facts about different animals, and it would tell you where they lived and how endangered they were and stuff like that and what they did and really enjoying that. And so I think I bought into animal rights completely...

The above analysis of the subjects' self-accounts reveals that people's concerns "are not just free-floating "values" or expressions projected onto the world but feelings about various events and circumstances that aren't merely subjective" (Sayer, 2011, p. 1). It supports the idea of reflexive conversation as a site where human emotionality and cognition unite to enable individuals to define their ultimate values and concerns and work out the best ways to manifest them in practice. It is noteworthy that the ethical consumers of my research acknowledge the key role of reflexivity in enabling individuals to work out the relationships between their inner self and the outer world. Their comments on the mental and emotional journey towards ethical consumption highlight this especially well: "*I think that comes from examining life much much more (...) it's always a good thing to take a look at where you are, build a clear picture of where you are and where you want to be and then move towards that*", says Joe; "*you are having to look what is the wrong thing to do, what is the right thing to do, in order to do the right thing you need to replace, find another way of living right*", echoes him Darren. He describes his progression towards ethical consumption as a process of finding his true self in the things that he values most: "*it was like the search for the truth I guess, in learning who you are, discovering who you are and what is important to you*". Likewise, the focus on reflexive self-awareness is shared by Lucy: "*I think it is important to think about what you are doing, you know, not act unreflectively*" and Solveig: "*what really gets me is when people are unconscious of what they are doing*". Solveig's internal deliberations through which she worked out her relationship to the outer world and came to embrace veganism as a way to fulfil her moral duties as a human is a glaring example of reflexive conversation:

(...) as a human being am I really that separate from a chimpanzee? And if I am not, how am I... I am only separated by degrees from, say, a pig or a cow and how... if I

don't have to eat these products to survive, how can I justify putting other sentient creatures through treatment like this?

What these quotations evidently show is that “values are things people can reason about” (Sayer, 2011, p. 18). This crucial finding enables me to join Sayer (2011, p. 18) in a crusade against the misconception that judgements of value and objectivity do not mix. My analysis of the participants’ reflexive deliberations about their ethical concerns has clearly shown that “emotions and subjectivity influence how we reason and what we accept as fact” as well as allowed to “acknowledge the opposite – the role of reason within emotion and value” (Sayer, 2011, p. 18).

Overall, the above account allows to firmly secure the concept of reflexivity in my theoretical framework purporting to explain the internal processes through which subjects define their moral concerns and arrive at ethical food commitments. It remains to vindicate the claim that through this reflexive work of discerning our ultimate concerns we define not only what to care about, but also the kind of persons we are (Archer, 2007). In the remainder of the chapter, I will corroborate this argument by revealing the direct links between moral concerns of ethical consumers and their distinct identities. By analysing the participants’ self-narratives, I will demonstrate that ethical food practices are manifestations of individuals’ ultimate values and beliefs which determine not only how they act, but also who they are or aspire to be.

Let us start by analysing the relationship between Lucy’s commitment to a meat-free diet and her unique moral character revealed in the following quote about factory farming: “*And it is just not right, I can’t do that to animals, it’s just cruel*”. This phrase conveys two main ideas: that Lucy considers factory farming cruel, and that she doesn’t want to partake in it. The key point of Lucy’s remark is a sharp juxtaposition that she makes between herself and the notion of cruelty. The reason she refuses to contribute to the enslavement of animals is not just because she thinks it is cruel, but because she does not consider *herself* the kind of person to do a cruel thing. Her statement, therefore, misses a logical ending which Lucy implies but fails to vocalise. Taken to its logical completion, the quote would read: “*And it is just not right, I can’t do that to animals, it’s just cruel, and I am not a cruel person*”. This single phrase is the vocalised quintessence of what Lucy’s commitment to veganism represents - a manifestation of her ultimate values, principles, and concerns, in which her unique identity is reflected and expressed, through specific ethical food practices. The links between ethical

consumption and individual identity are most explicitly revealed in the following quote from Joe in which he reflects upon the relationship between his dietary commitment and his inner self:

The main reason I am vegetarian is just because... (...) it is such an ingrained part of my identity, I was born on that diet, I've always put that forward and it's just – oh, it's like the fact that I am male, you know, it's just, that's my identity now, I feel that's so solid and unchanging.

...and describes the true, deeper meaning of ethical food practices which involve a lot more than merely changing what one does and are ultimately about changing who one is:

Being vegetarian or being vegan is ultimately just a dietary thing, you know, so, if you switch from eating foods from all colours to just eating blue foods or not eating any foods that have blue, that does not change you, it's the things that drive you to be vegetarian or vegan - that's where the change comes from.

In the same vein, Lila regards her commitment to veganism as “*a way to communicate your ideas and ideology and identity*”; for Mary, being an ethical consumer “*is kind of part of who I am really*”; while Solveig perceives her vegetarian practices as “*a social statement*”. Further, David explicitly referred to the symbolic value and identity-defining potential of ethical consumption when talking about the evolution of his pro-environmental practices and the relationship between his particular choices and self-image: “*fair trade - organic thing became automatically attached to political notions of environmentalism and social justice, just automatic, like “oh, wow, they are selling stuff for us!”*”. The idea of ethical food commitments as a key defining feature of one's distinct identity is equally prominent in the subjects' perceptions of other people. “*It's about who they are*”, says Maggi, explaining why she rejects the possibility of developing an affinity with a meat-eating person: “*if they think it's alright to eat meat then that's part of their value system that would clash, you know...*”. Likewise, Joe regards vegetarianism as an essential feature of not only his own personality, but also that of his potential life partner: “*I've not had a long term relationships with someone who hasn't switched to being at least vegetarian*”.

In the above discussion, I have brought the voices of the ethical consumers of my research to testify to the inextricable relationship between agential commitments to ethical consumption and their identities. A uniform agreement appears to have been reached that our moral concerns are, indeed, “both extensions and expressions of

ourselves” (Archer, 2000, p. 79) and that in defining what to care about in life one inevitably defines what kind of person she is. In this reflexive process of construction of our desired identities, an attentive observer will discern a continuous interplay between agential subjectivities and structural objectivities. On the one hand, the intricate process of defining our ultimate concerns and, through them, our unique personalities is propelled by human capacity for reflexivity, as I have previously argued and shown. On the other hand, however, the strong emphasis on reflexivity as an essential ability of agents to reflect upon their lives, define their ultimate commitments, and choose their moral pathways should not detract from the potent role of objective reality in shaping not only what people do, but also the kind of persons they become. Archer (2000, p. 249) highlights the limits of control that we, as human beings, have over shaping our life courses and ourselves: “we do not ever make our personal identities under the circumstances of our choosing, since our embeddedness in nature, practice and society is part of what being human means” – the point just as finely expressed by one of my research participants, David: “*there is a lot of structural elements that get on the way of you achieving what it is right to be*”.

Once again, I am calling my research subjects to testify for the truth of the argument. Consider, for example, how Darren celebrates his agential power to define and follow his preferred practices: “*it was freedom, you know, it was choice, food choice, it was ethical food choice, food empowerment and more education, more enlightenment*”, whilst also recognising various external forces shaping and moulding his pathways: “*your personal family circumstances, depending on how strong their values are, it is always gonna influence your behaviour (...) you have got all these social influences going on...*”. Equally revealing is David’s interpretation of his ethical choices as wilful acts of construction of his desired identity: “*it was a lot of just ticking the box - oh yes, I am someone who eats organic, I am someone who buys fair trade, I care, you know, I care about these things, because that is who I am*”. As Darren, he highlights the key role of his agential subjectivity in determining his concerns and setting his life priorities: “*I decided, I chose to place the environment at the top of my constructed idea of what is important, my hierarchy of what is important*”, and as Darren, he too is aware that his subjective vision of “*what it is right to be*” has been planted and nurtured in him throughout the course of his life by a variety of different influences – the family he was raised in, the education he obtained, the people he met and the relationships he developed, the experiences he had and the objective reality he

faced: *“all of my experiences had resulted in this my identity”*. In a remarkably similar way, Lucy too acknowledges both that her distinct identity is an outcome of her actively and reflexively taken decisions as well as that it bears indelible imprints of various forces of external reality: *“I am a product of my own environment, of my own background, and my own experiences”*.

Yet, that my participants might be aware of the roots of their ultimate concerns and are able to rationalize their moral food projects does not make their commitments any less authentic, emotionally appealing, or value-laden. They still represent integral elements of the subjects’ unique identities, extensions and reflections of their inner selves, as finely expressed by David: *“So just because I know that these things are constructed does not mean I can’t enjoy them, allow them to give me purpose, allow them to, allow my identity to develop within them”*. It is remarkable how this quote is almost an exact echo of Archer’s (2000, p. 241) own argument:

It does not matter in the least that these concerns do indeed originate outside ourselves in our ineluctable relationship with the natural, practical and social orders, for in dedication we have taken responsibility for them and made them our own.

This is precisely where human reflexivity plays its key part, i.e. in propelling a continuous dialogue between agential subjectivities and structural objectivity and mediating people’s relationships with the outer world. While not granting agents full command over the properties of the structure, it enables them to evaluate, reflect, and elaborate upon their subjective experiences of objective reality, identify matters of concern in the events and circumstances that are external to and independent from them, but, to paraphrase Archer, in dedication take responsibility for them and make them their own. As one of my interviewees, Lila, also noted, it is only through such inner reflexive journey that concerns about the external world can become indelible defining features of our true inner selves: *“you have to just walk the road and make it your own, otherwise it is just so superficial”*

In this chapter, I aimed to illuminate the subjects’ journey towards ethical consumer identities by exploring the origins of their moral concerns and revealing the generative principles of their ethical food commitments. By unravelling Lucy’s life story and drawing on other participants’ narratives, I have provided an account of how different features of objective reality, of which individuals became aware and to which they got emotionally sensitised through subjective experiences, became the objects of

their concerns and how, through continuous cycles of reflexivity-propelled internal conversations in which agents deliberated upon their relationships with the world, they came to embrace these concerns as ultimate moral guides and determinants of their consumption practices. I have argued that through this reflexive process of discerning what matters to them and why, not only did individuals decide upon their ultimate values and beliefs, but they also came to define what kind of persons they are and, in living out their moral ideals through subjectively devised shopping and eating practices, achieved the identity of an ethical consumer. Finally, by casting light on the participants' musings over the matters of concern and ways to address them, I have demonstrated the key role of human reflexivity in mediating the incessant dialogue between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity and enabling individuals to develop distinct identities in defining the relationships between their inner self and the outer world. Last but not least, I have highlighted an important caveat about the limits of individual agency to define who we are or will become, thereby distancing myself from the assertion that people can freely choose their identities outside of the social, cultural, and practical constraints – the view that deeply permeates the neo-liberal discourse on identity politics and that I deem essential to guard my account from.

In constructing this account I have made multiple references to McDonald's (2000) study on practicing vegans. Indeed, there are a lot of similarities between her exploration of the process of becoming a vegan and my research on the formation of ethical consumer identities, both in terms of the pursued questions as well as achieved conclusions. However, while McDonald describes the empirical, i.e. her subjects' catalytic experiences, and the actual, i.e. the subsequent changes in their worldviews and consumption practices, my analysis of the participants' self-accounts informed by the realist ontology, Archer's conceptualisation of reflexivity, and Coff's idea of "glimpsed experiences" penetrates to the level of the real and explains the generative principles of human concerns over food ethics and their evolution into the practices of ethical consumption. I have brought the abstract, i.e. my proposed theoretical framework, into the relationship with the concrete, namely the subjects' particular experiences, acts, and circumstances, thereby managing to disentangle the key elements, stages, and causal powers co-constituting the process of becoming an ethical food consumer. I have shown that this process begins with the properties of external reality – its objective facts, features, and states which are prior to and independent from agents but have the potential to become the objects of their concerns, e.g. animal abuse,

environmental degradation, labour exploitation, etc. For this to occur, those objective conditions need to come into play with the essential properties of the agents, namely their affective and cognitive capacities. The opportunity for subjective emotional perception and cognitive interpretation of the objects and circumstances of potential concern is provided by catalytic factors, such as direct exposure to or personal involvement in food production practices as well as other experiences through which individuals learn about and, most importantly, become emotionally involved with the matters of concern. For those concerns to result in ethical food commitments, agents need to elaborate their emotionality beyond initial commentaries in order to arrive at their ultimate moral priorities. The essential human property of reflexivity is absolutely key to the process of emotional elaboration – it kicks in at the moment when agents appeal to their deliberative capacities in order to review and evaluate their concerns in terms of their emotional appeal, moral worth, and sustainability, that is the potential to become a life-long commitment. This reflexive work takes place during internal conversations in which, through a unification of human feeling and thought, the formation of subjects' moral pathways and identities occurs. It is this account, supported by empirical evidence from my research, that I offer as a potential explanation of the mechanisms that give rise to subjective concerns over food ethics, produce ethical consumer practices out of the interplay between the objective properties of the world and agential capacities for affectivity and cognition, and forge out ethical consumer identities during reflexive conversations in which these essential human properties unite to enable people to define who to be and how to act.

Crucially, this account, grounded in a realist ontology of the world and guided by the key concepts of ultimate concerns (understood as internal commitments to external objects) and reflexive conversation (consisting of subjective deliberations about objective circumstances) enabled me to progress toward achieving my key research aim, i.e. to showcase ethical consumption as a site of continuous interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity – a performance that we will be spectating throughout the entirety of the thesis as the participants' ethical food stories unfold. Next, this incessant interaction between agency and structure will reveal itself in the daily lives and experiences of self-defined ethical consumers to which the next chapter is about to take us. In it, I will explore how, having achieved the identity of an ethical consumer, subjects actively and reflexively sustain desired self-images through on-

going accommodation of their ethical food practices in the changing contexts of objective reality and against the backdrop of their subjective concerns.

Chapter 6

Competing Concerns, Objective Constraints, and Moral Dilemmas: Toward a Coherent and Stable Ethical Consumer Identity

The relation that holds between us and our contexts is always one of forces in tension, in which we push and pull, and are pushed and pulled (Sayer, 2011, p. 104)

In the previous chapter, I began to follow nine distinct individuals as they set out on their journeys toward an ethical consumer identity. We have heard them voice their most intimate feelings and thoughts through which they figured out their subjective relationship to the world as one of the concern over the morality of consumption. We have seen how, by reflexively evaluating and elaborating their affective and cognitive experiences, they came to embrace particular moral concerns and devised specific food practices as a way to address them. We have thus witnessed how, by making ethical consumption their ultimate life commitment and a medium through which to express their unique moral selves, they attained the distinct identity of an ethical consumer. At this point, our focus shifts from the process of becoming an ethical consumer to the intricacies and complexities of actually being one. The questions this chapter is meant to illuminate concern the ways in which, once embraced, the ethical consumer identity is preserved and sustained; the subjective and objective enablements and constraints that individuals have to negotiate as they pursue their chosen moral pathways; and, finally, the essential human properties and capacities that enable agents to do so.

I will begin by demonstrating the embeddedness of ethical consumer practices in objective reality and their situatedness against people's subjective concerns and, building upon this evidence, construe ethical food consumption as a moral commitment that requires active and continual maintenance by reflexive and intentional agents. I will investigate the ways in which individuals under the pressure of objective conditions and subjective circumstances continually adjust their relationships with the natural, practical, and social orders of the world in order to achieve a satisfying balance between their competing concerns and ensure the stability of their ethical food projects. My analysis of the participants self-accounts' will reveal what it means for the subjects to not merely practice ethical consumption, but to deeply identify with it. I will argue that for the

individuals who perceive their dietary commitments as an integral constituent and the defining feature of their personal and social identities, ensuring the stability and consistency of their moral food projects is essential to maintaining a coherent and continuous sense of self. I will defend this point by exemplifying the destabilising effects that dietary compromises produce on the personal identities of self-perceived ethical consumers as well as revealing the variety of ideational strategies to which subjects resort in order to mitigate them. In fulfilling the above goals, I will open up new frontiers of the relationship between ethical consumption and individual identities, as well as reiterate and strengthen the fundamental argument about the crucial role of both objective reality and agential ability to reflexively respond to it in shaping ethical consumer practices.

The embeddedness of ethical consumption in external reality becomes manifest as soon as a subject makes his or her first attempt at fulfilling a particular dietary commitment. The properties of the natural, practical, and social contexts in which individuals are placed play a key role in determining agential ability to pursue their moral food projects as well as their concomitant costs. A review of my participants' initial endeavours to engage in desired eating practices is particularly helpful for bringing out the force of this argument. So, Lucy's first several bids at going vegan proved unsuccessful due to the unsupportive conditions: *"This is back in the 1990 and (...) then it was really difficult and most of the stuff was really unpleasant"*. Upon moving to Eastern Europe, the practical difficulty of sustaining a vegan diet was aggravated by socio-cultural context: the idea of avoiding animal products was unheard of and justifying a request for a meatless meal in a restaurant or canteen was almost as challenging as finding it on the menu. Thus, unavailability of vegan choices made Lucy's new ethical project unrealistic, food being an absolute necessity of life. In contrast, Joe's transition to veganism was greatly facilitated by a change in his living situation, i.e. moving in with his aunt – a committed vegan, nutritionist, and competent cook: *"it was easy to do living with my aunt, very very straightforward"*. Similarly, Lila's switch to a plant-based diet and the challenge of avoiding animal products in a meat-eating household were simplified by the practical implications of the cultural rules around food preparation followed by her family:

Because it is a Jewish family and they keep kosher, so it means they don't mix milky stuff and meat stuff (...) it made it really easy for me to become vegan because of

this reason, because it was really easy to avoid milk.

Likewise, a combination of practical and social factors has been conditioning the development of David's consumption practices. Accessibility of products with desired qualities has always been critical to his ability to engage in ethical eating. Back in Scotland, lack of shops selling environmentally friendly produce was a major restraint to David's ethical food pursuits: *"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..."*. Interestingly, this practical constraint was rooted in the socio-cultural context prevailing in his hometown of Cumbernauld: *"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..."*. David's opportunities to exercise ethical choices have expanded once Waitrose became part of his local shopping scene:

So many times over the years I have been buying things, something I really liked and I felt bad about it and I thought to myself, I wish I could get the fair trade version of it, I wish there were an organic one of these, and then going to Waitrose and there was!

At the same time, his explorations of ethical consumption could not have happened without an important social enablement - moving away from an old group of friends, whom David described as *"tough, dangerous, bad people"*, and starting a relationship with an environmentally oriented girl, who allowed him to set off on his desired moral path:

All the things that I wanted to change about myself, I wanted to try, I was only able to try that because of her, because she allowed that, she would not make fun of it, because she was interested in this as well.

Solveig offers another revealing example of the embeddedness of ethical food practices in the social reality. Socio-cultural factors have been critical to Solveig's ability to initiate her moral food project and carry it through the different stages in life. She came to the idea of veganism at the time when sustaining a plant-based diet was becoming increasingly easier due to such structural enablements as growing environmental awareness among the mass public and widening presence of green products and goods, including meat-free foodstuffs. Later, the prevalence of liberal outlooks in the university environment, easy access to vegetarian foods due to proximity of the Indian-Pakistani community during her study abroad year in Sheffield, the Green

Party's rise to power and a subsequent increase in public awareness and availability of environmentally friendly products in her native Germany all played a non-trivial role in ensuring the stability of Solveig's ethical food practices. Upon moving to the UK, she found herself in a social context where high levels of environmental awareness and a historically conditioned tradition of accommodating people of diverse cultural backgrounds and eating customs have ensured that Solveig's commitment to veganism was respected and well catered for both in professional and public settings: "*because it is a very diverse crowd of people anyway, I have never had any problems*", she testifies. Most recently, sustaining a vegan diet has become more straightforward due to the rise of the Internet, social media platforms and online communities, on which Solveig 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*". At the same time, objective conditions place significant constraints on Solveig's ability to fully realise her project of ethical consumption. Absence of fresh food markets close to home makes shopping at conventional supermarkets a more frequent activity than she would have desired; UK food stores' security measures preclude an opportunity for dumpster diving which she used to practice in Germany; while the realities of the global food industry prevent Solveig from putting her money where her mouth is:

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.

Jason's anti-capitalist position and Lila's desire for alternative shopping face the same objective constraints: "*that is the system, I have to follow it, I make most of my shopping at supermarkets*", says Jason; "*some things you just can't buy in the local shops*", echoes him Lila. Her desire for local consumption is further constrained by the climatic conditions in which her moral food project unfolds. "*It would be easier to go for local if you lived in a normal climate, England is such a nightmare*", she comments, offering a telling example of the embeddedness of ethical consumption in the natural order of reality.

This discussion demonstrates the role of objective conditions and subjective circumstances in determining individuals' ability to successfully implement their moral

food initiatives. It is because of the embeddedness of dietary commitments in the natural, practical, and social contexts of reality and their inevitable positioning against subjects' various concerns that ethical consumption, as any agential project, is a precarious and fragile enterprise. On the one hand, external reality, which consists of the systems that are not closed and fixed but open and mutable (Bhaskar, 2013), produces continuous effects on agential courses of action. On the other hand, the life cycle itself is a source of multiple changes and, as people make important transitions in their lives, such as leaving parental home, getting married or divorced, making career progress or retiring, becoming a parent and so on, the nature of their social interactions and practical circumstances change and so do their priorities, opportunities, and possibilities to pursue particular pathways (Archer, 2007). At the same time, what the respondents' experiences reveal and what is important to highlight is the need "to resist the common tendency to regard causes as always enemies and never friends, as constraining our freedom rather than enabling it; they may feed, empower and stimulate us" (Midgley, 2003, p. 11 cited in Sayer, 2011, p. 104). Since multiple systemic and personal factors affect the way people shop and eat at various stages in life and may constrain as well as enable their dietary undertakings, ethical consumer projects need to be continuously monitored, reflexively reassessed, and actively sustained by intentional and self-aware subjects.

Lucy's story allows to capture and understand the lived experiences of an ethical consumer who continuously negotiates her relationships with the natural, practical, and social orders of the world in order to maintain a satisfying balance between her competing concerns and ensure the stability of her moral food commitments. Although initially nothing seemed to impede Lucy's new eating practices - her mother was tolerant of her convictions, while school meals were easily replaced by packed lunches - she soon had to face the unintended consequences of the dietary restrictions she was stringently observing. For Lucy, being a 14-year-old vegetarian in a meat-eating household meant subsisting largely on vegetables, which she complimented with sweets and other foodstuffs, usually of low nutritional value, from the kitchen cupboard. After several months on the "*bread and jam diet*", Lucy fell ill. She was diagnosed with anaemia and strongly advised to switch to a more nutritious food regime. Abandoning vegetarianism was ruled out, and as an alternative solution her mother bought Lucy a vegetarian recipe book and let her cook her own meals - a concession on the part of a devoted housewife who didn't like other people in the kitchen, as Lucy notes in

hindsight. Let us now analyse the significance of this episode for Lucy's development as an ethical food consumer. The situation represents the first clash between her moral commitment to vegetarianism and concerns over health - the "animal-welfare versus self-welfare tension", as defined by Janda and Trocchia (2001, p. 1208) in a study of vegetarians. This tension could be neither eliminated, since health concerns are "embodied in our physical constitution" (Archer, 2000, p. 198), nor ignored, as the increasing intensity of its emotional import called for an action to eliminate or ameliorate the harmful relationship between Lucy's body and her dietary practice. Thus, Lucy was faced with the need to appease her ineluctable physical concerns by either abandoning vegetarianism - which would mean departing from her identity-defining moral commitment - or mitigating its damaging effects. As we have seen, by taking advantage of the social and practical enablements, Lucy was able to achieve a satisfying and morally acceptable solution to the progressively intensifying conflict between her different concerns. Mastering cooking skills and learning vegetarian recipes in particular was a performative achievement that enabled Lucy to attend to her physical needs without forsaking her dietary practice. Her mother's support has also been key to facilitating the shift to a healthier diet. Thus, by fine-tuning her relationships with the natural, social, and practical contexts of reality Lucy managed to achieve a liveable balance between her competing concerns and preserve her commitment to ethical eating.

Other participants too continuously face the need to negotiate subjective and objective impediments to their moral food projects. Prohibitive cost of ethical goods has been commonly singled out as one of the key factors restraining the subjects' ability to engage in ethical consumption. However, while concerns over limited food budgets undoubtedly place constraints on the contents of individuals' shopping baskets, the ethical consumers of my research demonstrate the capacity to overcome financial barriers and fulfil their moral food projects in the ways that do not command a premium price. For example, Solveig is keen on freeganism and considers dumpster diving a good way to cut grocery bills while simultaneously addressing the problem of food waste; Joe is actively exploring opportunities for downshifting and continually experiments with different vegan meals in search of the most cost-effective weekly menu; Darren organised an allotment collective to grow organic food for personal consumption as well as for charity; while Lila joined a buying group to purchase fair trade and organic foodstuffs in bulk at a much more affordable price. Those who for various reasons, such as convenience or lack of alternative options, rely on

supermarkets, came up with peculiar shopping strategies in order to accommodate both their moral and financial concerns. So, Maggi ensures a continuous supply of ethical goods by seeking out special offers and deals – once a bargain is found, she places a bulk order which usually lasts her 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, underscoring the power of consumer agency and its potential for creative approach to consumption practices. Subjects manifest similar resourcefulness when it comes to negotiating occasions where food choices consistent with their ethical beliefs are lacking. While such practical and social constraints may become a significant challenge to agential dietary commitments, the ethical consumers of my research successfully negotiate such barriers - for example, by bringing their own food, as does Lucy: *“usually if I go out on a social occasion I take something with me that I can eat”*, Solveig: *“I would bring vegan burgers or sausages so that I would have something to put on the barbecue”*, and Lila: *“I kind of coped, I brought my own packed dinner with me”*. As an undergraduate student, Joe had to actively defend his ability to sustain his commitment to veganism against the lack of meat-free options in the university catered halls: *“I remember having to fight for that for a bit, for that special treatment”*.

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 the given contexts and devise alternative ways to fulfil their moral food projects. They provide empirical evidence to counterbalance the argument that “the consumer role is plastic and open for business interests, civic society organizations, and governmental agencies to mold” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007, p. 473), for in the manner in which participants negotiate their relationships with objective reality and balance out their subjective concerns one cannot be mistaken to detect the exercise of human agency and a manifestation of individuals’ capacity for reflexive, active, and creative response to constraints and limitations facing their ethical food projects. Furthermore, the above analysis prompts me to engage in the debate on the connections between ethical consumption and economic capital. Particularly, it enables me to challenge the perspective essentialising ethical consumption as an exclusive province of the rich which has permeated media and public discourse on responsible shopping: a radical activist magazine *New Internationalist*, for example, condemned ethical consumerism as

merely “yet another way in which the poor are being disenfranchised” (Worth, 2006, no pagination), while a well-known environmental journalist George Monbiot (2007, no pagination) echoed the critique in his Guardian column attacking ethical pursuits as “just another way of showing how rich you are”. The accusations seem to be based on the fact that products with ethical credentials such as organic and fair-trade tend to come with significant price premiums leading critics to argue that the vast shoes of a responsible consumer can only be filled by high-income earners. Indeed, a comparative assessment of 75 products at the top six UK grocery stores revealed that on average ethical goods are 45% more expensive than conventional products, and that nearly half of UK consumers are unable or unwilling to pay the price (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008). Other commentators, however, reject the view of ethical consumption as an elite practice and just “a further brand of middle-class distinction” (Littler, 2011, p. 35). As Littler (2011) justly notes, being rich does not necessarily lead to ethical concerns or commitments. At the same time, many less well-off consumers subscribe to and practice responsible lifestyles – historically, associations between working class people and ethical consumerism are exemplified in such events as, for instance, American housewives’ boycotts of supermarkets with exploitative labour practices or the development of the co-operative movement in the UK, while contemporary statistical evidence suggests that ethically minded consumers are increasingly found among the poorer nations with China, Brazil, Mexico, and India actually outweighing UK, USA or Germany by the number of people prepared to pay ethical premiums (Havas Media, 2007 cited in Carrigan and De Pelsmacker, 2009, p. 681). Moreover, while it is true that organic and fair trade goods often carry hefty price tags, plenty of ethical choices come at no added cost providing for a convenient marriage of consumers’ environmental and financial concerns (Flatters and Willmott, 2009). My research findings corroborate the argument enabling me to challenge the view of ethical consumption as merely a wealthy shopper’s pursuit. Thus, out of nine individuals who took part in my study – all convinced ideological supporters and active practitioners of various forms of ethical consumption – only one interviewee reported no concerns about the cost of her food shopping (being retired and having no significant financial obligations, Mary can afford a rather generous food budget and faces very little financial constraints when it comes to grocery shopping), whereas others were rather restricted in their financial abilities and had to carefully watch their food spending. Unsurprisingly, for the subjects of my study shopping for premium priced products such as organic or fair-trade was neither

the only nor even the primary way to manifest themselves as ethical consumers. Instead, they fulfilled their moral food projects through various means demonstrating that certain ethical choices and practices can be embraced at little or no extra cost, such as choosing low-carbon options or products with minimised packaging; others can actually bring significant savings by helping to cut down the grocery bills, e.g. going meat-free, using leftovers; while otherwise unaffordable choices can be reached through consumer creativity and wise shopping techniques. In light of this evidence, I contend that the argument about prohibitive costs of ethical consumption overlooks the vast array of consumer practices, choices, and acts that fall under the term. The short-sightedness of the view of responsible shopping as an exclusive privilege of the moneyed classes becomes apparent once one breaks away from the extremely limited idea of ethical consumption as confined to leisurely shopping for conspicuously labelled fair trade and organic products in high-end grocery stores, and once one begins to understand food consumption not merely as *shopping* for, but as *provisioning* of goods and takes it outside the physical boundaries of quirky health shops, specialised supermarket sections, or farmer's markets to account for the variety of ways in which individuals may feed themselves as well as the variety of ways in which they can do it more ethically. While it is self-evidently true that some can more easily engage with ethical consumption than others due to fewer financial or social restraints, the socio-demographic profile of my research participants suggests that the possession of cultural capital plays a far greater role in the individual adoption of ethical food practices than access to economic resources – a finding which mirrors the results of the Eurobarometer (2011) survey proving educational levels to be a better predictor of the willingness to pay ethical premiums than income.

The above analysis of the ways in which my participants negotiate the inevitable constraints, financial or otherwise, facing their dietary commitments highlights the central role of reflexivity in enabling individuals to not merely design projects of ethical consumption, but to accommodate them to the fluid contexts of objective reality and the ever-changing backdrop of their subjective concerns. At the same time, sustaining a satisfying balance between competing concerns does not always prove possible and, as the respondents' accounts showcase, dietary compromises and slips constitute an inevitable part of ethical consumer experiences. Thus, despite being repeatedly subdued, concerns over physical wellbeing eventually took their toll on Lucy's moral food project. Although back in England where the idea of vegetarianism had already entered

the mainstream and meat-free options had become widely available both in shops and restaurants Lucy's ethical foodways faced neither practical nor social constraints, her health continued to deteriorate due to extensive over-reliance on convenience meals. As health problems intensified, so did their emotional import, which could no longer be neglected or repressed. Eventually, Lucy paid a visit to a doctor, whose major recommendation was to enrich her diet with fish. Reluctant to backtrack on her principles of ethical consumption, Lucy did not take the advice until practical, natural, and social influences all came together to encourage a compromise. This turning point occurred during Lucy's trip to Portugal where limited choice of vegetarian foods represented a practical constraint to her project of ethical eating. On the second week of a diet consisting largely of eggs, Lucy got covered in spots. The physical manifestation of the pressing need to attend to her bodily needs generated an emotional response – a growing feeling of worry – which, coupled with words of encouragement from her pescatarian boyfriend, prompted Lucy to reconsider her ways. Here is how she describes this decisive moment:

So you know, I got really spotty, and we were in a restaurant - it was a nice outdoor restaurant - and they were doing grilled sardines, you know, that traditional. And he was sat there, and he was eating these sardines, and he said, "they are absolutely delicious, you should eat this" (...) So I said, "ok, I'll try one" and I ate a sardine. Since then I try and eat fish once a week, just for the health.

Thus, combined pressure from the practical, natural, and social orders of reality forced Lucy to adjust her moral project to accommodate her bodily needs. Despite being rather dismissive of her health during her younger years, Lucy eventually had to acknowledge and accept the ineluctability of physical concerns and work out a new lifestyle within which they would be adequately heeded. Other participants also demonstrate preparedness to review their subjective hierarchy of priorities and compromise on ethical food commitments in order to address concerns that arise in the natural realm, i.e. those that involve their physical wellbeing and state. Like Lucy, Solveig too recognises the inevitability of her bodily needs and is ready to suspend the vegan diet for the sake of her health, as she did when milk chocolate was the only available solution to her quickly dropping blood sugar levels:

If it is something basic like that, something you need or something you don't have an alternative for, then I have to say that my own life in this situation is for me more important than my convictions.

Further, obligations and responsibilities entailed by various social roles as well as dominant norms around certain societal situations often take prevalence over the requirements of ethical consumption. Thus, Maggi subdued her vegetarian pledge to concerns over nutrition, whose emotional import overrode the significance of her ethical food commitments once she got pregnant and became a mother. *“I had a bigger focus on my baby”*, she explains, attesting to positional changes in her subjective hierarchy of priorities induced by the new familial context, her role within it and its concomitant responsibilities. Mary too embraced motherhood as a bigger commitment than ethical consumption. As Maggi, she prioritised her parental duties over her ethical pursuits: *“we had an allotment when she [her daughter] was little, but got thrown off it because I couldn’t get to it”*, and reviewed her moral convictions, such as those over having a cat, through the prism of her new ultimate concern over the needs and desires of her child:

I was aware of environmental issues of feeding cats food which was fish and meat and stuff that actually was not really environmentally very... should you be using the resources to feed cats? (...) it was because my daughter really really wanted her that I caved in.

Likewise, Lila is willing to prioritise an opportunity to treat her child over her ethical principles: *“sometimes, you know, I just think – my daughter is going to enjoy these treats, so I am going to buy it regardless of the packaging and trans-fats and what have you...”*

Respect for societal norms also appears to be among the values which subjects are ready to promote over their dietary commitments. Particularly, concerns over being a gracious guest or a hospitable host have the power to dominate one’s consumption behaviour. Thus, questioning the origins and characteristics of food prepared and served by a host was uniformly defined by the participants as unacceptable and rude: *“to go somewhere else, to stay at someone else’s house - you are not going to say, “oh, is this avocado organic? I am not going to eat it then”, that is so ridiculous”*, says David; *“you don’t have the right to do that, it is a matter of politeness”*, agrees Jason. Similarly, even the most committed ethical consumers put their dietary principles aside when serving food to their guests, as does David: *“my guests will get whatever they want, whatever they need and there will be no questions as to whether it is bad for the environment or not, cause they are my guests”*. How ethically motivated individuals negotiate their relationships with the social order and balance their dietary commitments

against inescapable concerns over social standing and worth, as well as how this affects their identities is an important theme that I will take up and explore in depth in the next chapter. What the selected examples above were meant to highlight is individuals' inherent sociality and its place within the inescapable "trio of human concerns" (Archer, 2007) which directly affect consumers' ability to pursue their desired food practices.

Finally, agential ethical food commitments often fall prey to financial concerns and practical difficulties. Echoing Adams and Raisborough's (2010, p. 263) respondent who described ethical shopping as a constant "balancing act between my social conscience and the size of my purse", my participants too emphasised the limits that family food budgets place on their ability to make ethical choices: "*I could not afford to be fussy about whether something was organic or anything like that*", recalls Lucy her life as a student with no secure income; "*I'd end up spending £30 a week on apples alone*" – justifies Maggi her limited consumption of organic products; "*we had very little money as well, so I could not invest in buying those expensive products*", looks back Lila on her early days in the UK; "*I could not find any vegan burgers which were not pre-fried tofu, which was just so expensive*" – explains Joe the wilful slip in his vegan diet; "*if I didn't have enough money then I wouldn't be able to and that is that, I'd have to prioritise much more carefully*", acknowledges Mary the ineluctability of financial concerns. Although Mary has a comparatively generous food budget and enjoys the freedom to consume a range of premium priced products like organic or fair trade, she too faced the need to suspend her ethical practices due to more urgent demands of life, such as going to Newbury to look after her old-aged aunt. Lack of time and easy access to ethical food outlets meant that Mary had to rely on the convenience of supermarket shopping, contrary to her commitment to farmer's markets and independent health food shops. She interprets this as a temporary, yet unavoidable, concession in the face of more pressing concerns: "*I can't worry about it because I've got so many other pressures on me, it is just how it is. When I come back, I'll start again*". Such temporal abandonment of ethical commitments due to exigencies of life is not an uncommon experience for ethical consumers. For instance, Joe faced the challenge of adjusting his vegan practice to a new living context in Leeds: "*I was a bit unfamiliar with everything, I just found it hard to carry that on*". Likewise, Lila's ethical shopping routine was thrown into confusion as she was trying to settle in England: "*I did not know where to get anything basically, I did not know where you shop more healthy food or organic food, I had no idea*". The need to fulfil the

responsibilities of a young mother while adapting to a new living situation proved too difficult to combine with the principles of ethical consumption:

I really made a point of not buying any packed fruit and vegetables, but if you go to a supermarket - it is so much easier just to grab a bag of carrots rather than pick them individually, and it sounds really lazy but actually, you know, when you have this big trolley and the girl is whining, you just kind of grab and just go, so...

“*You have to fit in so many tasks*”, justifies Lila this wilful negation of her moral principles, echoing Archer’s point about the ineluctable need to achieve and sustain a satisfying balance between our competing desires and needs.

The participants’ confessions exemplify the ways in which “the moral complexities of everyday life restrict the adoption of an active consumerist role” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, p. 2007, p. 469). They underscore the contingency of ethical food projects on agential relationships with the three different orders of the world and reveal that no matter how sincere and strong, individuals’ dietary commitments are liable to compromises and trade-offs commanded by the need to achieve a liveable balance between their competing concerns. The ethical consumers of my research demonstrate and acknowledge preparedness to adjust, suspend, or abandon their moral food projects in the face of ineluctable natural concerns, practical constraints, and their responsibilities as functioning members of society, as succinctly expressed by Darren: “*you have to balance enjoyment, your lifestyle, and your culture*”. In a study of ethical dispositions and actions of ordinary consumers, Adams and Raisborough’s (2010) too highlight the unevenness of individuals’ practices of ethical consumption. Following them, I too resist the temptation to take the inconsistency of the participants’ moral food commitments as a sign of fragmented identities and isolate what is best seen as “component parts of a coherent, liable to flux, but mostly uneven, biographical narrative” (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, p. 271). At the same time, my argument about a direct relationship between consumers’ identities and their ethical food practices suggests that dietary compromises affect not only how ethical consumers act, but also how they feel and, more specifically, how they feel about themselves as a particular kind of person. In light of the key goal of my thesis – to interpret moral food practices in relation to individual identities – an in-depth exploration of these effects becomes a research imperative. On this way, Lila’s interpretation of the inevitable dietary compromises imposed by the pressing subjective concerns and changing objective conditions is the

best starting point: *“I felt that I did not have the network and the know-how of being really me”*, she confessed. This idea of losing *“the know-how of being really me”* unites Lila’s account with the experiences of Mary, Joe, and other morally concerned and committed consumers who faced and accepted the need to subdue their inner moral self as their food projects became impractical or too costly to maintain. It reiterates the links between ethical food consumption and individual identities by alluding to the destructive effects that dietary concessions produce on ethical consumers’ self-image. The most revealing example is found in Lila’s eloquent description of the internal state of discontinuity with herself induced by a temporary collapse of her ethical practices:

Not only I felt guilty, I also felt I was completely remote from myself... I felt like, who is this person who goes to the supermarket and buys all this packed food? I really felt like it wasn’t me.

Another testimony is offered by Lucy, whose self-view as a person genuinely concerned about animal life was profoundly shaken upon her learning about veganism and recognising the misfit between her foodways and her ultimate concerns: *“I was about 20 when I met vegans and realised that I was a total hypocrite, and there was me eating all this stuff that I should not be eating”*. Lucy’s description of the destabilising identity effects of the value-practice gap revealed in her moral food project resonates with Joe, whose sense of true self is equally closely tied to his ethical commitments: *“if I switched from being an ethical consumer of food, I’d feel really hypocritical about that and quite miserable”*. Participants’ descriptions of the ways in which their sense of personal continuity and integrity changes depending on whether they are able to sustain their ethical food practices or forced to compromise on their commitments fit well into my theoretical framework. They demonstrate the direct relationship between people’s ultimate concerns and identities and substantiate the argument that, since we invest ourselves in our moral commitments, their consistency and stability is crucial for our sense of self-worth. As Archer (2000) reminds us, agents cannot be indifferent to how well their ultimate concerns are realised for they are expressions and extensions of their distinct personalities. Frankfurt (1988, p. 83) conveys the same point:

A person who cares about something is, as it were, invested in it. He identifies himself with what he cares about in the sense that he makes himself vulnerable to losses and susceptible to benefits depending upon whether what he cares about is diminished or enhanced.

This argument holds explanatory power to account not only for the practices that morally concerned individuals engage in, but also for the commitments that they abstain

from making. My analysis of the participants' development as ethical food consumers brings out the force of Sayer's insightful point that "our vulnerability is as important as our capacities; indeed the two sides are closely related, for vulnerability can prompt us to act or fail to act, and both can be risky" (2011, p. 5). Consider, for example, the reasoning behind Lucy's long-lasting reluctance to go vegan: "*I admired it, I thought it was admirable, I just... You know, I did not want to set myself up and fail*". Thus, despite high emotional appeal, she negated the project of veganism at the time when its long-term sustainability was uncertain. Lucy's unwillingness to set herself an ethical standard which she was not able to live up to can be neatly construed as part of the struggle for a continuous self. It is not a practical failure but one of a more personal kind that Lucy strove to avoid by refraining from unrealistic commitments, whose fiasco would not only unsettle her moral project, but by doing so would also diminish her sense of self-worth. Frankfurt (1988, p. 83) finely expresses the argument:

With respect to those we love and with respect to our ideals, we are liable to be bound by necessities which have less to do with our adherence to the principles of morality than with integrity and consistency of a more personal kind. These necessities constrain us from betraying the things we care about most, and with which, accordingly, we are most closely identified. In a sense which a strictly ethical analysis cannot make clear, what they keep us from violating are not our duties and obligations but ourselves.

That it is not specific dietary rules and principles but the sense of being true to themselves that ethical consumers most dearly observe is confirmed by my participants: "*It is more about my own sense of living in a bit more integrity*", acknowledges Mary; "*I want to be true to my values, I don't want to eat fish*", asserts Maggi; "*I would not lose sleep if I ate something and it's got egg in it and I did not realize and then I found out, then I would not really lose sleep about it*", admits Daren, revealing that his ethical commitments are ultimately about "*not lying to yourself, be honest to yourself*". My interpretation of the participants' confessions feeds into the argument advanced by Greenebaum (2012, p. 131) in her study of self-defined ethical vegans in which she construes her subjects' "quest for purity" of dietary commitments as "a pursuit of an authentic identity". My research offers ample empirical evidence to support this theoretical construct. For example, David's self-perception as a person of strong environmental values has been the main driving force behind his decision to give up meat. "*There was this cumulative effect over my entire adult life of this idea that I am kind of supposed to be vegetarian, but I am rebelling against myself*", admits David to the gradual recognition of the disturbing misfit between his omnivorous lifestyle and his

true self, defined by concerns over the environment. A desire to achieve a coherent self-concept by bridging the increasingly unsettling gap between values and practices became the major impetus for David's commitment to vegetarianism. His moral food project was informed by and still rests on the view that *"if you think you can be an environmentalist and still eat meat, then you are wrong"*, which alludes to the idea of ethical consumption as a way of achieving an authentic identity. Other participants have remarkably similar perceptions of the connection between their consumption practices and their self-view: *"it seemed contradictory to do anything else, I just could not justify not being vegan"*, conveys Joe his perception of veganism as the only right moral path towards his subjectively defined true self; *"there was probably a sort of – I should not be eating fish because I am, in my head, I am vegetarian"*, evokes Maggi her transition to a meat-free diet driven by a yearning for inner harmony with her vegetarian self-image; *"I knew it was inconsistent to be eating fish, so I became a vegetarian and shortly after that vegan"*, describes Darren the progressive refinement of his ethical food project propelled by the sense of discrepancy with his self-view as a person committed to cruelty-free lifestyle; *"my self-concept is of someone who is fairly environmentally and ethically aware and tries to be consistent with that"*, joins them Mary in interpreting her consumption practices as *"a pursuit of an authentic identity"* (Greenebaum, 2012, p. 131). These examples suggest that subjects' continuous reflexive efforts to align their values, beliefs, and eating behaviours are driven by the desire to live in congruence with their perceived authentic selves, offering support to the claim that *"self-inquiry ultimately enables an authentic self through active and deliberate choices of a specific, ethical consumption lifestyle"* (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322). The urge for the feeling of authenticity, arguably universal among humans and evidently shared by the ethical consumers of my research, is explained by Vannini (2006, p. 237):

The basic precept of authenticity is that when individuals feel congruent with their values, goals, emotions, and meanings, they experience a positive emotion (authenticity). In contrast, people experience inauthenticity as an unpleasant emotion when they perceive incongruence with their values, goals, emotions, and self-meanings.

Once again, my participants attest to the truth of the argument: *"I think I am more coherent with myself when I am more ethical, I am more in harmony with myself"*, says Lila; *"I feel safe, I feel comfortable in my own skin about it"*, echoes her Mary. This evidence offers support to the view that *"much environmental advocacy represents*

a certain way of thinking and acting that can be characterized as a style of life or as a desire to be a certain kind of person” (Moisander and Pesonen, 2002, p. 330; see also Shaw and Shiu’s, 2003; Newholm, 2005).

In the above discussion, I have offered ample empirical evidence to illustrate the relationship between agential performances of ethical consumption and their identities – a crucial association which explains the importance that self-perceived ethical consumers attach to the stability and consistency of their dietary commitments. It enabled me to substantiate the claim that subjects’ perseverance in sustaining their moral food projects is driven first and foremost by concerns over a stable and coherent identity. To fully harness the explanatory potential of this argument, I will now employ it to analyse and render meaningful the participants’ continuous endeavours to negotiate the shortcomings of their ethical food practices and the particular ways - or strategies - through which they do so. Let us start by considering how Lucy, for whom inconsequent dietary practices once presented a good enough reason to proclaim herself “a total hypocrite”, currently manages to preserve the sense of personal integrity despite having to compromise on her commitment to a plant-based diet. Although Lucy perceives and defines herself as an ethical food consumer, she claims neither the identity of a vegetarian: *“I don’t call myself vegetarian because I occasionally eat fish”*, nor that of a vegan: *“I am not a vegan because I eat fish and I eat eggs”*. What Lucy subconsciously achieves by refusing to be labelled as vegan or vegetarian is prevention of a destabilising inconsistency between the diet she follows and her assumed identity. Joe adopts the same strategy: *“right now I don’t tell myself that you’re a proper strict vegan at the minute”*. Like Lucy, he justifies his eating behavior by disclaiming the identity that would compel him into a vegan diet; moreover, he is well aware of the ideational process at work: *“not having kind of internalized or externalised identity as a vegan is what stops me from resisting that temptation”*. Through an analysis of the participants’ confessions I have been able to detect this strategy of identity disavowal as one of the tactics that subjects employ to avert the negative feeling of incongruity with their assumed and projected identities.

Further, Mills’ (1940) concept of the “vocabularies of motive” - social discourses that individuals know and expect to be accepted as morally valid excuses for potentially reprehensible behaviour - provides another useful theoretical prism through which to comprehend how ethical consumers legitimise their dietary compromises. In referring to it, I am following in the footsteps of Grauel (2014) who deploys Mills’

ideas to construct an account of the ways in which mainstream consumers resolve inconsistencies between their food practices and socially circulated ideas of responsible consumption. In his study, Grauel describes subjects' attempts to justify the lack of ethical considerations in their eating behaviour by invoking personal taste, family needs, and practical constraints which he interprets as appeals to the vocabularies of motives from which his participants derived socially legitimate excuses for their transgression of certain moral ideals. Following Grauel, I utilize the idea of the vocabularies of motives as a conceptual tool to analyse the ways in which the ethical consumers of my research explained away the disturbing contradictions between their dietary commitments and some of their actual food practices. To this end, I would like to go back to the participants' accounts of their voluntary and forced dietary compromises and consider their explanations. To ease the task for the readers, I reiterate the most revealing excerpts: *"my own life in this situation is for me more important"* (Solveig); *"I've got so many other pressures on me"* (Mary); *"I had a bigger focus on my baby"* (Maggi); *"I could not afford to be fussy about whether something was organic or anything like that"* (Lucy). The central message conveyed by these quotes is that the participants are ready to subdue their ethical concerns when faced with the matters of higher priority, i.e. those that they consider to be more important to them at a given point in life, such as motherhood, or those that they have no means of escaping, such as health problems, or those that they have no choice but to submit to, such as lack of money or unavailability of desirable choices. Such accounts can be construed as "justificatory conversations" (Mills, 1940) in which people engage in order to explain away their conduct and guard it against societal disapproval, and references to the vocabularies of motive can be clearly found within them. Like Grauel's ordinary consumers, my interviewees problematized the possibility of attaining their ideal vision of food ethics given the realities of life, as David succinctly expressed: *"structural elements get on the way – the shops just don't sell it, I don't have the time..."*. It is the need to account for the gaps between their actual eating practices and proclaimed ethical ideals that made the subjects resort to the vocabularies of motive and invoke socially approved values in order to justify the perceived shortcomings of their dietary behaviours. So, Lila referred to the notions of good mothering and fairness to explain why she had conceded to her daughter's desire for non-vegan ice-cream: *"it was just constantly – no, you are not allowed that, you are not allowed this, it was kind of – that is just so unfair"*; Solveig appealed to the social conventions around being a respectful guest as the reason for

sharing a non-vegan meal: *“not accepting it would have been rude beyond belief”*; while Maggi justified the occasional forsaking of her vegan principles by invoking respect for food and the value of thrift: *“it really seems morally wrong to throw food away”*. Apparently, my participants recognised that their eating practices were being questioned, and that there were normative implications of both their conduct and the excuses given for it. Urged to present a just cause for the transgression of their own subjective standards of ethical consumption, the interviewees invoked motives that they considered normatively relevant to the situation and that they knew and expected to be commonly accepted as morally legitimate. Moreover, the subjects were eager to underscore their aspirations and intentions to consume in more ethical ways while commenting on the lack of opportunities to do so: *“ideally I would want fair trade, organic, and local stuff”*, asserted Maggi her desire to support a wide range of ethical causes, unfulfilled due to financial constraints; *“if I had an infinite amount of time I would grow more food, I would develop more recipes, I would have time to research all of my foods to find out where everything comes from”*, stated David his ethical intentions, constrained by a constant lack of time. This evidence corroborates Grauel’s (2014) argument that not only actual behaviour, but preferences and intentions alone can be used in justificatory conversations as a way to assert one’s virtues.

Further, my analysis of the subjects’ accounts revealed the tendency among ethical consumers to justify their dietary compromises by referring to the practices and acts of ethical consumption in which they routinely engage and which, the participants argued, massively outweigh the negative impact of their occasional “wrongdoings”. This strategy, which I call “compensatory reasoning”, evidently guides David’s moral self-defence: *“I do so much, and I put so much thought into it, and I base my life around these principles for such a long time that I don’t feel that bad when I do something wrong”*. Likewise, it manifests itself in Joe’s approach to justifying his foodways: *“I am working towards a greater good ultimately, it does not matter if I eat the odd sandwich, you know, in the greater scheme of things”*, and Lila’s excuse for indulging in a non-vegan treat: *“after 15 years of being vegan – no, I thought, it wouldn’t harm, it won’t do any harm, I’ll just try because I feel like it”*.

Finally, developing subjective conceptions of ethical consumption is yet another way in which the ethical consumers of my research attempted to bridge the gaps between their ethical values and dietary practices. Consider, for example, how Lucy explains the apparent moral disaccord between her consumption of fish and eggs and

her ultimate concerns over animal welfare: *“the reason why I eat eggs – I’ve got friends who keep chickens and I know that the chickens are perfectly happy - I’ve seen those chickens, it’s not doing them any harm laying those eggs”* and *“I won’t eat farmed fish, I won’t eat anything that’s been produced in an unnatural way, but if it’s deep sea fish, I think - well, at least it had a normal life”*. Thus, by subjectively devising the rules and principles to define and guide her ethical food commitments, Lucy manages to achieve harmony between her self-perception as an ethical food consumer and her particular eating practices. As long as consuming free-range eggs and sustainably sourced fish is not perceived by Lucy as a transgression of her ultimate commitment to cruelty-free consumption, it can be neatly accommodated within her personal moral matrix and entails no detrimental effects for her sense of integrity and self-worth. Solveig resorts to the same strategy when trying to justify the ethical compromises she willingly makes, such as accepting non-vegan foods offered by the people she cares about:

I think in a way it is the whole Hippocratic thing, you know, – first do not do harm. I know that if I had gone to my grandmother’s place and refused the cheesecake that she bought especially because I was coming to visit (...) I think it would have been more harmful...

In the above example Solveig chooses to sacrifice her food ethics because, in her view, upholding them would entail more harm by profoundly offending the people whose effort went into providing the food: *“the priority in this case was really not to hurt people’s feelings and not to offend people”*. Although Solveig’s actions explicitly violate her commitment to veganism, they manifest respect for its underlying moral principle and are thus in alignment with her individual belief system. By presenting the principle of not doing harm as her ultimate moral benchmark, Solveig effectively eliminates the inconsistency between her dietary concessions and her self-image as an ethical food consumer and thereby manages to secure the sense of being true to her moral self. The deeply subjective nature of Solveig’s and Lucy’s reasoning reveals itself in their differing application of exactly the same moral principle that underlies their vision of ethical living and, more specifically, their idiosyncratic judgements of what constitutes harm and who the potential victims are. *“Harm for me would be animal welfare”* – says Lucy, justifying her unbending persistence in sustaining a cruelty-free diet even at the risk of hurting her mother’s feelings. By contrast, Solveig’s moral vision in this case extends beyond animals to include human beings which is why for her the best way to minimise harm might - and often does - involve compromising on

her vegan commitments. Lucy's and Solveig's divergent approaches to upholding the same moral principle and resolving the same moral dilemma, their differing "hierarchy of vulnerability and responsibility", to use Solveig's phrase, underscore the all-important role of agential subjectivity in shaping the ways in which individuals address their ethical concerns. As Archer (2000, p. 298) explains,

Part of being concerned about our concerns is also internally to interrogate ourselves about whether *we* are doing *them* justice. This is not simply a matter of persons asking themselves, "if I am dedicated to x, then am I dedicated enough?" There is also a judicious question, partly an instrumental one, of how "I" should act so as best to promote my concerns to the best possible effect. This can be answered very differently, for the same kind of concern, by different people, precisely because they are unique persons.

Darren's approach to ethical consumption is yet another telling illustration of this argument. His moral food practices are also informed by the subjective idea of what being an ethical consumer entails, which for him is "*eliminating the suffering, taking it out of your life, removing it*". Although Darren acknowledges that commitment to cruelty-free consumption requires addressing both human and animal suffering and is highly aware of such issues as child labour, abuse of workers' rights, and exploitation of immigrants, his moral food project is centred on veganism and displays very limited practical involvement with fair trade, anti-corporate, or organic agenda. "*You want to eliminate the suffering of those who are in the most pain, in the worst position*", explains Darren his specific focus on non-human animals thus adding another layer of personal judgements to his subjective idea about what it means to be an ethical consumer (eliminating the suffering); who is most vulnerable to suffering (animals), and how one could help to eliminate their pain (by going vegan). Likewise, David used to justify the habit of eating meat, which runs counter to the environmental values he strongly upholds, through subjectively constructed and endorsed ideas: "*I just told myself that by buying local, organic, free-range meat - that is minimizing the impact, therefore I can continue as normal as long as I am paying the premium*". Interestingly, David is remarkably well aware of the ideational work he performed, its underlying goal and achieved effects: "*I managed to wilfully convince myself that it was not a problem (...) because you can twist your morality quite easily like that*". Mary admits to the same conceptual trick of "twisting" the idea of what constitutes an ethical choice to make her eating habits feel and appear consistent with her environmental concerns: "*I've convinced myself that free range lamb, for instance, wasn't part of the problem*".

Mary's life-long consumption of meat was rendered acceptable by her "*intentional ignorance*", to use Solveig's phrase, of the negative impact of animal farming to which she admits in hindsight: "*I just missed it or did not want to see it, who knows*". These examples showcase how by developing their own subjective conceptions of ethical consumption individuals can justify the choices they make and practices they engage in – as well as those they avoid – and claim their desired moral identities without losing the sense of authentic self. These findings align with the conclusions drawn by Cherry (2006) in her study of self-defined vegans where she highlights how by constructing personal definitions of veganism individuals could claim and defend vegan identities without complying with strict dietary requirements. One of her participants, for example, acknowledged the inconsistency of his eating practice, which included milk, with the principles of a "true vegan" (Cherry, 2006, p. 161), yet defended his self-identification as a vegan person by declaring deep belief in preventing animal cruelty. Just as my interviewees, Cherry's participant sought to explain away the apparent contradiction between the mainstream practice of veganism and his idiosyncratic enactment of it by grounding it in his personal ethical principles and beliefs.

The significance of this evidence extends beyond merely revealing the diversities and divergences in ethical consumer practices. The undeniably subjective nature of individuals' understandings, interpretations, and enactments of ethical consumption undermines one of the key arguments of the proponents of practice-based perspective on the sources and determinants of consumer behaviour persisting in the view that "how we understand and actually use these things will be guided by the organisation of the practice rather than any personal decision about consuming" (Wheeler, 2012, p. 89). The idea that every practice tends to be enacted on socially recognized and approved terms fails to account for the variations in the performances of ethical consumption among the participants of my research. While social practice approach recognizes individuals as "active and creative, constantly reinterpreting social structures and norms within the changing contexts of their lives" (Hards, 2011, p. 25), to explain the differing interpretations and enactments of consumption practices by referring solely to the contextual nature of subjects' actions is to acknowledge only one side of the story. As Cherrier (2007, p. 322) argues,

The act of choosing among this wide constellation of possibilities calls for active participation in defining and selecting ethical products, ethical organizations, and, ultimately, ethical consumption patterns.

Thus, apart from objective structural conditions which, undoubtedly, shape the ways in which consumers act, these ways are also defined by individuals' subjectivities and, more specifically, the specific concerns that their engagement in particular consumption modes is meant to address. In other words, people exercise creativity in relation to their performance of practices not only in response to changing structural conditions, but also in order to more comprehensively and effectively accommodate their subjective concerns, desires, and needs. The ethical consumers of my research provide demonstrable evidence that "many lifestyles and types of consumption can be ethically valid, depending on the values, concerns, knowledge, historical background, or social context" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322). It is this pluralism of values, considerations, conditions, and concerns that leads to diverse ethical consumer behaviours which may either conform or run contrary to societal expectations and norms:

By becoming active participants in the working of their ethical consumption lifestyles, consumers critically analyze their personal ethical concerns and self-concepts, which initiates customized perceptions and personalized practices of the "good life" and the common good (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322).

This is precisely what the above examples from the participants' food stories demonstrate – the discrepant and even contrasting performances of socially established consumption practices by reflexive, interpretative, and purposeful agents. The respondents' deliberate departures from conventional enactment of vegetarianism and veganism occur not under pressure from social forces, but due to the actively and reflexively taken positions in relation to their subjective commitments and concerns. The subversion of societal expectations surrounding the practices is possible because human beings have the power to succumb to or evade social affectivity, i.e. feelings of emotional distress in response to societal judgments, by either embracing or staying dispassionate to particular social norms – an argument advanced by both Archer (2000) and Goffman (1959), contending that for public evaluations to have any affective impact on us, we first need to recognize relevant social norms and incorporate them into our personal belief system. Likewise, social conceptions of any given practice will circumscribe agential performances thereof only if the subject comes to acknowledge and prioritise its underlying values. As we have seen, commonly shared understandings of veganism guide Solveig's foodways only to the extent that they do not transgress her ultimate concerns which demonstrates that "particular discourses limit and enable our thinking in specific ways, but they do not imprison our thinking altogether" (Sayer,

2011, p. 36).

In making this argument, I do not mean to wholly reject the assertion that “personal values are drawn from the ideas circulating within the environment, and are shaped by social context” (Hards, 2011, p. 31). The argument about “the situated nature of values and practices as enabled and constrained by the various landscapes in which individuals are embedded” (Hards, 2011, p. 39) is the one that my own research corroborates. However, it does not stretch as far as to warrant the claim that any agential practice is predefined by an unbending “set of ideas, including values (...) that enables and limits the thoughts and actions of those performing it” (Hards, 2011, p. 26) and that social discourses are the sole prime determinants of how and to what ends individuals engage in particular activities. To me, this view seems flawed in a serious way for it overlooks the fact that ethical consumers are “pluralistic, heterogeneous, and multiskilled ethical persons” (Cherrier, 2007, p. 322), and homogenises the varied understandings, meanings, reflections, and dispositions involved in individual projects of ethical consumption. To see values as an inherent constituent of practices implies that whoever engages in any given practice is always acting upon and expressing the values that are commonly associated with it. Yet, as Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005, p. 2) note, “ethical purchases may ... have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another”. Indeed, different people may engage in the same practice for different reasons and with different purposes without being always concerned about or even aware of the values and norms that surround it. Jason, for instance, admits that he is motivated to buy organic products mostly because of their assumed health benefits and better quality, rather than as part of the pledge to avoid negative environmental impact, thus supporting the argument that “the wider social values of others *mediate* our own experiences, but they don’t fully determine them” (Sayer, 2011, p. 27, emphasis in original). Further, in claiming that when engaging in practices “people carry or express ideas that are circulating in their social environment”, Hards (2011, p. 26) seems to overlook an important nuance, i.e. that through performance of particular practices people may transmit ideas and values without necessarily expressing compliance with or commitment to them. To come back to the previously mentioned example, Jason’s purchase of organic foods may be conveying environmental values that are commonly associated with organic consumption to the people around him, and yet his shopping practice does not express environmental concerns in the sense of manifesting what is important to him, for it is

motivated by personal interest and therefore devoid of the value content. The notion of “governed” or “constructed” ethical consumers discussed in the literature review further substantiates the argument - as many commentators (Wheeler, 2012; Barnett et al., 2010; Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007; Trentmann, 2006) note, ethical consumption may simply be forced upon people by the organisation of the systems of collective provision, in which case it has little to do with an active choice based on conscious reasoning of an individual consumer. I refer to this perspective not in order to endorse the dismissal of consumers as agents of conscious choice or ethical purchases as an expression of individual commitment and beliefs, but to vindicate the distinction between engaging in a practice and expressing a genuine concern. Although buying an ethically labelled cup of coffee at a fair trade railway station is consistent with what society would broadly define as ethical shopping and, moreover, although such consumption act may well bring about intended benefits, it cannot be construed as a manifestation of moral agency or expression of beliefs on the part of the consuming agent, who simply had no choice but to choose fair trade. A truly meaningful act or practice of ethical consumption demands conscious subscription to the relevant moral cause, deliberate decision, and intentional action on the part of an active and reflexive individual.

Thus, while there is no objection to the claim that society is a significant source of personal values and beliefs and that the dominant social order has the power to affect or, in the words of Archer, “exercise causal efficacy” over individuals and their courses of action, the distinction between personal and social values is the one that can and should be made and maintained: “our values are not merely ventriloquized by social discourses, so that what we think is important or valuable is simply what is regarded as such in the wider society” (Sayer, 2011, p. 27). As Sayer (2011, p. 7) explains,

The social structures and norms in which we live shape how we behave towards one another, and provide provisions from which we interact, strongly influencing what we can do and the kind of people we become, but they do not fully determine our actions. Social structures and rules themselves can institutionalise moral norms about entitlements, responsibilities, and appropriate behaviour; as such they can still be the object of ethical evaluation, whether in everyday life or academic commentaries; are they fair, empowering, democratic, oppressive, conducive to respectful treatment of others, friendliness or selfishness?

In tune with this argument, my analysis of the participants’ self-accounts reveals that personal and social values are separate from – albeit in a continuous dialogue and interaction with – each other, as are our personal and social identities. Individuals have the power to transform the social into the personal by rejecting some norms and

subscribing to others – those that they embrace as guides to a morally satisfying, from their subjective perspective, way of life. Agential performances of any given social practice cannot be universally homogenous precisely because they are informed not merely by socially developed and shared ideas, but also by what individuals themselves deem important and wish to achieve.

The vocabularies of motives, along with the strategies of identity disavowal, subjective moral framing, and compensatory reasoning, represent conceptual techniques through which the ethical consumers of my research negotiate the discontinuities and inconsistencies in their eating practices and thereby vindicate their moral selves. Following Greenebaum, I use the umbrella term of “accommodation strategies” to refer to these various mechanisms through which the subjects “negotiated the consumption of products that contrasted with their own philosophies, ethics and politics” (2012, p. 132). Such accommodation strategies themselves can be construed as part of the broader psychological notion of coping strategies - “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage tensions that are outcome of specific external and/or internal demands”, as used by Janda and Trocchia (2001, p. 1216) in their study of vegetarians. At the same time, there are crucial differences between the techniques that I have described and exemplified. When resorting to the vocabularies of motives, identity disavowal, or compensatory reasoning, people acknowledge the contradiction between their beliefs and behaviours which they seek to justify by appealing to society’s normative discourses, renouncing compromised identities, or shifting the focus to their better acts and deeds. Consider, for example, how Maggi admits to the inconsistency between her values and practices: *“I should follow my values more and I should buy organic”*, and how she immediately justifies it by invoking the prohibitive costs of organic goods: *“but then it is like, this is a ridiculous price, it is so expensive, so I don’t”*. In case of subjective ethical framing, however, individuals modify the definition of the situation or practice so that to eliminate the very contradiction itself and achieve a conceptual alignment between their actions and personal value systems and thus defend the integrity of their moral selves. In this scenario, people’s subjective moral standards and beliefs regarding ethical consumption rather than socially dominant ideas around it serve as the basis for the justification of conduct, as Lucy’s approach to her food project reveals: *“Just that I thought through it carefully and it fits with my conscience”*.

It is for this reason that, while I find that Mills’ concept of the vocabularies of motives offers a valuable theoretical prism for understanding the ways in which subjects

negotiate their ethical food compromises, I find problematic his assumption that social discourses define and govern individual performance of practices. Building upon the evidence from my research and elaborating upon the previously made argument about the direct relationship between ethical practices and consumers' self-image, I contend that the fear of social judgments is not the sole and arguably not even the primary motive behind subjects' efforts to defend their moral selves. As Campbell (2006, p. 222) insightfully notes, "individuals have as much need to convince themselves as any observers who may query their conduct". This point is illustrated by Joe, with whom we had an extensive discussion about his food temptations and continuous efforts to live up to the image of a strict vegan. In response to my question as to what prevents him from having an occasional treat in the privacy of his home where no one could know it, he says: "*oh, but I would know, and that would bug me. (...) I would not want to be that type of person, I would not want to be hypocritical in that way*". This feeds directly into my earlier argument that subjects' relentless efforts to succeed in the fulfilment of their ethical projects are driven by a pursuit of an authentic identity – the internal state of consistency with their subjective idea of how it is right to be and act as particular persons they are. It is this critical finding that allows me to dispute Mills' view that social recognition is the sole end and purpose of agential attempts to solicit moral legitimacy to their behavior. It enables me to vindicate subjective moral judgments as major determinants of human practices and corroborate the view that "morality is not determined by social structures, being grounded in good reasons and the human capability of ethical self-reflection" (Grauel, 2014, p. 5). While the links between ethical dispositions that people come to develop and moral discourses circulating within their socio-cultural environments cannot be negated, I contest Mills' argument about the dominant role of societal structures in individuals' moral reasoning. The extensive empirical evidence I have provided in this chapter allows me to balance his emphatically social perspective on human motives by stressing their other essential dimension – the personal – and showcase how *both* subjective morality and social normativity can inform individuals' defense of their inner moral commitments. Thus, negotiation of discontinuities and inconsistencies in agential moral food projects represents one domain of ethical consumption where the interplay between agential subjectivity and structural objectivity is clearly manifest.

So far, I have evidenced the participants' endeavours to ensure the stability and consistency of their practices of ethical eating by actively and creatively negotiating

their subjective states and objective circumstances. I have argued that the relentless fight for the successful implementation of moral food projects is driven by human longing for a sense of continuous identity, personal integrity, and self-worth. What begs further explanation, however, is what enables agents to ceaselessly monitor their commitments in relation to their evolving concerns, shifting priorities, and changing circumstances; what empowers them to actively negotiate the costs of advancing their moral projects; and what fuels their capacity to creatively respond to the conflicts and dilemmas that arise between their ultimate commitments and meandering course of life. The answer to these all-important questions is found in the participants' accounts of the inner work – the logical and emotional reasoning - behind the development of their ethical food practices. Consider, for example, how back in time Lucy ruled out veganism as a possible course of action: *“then it was really difficult and most of the stuff was really unpleasant, you know, and I just thought – no, it’s just too hard line”*. As the quote reveals, her decision to put the project of veganism aside was based on the conclusion about its practical difficulty at which she arrived having assessed the potential commitment in light of all relevant circumstances. This seems to be a direct reference to the idea of reflexive conversation, whose purpose is to review our current and prospective commitments and evaluate their worth and accompanying costs against our subjective conditions and objective contexts (Archer, 2007). Other participants too engaged in such inner work. For instance, Lila rejected commitment to local consumption having evaluated its toll on the family diet in their current living conditions: *“in England it just means that in some season you just eat kale all the time, and I am not willing to go there”*. Solveig arrived at the decision to go vegan through an internal self-dialogue in which she reflexively reviewed and assessed her involuntary experience of vegan eating during student protests. Appreciation of the ease of sustaining a vegan diet contributed towards Solveig’s decision to turn veganism into her ultimate moral commitment:

We ended up doing only vegan food and I felt that I didn’t really miss anything (...) because I did not miss anything - I started thinking about whether or not I need to eat cheese and eggs and stuff.

Maggi too engaged in reflexive deliberations when devising her ethical food project. Not only did she have to evaluate prospective consumption practices in terms of their moral appeal and emotional import: *“I really don’t want to buy things that aren’t*

organic”, but she also had to assess the concomitant costs of such a commitment: “*I’d be spending a ridiculous amount of money*”, consider it in light of competing concerns, and decide upon her ultimate priorities: “*it’s that conflict with how much money I am prepared to spend on food*”. Darren went through the same reflexive process of balancing his desires and needs against his moral concerns: “*you have to ask yourself how important it is, those foods - those eggs and that milk - how essential it is for health, can we live without it?*”. Such reflexive deliberations form an integral part of the inner life of a morally concerned consumer for, as Archer (2000, p. 242) explains, the concerns we embrace as ultimate and come to identify with serve as a lens through which we evaluate all our subsequent relationships with reality: “our commitments represent a new sounding board for the emotions”. Once set out on a particular moral course, “we are no longer capable of the simplicity of purely first-order response: reactions to relevant events are emotionally transmuted by our ultimate concerns” (Archer, 2000, p. 242). The ethical consumers of my research offer persuasive illustrations of this argument. Lucy has repeatedly ignored the emotional import of increasingly pressing concerns over health in order to preserve her commitment to a vegetarian diet. Lila went through a similar experience of actively subduing her immediate bodily demands to her ultimate moral concerns:

I was really starving, it was late at night and we couldn’t find anywhere to eat and the only open option was basically McDonalds (...) and I said - no way, I am not buying anything from this place (...) I better be hungry...

The ways in which Lucy and Lila consciously and actively overrode the emotional import of their immediate needs in order to promote their moral commitments are examples of agential ability to elaborate their emotionality beyond primitive responses and re-evaluate problematic situations in light of their ultimate concerns. They testify to the key role of reflexivity in individuals’ development as ethical consumers for, as Archer argues, it is our reflexive capacities that fuel “our ability to reflect upon our emotionality itself, to transform it and consequently to reorder priorities within our emotional sets” (Archer, 2000, p. 222).

Setting priorities and devising a hierarchy of concerns is not, however, a one-off challenge – it is a fragile equilibrium that needs to be continually reviewed in light of our constantly changing subjective conditions and objective circumstances. Accordingly, our reflexive conversation becomes “a ceaseless discussion about the satisfaction of our

ultimate concerns and a monitoring of the self and its commitments in relation to the commentaries received” (Archer, 2000, p. 195). During such inner dialogues,

What the subject is doing is conducting an endless assessment of whether what it once devoted itself to as its ultimate concern(s) is still worthy of this devotion, and whether the price which was once paid for subordinating and accommodating other concerns is still one with which the subject can live (Archer, 2000, p. 297).

That subjects repeatedly engage in such reflexive work is clearly evident in the fact that their moral food projects incessantly change. Thus, Lucy becomes increasingly more flexible about her ethical food practices which suggests that an “endless assessment” and, subsequently, re-ordering of her subjective priorities is indeed taking place. In light of Archer’s point, her recent decision to start eating fish makes perfect sense:

I am not as stubborn as I used to be, I used to be really really really stubborn and, you know, I made myself ill many times by sticking strictly to a veggie diet. I am not as pig-headed as that any more. (...) I am older, I don’t want to be ill, life is short, you know.

Lucy’s admitted preparedness to compromise on her moral principles to the extent that she wouldn’t previously consider indicates that she continuously reviews and re-designs her hierarchy of priorities as other concerns become more pressing and their intensified emotional import calls for a restacking of the old balance. It is through such evaluative process that Lucy has finally come to tilt the balance of concerns in favour of her physical health, having realised that the price which she used to pay for repeatedly promoting her ethical food commitments over her bodily needs is no longer the one with which she feels she can live. Likewise, Maggi called off her project of organic consumption having realised that it comes at too high a cost: “*I thought I’d try buying organic apples and I did for a few months, but they are twice as expensive*”. On the other hand, a repeated review of subjective concerns enabled Maggi to advance her moral undertaking – once her grown-up children left home and their nutrition ceased to be Maggi’s responsibility, she could fully commit to a vegan diet thereby promoting ethical consumption to the very top of her subjective hierarchy of concerns. Let us hear her explain this shift in priorities:

As I get older that becomes more of a focus for me about what’s important to me, about who I am (...) I think because your focus changes, I think because when you are caught up with work and are focused on children and making sure that they are kind of healthy and that is the main concern, and rushing around and trying to do everything...

and I suppose now that, you know, it's just me now at home - cause I am not working – and it's like I've got more freedom and space to kind of - not to explore - but to focus on the things that are important for me.

That Maggi's balance of priorities is continuously changing and that at different stages in life her ethical food project occupied different positions in her subjective hierarchy of responsibilities depending on which concerns commanded supremacy over her actions suggests that a reflexive “monitoring of the self and its commitments” (Archer, 2000, p. 195) has been and is still taking place, its most recent achievement being Maggi's increased focus on living out her true self and paying heed to her most important concerns.

Overall, the above examples demonstrate that a reflexive audit of concerns against changing subjective conditions and objective contexts and concomitant adjustment of moral commitments is an essential part of ethical consumers' experiences. This evidence is key for defending the view of ethical consumption as a *continuous* reflexive process that this thesis develops and that has been problematized in the literature. Thompson and Coskuner-Balli (2007, p. 150), 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”, 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”. Drawing on the evidence supplied by the ethical consumers of my research, I want to respond to this scepticism and reinstate the continuous nature of reflexive work involved in consumption practices of morally concerned individuals. The indispensability of human reflexivity for successful implementation of ethical food projects arises out of the open and mutable nature of external reality in which human practices are embedded and which demands the practitioners to exhibit “the powers of ongoing reflexive monitoring

of both self and society” (Archer, 2000, p. 295). The ethical consumers of my research demonstrate the ability to meet these demands. Mary offers a telling illustration of the ways in which constantly changing properties of objective reality induce consumer reflexivity:

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.

Mary’s deliberations showcase her deeply reflexive approach to the fulfilment of ethical food commitments. They illustrate the potential of consumer reflexivity to extend beyond the immediate temporal and spatial contexts of individuals’ existence and incorporate distant places and people into the sphere of reflexive awareness of an ethically concerned subject, epitomising Coff’s idea of long-range ethics and exemplifying the rise of the “global imaginary”, i.e. the sense of belonging to a global community (Steger, 2008), or ‘political ecological imaginary’, to use Goodman’s (2004) more specific term. Further, not only does Mary stay alert to the ways in which changing economic and socio-cultural landscapes affect her diet, but she also engages in a repeated re-assessment of the ethical consequences of her consumption choices and continuous review of the consistency between her concerns and her actual food practices. This shows compellingly that “the internal conversation is never suspended, it rarely sleeps, and what it is doing throughout the endless contingent circumstances it encounters is continuously monitoring its concerns” (Archer, 2000, p. 297). In ethical consumption, this task is complicated by the lack of clear, consistent, reliable, and easily accessible information needed to support consumers in navigating the ethical shopping landscape. Cherrier (2007, p. 321) highlights the overwhelming abundance of “conflicting and nonlinear ethical opinions about what to purchase (or not purchase)” which fragments the ethical consumption landscape and complicates the task of “doing the right thing”. Her argument resonates with the participants of my research who directly face the predicament: “*information in order to make that decision is not widely available and quite often it is so complex, and so arbitrary and so changing*”, complains David; “*there is so much conflicting advice and information out there, let alone the whole marketing industry and stuff which is misleading or confusing or*

contradictory”; Mary echoes him, “*sometimes you just don’t know and then you realize that this company you trusted is not really trustworthy*”; Lila joins them. However, although at times disoriented by the complexity of ethical goods market, the ethical consumers of my research, contrary to what Cherrier (2007, p. 323) goes on to suggest, are not paralysed by the “moral fatigue”, nor do they lack tenacity to follow through on their commitments by reflexively revising their food practices. Consider, for example, how Lila continuously reviews her consumption habits as new products and information about them becomes available:

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 - you know what, my kids are going to be delighted with this processed soya sausages...

This evidence offers support to Adams and Raisborough’s (2010, p. 271) conclusion that

(...) ‘unevenness’ and ‘doubt’ are not always unwelcome accompaniments to commitment that threaten to potentially hijack or soften it. Instead, we get the view here that unevenness is a necessary constituent to the ways that commitment materializes through dynamic epistemologies (knowledge of supermarket practices for example) that differently assert the realities of global business and also, of any moderating ‘good’ action.

Likewise, my analysis of the participants’ experiences indicates that in an environment where knowledge about products’ attributes and impacts emerges, develops, and changes every day, ethical consumers are not only required to consciously seek out, actively learn, and reflexively evaluate information to make appropriate consumption choices, but have the capacity and demonstrate the ability to do so.

The reflexive capacity of human beings to progressively evaluate their performance in relation to their ultimate commitments is absolutely vital for ethical consumption because, as a moral project, it 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). My participants’ sentiments align with this point, as Maggi’s remark demonstrates: “*I think it is probably an on-going kind of struggle (...) struggle of what’s best, you know*”. The task is further complicated by the indeterminacy of consumption ethics the roots of which Cherrier locates in the postmodern moral climate, characterised by contingency and non-foundationalism: “in a constantly changing and unpredictable world, postmodern ethics, rather than being fixed

and predetermined, become plural and nonlinear (2007, p. 321). Indeed, ethical consumer choices carry a variety of moral meanings, values, and stances on a wide range of issues, such as animal welfare, human rights, environmental sustainability, etc. For example, endorsement of fair-trade may convey a strong sense of justice and equality, preference for organic goods points to environmental awareness, while commitment to a meat-free diet is a sign of compassion and respect for non-human life. Consequently, ethical consumers often find themselves faced with “a complex overlaying of competing ethical demands” (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, p. 264), as Joe’s confession reveals: *“I am riddled with areas of conflicts and what is the right thing to do”*. The statement rings true for other participants too: Maggi is torn between her commitment to ethical shopping and a desire to avoid materialistic lifestyle and live an existence that is not dependent on money: *“maybe I need to examine my own motives as well and be prepared to spend more money”*; Joe is trying to solve the dilemma as to how it is best to use his consumer spending power: *“am I letting down the local business or am I exploiting foreign farmers through using the local business? – oh, it’s very hard to have all the right answers”*; as is Lila: *“you have to kind of balance – 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?”*. In line with the conclusions drawn by Adams and Raisborough (2010) in a study of ethical dispositions of mainstream shoppers, these comments highlight the complexity of consumers’ motivations and their understanding of their own ethical practices as “far from idealized, but hedged by the hard ‘realities’ of global capitalism” (p. 266). They also offer support to the assertion that value-oriented reflexivity is a continuous and iterative process. They reveal that living an ethical food project informed by moral concerns that are often in competition or even at war with each other is a difficult moral conundrum, and that every shopping trip therefore creates the need for a reflexive review of individuals’ priorities. These findings also resonate with Adams and Raisborough’s (2010) participants who expressed concerns about the need to “question your every action” (p. 264) while highlighting the importance of being “ethically effective by thinking of the bigger picture *at all times*” (p. 262, my emphasis). Such “pervasive reflexivity”, as Adams and Raisborough define it, permeates the practices of my research participants: *“if you really want to become an ethical consumer you look at all aspects of your consumption”*, claims Joe; *“ethical consumerism is not the action of just eating, it is the whole life attitude”*, supports the point Jason.

It is precisely because as a moral project ethical consumption does not “lend itself to the termination of one’s mental review of moral considerations” (Archer, 2007, p. 301) that it requires a continuous exercise of human capacity for reflexive deliberations – an argument that is in tune with the participants’ perceptions of their quest for a perfect way to consume as a life-long, perhaps impossible, challenge: “*maybe I never will get round to finding out the most environmentally friendly way of doing everything*”, accepts David; “*you have to accept that you can’t be ethical on all fronts*”, echoes him Lila. Moreover, ethical food projects need to be continuously revised not only against changing objective conditions and information contexts, but also in light of the subjects’ continually evolving knowledge and understanding of the self. As Gabriel and Lang (2006, p. 86) remind us, identities are not fixed but constantly changing entities:

Identity, then, can be seen as a story which a person writes and rewrites about him- or herself, never reaching the end until he/she dies (...). In this sense, it is both reflexive and incomplete. Identity and identity-seeking are (...) essentially the same thing.

Because moral food commitments are extensions and expressions of individuals’ identities and because “the narrative of self-identity has to be shaped, altered and reflexively sustained in relation to rapidly changing circumstances of social life, on a local and global scale” (Giddens, 1991, p. 215), ethical consumption is bound to be a reflexive, constantly developing, and continuously changing agential enterprise. As Lawler argues, “the achievement of identity is creative work and if we are plagued by a sense of not quite getting it right, that is because it is a project that can never once and for all be got right” (2008, p. 145). This sentiment is close to the hearts of the participants of my research - that ethical commitments are subject to review and open to change is acknowledged by Mary: “*I don’t think I will ever go fully vegetarian but I might well change my mind cause I have changed before*”; explained by Lila: “*because the situation changes as well and I learn more things all the time*”, and finely summed up by David: “*the idea of what you think is right to be - it is constantly moving, constantly changing layer upon layer upon layer*”. These responses echo the findings of other cognate studies, such as Adams and Raisborough’s nuanced analysis of fair trade consumption highlighting how consumers’ ethical activity is “increasingly complicated over the years and requires a constant review and reappraisal of (...) attitudes and values” (2010, p. 262). This makes reflexivity indispensable to the project of ethical

consumption, for it is the reflexive capacities that enable individuals' to not only devise, but also revise their ethical food commitments in light of their constantly developing understanding of themselves, the subjective circumstances in which they happen to be at different points in life, and the objective conditions in which their projects unfold.

Thus, as long as a perfectly ethical way to consume remains a moving target and as far as being an ideal ethical consumer is a work in progress and never an accomplished mission, the need for reflexivity in agential moral food pursuits cannot be dispensed with. It is for this reason that social practice theories, which approach consumer practices as predominantly "a routinized type of behaviour" (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249), cannot provide an adequate framework for exploring ethical consumption as a highly reflexive consumer engagement. It is not that ethical consumer choices are completely immune to routinisation, but that such routines, even if allowed to form, are constantly challenged and disturbed by ongoing changes in subjective conditions and objective circumstances to which the inherently reflexive mind of an ethically concerned consumer always stays alert. What is also important to stress is that automatisations to which individuals' moral food practices may succumb (until, of course, something prompts a re-opening of reflexive deliberations about their feasibility, suitability, and worth) does not work to disrupt the links between ethical consumer practices and identities defended in this thesis. Standardisation of decision-making process does not render ethical food choices meaningless or void of the affective charge, subjective values, and identity investments for, as Sayer (2011, p. 26-27) contends,

General evaluative stances towards familiar things may become habitual, but they are habits of thinking to which we become committed or emotionally attached. They inform not only how we evaluate others but how we evaluate ourselves, and they influence how we act, albeit often imperfectly. They therefore become part of our character.

Archer (2000, p. 303) echoes the point:

(...) we all develop routines for meeting what we have adopted as our routine concerns. Yet in this very routinisation lies our distinctive personification of our roles; recognisable to self and to others and expressive of our continuing commitment.

Yet, what also needs to be acknowledged is that while my account of consumer reflexivity suggests deliberate agential engagement with the relationships between their identities, concerns, and practices on the one hand and the objective world on the other, and while the subjects of my research demonstrate ample capacity for such engagement, I do not intend to portray ethical consumers as all-knowing social actors who always

and everywhere make conscious, well-planned, and evaluated decisions about food. My participants admit to the limits of their mindfulness with regard to consumption: “*I forget that I am supposed to like this and not that*”, comments David on the mental strain of constant monitoring of his choices against his self-concept; “*it is just neglect*”, points out Lila what can be best described as “the inertia of ordinary consumption” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud’s, 2007, p. 469) which prevents her from finding a new vegetable box scheme to join; “*if I was really really committed, I’d spend a lot more time thinking it through and shopping carefully*”, confesses Lucy to the lack of reflexive effort in her approach to consumption. These examples demonstrate that a proportion of ethical consumer practices inevitably stays “outside the area of reflective action” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007, p. 477) and that mindful consumption is not “a full time preoccupation” (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007, p. 477) even for the most deeply concerned and committed individuals. In light of this, the notion of “particular and partial reflexivity”, which Adams and Raisborough (2008) propose as a better theoretical construct on which to hang ethical consumption, seems appealing. Thus, just as in the preceding chapter my pronounced emphasis on a key role of agential subjectivity in shaping ethical consumer practices was accompanied by an acknowledgment of the inevitable embeddedness of individual agency in objective reality, so should the celebration of human reflexivity also leave room for habitual practices, spontaneous choices, inconsistent preferences, mindless and at times unpredictable decisions in consumer behaviour.

In this chapter I have argued that achieving the identity of an ethical consumer by embracing particular moral concerns and developing appropriate dietary projects is not a conclusive achievement, but the one that needs to be continuously reaffirmed, monitored, and sustained. I have corroborated this argument by demonstrating the embeddedness of ethical consumption in the natural, practical, and social realms of the world as well as its positioning vis-à-vis individuals’ subjective concerns that emerge, evolve, intensify, and fade as they go through different stages and experiences in life. Having demonstrated the contingency of ethical food practices on the constantly shifting objective contexts and subjective circumstances, I proceeded to show how ethical consumers continuously negotiate their relationships with the three orders of reality in order to successfully fulfil their dietary commitments. By drawing on the participants’ experiences, I have provided revealing illustrations of how ethical consumers maintain their moral food projects by continually prioritising consumption

ethics over their other concerns, as well as how they backtrack on ethical food commitments when confronted with the pressing realities of life.

Having shown that agential practices of ethical consumption are charged with moral dilemmas and riddled with compromises arising out of the inescapable tensions between individuals' competing concerns, I went on to analyse their import in relation to subjects' identities. By delving into my participants' confessions, I have uncovered the profound effects that discontinuities and inconsistencies in individuals' moral food practices produce on their sense of integrity, personal continuity, and self-worth. This empirical evidence, interpreted through the lens of Archer's argument that people sustain desired identities by actively and repeatedly promoting their ultimate concerns and advancing their moral commitments, allowed me to construe the respondents' relentless struggles for the stability and consistency of their dietary projects as a pursuit of an authentic self. In light of this evidence of a direct association between subjects' self-view and the success of their ethical food practices, I went on to investigate the ways in which ethical consumers negotiate the contradictions between their assumed moral identities and their actual food practices. An analysis of the participants' explanations behind the inevitable shortcomings of their food projects enabled me to identify and describe a set of strategies through which the ethical consumers of my research mitigated the identity implications of their occasional and long-established dietary compromises. To construct this account, I relied on Mills' concept of the vocabularies of motive, yet have been able to show that appeals to social normativity represent but one of a range of accommodation strategies that subjects deploy to feel and appear continuously consistent in the fulfilment of their moral food commitments, and that there are forces and drives that do not belong in the social realm, but are innately a part of human nature which can foster moral self-defense.

Finally, I have argued for the key role of human reflexivity in enabling individuals to sustain their ethical food commitments and through them – their desired moral identities. By analysing the participants' subjective relationships with the natural, practical, and social orders of the world I have demonstrated how reflexivity enables agents to progressively monitor their moral food projects against ever-changing subjective circumstances and objective conditions, reassess their ultimate concerns and ways to address them in light of the constantly expanding knowledge of the outer world and their inner selves, and actively negotiate the enablements and constraints emerging on their moral pathways. By evincing the subjects' ability to successfully maintain their

ultimate commitments and propel their moral food projects through evolving personal life and shifting objective contexts, I have demonstrated that the causal powers of external reality do not operate unmediated and unconstrained, and that agential responses to the given conditions and circumstances play a key role in the development of individuals' ethical projects and moral selves. I have thus not only underscored the embeddedness of humans and their practices in the external world, but also demonstrated "how involuntary placement in the three different orders [of reality] intertwines with the voluntary human response" (Archer, 2000, p. 249). In 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), I have contributed towards my key research goal, i.e. to evidence the key role of both structural objectivity (the enabling and constraining properties of objective reality) as well as agential subjectivity (human capacity for reflexivity, creativity, and intentionality) in determining and shaping individuals' practices of ethical consumption.

Chapter 7

The Inner Self in the Outer World: Toward the Social Identity of an Ethical Consumer

Identity is a relation which embraces both our ability to recognize ourselves and the possibility of being recognized by others (Melucci, 1996, p. 30).

In the previous chapter, I have construed ethical consumption as an identity-defining moral commitment that requires active and continuous maintenance by reflexive and intentional agents and whose stability is contingent on subjects' interactions with the natural, practical, and social orders of the world. My account of the participants' on-going struggles for the solidity and consistency of their dietary practices highlighted the importance that self-perceived ethical consumers attach to the successful implementation of their moral initiatives, enabling me to advance the argument that the ability to carry ethical food projects through is as key to individuals' identities as ethical consumers as making the commitment itself. I have provided multiple examples from the participants' accounts to demonstrate how ethical consumers continuously negotiate their relationships with the natural, practical, and social realms in order to defend their ability to sustain their moral food commitments against changing objective and subjective conditions. Out of these three orders of reality in which individuals are placed and which provide contextual backgrounds for their ethical food projects, the social order is of particular relevance for this thesis given the sociological nature of the study and its concern with consumer identities. As the preceding chapter has begun to show, ethical consumption as an agential project involves not only individuals' relationships with the practical and natural orders (through food provisioning and consumption), but also places particular requirements and demands on their social lives. While up until now my analysis has been concerned with the process of achieving and sustaining the identity of an ethical consumer and the generative forces behind it, it is now time to shed light on individuals' experiences of taking this identity into the social world and living it out in public. The key aim of this chapter is to reveal and explain the underlying mechanism that accounts for the emergence of the social identity of an ethical consumer, that is as a public persona of a

subject with particular moral concerns and consumption commitments. To this end, I will bring into focus the lives of ethical consumers as social beings and examine the interplay between individuals' moral food projects and responsibilities, desires, and needs arising from their inevitable position as functioning members of society and carriers of particular social roles. I will ground the discussion in two participant cases - those of Lucy and Solveig – and, by analysing how and with what results these two self-perceived ethical consumers negotiate their competing moral and social concerns, determine the place of the ethical consumer identity among the different facets of their social selves. By comparing and contrasting Lucy's and Solveig's experiences, I will show that the character of an ethical consumer can be either allowed to represent the subject's social identity - how she act towards other people and how other people perceive her - or subdued to some other social image – that which lies closer to her ultimate concerns. I will use this evidence to advance the argument that individuals' ultimate concerns determine what societal roles they take up or discard, foreground or restrain at different points in life (Archer, 2007), thus revealing crucial links between people's personal and social identities. I will achieve the above goals by intertwining Archer's theoretical account of the process of co-emergence and co-development of personal and social identities with my analysis of Lucy's and Solveig's experiences of trying to live out their ethical selves in the specific social environments which provided meaningful backgrounds for the fulfilment of their ethical food projects. The purpose of this, consistent with the approach taken throughout the thesis, is to bring the abstract into the relationship with the concrete (Sayer, 2010) and in so doing uncover and explicate the mechanisms behind the emergence and development of ethical consumer identities. By explaining how people's personal identities “spill over onto how we are towards other people and things and how other people find us” (Archer, 2000, p. 298), Archer's theory, applied to the concrete experiences of two distinct individuals, will enable me to yield an understanding of how as well as under which necessary and sufficient conditions the identity of an ethical consumer rises from the deepest layers of one's inner self to become his leading social part.

Before we can get immersed into Lucy's and Solveig's stories and by examining their comportment as morally committed individuals and as bearers of various social roles determine the place that the identity of an ethical consumer has been assigned in their social lives, it is essential to clarify the conceptual distinction between personal and social identities. Following Archer (2007), I construe social identity as individuals'

unique personification of their chosen roles in society. From this perspective, personal identity, which arises out of human relationships with the natural, practical, and social orders of reality, encompasses social identity, which pertains exclusively to the discursive realm. Moreover, personal identity represents the source of “human qualities of reflexivity and creativity” (Archer, 2000, p. 288) essential for shaping agential performances of social roles in an idiosyncratic way: “what we need is personal identity in order for any individual to be able to personify a role, rather than simply animating it” (Archer, 2000, p. 288). The performance is distinctive precisely because it is produced by the unique character that the individual has attained and brought to bear upon the process of realisation of his concerns. At the same time, the development of personal identity is itself dependent on an individual’s possession of social identity, for it is the latter that determines our social commitments and their relative position on the hierarchy of concerns defining our unique personalities. The relationship between personal and social identities, Archer (2000, p. 288) specifies, is inherently dialectical, meaning that “both personal and social identities are emergent and distinct, although they contributed to one another’s emergence and distinctiveness”. Within these dialectics, Archer discerns three key points of interaction between personal and social identities through which individuals attain the final synthesis between the two and thereby develop an overall personality, defined by a unique constellation of their natural, practical, and social concerns. At the first point of interplay, subjects’ nascent personal identity overpowers their preliminary social identity prompting them to draw on their limited experiences in the different contexts of objective reality to explore both their involuntary roles (e.g. those into which they have been born or placed) as well as those that are open for choice. Through trying and testing different roles, people draw “a best-guess sketch of a potential future life” (Archer, 2000, p. 290) thus getting a step closer to the social identity that they feel they want and can appropriate. As Archer contends, this is the moment where “the nascent personal identity [brings] something to the task of role selection. Otherwise we would be dealing with an entirely passive procedure of role assignment through socialisation” (2000, p. 290). This theoretical argument provides a useful lens through which to interpret and comprehend Lucy’s and Solveig’s initial attempts at cruelty-free consumption. The social identity of a vegetarian which they first tried on as young individuals was informed by their nascent personal identities defined by an evolving concern over animal welfare and life. It is this incipient personal identities that prompted Lucy and Solveig to push the boundaries of

the “passive procedure of role assignment through socialisation” (Archer, 2000, p. 290) and commit to what was regarded as a radically alternative diet in a traditionally meat-eating familial and socio-cultural contexts. The particular mechanism through which the subjects developed their distinctive moral concerns and the essential human properties that ignited and propelled this intricate inner process have been discussed at length previously in the thesis. Our attention thus turns to the second point of interplay between one’s personal and social self which is when the social roles that the agent tries on under the impetus of his evolving personal identity start to provide experiential information about their material and symbolic benefits and costs. In light of this knowledge, subjects evaluate whether investing themselves in this particular social role and assuming this particular social identity is an appealing, worthwhile, and feasible undertaking:

The internal conversation has begun a dialogue about the kind of person an individual believes they want to be: that it will undergo revision in the light of further experience is precisely what makes this a dialectic process (Archer, 2000, p. 290).

During such reflexive self-dialogues individuals undergo significant changes both subjectively - by developing a better understanding of themselves, their interests, values, and concerns, as well as objectively - by becoming someone with different experiences, resources, and skills (Archer, 2000). It is this stage that Lucy’s and Solveig’s early experiences of being a vegetarian in an overwhelmingly meat-eating environment represent. Their initial attempts at sustaining a cruelty-free diet reflect the interplay between the moral imperatives of their evolving personal identity of an ethical consumer and the costs of enacting a corresponding social role. For Lucy, being a sole vegetarian in an omnivorous household posed a risk of undermining familial bonds – her explicit avoidance of meat started to create tensions at the family dinner table with her father getting increasingly intolerant of her eating principles. “*He gave me so much grief (...) he’d be eating meat and wave it at me, my face, as if to say, “come on, don’t be silly”*”, recalls Lucy her unpleasant experiences of the family meals through which she became aware of the clash between her ethical food commitment and her role as a daughter, expected to share and enjoy traditional meals with the rest of the family. Likewise, for Solveig commitment to vegetarianism in a socio-cultural context where both everyday and festive cooking was heavily centred around meat became a factor profoundly affecting her life as a social subject. Although accepted with respect by the

immediate family – both her parents were green voters and supporters of liberal views – Solveig’s alternative food practices soon started to compete with her evolving social life outside the familial context. The first consequential conflict of concerns occurred following her move to a secondary school, where Solveig’s desire to engage in social activities with new friends collided with her unconventional foodways: *“after school you go for kebab with your friends, you go for burgers with your friends, and if you don’t eat meat - you don’t fit in”*. The experiences of social exclusion prompted Solveig to take a fresh look at her vegetarian practice which *“wasn’t cool anymore”* and *“just wasn’t the thing you do”*. Thus, both for Solveig and Lucy the initial attempts at ethical eating proved an important learning experience. Through them, they acquired direct knowledge about the symbolic costs of presenting and sustaining the identity of an ethical consumer in their given social contexts: for Solveig, commitment to vegetarianism came at the expense of her social standing by making her look different and “uncool”, while in Lucy’s case it took a toll on kinship relations by leaving her outside the family dinner table. The negative emotional import of these unsettling situations prompted Solveig and Lucy to engage in reflexive evaluation of the worthwhileness of their moral commitments and tolerability of their concomitant costs. Through this deliberative process, Lucy came to prioritise her dietary principles over her duties as a daughter - she stopped eating with her father and eventually moved out of the family house - thereby re-asserting food ethics as her ultimate concern and sustaining her vegetarian identity. For Solveig, however, it resulted in an abandonment of ethical pursuits following the subdual of her moral concerns to increasingly pressing social needs.

The rethinking and redesign of Lucy’s and Solveig’s commitments was a concomitant of their evolution as distinct individuals for as subjects’ understanding of their ultimate values and goals as well as opportunities to live them out improves, they reassess and rewrite their projects to achieve the best possible match between their personal and social selves (Archer, 2000). It marked the beginning of a continuous reflexive process of prioritisation of concerns induced and informed by the participants’ subjective experiences and geared towards achieving their desired identities. Thus, it is the need to define who they are and how they want to be seen that urged Lucy and Solveig to review their hierarchy of concerns and the place of ethical consumption on it. Since the drivers behind subjects’ efforts to sustain their ethical food commitments and the essential human properties which enable agents to do so were discussed at length in

the previous chapter, Lucy's preferred course of action - to stay true to her moral food project - should not leave the readers bewildered. In contrast, Solveig's wilful decision to surrender her dietary principles to her social needs and its implications for her personal and social identities deserve more thorough consideration.

This brings us back to our central concept of ultimate concerns. In the above accounts of Lucy's and Solveig's experiences one can unmistakably discern individuals with particular moral and social concerns – an exposé enabling me to reiterate Archer's notion of a human being as someone with concerns in the different orders of reality which I introduced at the beginning and used to lay the foundations of my theoretical framework. In the preceding chapter, this concept allowed me to account for the inner forces that propel individuals to either continuously advance their ethical food initiatives or suspend and even cast them aside. In the upcoming discussion I will elaborate on this analysis to fulfil a key goal of this chapter, that is to reveal how the relationships between people's ultimate concerns and their dietary projects extend to their social identities. I will achieve this by inspecting Solveig's ultimate concerns and leading to an understanding of what can urge a morally committed individual to steer away from the role of an ethical consumer and forbid this important constituent of her inner self from defining her social identity. This need not be a difficult task, for Solveig's own account of the reasons behind her abandonment of a vegetarian diet alludes to the notion of concerns: *“there wasn't a conscious decision: “oh, I want to fit in, I want to eat meat again”, it was more – “I don't care enough anymore”*. Despite Solveig's denial of the desire to fit in as the central reason behind her return to conventional foodways, I argue that it is precisely concerns over social recognition that made her backtrack on her vegetarian commitments. Consider how she attests to the emotional import of these concerns: *“I didn't fit in well anyway - I've always been a very bookish child, a quiet child, and I wasn't cool, and I wasn't pretty (...) but, of course, when you are that age, that is a terrible thing...”*, and links them immediately to her decision to return to meat-eating: *“because everyone does it, you might as well go along with what everyone does because, perhaps, it is going to help more or less”*. This confession reveals the real forces responsible for unsettling the continuity of Solveig's moral food project. Upon moving schools, strict avoidance of meat became something that marked Solveig out as different from others and disabled her participation in social activities, such as eating out with friends. This explicit clash between ethical consumption and an increasingly pressing desire to fit in prompted Solveig to

reconsider her moral food project in light of its new costs. Through a review of her ultimate concerns, she came to the conclusion that she did not “*care enough*” about her ethical commitment to promote it over her social needs. Thus, in the struggle between two competing concerns, the need for social acceptance displaced consumption ethics from their superior position on Solveig’s hierarchy of priorities forcing a collapse of her moral food project.

In the above account, nothing seems to go off the script which, by now, we are well-familiar with: under the impetus of changing conditions and circumstances individuals reflexively review their subjective hierarchy of priorities and redesign their course of action in order to address their most important concerns. What marks this discussion out as worthy and pertinent to the goals of this chapter is that the concerns under focus are social concerns which, when embraced as ultimate, became new key determinants of Solveig’s distinct personality. By refusing to reaffirm animal suffering as her ultimate concern, Solveig failed to successfully fulfil the role of an ethical consumer which her personal identity had once prompted her to assume. This evolving part of Solveig’s inner self was subdued by the requirements of her position as a subject who shares the norms and practices of the group with which she identifies and to which she is willing to belong. Thus, by elevating her social needs over her moral commitment, Solveig deliberately moved away from the social identity of an ethical consumer and toward establishing a different social self. My account of Solveig’s experience resonates with the findings of Hards’ (2011) study describing how climate change activists tended to subdue their green identities when those clashed with the social world around them. Subjects’ deliberate retraction from problematic identities described by Hards and observed in my study might be construed through Goffman’s (1963) lens, that is as an attempt to avoid social stigma through the management of “spoiled identity”. Goffman’s definition of stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance” (1963, p. 9) and his emphasis on the key role of social relationships in turning a particular characteristic into a stigmatising factor seems to offer a fair description of Solveig’s experience. As with Goffman’s stigmatized person, Solveig too strove to achieve social recognition and be considered “normal”, with the exception that managing her social image was significantly easier than it would be for those whose identity was “spoiled” by less easily hidden or changed features, such as race, nation, disability, etc. In contrast, Solveig’s non-conformist image of a vegetarian could be - and was - easily discarded by returning to the mainstream practice of eating

meat. Such identity management has become integral to Solveig's subsequent experiences of living as an ethical consumer. Her pursuit of cruelty-free consumption, in which she repeatedly re-engaged throughout her life, represented an uneven journey with several major downfalls imposed by continuously resurfacing concerns over her social image. Time and time again Solveig demonstrated preparedness to suspend her moral food project for the sake of her social needs and, despite the fact that concerns over animal suffering have always remained on her moral register, addressing them only proved possible when being a vegetarian did not come at the expense of her ability to succeed in her other social roles. Consider, for example, how Solveig describes one of her comebacks to a meat-free diet following her involvement in the Goth subculture and the socio-cultural factors that precipitated it:

I started to dress differently, started to go to different clubs, hang out with different people, I started university, I started going out with my now husband, and I became a vegetarian again. Mainly because people I spent time with were vegetarians and vegans, and I just thought, yeah, there was something, you know, back then, that is true.

Thus, getting engaged with the Gothic social scene and the kind of people, norms, attitudes, behaviours, and practices accommodated in it presented Solveig with an opportunity to resume her moral food project at no cost to her social worth. The environment where vegetarianism was not only an acceptable but a commonly pursued practice enabled Solveig to strike a satisfying balance between her moral and social concerns – being an alternative food consumer was no longer a hindrance to but, instead, became a means of gaining the recognition of the group. The same influences were key to Solveig's transition to veganism. In the previous chapter, I have examined the subjective drivers (particular emotional and cognitive experiences that triggered the development and intensification of Solveig's moral concerns) and objective enablements (e.g. availability of appropriate food choices) behind Solveig's decision to go vegan. What has not been acknowledged, however, and what I am now able to argue in light of the preceding discussion is that this commitment could only be sustained if successfully married with Solveig's social concerns. An outward manifestation of her ethical consumer identity proved worthwhile for Solveig not only because of its emotional appeal and practical feasibility, but also because of the enabling social environment. As we know, Solveig's switch to veganism occurred during her participation in student protests when she got closely involved with activists, many of

whom were devoted vegans. Surrounded by like-minded individuals, Solveig was able to manifest her ethical self and engage in non-conventional food practices at no risk of becoming a social reject. It is this specific socio-cultural context, where there was no room for concerns over being different and challenging the norms because being different itself was a norm, that enabled Solveig to re-take the social identity of an ethical consumer and actively live it out. This analysis echoes Hards' study (2011, p. 37) of personal environmental values in which she describes the need to reconcile "competing demands of 'normality' and 'sustainability'" as a common challenge faced by environmentally concerned people. Hards' conclusion that "without conducive social networks it may be hard to reject dominant norms, or envision alternative forms of normality" (2011, p. 33) clearly resonates with Solveig's experiences. The vegetarians and vegans among whom she was able to realise her moral food project may then be construed as communities of practice - "groups of individuals who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly" (Wenger, 2006, p. 1 cited in Hards, 2011, p. 34) - which can influence and support the development and transition of individual environmental values (Hards, 2011).

However, there is more to be inferred from Solveig's account than merely the enabling or restricting impact of social environment on her food practices. What Solveig achieved through her subjective experiences of living as well as failing to live as an ethical food consumer - just as Lucy did through hers - is an enhanced understanding of her ultimate concerns and priorities and the kind of social roles they required her to assume or discard. This marks the third and final stage of negotiations between a subject's inner self and its social expression which Archer defines as "the moment of synthesis between personal and social identity" (2000, p. 293). At this point, individuals demarcate their ultimate and subordinate concerns which not only determine what kind of persons they become, but also inform what social roles and positions they take up. At the end of this reflexive process, subjects achieve "the personal identity within which the social identity has been assigned its place in the life of an individual" (Archer, 2000, p. 293). That social identity represents but one aspect of subjects' overall identities explains why, despite that both Lucy and Solveig have developed a self-concept of which ethical consumer is a key co-constituent, its imprints on their social identities are not equally clear and deep. In the following discussion I will demonstrate how through reflexive re-ordering of their ethical and social concerns Solveig and Lucy achieved the synthesis between their personal and social identities in which the ethical consumer has

been assigned its particular place. By describing, comparing, and contrasting their experiences - very similar, but producing opposing outcomes - I will show that the different ranks that the persona of an ethical consumer came to occupy in Solveig's and Lucy's social lives stem from the differing hierarchies of concerns that they reflexively worked out for themselves. This will bring out the force of a key argument of the chapter, i.e. that our ultimate concerns define the societal roles we take up and that it is in this relationship that the crucial links between our personal and social identities are exposed.

Let us first consider Lucy's alliance with the ethical consumer within her who, as I aim to show, has not only become the central inhabitant of Lucy's inner self, but has also been allowed to define her social identity and guide her relationships with the social world. That Lucy invested herself in the role of an ethical consumer can be deduced from the way it dominates over other social positions in which she has been involuntarily placed or which she wilfully takes up as she makes her way through the life: a daughter, a partner, a friend. As Lucy's self-account reveals, social concerns almost never gain prominence over her ethical food commitments, whose requirements prevail over the duties, expectations, and norms of these various roles: "*it never came up as a question, you know, I would not be with a guy who made me eat meat, and if I've got friends who are insisting I eat what they eat, then I don't eat with them*", she declares. Particularly revealing of Lucy's priorities is the following episode involving her role identities as an ethical consumer and a daughter. This was a family Christmas lunch organised by Lucy's mother, who took care to provide a free-range chicken in the hope that her daughter will share the traditional meal with the rest of the family. Lucy, however, refused to transgress her moral principles thereby causing distress both to her mother and to herself: "*I felt really guilty because she was upset, you know, I don't want to upset anybody*". Lucy's sense of guilt suggests that, firstly, she recognised that in refusing to eat the chicken she failed to conform to social expectations attached to the role of a daughter and, secondly, that she was not completely indifferent as to how well she performed in this role. As Archer explains, social affectivity depends on our subjective acknowledgment of the emotional import of the problem situation: "there cannot be any sense of remorse without the personal acceptance that I have done something wrong" (2000, p. 216 - 217). Lucy's expression of regret over upsetting her mother indicates that familial ties do hold a place among the things that Lucy values in life, since "for social evaluations to matter - and without mattering they are incapable of

generating emotionality - they have to gel with our concerns” (Archer, 2000, p. 219). However, the affective import of concerns over family relations was actively and consciously subjugated by Lucy in the interest of her ultimate concern over food ethics – an example of the process of emotional elaboration which I have previously illustrated and analysed. It is worth being highlighted since it provides yet another opportunity to reiterate the argument about the key role of reflexivity in the development of subjects’ personal and, as we are now able to see, social identities. It is through such reflexive inner work that Lucy managed to subdue the emotional import of her concern over mother-daughter relationship and prevent it from unsettling her moral food project. By setting her priorities in this particular way, she reaffirmed both her self-view as well as her social image as an ethical consumer. Thus, through an account of Lucy’s experiences I have illustrated the entire process of development of the social identity of an ethical consumer – from a subject’s initial experiments with the role, to the experiential recognition of its costs and subsequent reflexive reassessment of its feasibility and appeal, to embracing it as a dominant social image through prioritising its requirements over those of competing positions and roles.

For Solveig, however, the journey towards the all-embracing social identity of an ethical consumer is yet incomplete. The ease with which she discarded the image of a vegetarian whenever it clashed with the obligations of other social positions that she occupied at different points in life suggests that the identity of an ethical consumer was denied the leading part among Solveig’s various social roles. Despite that over recent years a particular combination of natural (love for vegan food), practical (e.g. widespread availability of meat-free foodstuffs), and social enablements (inclusive socio-cultural environment) allowed Solveig to not merely resume and sustain her ethical food commitments but, moreover, take them to the next level by going vegan, her moral project is riddled with occasional concessions and regular compromises which reveal that the real locus of Solveig’s ultimate concerns lies in the social realm. Her self-account provides multiple illustrations, some of which have been analysed and discussed above, of Solveig’s preparedness to eschew her dietary principles for the sake of her social needs, i.e. achieving social recognition and meeting the requirements and expectations attached to the various situations and roles in which she happens to be. One of the most interesting examples of the compromises that Solveig is willing to make in order to succeed in her assumed social roles relates to her passion of softball. Being an avid player, Solveig was keen on having her own softball glove, and she

consciously violated her commitment to cruelty-free consumption by buying the one made of natural leather. Here is how she explains this wilful concession:

It is sheer impossible to get faux leather gloves - they are ridiculously expensive and I just would not be able to afford it. And not having your own glove is not really good, you can borrow them from, I don't know, the sports kit, for example, but the glove shapes around your hand and you just play better with your own glove. So it's – yes, it is a compromise, but one I am willing to take.

In this situation, Solveig's concern over her worth as a team player came into collision with her moral concern over animal life and its accompanying ban on the purchase of leather goods. To uphold her commitment to ethical consumption, Solveig could either buy a synthetic glove or borrow one from a sports kit - the first option required excessive spending, while the second one meant compromising on her worth as a player. Thus, both ethically satisfying solutions involved costs - material in the first case, symbolic in the second – that Solveig deemed too high to accept given her circumstances and needs. Among these competing concerns, she chose to prioritise her desire to perform the role of a softball player to the best possible effect thereby receding from the position of an ethical consumer. That the responsibilities entailed by Solveig's various social roles prevail over the requirements of her ethical food practice is further evidenced by the following two examples. In the first, we find Solveig at a family dinner table, where she steps back from her ethical foodways to eat the cheesecake offered by her elderly grandmother. In the second, we follow her on a trip to Nigeria where she puts aside her vegan diet and shares seafood and meat dishes with her hosts, who went to great length to provide their guest with the best food available. In the preceding chapter, we have heard Solveig's justification of these deliberate compromises: *“the priority in this case was really not to hurt people's feelings and not to offend people”*, which I construed as an attempt to solicit moral legitimacy to her dietary concessions through the strategy of subjective ethical framing, i.e. the construction of personal ethical standards. This time, however, I shift the focus to the inner mental and emotional work that preceded Solveig's decision rather than that which provided its *ex post facto* account. The dilemma situations that Solveig faced at the dining table required a difficult choice between her social and ethical concerns. In order to make it, she had to promote one over the other based on reflexive assessment of their emotional appeal, moral worth and, most importantly, their import in relation to her identity. While Solveig interprets her ethical compromises as a tribute to her

ultimate concern over not doing harm, what she is not conscious of is that there was more at stake than the feelings of her grandmother or hosts. Behind Solveig's desire to avoid causing upset to her family and friends stands an aspiration to comply with the dominant norms and ideas about what it means to be a respectful granddaughter or thankful guest. *"I wouldn't have felt comfortable sitting there saying, "oh, no, I am not going to eat that cheesecake"; "I am a guest there (...) not accepting it [the food] would have been rude beyond belief"* – shares Solveig her evaluations of the affective import of the above described situations. It is this predictive analysis of the emotional (the feelings of discomfort, embarrassment, guilt) and symbolic (diminished social worth as a result of appearing rude, disrespectful, and lacking in manners) costs of transgressing societal expectations that led Solveig to promote the requirements of her assumed social roles. Another revealing example of Solveig's ultimate commitment to social norms is found in her disapproval of more aggressive solutions to ethical problems, such as illegal animal liberations:

I know that they are probably doing the right thing, but I have a feeling that there are other ways to get to these goals, more socially acceptable and effective ways, and they always seemed to be a bit extreme to me.

Thus, despite supporting the causes for the environmental and animal rights movements, Solveig opposes their radical tactics which she defines as not *"socially acceptable"*. This explicitly stated esteem for the social order explains not only why Solveig does not engage in such *"extreme"* activities, but also why her own moral food project is replete with compromises and downturns. It is the fear of challenging the *"acceptable"* that stands behind Solveig's reluctance to defend the consistency of her dietary commitments whenever they happen to conflict with societal expectations and norms.

Finally, while concerns over fitting in no longer prevent Solveig from manifesting her vegan identity - an important enablement rooted in her diverse socio-cultural environment - they continue to affect her ethical practices by defining the range of consumption activities that Solveig chooses to engage in. For instance, farmer's markets, which have now become a popular meeting place for ethical consumers, are excluded from Solveig's shopping repertoire because of their particular ambience and clientele:

... it is mainly young professionals and young families, and it is very hipster and very cool to buy organic food, and I just – it just annoys me so much. So I don't feel... I don't like the atmosphere because I feel it is a bit pretentious (...) I really wouldn't feel comfortable among these people.

Solveig's affective response to farmer's markets, where she feels annoyed, uncomfortable, and out of place, is best construed as an emotional commentary upon her concerns over social belonging and fitting in: *"I don't feel like I am the kind of person that fits in there"*, she says. It is the need to pay constant heed to these utmost concerns that, along with some other factors, prevents Solveig from embracing farmer's markets as yet another way of sourcing more ethical food.

That societal pressures, evaluations, and norms repeatedly prevail over the requirements of Solveig's moral food project suggests that social concerns rank highest on her hierarchy of priorities. It is because she has embraced her subject status as her ultimate concern that the affective import of societal expectations and norms overshadows the emotional appeal of her ethical food commitments, and it is because her social projects (family, friendship) and roles (a grandchild, a guest) are a means of addressing her ultimate concerns - and hence expressions of her identity - that their success or failure directly affects her sense of self-worth. As Archer reminds us, "it is because we have invested ourselves in these social projects that we are susceptible of emotionality in relation to society's normative evaluation of our performance in these roles" (2000, p. 219). The fact that Solveig's social concerns prevail over her ethical motives explains why dietary compromises do not produce the same destabilising effect on her self-view as does failure to succeed in her social roles. Unlike Lucy, whose self-image is highly dependent on the stability and coherence of her moral food project (as demonstrated by multiple examples from her life story which I presented and analysed in the first chapter), Solveig does not feel dishonest or like *"a total hypocrite"*, as Lucy has put it, whenever she fails to uphold her dietary commitments. In part, she averts the sense of personal discontinuity by resorting to specific accommodation strategies, particularly that of subjective ethical framing, as I have previously shown. But the key reason why Solveig readily tolerates the discontinuities and inconsistencies of her ethical food practice is because her inner ethical consumer acts as a co-partner rather than the sole proprietor of her identity. The following quote is revealing: *"It is part of who I am, yes, but it is not... Like when I meet someone I wouldn't say – "hi, I am Solveig and I am vegan" (...) It's not the first thing I would tell someone"*. It is because

Solveig's self-image is much broader than the identity of a vegan that she permits the instability of her dietary commitments for, as Archer (2000, p. 10) notes, it is our self-concept - "a continuous sense of self (...) universal to human beings" - that supplies continuity to our personal identities and consistency to our unique performances of selected social roles. This is precisely why Solveig's ethical food compromises neither profoundly destabilise her self-image, which involves a lot more than just being a vegan, nor conflict with her social identity, which depends more on her triumph as a social being than as an ethical consumer. The key conclusion derived from the above discussion is that for Solveig being "a subject among subjects" (Archer, 2000, pp. 198-199) comes before being an ethical consumer. The above analysis of Solveig's self-account allowed me to demonstrate that this position is informed by her ultimate concerns whose locus pertains to the social realm. I thereby confirmed the direct relationship between people's ultimate concerns and their social identities and, building upon this argument, accounted for the different positions that the identity of an ethical consumer may come to occupy in one's social life.

But if Solveig's ultimate concerns lie in the discursive order, if it is her social relations that serve as a depository of her sense of self-worth, and if commitment to ethical consumption has been forbidden from defining her social image, then what place does the ethical consumer hold among the multiple facets of her identity? For, if we fully embrace Archer's (2000, p. 221) idea that "which precise balance we strike between our concerns, and what precisely figures amongst an individual's concerns is what gives us our strict identity as particular persons", are we to assume that by refusing to prioritise ethical food commitments over her social obligations, desires, and needs, Solveig failed to achieve the identity of an ethical consumer? Does the fact that food ethics do not rank first on Solveig's hierarchy of concerns mean that she is less of an ethical consumer than Lucy, for whom commitment to cruelty-free eating is a top ranking priority? Does the fact that for Solveig being a good granddaughter comes before being a devoted vegan mean that it necessarily comes *instead*? I argue that it does not, and that such reading of Archer would do injustice to her theory for it could only provide a narrow and impoverished concept of human identity. To argue that "which precise balance we strike between our concerns (...) is what gives us our strict identity" (Archer, 2000, p. 221) should not imply that, when under the weight of subjective conditions and objective circumstances we come to prioritise one concern over another, we instantly lose our once deeply held identity and put on another

instead. Firstly, as noted by Lawler, “no one has only one identity; and indeed those identities may be in tension” (2008, p. 3). Secondly, if, as Archer’s argument implies, people’s identity-defining concerns are not simply discarded, but re-ordered according to their changing priorities, then the identities reflected by those concerns can not be merely lost either. These identities, along with the obligations and responsibilities attached to them, may be overshadowed by various social roles that people assume as they go through the life and that may come to acquire the utmost priority. But even subdued, these identities do not cease to be integral constituents of subjects’ inner selves or influence what course of action they take. That Solveig concedes the social identity of a strict vegan, investing herself in some other social roles, should not suggest that the ethical consumer has been denied a place among the different layers of her distinct personality for, as has been already argued, people’s social identity constitutes but one aspect of their overall personal identity which, although “intertwines with their sociality, but exists *sui generis* and cannot be reduced to it” (Archer, 2000, p. 196). As Archer explains:

Certainly, (...) the social positions we occupy do contribute to the person we become, which is why this is presented as a dialectical process: but the final synthesis is one which finally defines the person as someone with concerns in the natural and practical orders, as well as the social order. In the process, our social identity also becomes defined, but necessarily as a sub-set of personal identity (2000, p. 295).

Thus, Solveig’s social identity is neither exhaustive of her personality, nor is it the only determinant of her relationships with external reality. Undoubtedly, it affects how, where, and when the identity of an ethical consumer is allowed to manifest itself to the world, but this is not a one-way relationship for, as Lawler (2008, p. 3) highlights, “different forms of identity (...) should be seen as interactive and mutually constitutive, rather than ‘additive’ ”. The principles of ethical consumption, albeit at times subdued by Solveig’s sociality and hence liable to compromises and trade-offs, still hold a prominent place among her ultimate concerns – those that contribute to defining her distinct personal identity and take part in shaping her pathways. Consider how Solveig describes the kind of person she is, or rather perceives herself to be, “*I am trying to be accepting, and I am trying to be caring and loving, and I am trying to live a life that has – that does not have a negative impact on others*”, and her ethical food commitments as a natural concomitant of her overall character: “*for me eating animal products wouldn’t really fit in there, it is just a logical consequence*”. The interplay between Solveig as an

ethical consumer and Solveig as a social subject might be construed as a tension between “the self as an autonomous entity” (Lawler, 2008, p. 39), defined by concerns over the morality of consumption, and “the self as the embodiment of relationships” (Lawler, 2008, p. 39) which places limits and constraints on whether and how Solveig’s autonomous self can go about realizing her ethical food concerns.

The above discussion, besides illuminating the relationships between subjects’ personal and social identities, sends out an important conceptual message. It warns against a narrow view of human identity which Archer’s idea of an individual as someone defined by concerns pertaining to the three different orders of the world allows to steer clear of. It is by relying on this concept that I have been able to defend the place of the ethical consumer in the synthesis between Solveig’s inner and outer self, and it is the same concept that explains why even the most devoted individuals with well-rounded personal and social identities of an ethical consumer, such as Lucy, cannot be completely free of social concerns. Several brief examples from her story suffice to illustrate the point. So, although Lucy’s dinner party menus are invariably vegan, she agrees to provide her guests with regular milk – a concession made for the sake of hospitality: *“it is just being hospitable, you know, I don’t want people go away thinking, “bloody hell, she put soya milk in my drink!”*. Lucy’s remark reveals that not only does she recognize social norms and expectations about the obligations of a good host, but that she has internalised them thereby becoming susceptible to societal evaluations of her performance in this particular role. Lucy’s social concerns manifest themselves further in the way she goes about her ethical food commitments when being a guest herself. Despite not being prepared to compromise on her dietary principles on social events, family occasions, or friendly gatherings, Lucy never expects or demands being specially catered for. This tendency to keep alternative food habits as low-profile as possible has been observed by Janda and Trocchia (2001) in their study of vegetarianism. The authors interpret it as a coping strategy through which non-mainstream consumers resolve the tension between individual freedom and social belonging and avoid possible criticism and judgement. Lucy admits to the same motives: *“I just don’t really want to draw a lot of attention to myself, it’s tiresome, and then you got somebody thinking, “God, she is a pain in the neck!” I don’t want to irritate people”*. Thus, despite letting the identity of an ethical consumer occupy both her inner and outer self, Lucy can neither escape her subject status, nor completely break free from social concerns. *“I don’t want my food choices to put other people in a difficult*

situation”, “*I don’t want to be a complete bore*” – she says, testifying to the truth of the argument. This is because “sociality is (...) necessarily the lot of human beings” and “participation in the social realm entails concerns about self-worth which cannot be evaded in this discursive environment” (Archer, 2000, pp. 198-199). This, however, in no way undermines my previous argument that Lucy’s personal and social identities are defined first and foremost by her concerns and commitments as an ethical consumer. Indeed, in none of the above examples do the requirements of particular social roles force Lucy to violate her personal dietary principles and compromise on the identity of an ethical consumer; what they do, however, is prompt her to adjust her relationships with other subjects (e.g. by accommodating their eating preferences or concealing her own) so that to avoid explicit conflicts between her ethical commitments and her social standing. While taking nothing away from her ethical consumer identity, Lucy’s efforts demonstrate that, consistent with Archer’s concept of an individual, she too, inevitably, has relationships and concerns in the social realm that are part of her human condition and that affect, even if only in minor ways, how she lives out her ethical self.

This concludes my account of the interplay between personal and social identities of ethical consumers. In this last section, I have focused on the ways in which individuals reflexively work out the balance between their concerns as ethical consumers and as social beings thus achieving an identity within which both their ethical and social selves have been assigned their particular places. I chose to advance my argument through a sharp focus on Solveig and Lucy because of their contrasting experiences that provide an opportunity to catch the best view of the continuum along which subjects shift their ethical consumer identity in relation to their social self. The following quote from Archer (2012, p. 67, emphasis in original) highlights the aim of my effort:

To account for variability as well as regularity in the courses of action taken by those similarly situated means acknowledging our singularity as *persons*, without denying that our sociality is essential for us to be recognisable as *human* persons.

Despite the difference in the positions that the identity of an ethical consumer has been allowed to occupy in Solveig’s and Lucy’s social lives, my analysis of the process through which they achieved the final synthesis between their personal and social selves reveals the same underlying mechanism. This is the mechanism that I have described in detail in this chapter and that can be briefly summarised as follows:

- under the impetus of their incipient personal identity, defined by concerns over the morality of consumption, individuals try on the social identity of an ethical consumer;
- through these exploratory role performances, subjects acquire direct knowledge of the costs and benefits of sustaining the social image of an ethical consumer;
- this informs their reflexive reassessment of the role in terms of the concomitant losses and gains based on which subjects either make the identity of an ethical consumer their leading social part or confine it to the more private aspects of their lives and assume another social image instead;
- no matter what position the identity of an ethical consumer gets assigned in individuals' social lives, it remains an integral part of their personal identity for as long as food ethics reside on the list of their ultimate concerns.

The above synopsis summarises my explanation of the mechanism that brings about the social identity of an ethical consumer and accounts for the varying degrees of its visibility - from near-absence to sporadic appearances to full-time presence - in individuals' social lives. It was conceived through an outline of Archer's theoretical account of co-evolution of people's personal and social identities brought to life by my analysis of subjective experiences of two concrete ethical consumers. It enabled me to illustrate with empirical evidence and interpret through the prism of ethical consumption the entire process of social identity development, while highlighting the key role of reflexivity in propelling individuals through its different stages. By drawing on Solveig's and Lucy's narratives, I described and analysed how aspiring ethical consumers try out their desired social roles; how through these identity experiments they become aware of their concomitant costs; how this experiential knowledge feeds into subjects' evaluation of the worthwhileness of their assumed positions; how based on this reflexive inner work they embrace some roles while subordinating others and in so doing define their social identity; and, finally, how through reflexive prioritisation of their moral and social concerns they define the place of an ethical consumer in their social lives. In this account, I have demonstrated that inextricable connections between individuals' ultimate concerns and personal identities extend to their social selves and that in determining their commitments people define not only who they are, but also *how* they are towards the social world. Building upon this argument, I have been able to fulfil the key aim of this chapter and reveal the necessary and sufficient conditions for

the emergence of the social identity of an ethical consumer. I have argued that for an individual to develop a yearning for such social role, concerns over food ethics have to appear on the list of his ultimate concerns which define his inner self and supply the impetus to manifest it in public. This is a necessary condition – in the absence of concerns over food ethics, the social identity of an ethical consumer (by which I mean a genuine manifestation of the true self rather than a mere performance of the scripted role in a pursuit of some other goals) can neither appear nor thrive, for it is our ultimate concerns that inform what social roles we take up and how we personify them:

What we seek to do is reflexively defined by reference to the concerns that we wish to realize. Ultimately, that realization means becoming who we want to be within the social order by personifying selected social roles in a manner expressive of our personal concerns (Archer, 2007, p. 88)

Further, the emotional import of ethical concerns needs to be sufficiently strong to prevail over the person's inescapable social concerns and enable the requirements of his dietary commitments to overshadow the responsibilities and obligations of his various social roles. This, however, represents a sufficient condition for the appearance of the social identity of an ethical consumer, since a successful enactment of the role of a conscientious food eater does not imply that active and conscious prioritisation of ethical concerns over social needs has necessarily taken place. Indeed, it may be enabled by a simple lack of an apparent clash between agential moral food practices and their social projects. As Solveig's experiences have shown, as long as commitment to alternative modes of consumption does not undermine a person's social standing and worth, the need for a deliberate choice between the two will most likely never arise, meaning that the identity of an ethical consumer can be assigned its place in the social life of the subject and exist on a par with his other positions and roles.

Finally, I have argued that regardless of their relative hierarchical positions people's ethical and social concerns do not cease to be indelible components of their personal make up – relegated to the deeper parts of the self and restricted to the more private aspects of life, the identity of an ethical consumer remains a significant determinant of Solveig's distinct personality, just as Lucy's social concerns continue to exist alongside - often muted, sometimes on a par, yet never rising above - her ethical self. This important point enabled me to render meaningful the decisions and actions that participants take both as ethical consumers and as social subjects. I have thus

achieved the key goal of this last section of my analysis of the participants' accounts – to portray ethical consumers as human beings with particular concerns that define them as moral, but also as social agents who continuously negotiate their relationships with the discursive realm, of which they are inevitably a part, in order to achieve a satisfying balance between their identity-defining dietary commitments and their status as subjects. I have shown that people's identities are inevitably "*embedded within and produced by the social world*" (Lawler, 2008, p. 144) by demonstrating that when individuals live out their ethical consumer identities in public, they improvise within scenes of constraint, as Butler (2004) would have it, for their idiosyncratic performances - creative productions of their unique singularities as persons - are always and inevitably restricted by the particular societal contexts in which they happen to be. By explaining how people's ultimate concerns inform what social roles they take up and determine what position the identity of an ethical consumer comes to occupy in their social lives, I have revealed the crucial links between subjects' personal and social identities while highlighting the key role of reflexivity in enabling individuals to achieve the final synthesis between the two.

In Conclusion

Ethical Consumers: From the Concrete to the Abstract, Out of the Particular Toward the Universal

This thesis has told a story of ethical food consumers. It began with a human being with intrinsic capacities for emotionality and cognition and essential properties of reflexivity, intentionality, and self-awareness. It followed his evolution into a moral character whose subjective relationship to the world is one of concern over ethical living and witnessed this relationship translate into consumption projects which are not just a set of food practices but embodiments of commitments, expressions of beliefs, and reflections of distinct identities which people embrace and develop as they go through the life. Shaped and moulded by a variety of structural forces, these moral food projects are at the same time manifestations of distinct human powers, i.e. the reflexive capacity of agents to adjust their preferred courses of action to the enabling and constraining properties of the world and in defining their subjective practices transform the objective reality itself. This story is meant to fill the gap in the existing literature on consumption behaviour which has been largely oblivious of the relationship between the social embeddedness of consumer practices and the role of the structure in the constitution of personal style and the construction of self on the one hand and the power of agency to define individual courses of action and contribute to social outcomes on the other. This study was set out to correct the imbalances underlying the dominant approaches to consumption and through the integration of agency-focused and socio-centric perspectives acknowledge and analyse the complex ensemble of individual and systemic powers which informs, motivates, and defines consumer practices, choices, and pursuits. Applying the principle of analytical dualism, that is being able “to distinguish sharply, then between the genesis of human actions lying in the reasons, intentions and plans of human beings, on the one hand; and the structures governing the reproduction and transformation of social activities, on the other” (Bhaskar, 2010, p. 75-76) has been critical to fulfilling a key aim of my research, that is to expose ethical consumption as a site and product of a continuous interplay between individual agency and social structure. By tracing the uneven trajectories of my participants’ moral food projects, I have been able to demonstrate how structural conditions shape individuals’

situations in particular ways thus motivating differently positioned agents to engage in different practices and pursue different courses of action. I have revealed both the ways in which agential ethical commitments and pursuits are constrained by structural properties, i.e. “productive resources, roles, and associated interests” (Archer, 1998, p. 371), which they are not responsible for creating, as well as how ethical consumers actively negotiate the causal powers of these structures to see their moral food projects through. Ultimately, then, I have showcased “*how* structure actually does impinge upon agency (who and where) and *how* agents in turn react back to reproduce or transform structure” (Archer, 1998, p. 371, emphasis in original).

In recounting this story, I have fulfilled the overarching aim of my research – to understand and explain the process of emergence and development of ethical consumer identities. I have grounded my account in the view of humans as “beings whose relation to the world is one of concern” (Sayer, 2011, p. 2). Yet, I went beyond merely showcasing the presence of ethical considerations in the subjects’ day-to-day choices and pivotal life decisions and made an ambitious attempt to penetrate deep into the inner lives and worlds of self-perceived ethical consumers to unravel the origins of their moral concerns and reveal the generative principles of their dietary commitments. I started by locating the roots of my participants’ ethical concerns in their subjective experiences of the objective world enabled and propelled by the intrinsic human capacities for emotionality and reason. I presented human reflexivity as the key force that mediates between the properties of the agents and those of external reality enabling subjects to elaborate on their affective and cognitive experiences and in the process of internal conversation with themselves define their ultimate concerns, devise subjective consumption projects, and work out ways to fulfil them in the specific objective contexts in which they are placed. By construing reflexive conversation as a site where human logos and pathos unite to propel individuals toward unique constellations of concerns and thus into distinct identities, I have contributed to the negation of the view that “values are merely subjective or conventional, *beyond the scope of reason* – not susceptible to evidence or argument – and have nothing to do with the kind of beings that we are, or with what happens” (Sayer, 2011, p. 3). To the contrary, I have demonstrated how in an attempt to address their identity-defining moral concerns individuals embark on reflexively conceived and evaluated consumption projects, and how in living out their ethical values and beliefs through specific shopping and eating practices they achieve their desired identities. I have thus construed ethical consumer

practices as an outcome of the process of personal morphogenesis – subjects’ evolution into individuals with particular moral values, principles, and concerns, from which their identities derive, and with specific ethical commitments, through whose fulfilment these identities are lived out and sustained. I have completed this account by showing how this personal morphogenesis spills onto people’s life as social subjects and extends to their social identities, and how by embracing food ethics as their ultimate concern individuals’ define not only who they are, but also how they are towards other people. By revealing crucial links between the participants’ ultimate concerns and the social roles they take up and pursue, I offered an insight into the process of emergence of a social identity of an ethical consumer.

By disentangling and analysing the essential steps in the evolution of the participants’ moral food practices – from developing concerns over ethical eating, to reflexively embracing them as their ultimate commitments, to engaging in and continuously sustaining subjectively conceived but objectively conditioned projects of ethical consumption – and piecing them back together in one coherent story, I have constructed an account of the process of becoming and being an ethical food consumer. I have uncovered the key factors that initiate and guide this intricate development, i.e. agential subjectivity and structural objectivity, and the critical force - human reflexivity - that drives this process forward and steers it toward specific personal and social outcomes. I have achieved this by demonstrating the embeddedness of ethical food practices in the natural, practical, and social orders of the world and the contingency of individual choices on the enabling and constraining effects of the structure, and by defending the indispensability of reflexivity to agential ability to respond to and continuously negotiate the properties of objective reality in order to advance their moral food projects and, in doing so, sustain their desired identities. I have shown that reflexivity is the central generative force behind individuals’ a) moral concerns, for it enables people to elaborate on their subjective responses to objective circumstances thus furthering self-knowledge and awareness of their ultimate values and beliefs; b) ethical food projects, for it is during reflexive conversations with themselves that subjects work out appropriate ways to fulfil their internal commitments within the external circumstances in which they are placed; and c) consumption practices, for it is only through reflexive negotiation of structural enablements and constraints that ethical consumers can ensure the consistency and continuity of their preferred lifestyles. In doing so, I have affirmed the key role of agential capacity for reflexive deliberations in

enabling individuals to attain their desired identities and live them out within the constraints of their personal as well as wider societal contexts. The concept of reflexivity has thus been critical to allowing me to integrate agential subjectivity of ethical consumers and structural objectivity in which they live and act into a single story and produce a unified, yet bilateral account of their interplay, thereby fulfilling the key goal of my research – to reveal and explain the generative mechanism behind ethical consumer identities. This mechanism represents a complex, multi-step, and multi-dimensional process, by which these distinct identities are brought about and sustained through an incessant interaction between agential and structural forces, and whose key principles can be summarised as follows:

1. The first step towards achieving the identity of an ethical consumer is developing a concern over a cause that can be addressed by changing one's approach to consumption.
2. Next, through internal conversations with themselves individuals embrace these concerns as ultimate and design subjective consumption projects through which to address them.
3. By embracing consumption ethics as their ultimate concern and developing a moral commitment to a particular style of consumption, individuals attain the identity of an ethical consumer.
4. Once achieved, the ethical consumer identity has to be continuously reaffirmed and maintained. In order to sustain the desired identity, individuals must repeatedly reassert food ethics as their ultimate concern and ensure the continuity of their moral food projects by accommodating them to the ever-changing objective conditions and subjective circumstances.
5. Emotionality plays a key role in triggering concerns and driving subjects to act upon them, while reflexivity enables individuals to evaluate their food projects in terms of their moral worth, emotional appeal, and potential to become a life-long commitment, and, subsequently, achieve and sustain a liveable and satisfying balance between their ethical concerns and other inescapable concerns and needs.
6. Not only do the ethics of consumption as an ultimate moral concern define people's unique personalities, but they also inform their social identities. Living out ethical consumer commitments in public involves a complex interplay

between personal and social self, and the relative position of food ethics on agential hierarchy of concerns determines the place of being an ethical consumer in the subject's social life.

As I approached the end of the research process, along with an understanding of how individuals evolve to be ethical food consumers, a clearer vision of who an ethical consumer actually is started to shape up. By no means do I want to suggest that the identity of an ethical consumer can be construed in terms of a fixed set of predefined features and prescribed actions that anyone who claims to be a mindful eater should be able to match. An assumption of the ethical consumer as a "fixed identity" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 332) is, of course, a mistaken one, easily confuted by the diversity of ways in which individuals conceive of and enact ethical consumption and the sheer creativity with which they approach their dietary commitments. Indeed, no two ethical consumers I met through my research could be possibly squeezed into one type. Understandably so, for all of them came from different walks of life, developed different concerns about the world, and faced different enablements and constraints on the way towards their moral ideals. Yet, despite all the idiosyncrasies in their ethical foodways, there are certain characteristics and traits that the participants of my research share and that, I argue, represent their essential properties as social agents and, more specifically, ethical food consumers.

Firstly, the ethical consumer of my research is an emotional, morally concerned, and value-driven human being. He does serve to endorse the view of ethical consumption as a self-serving pursuit of inward-looking individuals who do good not in order to be good but rather to feel good about themselves. While his moral food project is not void of rational considerations, since all people have to evaluate their commitments not only in terms of their moral worth and emotional appeal, but also their practical feasibility and accompanying costs, his ethical practices do not result from a cost-benefit analysis of a "risk discounting and profit-maximising bargain-hunter" (Archer, 2000, p. 55), but are an outcome of a reflexive conversation about his deepest values and beliefs and possible ways to manifest them in life. He does not conform to the model of a social actor as a preference-driven agent "who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing" (Archer, 2000, p. 4) tendered by the rational choice theory, but aligns with a human being who has ultimate concerns that are "not a

means to anything beyond them, but are commitments which are constitutive of who we are, and an expression of our identities” (Archer, 2000, p. 4).

The ethical consumer of my research is “the author of his own projects in society” (Archer, 2003, p. 34). She is not an over-socialised subject all of whose qualities are supplied by the social reality, whose values are neither individually developed nor personally possessed, and whose practices are determined by a fixed set of dominant, commonly shared norms and beliefs. The idiosyncratic ways in which she understands and performs ethical consumption overturn the idea of the primacy of societal discourses over personal thoughts which theories of social practice assume. To the contrary, she is “the ultimate and effective cause of social practice” (Archer, 2003, p. 134), shaped and moulded as much by the properties of the structure as by those of the creative agent herself.

The ethical consumer of my research is a reflexive and self-aware person. He cannot be a Bourdieusian actor whose subjective dispositions are merely a reflection of objective positions and whose ways are guided by habitus which is nothing other than internalized social structures and facts. He cannot be denied self-consciousness, for it is through awareness of his being, actions, and thoughts that he develops knowledge of himself and his beliefs, values, and ultimate concerns. Neither can he be stripped of reflexive capacities, for it is through incessant monitoring of the self and his commitments that he defends the continuity of his ethical foodways against subjective conditions and objective circumstances.

The ethical consumer of my research is an intentional agent. She does not fit the image of a “constructed” consumer whose practices are neither deliberately chosen nor actively developed, but are dictated by the system and orchestrated by a set of strategically oriented actors in pursuit of vested interests and goals. She is not a passive victim of the “governing of consumption” (Barnett et al., 2010), but an agent of active choice - at the core of her moral food project are consumption acts that are intrinsically motivated, subjectively conceived, and creatively performed. Inevitably, however, the ethical consumer of my research is also “a wavering, suspicious, ambivalent ‘consumer’ juggling their choices amidst competing knowledge claims” (Adams and Raisborough, 2010, p. 270). His project is riddled with compromises subjectively negotiated and gaps precariously bridged, for in the absence of fixed stereotypes or even definitive guidelines about what constitutes a moral food choice ethical consumption discourses remain fluid, meanings - open for interpretation, practices – subject to change.

Finally, the ethical consumer of my research is a social actor who is embedded in objective reality and whose practices are contingent on his inevitable and incessant interactions with the natural, practical, and social orders of the world. His inner self *is* “a *reflexive* project” (Giddens, 1991, p. 32, emphasis in original), but the one that is always and necessarily externally conditioned and constrained, and while he is free to choose his own identity, he is not free to determine the circumstances under which he will make it. His agential subjectivity is always juxtaposed against structural subjectivity, and it is in their continuous interplay that the shaping of his practices and the forging of his identity occurs. The ethical consumer of my research is thus like “a sculptor at work fashioning a product out of existing materials using the tools available” (Archer, 1998, p. 360). She can also be thought of as Jonathan Haidt’s (2012) imagined elephant rider - another eloquent metaphor that has encouraged my understanding of ethical consumers as intentional agents in pursuit of subjectively conceived but objectively conditioned moral commitments. The rider is trying to control the elephant, but has only limited command of the direction in which the giant animal takes him. Having painted a mental picture of a little rider who wants to follow a particular course, but is always at the mercy of the powerful elephant, I could instantly project it onto the participants of my research. The idea of ethical consumers as determined travelers who are striving to follow certain pathways but find themselves constantly constrained by external forces has not only brought me closer to understanding individuals’ practices of ethical consumption, but also enabled me to achieve a clear vision of what exactly I had learned from hours of grocery shopping and in-depth interviewing. When observing subjects’ buying behaviors, I was looking at the riders – committed ethical consumers appearing to be continuously mindful of every little choice they made, capable of justifying their consumption decisions, rarely failing at finding a reason for why this or that particular product earned a place – or was rejected one – in their shopping basket. By learning their life stories, however, I was able to see the elephant: the family backgrounds, educational inputs, cultural exposures, social pressures, and structural opportunities - all the subjective and objective factors that have been shaping and moulding the participants’ courses of life leading them to become the people they are, to have the concerns they cherish, to develop the values they live by. This giant elephant, a powerful force, is not just a product of past experiences - it is caught up in an intricate web of subjective conditions and external circumstances that continually define the subjects’ ability to fulfill their moral projects and live out their ethical selves. Although

my version of the animal is different from that of Jonathan Haidt's, whose elephant symbolises the unconscious – automatic, emotional, visceral – side of the human mind, his illuminating metaphor has given me yet another hint for understanding human practices of ethical consumption as an ongoing process of incessant negotiations between the rider - an active and purposeful agent in pursuit of her idiosyncratic vision of the good – and the elephant – the subjective and objective determinants of the overall direction that her moral path follows as well as every little turn that it takes.

In developing and presenting the above profile of an ethical food consumer, I aim not to promote a uniform, deterministic view of human nature, but to outline those aspects of it that make people evaluative, normative, reflexive human beings whose relationship to the world is one of concern, who deliberately act upon their concerns, and whose well-being directly depends on the well-being of the objects of their ultimate commitments. Suggesting that there are universal, intrinsic features that make us beings “for whom things matter” (Sayer, 2011, p. 99) and who conduct their life accordingly does not entail the denial of the prodigious diversity of people's identities and the ways in which those identities reveal themselves to the world for, as Sayer (2011, p. 104) argues, “making claims about the particular capacities of human beings does not mean that they are all manifested equally or in the same way everywhere and never change”. By describing how - and explaining why - ethical consumer identities are necessarily *subjectively* conceived and enacted, I have guarded my research account against the assumption that these identities are, or can be, pre-determined and fixed. Yet, I have also uncovered fundamental similarities which reveal what the ethical consumers of my research have in common and which help to explain “what is it about people that makes them both ethical subjects and objects of ethical concerns” (Sayer, 2011, p. 98). These admittedly universalist assumptions about social agents inform a specific conception of a human being which lies at the very basis of my research account and without which no understanding of human society and behaviour can be achieved – as Sayer points out, “it is hard to say anything much about people or indeed interact with them without presupposing something about what they have in common” (2011, p. 106). Such universalism, Sayer explains, need not imply uniformity – in fact, our differentiation is enabled *precisely* by our essential commonalities. Indeed, it is what the ethical consumers of my research have in common - susceptibility to moral concerns, capacity for emotionality and cognition, reflexive abilities, creativity, self-awareness, and intentionality - that is responsible for the variety of their moral food projects, practices,

and pursuits through which their unique identities are lived out and sustained.

Further research: beyond individual identities

So where to from here for deepening the understanding of an ethical food consumer and further exploring the multiple dimensions of her hybrid, complex, and fluid identity? In this thesis, I placed primary emphasis upon subjective meanings and experiences of ethical consumption and explored ethical food practices from the standpoint of an individual consumer in pursuit of an authentic identity through personal commitment to particular foodways. I focused on individual subjectivity, human agency, and reflexive capacity as they manifest themselves as a morally concerned consumer advances her ethical food project through enabling and constraining contexts of objective reality. However, it should not escape our view that consumption in general and eating in particular is rarely a purely individual experience, but more often a social one (Carù and Cova, 2003; Warde, 1997). In a bid to counterbalance the emphasis on individualized practices and personalized choices of individualistic consumers in the context of ethical consumption, Cherrier highlights that “an ethical consumption experience goes beyond an individual act in the marketplace (...) Consuming ethically links consumers to family members, friends, the state, and the market” (2007, p. 323). Indeed, as my study has clearly shown, consumers’ engagement with and performance of ethical practices, while informed by subjectively defined concerns and moral imperatives generated by their distinct identities, is contingent upon societal context, cultural environment, and commitments to other social subjects and their needs. This means that the process of formation, development, and realization of ethical consumer identities does not occur in isolation or some kind of a social vacuum, but is shaped by continuous negotiations between the subject’s inner and social self. The point resonates with the argument developed by Lawler (2008), who negates the common perception of an individual’s “‘true’ or ‘deep’ self” (p.5) as “something which belongs to the person in question and is nothing to do with the social world” (2008, p. 5). Contrary to viewing identity as “outside, or nothing to do with, the social, or as coming fully formed into the social world” (Lawler, 2008, p. 7), Lawler suggests to understand it as “formed *between*, rather than *within* persons”, that is through continuous social interactions. Building upon this argument, Cherrier (2007, p. 323) points out that “the key reference points for constructing ethical consumption lifestyles come from not only the inside (self-identity) but also the outside (collective identity)”. It is on this basis that

she advocates approaching the questions of identity formation from a dialectical perspective, which is sensitive to the fact that identities are “both individually and socially constructed” (Cherrier, 2007, p. 323).

The meanings ascribed to ethical consumer identity necessarily and inevitably connect with social relations and collective experiences, so researchers should never conceptualize ethical consumer identity as fixed (McDonald et al., 2006) and must treat it instead as constantly evolving through processes of identification and recognition (Cherrier, 2007, p. 332)

While I have partially responded to this call by exploring the intricate relationships between personal and social identities of my ethical food consumers, future research should place a greater emphasis on the idea that “the notion of identity does not emerge from an individual process of self-identification and therefore, should not be regarded solely as individualistic” (Cherrier, 2007, p. 329). Having presented the process of identity construction as an outcome of agential reflexive examination of the self and its relationship with the world, I nevertheless recognize that “the inner conversation cannot be portrayed as the fully independent activity of the isolated monad, who only takes cognisance of his external social context in the same way that he consults the weather” (Archer, 2003, p. 117), and that the reflexive practice “is shaped by the networks of relations within which it takes place because these profoundly affect what does and can satisfy the subject and be sustained by each of them” (Archer, 2012, p. 97). It is therefore important to consider that “the ability to choose an ethical consumption lifestyle and identity (...), does not result purely from a process of self-inquiry” (Cherrier, 2007, p. 323). Although none of the ethical consumers of my research have explicitly framed their moral food practices as part of “collective participation” (Shaw, Newholm and Dickinson, 2006, p. 1062), there are, no doubt, many committed individuals for whom the meaning of being involved in ethical consumption goes beyond personal choice to give rise to the feelings of shared morality and collective identity. Thus, further research, while continuing to acknowledge the heterogeneity of ethical consumers and the diversity of meanings that they attach to their moral food commitments, should examine ethical consumption as a communal activity and shared domain of moral values, principles, and beliefs and explore the collective identities that emerge and develop within it. Turning the spotlight on shared emotions, concerns, meanings, as well as social interactions through which they are spread and exchanged might offer a means to broaden our view on the different ways in which individuals develop as and into ethical consumers, while seeing individual and

collective identity as mutually constituted may open up new perspectives on the process of individuals' formation as particular persons. It is by following these avenues that the future research can offer "a new level of sensitivity in considering the development of ethical consumer identities" (Cherrier, 2007, p. 332).

The scale of debate on consumer practices and identities is extensive and multifaceted at both individual and social levels. By producing a sociological account of ethical consumption practices that takes people's "first-person view of the world seriously, both recognising their agency and what their concerns tell us about them and their situations" (Sayer, 2011, p. 10), I have contributed to this debate and hopefully helped to steer its course toward a more balanced methodological approach to and more integrated conceptual understanding of the phenomenon – that which explores ethical consumption both at the level of concrete experiences, practices, and circumstances as well as that of abstract relations, mechanisms, and processes and thereby provides both micro-level and macro-level explanations of the complex ensemble of the driving forces of ethical consumer practices and identities.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Participant consent form

This project explores the motivations, experiences, perceptions and attitudes of people who incorporate ethical commitments into their daily food consumption habits and practices. Its purpose is to understand the relationships between individual identities and specific food product choices.

If ethical considerations are one of the key factors in your food purchase decisions, and you are you regularly shop for foods with ethical attributes, such as fair-trade, free-range, organic and more, then your participant will benefit this research.

As part of the project, I would like to speak with you about your experience of being an ethical consumer and shopping for ethical foods. This will be an informal discussion, at a time and a place of your choosing, that will last for about one to two hours. With your permission, I will record the conversation to help me remember your valuable insights.

To help me better understand your experiences and practices of ethical food consumption, I would also like you to take me on a couple of your weekly grocery shopping trips. It will be entirely up to you when, where and for how long I will accompany you – I will appreciate any opportunity to learn a little bit more about how you choose and shop for foods with ethical attributes. I would also appreciate the opportunity to interview you to learn more about your experiences as an ethical consumer.

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this project. The expected benefits are the opportunity to participate in a research study and the information about individual experiences of ethical food consumption. I will be happy to share my findings with you once the research is completed. You will also have a chance to review and comment on the draft analysis of the data; your feedback will be discussed and acted upon as appropriate.

Read the information overleaf carefully to help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Should you have any questions either before or in the course of your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me using the details below.

Yana Manyukhina
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Department of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds

Consent to take part in the research project

Add your
initials next to
the statement
if you agree

<p>I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated [date] explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.</p>	
<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before the data analysis begins (date) without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. In case of withdrawal from the study, all data already provided will be destroyed.</p> <p>Researcher's contact email address is ssym@leeds.ac.uk</p>	
<p>I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.</p>	
<p>I agree for the data collected from me to be used in relevant future research in an anonymised form.</p>	
<p>I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change.</p>	

Name of participant	
Participant's signature	
Date	
Name of the researcher	Yana Manyukhina
Signature	

Appendix B

Recruitment flyer



0%
CARBON EMISSIONS

Animal Welfare
**ORGANIC
FAIR TRADE**
GO GREEN

**Are you
an ethical
food consumer?**

Do ethical considerations guide your day-to-day grocery shopping?
Is **fair-trade, organic, free-range** your habitual grocery lexicon?
If yes, then your participation would benefit this research.

I am a doctoral researcher exploring the perceptions and attitudes of people for whom products' social and environmental impact is the dominant factor in food shopping decisions. If you consider yourself an ethical consumer and would be willing to share your experiences, please get in touch!



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