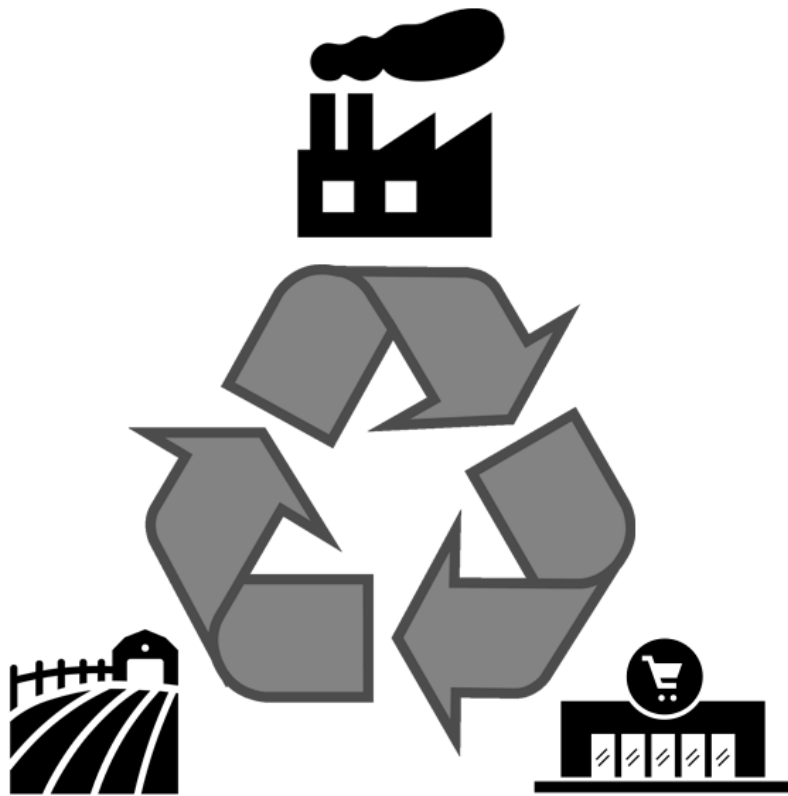


The Plant-Based Turn in Industrial Food Production: A New Perspective on the Limits of Commodities



Robbert van Rumund, MSc

Student number: 3965244 robbertvanrumund@gmail.com

Supervisor and first reader: Prof. dr. F.W.A. (Frans) Brom

Daily supervisor and second reader: J. (Joachim) Nieuwland MSc MA

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Summary

In recent years, we have witnessed an upcoming ‘plant-based turn’ in food production. However, at least in the Netherlands, this trend seems to be stagnating. Hence in this research, I critically assess one of the main tactics used to realize a decrease in our dependency on animal products: plant-based product differentiation. Taking plant-based alternatives and substitutes for meat as example, I focus on various kinds of ‘product-differentiating activities’, and assess that such activities are problematic, since commodities are then presented too much as agents of change. Yet I maintain that one of the product-differentiating activities might withstand this criticism: presenting products as ‘experiential overridingness’, meaning that the ethical implications associated with plant-based food constitute a relevant background, while the direct experience of a product is moved to the foreground. I argue that this might foster an understanding of products as relevant but only limited contributors to tackling the many issues which plant-based producers claim to be able to solve solely through products. However, ‘experiential overridingness’ is strongly open for contextualization, since it places a strong emphasis on the product itself. Hence I will also focus more specifically on the context in which experiential overridingness might function: in a context of various issues and a diversity of potential courses of collective and individual attempts to mitigate the various issues.

Introduction

The consumption of meat produced in industrial animal agriculture, and the attempts to decrease this consumption through offering plant-based products to the market, have momentarily arrived at an interesting meeting point. On the one hand, meat consumption in the Netherlands has stagnated over the last three years (2016-2018), as it remains consistently around 76,6 kilos per person per year, after a steady decline of about 2,5 kilos per person per year from 2010. Current consumption levels are roughly the same as they were in 2005.¹ On the other hand, increasing amounts of alternatives for meat produced in industrial animal agriculture are available, which we shall see in this research. Based on the data above, however, it seems hard to conclude whether there is any significant correlation between the increase in the amount of plant-based products and the total amount of meat consumption.

This research will exclusively focus on the production and consumption of plant-based ‘meatless’ products, and the associated attempt to lower meat consumption. I will focus on the commitments of plant-based product producers and consumers, and to what extent their additional commitments (for example a fairer global food distribution or ‘localizing’ food production) are consonant with their practices. Since every animal product will have its own discussions and intricacies, other animal products like milk and leather clothing will be left outside of the scope of this research.

The main ‘tactic’ mostly used for decreasing our meat consumption and our (economic) dependency on animal products in general, has been product differentiation, the (economic) process through which products are differentiated from other products by adjusting one or more of the product’s aspects. In this context, it would mean producing plant-based products rather than meat products. Moreover, ‘our’ mostly refers to industrial or ‘post-industrial’ economies. A more elaborate and adequate research on meat consumption in non-industrial economies remains outside of the scope of this research. Hence all further references to ‘animal agriculture’ and ‘meat’ refer to industrial animal agriculture and industrially produced meat. I shall now briefly focus on the main commitments all plant-based producers seem to have in common.

After all, why would we want to reduce the consumption of meat in the first place? One could detect four main reasons which all parties desiring to reduce meat consumption seem to

¹ Wakker Dier, Vleesverbruik in Nederland daalt niet, <https://www.wakkerdier.nl/persberichten/vleesverbruik-in-nederland-daalt-niet/> (November 19, 2018), consulted on December 14, 2018 ; Hans Dagevos et al, Vleesconsumptie per hoofd van de bevolking in Nederland, 2005-2017, <https://files.wakkerdier.nl/app/uploads/2018/11/19150214/Rapport-vleesverbruik-2017-WUR.pdf>, Wageningen Economic Research Nota (2018-108) 7.

share. The following elaborations are illustrative, not conclusive, and shall for the sake of the argument be granted. First, animal agriculture is a significant contributor to man-made climate change and resource depletion.² Second, animal agriculture causes many kinds of pollution. For example, in the Netherlands (and presumably, also in many other countries), the animal agricultural industry is a disproportionately high overproducer of fertilizer compared to the amount of fertilizer produced through crops.³ Third, a high amount of animal product consumption, especially red meat, has been linked to personal health risks.⁴ Also, public health risks are often associated with intensive animal agriculture. For example, the spread of the African Swine Fever seems to be strongly catalysed by animal agriculture.⁵ Fourth, animal agriculture creates various ethical and moral dilemmas regarding the treatment of animals, to which I will return later in this research. There are thus many justifications for decreasing meat consumption, but at the same time we are faced with the problem that the level of meat consumption does not seem to correlate significantly with an increase in plant-based products.

The research question

Judging from the mentioned observations, there might be something wrong with the methods we use in trying to decrease meat consumption. Until now, no elaborate critical assessment of plant-based product differentiation, as main tactic to decrease meat consumption, has been offered. Recently, there has been discussion on what it means to lead an ‘eco-positive’ life (where negative environmental impacts are lower than positive impacts). However, despite being critical of focussing solely on individual actions like consuming plant-based products (critically assessing the role of companies, governments and economic systems), the emphasis

² Mario Herrero et al., Biomass use, production, feed efficiencies, and greenhouse gas emissions from global livestock systems, <https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/early/2013/12/12/1308149110.full.pdf>, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, October 13, 2015, passim.

³ Marcel aan de Burgh, Nederland is overbemest, van de lucht tot het grondwater, NRC (5 april 2018).

⁴ See for example the Dutch Government’s reaction to the WHO report linking red meat consumption to higher risks of cancer: Voedingscentrum, ‘Vergroot rood vlees de kans op kanker?’, <https://www.voedingscentrum.nl/nl/service/vraag-en-antwoord/gezonde-voeding-en-voedingsstoffen/vergroot-rood-vlees-de-kans-op-kanker.aspx> (publishing date unknown), consulted on April 23, 2019 ; Voedingscentrum, ‘Wat staat er in de Schijf van Vijf?’, <https://www.voedingscentrum.nl/nl/gezond-eten-met-de-schijf-van-vijf/wat-staat-er-in-de-vakken-van-de-schijf-van-vijf/vis-peulvruchten-vlees-ei-noten-en-zuivel.aspx> (publishing date unknown), consulted on April 23, 2019.

⁵ World Organization for Animal Health, ‘General Disease Information Sheets: African Swine Fever’ <http://www.oie.int/doc/ged/D13953.pdf> (publishing date unknown), consulted on April 23, 2019. Or, as it is put in the report, through ‘pig meat products’ (p. 2).

is still mostly placed on individual actions.⁶ This is an assertion I wish to challenge. The main question I will attempt to formulate an answer to, is as follows:

‘Taking meat consumption as an example: if we wish to decrease our dependency on animal products, then what is the status of product differentiation in trying to achieve such a decrease?’

I will answer this question in two steps. In the first chapter, I shall give an overview of four different kinds of product-differentiating activities (PDAs) conducted by producers and investors on the meat substitution market. Note that I shall mainly focus on the *presentation* of alternatives: I will not make distinctions on the basis of the kinds ingredients used for various meat alternatives (vegan or vegetarian), and I will mostly refer to the term ‘plant-based products’. I then critically assess product differentiation as practice in general and in particular, looking into the four kinds of PDAs. I will conduct this assessment by using two different critical lenses: (I) product differentiation as a form of ‘commodity fetishism’, distancing the product from the production process and potentially overstating what a product can actually do, and (II) product differentiation as a form of greenwashing of unethical business practices, making the business look more ethically and morally ‘sound’ than it in practice is, allowing corporations to ‘freeride’ on the work of others who actually try to achieve changes. Both critical lenses are meant to show what product differentiation can and cannot do. Yet in the end, I will try to designate a particular kind of PDA as ‘passing the test’ of the critical assessment. This could also be regarded as a ‘best practice’ of product differentiation on the meat substitution market in light of our foregoing considerations.

In the second chapter, I will focus on placing the ‘best practice’ of product differentiation in a broader context. After assessing how my approach refers to a specific critical assessment of modernity, I will describe how product differentiation, as the production and consumption of specific products, signifies individual responsibilities, unable to deal with larger-scale, collective responsibilities necessary to tackle the problems which producers of plant-based products claim to solve through products. I will briefly assess different ways of dealing with various kinds of individual and collective responsibilities. I conclude the chapter by rephrasing the latter as advantageous in terms of (moral) psychology. I will then conclude the research, offering summaries, final reflections, and suggestions for further research.

⁶ Babette Porcelijn, *De verborgen impact. Alles voor een eco-positief leven* (Uitgeverij Q, Amsterdam 2018, fifth press) 186-215.

Over-arching theoretical perspective: virtue ethics

This research was conducted within a virtue-ethical framework, which might help to explain how the previously encountered assessments are related. Yet first, an elaboration on the specific interpretation of virtue ethics within this research is necessary, before I will turn to how this specific interpretation has been used to argue for a certain view on the good life, in relation to the matters at hand.

Following Aristotle, pursuing the good life is done in a community with other humans, who pursue happiness out of reasonableness, as it is the only good pursued for its own sake. As the pursuit of happiness always implies activities, Aristotle defines the good life as linking our activities with our ‘reasonable’ conception of happiness or the good life.⁷ Moreover, shaping our activities according to our reasonable conception of the good life requires our activities to become habits.⁸ In other words, the good life is not built in a day, and requires sustainable activities.

Aristotle’s conception of the good life is different from the usual liberal stance on the good life. From a liberal perspective, one might state that a strict separation of public affairs and private lives should be maintained: only public issues should be debated on a more collective-political level, as private lives should be left to personal choices. This would also avoid paternalism. However, these assertions themselves imply a view on the good life, in the sense that it is asserted that persons will be happier when they can personally choose their desired way of life from a variety of options. This implies that (I) there can in principle be such a thing as a fully ‘personal’ choice without influences outside of the individual and (II) that having options implies a certain neutrality, as no choice for a certain option is made for individuals beforehand.

I would object to the first claim that it is implausible to think that individuals make choices fully on their own, without being informed by more collective or shared practices of identity-formation.⁹ Moreover, one then also has to argue for the implausible assumption that everybody has the same capacities to make informed choices. Some people might lack access

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*, transl. C. Pannier and J. Verhaeghe (Historische Uitgeverij, Groningen 1999) 33-36.

⁸ Aristotle, *Ethica*, 55.

⁹ For a stronger focus on the collective and shared aspects of identity formation, see: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, Harvard 1992) passim.

to ‘basic rights’, such as subsistence and security, which are necessary to exercise other rights.¹⁰ Others might simply have less ‘cultural capital’ necessary for making sense of more complex issues and turning it into a political language of demands.¹¹

In reply to the second claim, I would be sceptical about the idea that there is no bias in both the life options we get presented and the weight given to various options. They are both informed by the habits and ways of life we collectively maintain, and such views are always present on the individual and collective level, shaping our lives and our political decisions. The latter signifies that views on the good life are politically relevant. Hence, I think that it is precisely necessary to bring the issue of views on the good life into the political realm, in terms of being open to scrutiny and change.

The arguments above imply an openness in our views on the good life and a denial of moral perfectionism, which might be present in more paternalist readings of virtue ethics. Such readings would deem it possible to arrive at a way of life in which our activities are perfectly related to good moral character. This implies the belief in ‘the’ good moral character and ‘the’ good way of life instead of a belief in multiple possible good ways of life.

To the above, we can reply that keeping reflective processes on the good life ‘alive’ requires its tenets to be open to new interpretations.¹² Also, views on the good life are necessarily subject to change as they are constructed through their interplay with dynamic practical contexts. From this perspective, we can evade moral perfectionism and rather aim at a ‘sharpening’ of our creative and reflective capacities, implying an assertion of the existence and legitimacy of multiple conceptions on the good life. Moral pluralism is then not simply a given, but part of the meaning of reflection on social life.¹³

Virtue ethics and the issues at hand

In order to for a virtue-ethical perspective to be illuminative, some minimal, but reasonably defensible assumptions must be made regarding the good human life in reference to the matters

¹⁰ Henry Shue, *Basic Rights: Subsistence, Affluence, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1996) passim.

¹¹ Alexander Korolev, ‘Needs/Wants Dichotomy and Regime Responsiveness’, *Critical Review* 27-1 (2015) 23-48, 34.

¹² For such a conception of a (moral) ‘tradition’, see: Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985, second press) 221-222.

¹³ A more radical acceptance of moral pluralism as given (and thus insurmountable) is presented in: Tristram Engelhardt, ‘Bioethics in the Third Millennium: some critical anticipations’, *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 9-3 (1999) 225–243, passim.

at hand. For the sake of brevity, I shall not aim to come up with an elaborate account of ‘the good life’. That would be both outside the scope of this research and potentially providing too rigid schemes. In accordance with our previous theoretical considerations, more precise elaborations on the good life should arrive out of the interactions between conceptions and their relation to practical contexts, which shall be part of the research process.

One characteristic of a good human life assumed in this research is living together with other animals in harmony. Aristotle takes human-specific interests as the main point of focus, and the underappreciation of animal concerns has become a commonplace criticism under the name of ‘anthropocentrism’. However, the idea of an animal’s capabilities approach, the animal form of a human capabilities approach focussed on supporting the functionings belonging to a decent animal life, is gaining ground with a strong basis in virtue ethics.¹⁴ For Martha Nussbaum, it entails respecting animals as different agents with different ends (in relation to humans), in need of opportunities to perform the functions of a good life.¹⁵ Next to more negative duties such as respecting animal life, capabilities such as health, exercising senses, emotions, engaging in social relations (with humans or with other animals) and playing signify positive duties such as caring for animals, engaging in social relations with them, and making sure that animals have the ability to exercise their senses through for example climbing or using toys.¹⁶ In recent psychological research, compassion, feeling concern for others, is not just identified as mutually beneficial, but also as mediating empathic responses (‘sharing affective states’).¹⁷ Care-taking is thus positive for both human sociability and animals themselves.

A second characteristic of a good human life which will be assumed in this research is the conception of humans as living ‘in nature’ as well as in societies, asserting that any strict division between society and nature is untenable. More concrete examples of this assertion are mixed farming and mixed-crop farming, where human impact on nature is decreased through coexisting with natural processes (I will specify this further in chapter two). It again signifies a relation of care which, besides being beneficial for natural environments and its non-human inhabitants, is also beneficial for humans themselves in terms of self-sufficiency: if the

¹⁴ Marcel Wissenburg and David Schlosberg, ‘Introducing animal politics and political animals’, in: Marcel Wissenburg and David Schlosberg (eds.), *Political animals and animal politics* (Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke 2014) 1-14, 4.

¹⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Harvard University Press, Harvard 2007) 346-352.

¹⁶ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, 392-401.

¹⁷ Katrin Preckel, Philipp Kanske and Tania Singer, ‘On the interaction of social affect and cognition: empathy, compassion and theory of mind’, *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences* 19 (2018) 1–6, 6.

environment fares well, we will at least fare better, as we still are to a significant extent dependent on natural environments.

The third assumption on the good human life is that discussions concerning our way of life should be as democratic as possible. We have already asserted that discussions on our way of life should necessarily be as open as possible, implying a form of deliberative democracy. Yet the main point I will try to defend in this research is not a specific form of democracy, but rather that, in relation to the topic at hand, we do not have a clear image of the necessities of democratic debate in the first place. Here, I designate three necessities which are considered in this research. First, one needs good information and a clear language on product differentiation (or any topic for that matter) to be able to exercise democratic debate properly. Hence I will attempt to pull different kinds of discussions apart to gain a sharper understanding of the role and status of product differentiation in relation to its practical context, to criticise its over-extended use. Second, a certain amount of ‘cultural capital’ is needed to address issues. Of course, I do not claim to find a solution to inequalities in cultural capital within this research, but I more moderately claim that a more specific understanding of the role of product differentiation might be one step in mitigating the effects of cultural capital asymmetries. Last, one needs material means and the satisfaction of basic rights in order to engage in democratic debate. This is a point which we shall especially encounter with regards to economic issues related to product differentiation.

In short, the three aspects of the good life might be summarized as expressing mutually beneficial relations of care. Taking care of an animal’s capabilities is not just psychologically beneficial for humans and beneficial for animals. Such relations of care might also signify a broader care-taking attitude towards the environment and human capabilities. Caring for the environment and its non-human inhabitants also means caring for one’s standard of life, while caring for human capabilities is mutually beneficial in terms of social security and stability. These relations, understood as shared social relations, which will be explored in the following chapters. But first, let us focus on the more dominantly present categories in our frames of reference: individual commitments and responsibilities in the form of product differentiation.

Chapter one: product differentiation on the meat substitution market

In this chapter, I critically evaluate product differentiation in two steps. First, I will assess different kinds of PDAs on the meat substitution market. I chose to analyse various product differentiations as ‘activities’ and not as ‘kinds’ of product differentiations, as various product differentiations do not have to be mutually exclusive in principle. Rather, different PDAs conjure up different images of the presented products and places them in specific contexts (for example, a meat substitution as just a nice product or presented as contributing to problems of climate change: both presentations may be offered by the same producer, but imply different images and contexts of the product). I have designated four kinds of PDAs. I will describe the claims and backgrounds of each activity.

Interestingly, as we shall see, different producers seem to prefer specific kinds of presentations using specific PDAs. This has, however, been a comparative assessment between company presentations in a way that might not be recognizable for the companies themselves. The assessment fully rests on interpretation.

In the second part, I will critically assess product differentiation in general, and the various forms of PDAs found in the previous section in particular. I shall especially be concerned with the issue that too much social, economic and environmental problems are attempted to be solved through the consumption and production of plant-based food. The actual impact of these products is over-estimated, and my aim in this part of the chapter is to point out the different areas where this is the case, using the critical lenses of commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing. To conclude this section, I will return to the opportunities of product differentiation, arguing for a ‘best practice’ in product differentiation, able to withstand criticism from the mentioned critical lenses.

1.1 Four activities in the meat substitution market

I have roughly distinguished four PDAs on the meat substitution market, respectively (I) presenting meat *alternatives* in plant-based and ‘lab-grown meat’ rather than meat ‘substitution’, (II) meat substitution with vegetarian or vegan alternatives, (III) a ‘whole foods, plant-based’ lifestyle, viewing animal consumption as well as meat substitution negatively, and finally (IV) presenting vegetarian or vegan products as experiences of good food.

The presented order of activities is not random. The first three activities imply various conceptions of the meat industry, which might be conceptualized as different positions on a

perceived ‘societal-natural’ scale. The first PDA implies full acceptance of industrial production processes in a capitalist economy (cheap and mass production, interwoven scientific research and international markets), engaging in these processes to produce meat alternatives cheaply on a large scale for a world market. The second PDA, at least in the example I will investigate, is specifically dedicated to marketing new meat substitutions with an emphasis on ‘substitution’. This is a very subtle difference in presentation, but signifies a commitment to presenting an alternative to the large-scale animal agriculture not only in terms of evading the use of meat, but also in localizing production and more directly monitoring the production chain. Although it is still significantly embedded in modern capitalist production methods, it implicitly presents a picture of being more closely connected to the (‘locally grown’) produce of which the end products are made, and might thus be said to inhabit a form of ‘middle position’ on the ‘societal-natural’ scale. The third PDA is often associated with a very negative assessment of modern society and its technologies as a hindrance to leading a more ‘natural’ lifestyle, and is thus strongly on the ‘natural’ side of the ‘societal-natural’ scale.

The fourth PDA is less specifically related to a ‘societal-natural’ spectrum, and presents an option which is quite different from the three previous kinds of activities we have discussed. This form of product presentation is less concerned with explicating its difference from animal agriculture dependency and other forms of meat substitution, but more with what the product itself offers us when we consume it, e.g. a pleasant taste. The ‘more’ in the previous sentence already implies that the critical attitude towards animal agriculture is never fully out of the picture. Rather, it is a form of presentation which undeniably asserts the latter, but without explicating it. The product itself seems to have what I would call a certain ‘experiential overridingness’, in the sense that we know this critical attitude to be there without having to mention it. I will elaborate this idea in the respective section.

Moreover, as I will argue, the fact that experiential overridingness focusses strongly on the experience of the product, and not the context of the product, leaves its specific place in a context strongly open-ended. This contrasts the other three kinds of actions, as meat alternatives, meat substitution, and whole foods, plant-based lifestyles already imply a certain tactic and related actions: namely, changing society through the consumption and production of specific products. I will develop this idea throughout this chapter. Let us first focus on meat alternatives.

Meat alternatives in plant-based products and lab-grown meat

The first example of this trend we shall consider is the Good Food Institute (GFI), a private investor in market-based solutions for alternatives to animal products. Their focus is on supporting start-ups, existing companies and scientific research through marketing, creating a consumer demand, and investing in research. On their website, they describe plant-based meat and clean meat as an alternative to their ‘outdated counterparts’.¹⁸

In 2016, co-founder Bruce Friedrich gave a speech at the Change Food Fest which clearly highlights the commitments of the GFI. Friedrich starts by mentioning the problematic aspects of animal agriculture. He starts his argument by stating that 40% of our grown food constitutes food waste, which becomes a worse picture when we consider that 9 calories in crops is needed for 1 animal calorie (and when we consider we need to feed an ever-growing world population). Animal agriculture ‘entrenches global poverty’ as animals consume an enormous amount of crops, driving up the prices for crops, which hits poor countries the hardest. Animal agriculture harms the environment through its high consumption of crops and resources like fuel (for the many steps of shipping and re-shipping products), causing more pollution than all forms of transport combined. From the perspective of efficiency, it is a waste of resources. Animal agriculture also significantly contributes to climate change, driving up the earth’s temperature which will hit poor countries harder than rich countries. It also contributes to the loss of biodiversity and rainforests. It is a problem for animal welfare, as millions of animals suffer in animal agriculture, to which Friedrich adds: they are ‘all individuals’. Last, animal agriculture has the risk of importing and exporting many diseases, and it causes an increasing resistance to antibiotics due to the high consumption of antibiotics by industry animals.¹⁹

Luckily, there are solutions. The GFI aims to ameliorate the above mentioned problems through investing in both plant-based meat and lab-grown or ‘clean’ meat (the latter name was chosen as lab meat is free from harmful bacteria and decreases overall pollution by food production). The focus on ‘clean’ meat is justified from the consideration of ‘our 2.5 billion year obsession with meat’: many people will simply not be able to let go of meat. With both

¹⁸ Good Food Institute, ‘What we do’, <https://www.gfi.org/what> (publishing date unknown) consulted on April 2, 2019.

¹⁹ Change Food, ‘Markets & Food Tech Will Save the World | Bruce Friedrich | Change Food Fest’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dKRL2YyvJk> (December 21, 2016) watched on April 2, 2019.

products, it is aimed to arrive at an optimal (low) price, taste and convenience, understood as the main reasons for deciding what we will eat. Moreover, producing as cheaply as possible will also allow producers to produce meat alternatives for the developing world. The meat alternative industry already yields a 500 million dollar revenue, yet versus a 200 billion dollar meat industry. The meat industry is already responding with both ‘rebranding’ and investments in plant-based and ‘clean’ meat. In short, Friedrich supposes that ‘markets and food technology are going to save the world’. Just like the enormous problems early twentieth-century cities had with manure from horse carriage transport were solved less than twenty years after the invention of the T-Ford, technological progress on the free market will solve the problems of animal agriculture.²⁰

We get a comparable picture when we look at one of the large meat substitution producers in The Netherlands, *De Vegetarische Slager* (DVS, ‘the vegetarian butcher’). The front page of their website mostly lists sales numbers and tasty looking products.²¹ The story of DVS mostly focusses on how the founder, Jaap Korteweg, became vegetarian after he saw the animal suffering during the swine flu epidemic in The Netherlands (1998). Yet he desired to replicate animal products in a vegetarian way, as he missed the taste and structure of meat products. Throughout DVS’s story, animal agriculture is only indirectly criticised. Moreover, one of the highlighted moments in the history of DVS is the cooperation with Dutch meat producer Unox to create vegetarian meat balls in satay sauce.²² Nevertheless, DVS does highlight that their ‘plant-based revolution’ is based on three values: creating culinary high-end meat alternatives, liberating animals from the conditions of animal agriculture, and lowering the ecological footprint (with a minor reference to the use of, amongst other products, ‘locally grown’ vegetables).²³ Yet the more critical voice might still point to the tension between collaborating with Unox and the indirect criticism of animal agriculture.

In short, animal agriculture produces environmental, economic and ethical problems. The solution seems to encompass using the modern technologies of an industrial economy, to make our modern industrial economy more resource-efficient, animal-friendly and environmentally sustainable. This should be achieved through offering alternative and

²⁰ Change Food, ‘Markets & Food Tech Will Save the World | Bruce Friedrich | Change Food Fest’, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7dKRL2YyvJk> (December 21, 2016) watched on April 2, 2019.

²¹ De Vegetarische Slager, ‘Homepage’, <https://www.devegetarischelager.nl/> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 23, 2019.

²² De Vegetarische Slager, ‘Since 1962’, <https://www.devegetarischelager.nl/ons/since-1962> (publication date unknown), consulted on April 23, 2019.

²³ De Vegetarische Slager, ‘Waarden’, <https://www.devegetarischelager.nl/ons/waarden> (publication date unknown), consulted on April 23, 2019.

affordable meat alternatives to the market place. As we shall see, not everyone is unanimously positive about a large-scale industrial economy. Later, I shall also critically assess the idea that offering alternative products to the market place can change as much as implied here. Yet let us first focus on the second kind of PDA in the meat substitution market: emphasising meat *substitution*.

Meat substitution

Through marketing plant-based meat explicitly as ‘meat substitution’, more emphasis is placed on the replacement of meat and its accompanying industry, rather than simply providing alternative products to meat. A major Dutch producer of meat substitutes is Vivera, clearly expressing the aim of substituting meat through vegetarian and vegan alternatives.²⁴ This shift in marketing compared to ‘meat alternatives’ seems a rather unimportant detail at first sight. But as we shall see, the notion of ‘substitution’ over ‘alternatives’ also signals a more explicitly critical attitude to a large-scale industrial economy and animal agriculture.

Vivera claims it uses ‘GMO-free soy’ from North America. They are part of the Round Table on Responsible Soy Association (RTRS), an organization aiming to produce soy responsibly and sustainably. They also use lupine, an ‘old crop’ which Vivera claims to have ‘rediscovered’. They produce it on their own plantations at Holten, The Netherlands, and on farming grounds in the east of The Netherlands ‘close’ to their factory. Since lupine produces nitrogen on its own, it requires less fertilizer and thus less production of CO₂. Moreover, lupine increases biodiversity on the fields and in the soil.²⁵ Also, the energy coming from their waste is used for the heating of 3.900 houses, and their water drainage is as energy-neutral as possible. Not only does Vivera monitor its own production cycle’s environmental sustainability, they also try to maintain comparable standards towards their suppliers, i.e. the larger but *surveyable* production chain.²⁶ Vivera thus presents itself not just as engaged in the ‘local’ production of goods, but also implicitly as economically ‘circular’ in the sense of climate ‘neutral’ production processes.²⁷

²⁴ Vivera, ‘Home’, <https://www.vivera.com/nl/home> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

²⁵ Vivera, ‘Grondstoffen’, <https://www.vivera.com/nl/grondstoffen> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

²⁶ Vivera, ‘Duurzaamheid’, <https://www.vivera.com/nl/duurzaamheid> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

²⁷ This refers to the ‘circular economy’ idea which is becoming increasingly popular, see: Smart Circle, ‘Circulaire Economie Festival’, <https://www.smart->

Interestingly, Vivera explicitly prizes itself for its local product use and the sole production of vegetarian and vegan products, *unlike other producers* such as Unox, which we already encountered offering a vegetarian variant of their meat balls, whilst being a large-scale meat producer.²⁸ Another example is McDonalds' 'green' rebranding and their introduction of vegetarian burgers.²⁹ As Friedrich already commented, the meat industry is indeed taking notice of new, plant-based and vegetarian food trends and responds by producing plant-based meat substitutes. There seems to be an implicit idea that these producers, unlike Vivera, are somewhat insincere in their intentions. We will return to this issue later in the chapter.

In sum, we can state that Vivera indeed seems to inhabit a 'middle ground' in the societal-natural scale. On the one hand, they seem critical of large-scale industry and attempt to promote more localized, 'cleaner' production, adding to a sense of closer connection with all producers, produce and environments involved. It also criticises companies which are not fully dedicated to plant-based production. On the other hand, Vivera is undeniably a rather large industrialized company and uses soy from North-America. Nevertheless, the critical attitude towards both the large scale of animal agriculture and its use of animals is interestingly more explicit than the companies who use the word 'alternative' instead of 'substitution': it seems that not just animal products need to be substituted, but also the current (large-scale) form of food industry.

There are, however, more radical perspectives possible, where activities are not limited to promoting plant-based food. Such perspectives signify an attempt to break more radically with the contingencies of modern industrial societies. Hence I will now discuss the idea of a plant-based 'lifestyle'.

Plant-based lifestyles

The plant-based lifestyle promotes a mostly strict vegan lifestyle clearly located on the 'natural' side of the societal-natural scale. There are roughly two ways in which this lifestyle is expressed. First, it is expressed in the trend of 'whole foods', meaning attempting to consume mostly unprocessed foods. A 'Whole Foods, Plant-Based' (WFPB) diet avoids processed food,

circle.org/circulareconomy/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwklzIBRDzARIsABgXqV9NtjoKLy68j_kgkAC4QD-IfIkPA_WfKox-4UTxTmwGBpPjAgLIC2MaAk_OEALw_wcB (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

²⁸ Vivera, 'Over Vivera', <https://www.vivera.com/nl/over-vivera> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

²⁹ McDonalds, 'Veggie Homestyle Crispy Chicken', <https://www.mcdonalds.nl/producten/burgers-mcnuggets/veggie-homestyle-crispy-chicken> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 23, 2019. Notice especially the change from the old red-yellow colour scheme to a green-grey-yellow colour scheme.

animal products, focusses on plant-based food, excludes refined food like refined sugar, and tries to focus on local produce and good food quality. The diet is mainly promoted as a healthy diet which is also ‘good for the planet’. There is a strong focus on the ‘healthy diet’ part, and hence most of the products which are associated with this food trend are dietary books, consultancy services for a healthy lifestyle, lifestyle magazines and ‘local’ products, judging from its advertisement on Healthline.³⁰ The second variant is the Raw Vegan diet, where in addition to the rules of WFPB, food is not to be cooked at temperatures above 48 degrees Celsius. This diet is mainly chosen for health reasons, as many followers of the diet believe that raw foods contain more nutrients than cooked food.³¹ Yet besides the scientific story, we can detect an idea of more ‘natural’ food, as untouched by human interventions as possible, implicitly in the background in both WFPB and raw vegan diets.

The vegan diet as ‘lifestyle’ has a longer history. During the early twentieth century, the Dutch vegetarian movement was also a ‘civilizing’ movement, emphasising enhanced compassion (controlling natural inclinations and aggressive passions), civility, a longing to ‘naturalness’ and combatting the alienation from nature through modern society. Moreover, as meat decreased in its status as a symbol of wealth since more people could afford it, vegetarianism now became a status symbol of civility. Until after the Second World War, the vegetarian movement was a (high) middle-class movement on a mission to civilize the workers, even seeking active alliances with socialist movements. The contradictory view of nature in this endeavour, as source of malicious passions and as antithesis of the ‘over-civilized’ industrial modern world, was supposedly alleviated through a positive and progressive view on nature as standard for social relations, inhabited by already civilized people (hence the malicious passions would be avoided). This ironically underlined a relative independence from the hardships of nature, in opposition to those who had to rely on that same unpredictable nature.³²

As we saw, many ‘lifestyle vegans’ continue to distance themselves from both animal agriculture and meat substitution or any form of processed-foods alternative. There seems to be a strongly negative view on the ‘unnaturalness’ of modern (post-)industrial society. They tend to offer their own products to their audience in the form of dietary books, dietary consultancy

³⁰ Healthline, ‘What Is a Whole Foods, Plant-Based Diet?’, <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/plant-based-diet-guide#overview> (June 12, 2018) consulted on April 3, 2019.

³¹ Healthline, ‘How to Follow a Raw Vegan Diet: Benefits and Risks’, <https://www.healthline.com/nutrition/raw-vegan-diet> (December 3, 2018) consulted on April 3, 2019.

³² André de Roo, *Natuurlijk, ethisch en gezond. Vegetarisme en vegetariërs in Nederland, 1894-1990* (Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam 1992) 70-75.

services, lifestyle magazines, ‘local’ produce and their own ‘organic’ restaurants.³³ More ironically, the positive assertion of a ‘natural lifestyle’ is again significantly enabled through the independence of its hardships in a (post-)industrial society.

We will now turn to a very different kind of PDA in the meat substitution market: presenting plant-based food as ‘experiential overridingness’. It is less concerned with a societal-natural perspective, or presenting a critical account of the animal-agricultural industry in marketing and presentation, instead strongly focussing on the experience of the product.

Plant-based food as ‘experiential overridingness’

Experiential overridingness paints a picture of enjoying ‘good’ food without engaging into the ethical, environmental and economic intricacies of a choice for plant-based cuisine over meat-based food. This does not mean that these intricacies are seen as any less important, but they are mostly assumed as a background to the experience of good plant-based food. The experience overrides any necessity to explicate ethical, environmental and economic issues.

This form of presenting plant-based food is for example visible in the presentation of two Utrecht-based restaurants. The first restaurant is Rammenas. Their website only shows their playful slogan, ‘greasy vegetarian, not afraid of healthy [food]’ in typewriter font (giving it a sort of ‘do it yourself’ kind of aesthetic), along with the picture of a tasty-looking burger.³⁴ They do not explicate the intricacies of the environmental concerns, the concern for animals or the economy. The same goes for the second restaurant, Waku Waku. Besides mentioning that ‘the future is plant based’, the sole focus is on providing healthy and tasty food in a chic environment.³⁵ We see that the environmental, ethical and economic concerns are not explicated, yet far from forgotten.

Experiential overridingness might relate to the different socio-economic and cultural role that restaurants have in comparison to large-scale food producers. It might simply be a form of presentation more appropriate to restaurants. Yet I think, as I shall further explicate, that experiential overridingness might be useful in more than just the restaurant context.

We already asserted that experiential overridingness is more open for interpretation than the previous PDAs, which might be further explicated through linking experiential

³³ See for example the following raw vegan restaurant: Rawsome, ‘We are Rawsome’, <https://rawsome.nl/> (publishing date unknown) consulted on April 3, 2019.

³⁴ Rammenas, ‘Rammenas’, <http://www.rammenas.nl/> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019. Their current website has changed a lot, but roughly expresses the same idea.

³⁵ Waku Waku, ‘About’, <https://wakuwaku.nl/> (publication date unknown) consulted on April 4, 2019.

overridingness more explicitly with John Kekes' defence of moral pluralism. His main claim is that people maintain values as they aim to live a good life. Yet there are many different conceptions of a good life. In response, it is often claimed that there are certain constraints or values which override others. For our argument, 'taste' could be seen as a lesser (and more or less conditional) concern in meat consumption, as 'respect' for animal life (a supposedly unconditional concern) overrides this concern. Kekes denies the validity of these kind of overriding claims. We are dealing with both incompatible and incommensurable claims, irreducible to each other and to a supposed 'metric' or 'over-arching' value. We thus ought to focus rather on a balance between different values.³⁶

The argument becomes more interesting when we zoom in on the content of this 'balance'. We should not just aim for 'a' balance between values, but for the balance '*we wish to continue to pursue*'.³⁷ This carries two implications. First, there is a plurality of collections or balances of values. Second, it seems that the more relevant moral choice is for a specific balance of values in which the pursuit of those values make sense, not in merely a choice for specific values themselves, which is also summarized in other words as a choice for a 'system of values', a 'larger perspective', or a 'way of life'.³⁸ Moreover, aiming for a definite understanding of the weight of moral values is simply a philosophically untenable practice.

Kekes' argument implies that the 'balance' between values is the most important aspect of a system of values. From the point of view of consistency and reasonability, this makes sense. From such a desired consistency, we can assess the weight of the different parts which make the balance, and potentially change either our desired consistency or certain parts when we for example risk compromising our beliefs too much in practice. However, one might wonder whether it is a 'balance' which makes a system of values attractive for people to pursue. Is the presentation or the 'experience' of a specific moral balance not equally important? In all PDAs we encountered so far, we witnessed an attempt to not just argue for a certain balance of values, but also to present this balance of values in a pleasant fashion. Experiential overridingness, however, seems to be most strongly focussed on the 'presenting' part of a balance of values, as qua moral context, it is highly open for interpretation, since the chief focus is on the experience of the product itself. This leaves the specific contextualization of a product open for discussion.

³⁶ John Kekes, 'Pluralism, Scientific Knowledge, and the Fallacy of Overriding Values', *Argumentation* 9-4 (1995) 577-594, passim.

³⁷ Kekes, 'Pluralism', 592. Italics are mine.

³⁸ Ibidem, 591-593. Kekes does however state that it is possible to aim for a collection of values which are not balanced, yet this would potentially result in too conflicting constraints.

This openness has its advantages over the other three mentioned PDAs, but also some potential pitfalls, which we shall assess in the following section.

We have so far discussed four trends in the meat substitution market. We will now focus on a critical assessment of product differentiation, in general and in its particular activities. To conclude the assessment, I will try to defend experiential overridingness as ‘best practice’ of product differentiation.

1.2 Product differentiation in general and in particular: a critical assessment

Before I can critically assess product differentiation, I will elaborate on the critical-theoretical lenses of commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing. Second, I will assess why meat alternatives, meat substitution and vegan ‘lifestyle’ PDAs are unfit for the job they aim to do. Last, I will defend experiential overridingness as a ‘best practice’ in product differentiation, able to deal with the mentioned critical lenses.

Commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing

Commodity fetishism is a complex and multifaceted concept. Hence, I will only focus on two of its critical components necessary for this analysis. In short, the idea of commodity fetishism is a critical interpretation of what happens when products enter the free market and become commodities. In *Capital*, Karl Marx maintains a distinction between physical things and ‘the existence of things *qua* commodities’. Unlike products (or the class of physical things we are at the moment concerned with), commodities can be described as alienated products, in the sense of being alienated from the context of their production and their physical properties, as they solely derive their value from their relations to other products.³⁹ This is the first relevant component of commodity fetishism which might prove illuminating for our research, especially when we will discuss freeriding through corporate greenwashing.

Not only are commodities alienated from their physical properties and context of production, but individual producers or groups of producers are also alienated from each other until the act of exchange of commodities, the only moment where production is visible. This has the double effect that all forms of labour only become visible as part of the commodity produced, and that labour becomes a commodity, ‘equalizing’ various forms of labour through

³⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Transl. Samuel Moore (Wordsworth, Hertfordshire 2013, reprint) 47.

grouping them together under a common, objectifying denominator, ‘labour power’ or ‘human labour’ producing *value* instead of various different products.⁴⁰ Yet this organization of economic productivity shows the tendency to spill over in other areas of social life as well: ‘all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.’⁴¹ Although Marx, as a materialist and atheist, might have indeed seen a form of ‘progress’ in an increasingly secular view of the world, he certainly was no fan of the way the modern economy ‘popularized’ such a worldview: ‘the bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.’⁴² Or to put it in other terms: all previous social and economic relations are increasingly objectified as supposed ‘universal’ questions of a supply and demand of commodities, in a world increasingly connected through market relations.

The second main component of commodity fetishism we can distil from the previous explanation, is that *the role of commodities as agents of social change tends to be overstretched*. At the time that Marx was writing, the capitalist economy was still well on its way of revolutionizing forms of production and social relations worldwide. In the contemporary world, however, a capitalist mode of production, and accompanying social roles, have become near-universal social patterns, with few exceptions confirming the rule. Hence in a rather straightforward sense, the new products we have seen in the previous section might not be the world-changers some implicitly or explicitly claim, but a continuation of the exact same social relations. However, this would be a rather simple criticism, leaving out the interesting intricacies of commodity production we have discussed.

More specifically, we might say that, in an advanced capitalist mode of production, people tend to overstate the value of commodities as agents of social change, as it perpetuates both labour objectification and the objectification of social and economic relations as simple questions of supply and demand. Hence outside of the questions on resource efficiency and the kind of commodity production, the introduction of new commodities might inspire little change in shared social relations, expressed in for example global justice or a shared view of animals or nature. Issues in such social relations might require different kinds of mitigating actions. In

⁴⁰ Marx, *Capital*, 48-49.

⁴¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, Transl. Samuel Moore (Penguin Books, London 2015, reprint) 6.

⁴² Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 7.

the following sections, the critical lens of commodity fetishism will be used to assess excessive claims on the social agency of commodities.

Another important critical lens I will be using is the idea of corporate greenwashing. William S. Laufer regards corporate greenwashing as attempts to repair the public image and reputation of a corporation, but without actually changing the practices of the corporation. Laufer continues that the tactics used in greenwashing mirror those of corporate compliance with the law. As soon as something goes wrong within a large company, a tactic which is often used is to ‘decentralize’ responsibilities to the ‘lower’ inhabitants of the corporate hierarchy, and to individual employees (keeping the larger malicious structures free from blame). In a similar fashion, tactics of confusion, fronting and posturing are used in corporate greenwashing. Regarding confusion, Laufer asserts that it ‘flows naturally from the complex nature of the corporate form, reliance on decentralized decision making, and the practices of managerial winking’.⁴³ Fronting means that through for example ethical committees and counselling, corporations seek to present their activities as ethical or at least ethically informed by the ethical spearheads within the company. Posturing is an attempt to frame an entire company as collectively motivated to ethical business practice.⁴⁴

Seen in a different light, corporate greenwashing is a form of freeriding. As stated earlier, one might present a company ‘greener’ or more sustainable than it actually is. Yet this in turn means that such greenwashing companies profit from the good reputation of the sustainability label, freeriding on companies who are attempting more zealously to make their businesses sustainable.

One might say that to ‘decentralize’ responsibilities to decrease our dependency on animal products to individual producers and consumers, rather than emphasising more collective responsibilities, might qualify as a tactic of confusion. In a sense, this research tries to show how a too strong focus on commodities and product differentiation might create confused and inaccurate accounts of responsibilities. Hence I will now assess the PDAs which, if I am correct, cannot endure criticism from the critical lenses of commodity fetishism and greenwashing.

⁴³ William S. Laufer, ‘Social Accountability and Corporate Greenwashing’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 43 (2003) 253-261, 257.

⁴⁴ Laufer, ‘Social Accountability’, 251-258.

Unfit practices: why meat alternatives, meat substitution and lifestyle presentations will not do the job they aim to do

In order to critically assess each PDA through the lenses of commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing, I will revisit each practice and assess where the theoretical lenses can detect overstatements of the agency of commodities. I will first look at meat alternatives, starting with the GFI.

The first problem which Friedrich, CEO of the GFI, considers, is food waste. Remember that the argument starts with the assertion that we throw away 40% of our food, and that on top of that, from the viewpoint of resource efficiency, 9 plant calories must be used for 1 meat calorie. Hence, providing meat alternatives will seemingly solve the issue of resource depletion. However, the only solution that is being offered is the comparative calorie efficiency of crops over animal consumption, not the resource-efficiency of the way we buy and sell food. For example, we also throw away enormous amounts of vegetables, fruit, plastics used for food packaging, et cetera. Of course, opting for plant-based products will decrease our use of resources and allows us to use resources more efficiently, but it will not solve the issue of food waste as such. This can be seen as the materialization of the second effect of commodity fetishism we discussed earlier: overstating the role of commodities as agents of social and economic change.

A similar argument might be made for environmental harm, climate change, and the loss of biodiversity. Although again, A plant-based diet and food economy might have positive effects on the mitigation these processes, it is by far not the only contributor to all these processes. Environmental harm still endures through the use and production of for example plastics. The use of fuels like oil also contribute significantly to climate change. Regarding biodiversity, many forests are for example being cut down for palm oil or wood used for furniture in the West. The latter also refers to relations of political power which remain largely unaddressed in a plant-based food economy, yet such relations are very important to finding a solution to environmental sustainability issues: see for example the myriad conceptualizations of who is politically responsible for what on a global scale, regarding climate and environmental policy.⁴⁵ The main point, again, is that a plant-based food economy, and especially only one institution within such an economy, is only a small part of the many necessary solutions for large problems such as climate change. Again, the GFI seems to overstate its actual capacities.

⁴⁵ For an elaborate account, see: S. Caney, 'Human Rights, Responsibilities, and Climate Change', in: C. Beitz and Robert Goodin (eds.), *Global Basic Rights* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009), 227-247, passim.

The last issue is also closely related to the assertion that as animal agriculture entrenches poverty due to increased prices for crops, a plant-based food economy will rid the Earth of entrenched poverty. However, many issues remain unaddressed in such a perspective. One might say that global poverty is also related to the economic power relations between different countries, for example, between West-European and North-American countries on the one hand and South-American, African and Asian countries on the other. Western companies producing plant-based food cheaply for poor countries would not seem to change that much about the mentioned power relations and economic asymmetries. Moreover, we might see the insistence on Western companies producing cheap goods for poorer countries as a form of posturing, if we would concede that these kind of economic relations perpetuate more systemic causes for global poverty. Looking through the lenses of commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing shows how the GFI overstates what commodities can actually do and change.

There are of course aspirations where the GFI can have a more substantial role. Friedrich is indeed right to point out that the suffering of animals in agriculture will disappear when we stop consuming its products. This will leave aside the issue of whether small-scale farming might still be justified in areas where humans are reliant on this type of agriculture (consider places like Indonesian highlands, Alaska, Siberia, Mongolian plains, et cetera), so this argument should strictly be concerned with industrial animal agriculture. Moreover, it will indeed mitigate the risk of antibiotic resistance and diseases spread through the shipment of large amounts of animals. In this area, the GFI has a much stronger claim to make.

The approach of DVS is comparable to the GFI in some respects. Creating high-end meat alternatives and lowering the ecological footprint through bringing vegetarian meat alternatives to the market, are indeed reasonable goals to be set for a single company (although the phrase ‘lowering *the* ecological footprint’ might overstate what a single producer can achieve with his or her own production alone). Yet ‘liberating animals from the conditions of animal agriculture’ as a goal for DVS is somewhat inconsistent with their collaboration with Unox.⁴⁶ We see a combination of commodity fetishism and corporate greenwashing here. First, the company’s goal of animal liberation is rather alienated from the practice of cooperating with a large meat producer. One might adopt a utilitarian calculus and conclude that cooperating with a large name in meat production might ‘win’ more consumers for meat alternatives amongst meat eaters. Yet this is where the perspective of corporate greenwashing might offer a critical assessment. We might see this cooperation as a form of fronting in the sense that a

⁴⁶ See page 15.

group of people from both companies form an alliance, which allows Unox to present itself more animal-friendly and mindful of the harms of the meat industry than it actually is, and DVS as ‘open’ to meat-eating customers while it might counter the values they aim to uphold.

Even worse: it might stagnate the current situation in terms of meat consumption, since the cooperation between Unox and DVS might result in a form of disavowal. Unox might say: ‘yes we produce meat, but actually, if you look at our cooperation with DVS, we do care about animals and the environment.’ And if Unox will not say this, we can certainly find a link between such practices of disavowal amongst consumers and actions like ‘meat-free Mondays’ and various ‘vegan challenges’ (where participants maintain a vegan diet for a week or month). Here, we might say that a similar pattern could be repeated: ‘no, I do still eat meat, but I think that we must indeed critically assess our relation to food’. What is problematic about disavowal is that it implies a belief in an incorruptible core, for example the care for animals and the environment, in opposition to its other, corruptible material body, or the imperfect materialization of such cores.⁴⁷ We might rather be inclined to believe that the two are related, in the sense that disavowal allows (or even legitimizes) one to deem a practice unethical and participate in it at the same time (criticising meat consumption during a vegan challenge while eating meat during the rest of the year). Alternatively, we might again say that such actions lower the bar for people to be more open to alternative ideas about our food production, but the mentioned risks of disavowal and greenwashing remain.

The cooperation with Unox might explain why DVS has little to say directly about the animal-agricultural industry other than the value of liberating animals from it (but this value is never used to directly criticize the animal-agricultural industry itself). There is a minor reference to ‘locally grown’ vegetables being used in the products (implicitly, vis-à-vis large-scale agriculture), but no further explication of the position of DVS towards animal agriculture is offered. We shall now turn to Vivera’s more explicitly critical assessment of the animal-agricultural industry.

As discussed earlier, Vivera aims to localize production and to monitor production chains (including their suppliers and associates) closely for their environmental circularity. This is a major aspect of their emphasis on substitution: not only does Vivera aim to substitute meat products with vegetarian and vegan alternatives, the scale of the food industry itself should also be replaced by more localized, monitored and circular alternatives. However, this again signifies the effects of commodity fetishism, overstating the possibility of a few commodities

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (Verso, London/New York 2008, 2nd press) 13.

produced by (a) single producer(s). As was already stated, Vivera, despite its localizing aspirations, still imports soy from North America, and is thus reliant on larger economic chains. Vivera is also still a comparably small market participant in the economic arena. As we shall also elaborate in the following chapter, changing such economic structures might require different approaches than simply offering products to the free market.

Vivera is, however, more mindful of the effects of greenwashing. They insist that unlike other producers, they solely produce vegetarian and vegan products. It seems they criticize producers like Unox, who only have a few vegetarian options (where a profit motive, pleasing as many customers as possible, seems to override concerns for animal-ethical and environmental concerns).

As said earlier, Vivera assumes a middle position in the natural-societal scale. Although they are critical of large-scale industry and aim to foster a more ‘localized’ form of production, they are nevertheless an industrial company of significant size. We have already addressed how they overstate their capacities for social change in their aspirations. We shall now focus on how this effect plays its role in presenting plant-based lifestyles.

We have already addressed the argument that product production and consumption alone will not suffice to make more systemic changes in our food production. This argument returns in the example of veganism as lifestyle: there is, amongst both WFPB and Raw Vegan lifestyles, an idea of a more ‘natural’ lifestyle through consuming unprocessed and locally grown food. Moreover, the insistence on lifestyle coaching and consultancies also implies a rather individualized form of self-education as a means to arrive at more ‘natural’ ways of life. One might say that such presentations of veganism as lifestyle place an even more fundamental emphasis on the individual as main agent of change, much more than the 20th-century vegans we mentioned who were also concerned with social relations.

There is however one important commonality between the 20th-century ‘lifestyle vegans’ and their contemporary counterparts. Both relied on a highly positive view of ‘the natural’, which we already asserted to be somewhat ironic, given that many people who are more directly reliant on nature and its vicissitudes will possibly not maintain a positive and harmonious view on nature. A positive view on nature is precisely possible through being less directly dependent on nature for survival. One might then see such advocacies for lifestyles as an interesting form of posturing, as it presents the more ‘natural’ vegan lifestyle as an attempt to break more radically with the contingencies of modern society, while such lifestyles and valuations of nature are actually possible because of modern society’s decreased dependence on nature. One might say that such a presentation of a lifestyle paints its pictures more ‘natural’,

in the sense of ‘not-societal’, than they actually are, again over-extending what (individualized) lifestyles can actually do.

We have so far discussed the PDAs of presenting meat alternatives, meat substitution, and insisting on ‘natural’ plant-based lifestyles. We have seen how these three PDAs find themselves in potentially too problematic relations when we regard them from the perspective of commodity fetishism and greenwashing. Especially regarding ‘meat alternatives’, the encountered examples of greenwashing entail their own forms of freeriding. The GFI’s insistence on fighting global poverty might freeride on the work of more sophisticated attempts to combat poverty, while Unox freerides on the more systemic attempts by DVS and other meat alternative and substitution producers like Vivera to transition to plant-based food production. One might see these forms of freeriding as a result of the alienation of the practices of companies like Unox (being a large-scale meat producer) from its presentation (as a company supporting a plant-based turn in food production). We have also seen multiple examples of how the agency of commodities, in terms of social change, is often strongly overstated.

Yet, as I try to defend in the following section, there is a PDA which might deal better with the critical lenses of commodity fetishism and greenwashing. I shall now turn to product presentation as experiential overridingness, to show how it presents a ‘best practice’, in the sense that it presents an option in product differentiation which is less problematic than the previous three examples we assessed. I will also point out the limitations and potential pitfalls of experiential overridingness.

The possibilities and limitations of experiential overridingness

The idea of presenting plant-based products as overriding experience means that the associated critical perspectives on meat consumption, environmental and economic issues become the relevant background of the experience of eating good food. In this sense, ‘overridingness’ does not mean that the experience of good food is more important than the mentioned concerns, but that the experience of good food is simply put to the foreground when presenting plant-based food.

Experiential overridingness, as we witnessed, can also be linked to the moral pluralist critique of overriding values. Most moral values are incompatible and incommensurable, hence the relevant discussion should focus on presented balances of values. We asserted that although it seems credible that the soundness of the value balance is of importance, to convince people of a certain balance of values might also require a certain presentation of those values. Unlike

other PDAs who are directly concerned with placing a product in a moral context, experiential overridingness is mostly related to the ‘presentation’ part of a balance of values, and is thus open to various interpretations. Of course, the presentation is not disconnected from the consistency of the presented balance of value. Hence the relevant question to answer now is what kind of balance of values might be presented through experiential overridingness (‘might’, due to its openness to various interpretations).

Experiential overridingness asserts that what one is doing is simply consuming good food, but food which is less ethically problematic, leaving the latter assertion in the background. From the point of view of consciousness, this might be advantageous. It potentially fosters an understanding of food choice as contributing to economic, environmental and animal-ethical issues, yet as playing only a small, individual part in thinking about collective *and* individual solutions for the mentioned problems. Looking at products, then, means looking only slightly at the associated ethical context, while looking at the ethical context means looking only slightly at products.

When experiential overridingness is used as such, it avoids both commodity fetishism and greenwashing at least in their strongest sense, as it presents a nuanced picture of what products can and cannot do. Moreover, products can now no longer be seen as the agents of change in the way we encountered in the previous sections. Moreover, it also connects to the virtue-ethical idea of bringing practices closer to a reasonable conception of the good life. Product presentation as experiential overridingness presents a more nuanced picture of the role products can have. In this way, we can more precisely focus on the different kind of solutions (or actions) necessary for the mentioned economic, environmental and animal-ethical issues. This also potentially fosters the necessarily democratic nature of discussing the good life: in order to be able to reflect on the good life, one needs at least a somewhat nuanced understanding of the intricacies of contemporary life, where commodities have a substantial role.

There might be some pitfalls in using experiential overridingness, however. Note that until now, a very specific reading of the role of experiential overridingness has been given. One potential problem might be that despite the previous assertion that the overridingness of the experience of good food does not mean it overrides ethical issues, it might just do that. This means that presenting plant-based products through experiential overridingness must necessarily go hand in hand with other kind of activities and political actions, if the mentioned advantages vis-à-vis other PDAs are to be maintained.

A second problem is that experiential overridingness might still be a tactic used in combination with the practices we found under meat alternatives, meat substitution, and the

lifestyle approach. As we already asserted, due to the strong focus on the experience of the product, experiential overridingness can be embedded in various contexts. This contrasts what we witnessed in other PDAs. We witnessed that the presentation of meat alternatives already implies a certain view on industry and mode of production; that the presentation of plant-based products as meat substitution implies accompanying tactics of attempting to replace the large-scale form of industry as well as the use of animals (through plant-based product differentiation); and that the plant-based lifestyles also imply a certain focus on patterns of consumption and even personal, individual development. This of course does not mean that all three kinds of PDAs are fully set in stone in their precise context and function, but they do tend to refer to a context of other practices which we have seen to be problematic at their outset. Experiential overridingness is in that regard more ‘radically’ open to different contextualizations.

To frame the second problem differently: the radical openness of experiential overridingness is both blessed and cursed. The advantage is that when adequately contextualized, experiential overridingness might cope with accusations of commodity fetishism and greenwashing. The downside of this openness is that we might never be sure of the context in which experiential overridingness is used, and that it might not share the mentioned advantages it has when placed in the context I attempted to sketch. This makes it even more important to be clear about the context in which we use the practice of experiential overridingness.

1.3 Conclusion

Using the critical lenses of commodity fetishism and greenwashing, we have assessed how practices of presenting plant-based products as alternatives or substitutes for meat, or as expressing a ‘lifestyle’, are untenable in light of their overstatement of what products can do. We have argued that experiential overridingness, in contrast, might cope with the critical lenses of commodity fetishism and greenwashing. As PDA, experiential overridingness can be regarded as a practice which is very open to various uses and contexts, as it chiefly deals with the direct experience of a product. This, however, leaves issues connected to food consumption to be assessed, and radically open for interpretation, which can be both advantageous and disadvantageous. Without an assessment of the mentioned issues, we might lose potential advantages of the practice of experiential overridingness (being able to be embedded in a context of diverse necessary actions for the changes which the considered producers claim to

desire). Hence in the following chapter, I will focus more specifically on the diverse context of issues and potential courses of action in which experiential overridingness might be embedded.

Chapter two: contextualizing product differentiation

Assessing the place and role of experiential overridingness in a larger context, requires us to first look at different conceptions of modernity. I will look at two conflicting conceptions of the position of modern society towards nature, the problems of climate change, pollution, overconsumption of resources and accompanying economic questions. The first conception is ‘ecomodernism’, a highly optimistic view on the possibilities of modern technology to solve the mentioned issues. The second conception is referred to as ‘uncivilization’, the idea that our specific way of living together as civilization, and the constant insistence on civilization’s progress, jeopardizes our existence and planet. Hence we must ‘uncivilize’ ourselves to a significant extent. Both conceptions respectively signify optimism or pessimism regarding the possibilities of modern society. I shall argue that both positions are unsatisfactory. I will propose a critical-reflective position towards the relations between modern society and nature: neither overtly optimistic nor pessimistic. I will show that this is in line with my approach so far.

Using a critical-reflective perspective, I will assess how the issues we encountered earlier, which could supposedly be tackled through the consumption and production of plant-based products, require a multiplicity of collective and individual actions. I will focus on animal-human, animal-human-environment and inter-human relations respectively in my attempts to roughly sketch various possible courses of collective and individual action. To conclude this chapter, I will assess the benefits of my assessment in terms of (moral) psychology and motivation.

2.1 Modernity and nature, or modernity versus nature?

The most optimistic reading of the relations between modern society and nature comes from the angle of ecomodernism. Ecomodernists maintain that technological innovations through market-based solutions will provide for a future wherein we salvage both increasing wealth for humans and maximum flourishing of nature. First, ecomodernists claim that we need to make ourselves economically independent from nature, and concentrate our use of land into increasingly urbanized areas. Moreover, we need technological solutions which make our use of resources increasingly efficient and climate-neutral. In a sense, the latter intensifies the process of becoming economically independent from nature. This brings us to the second assertion of ecomodernists. We need to decouple economic growth from ecological impact,

either relatively (meaning added economic growth does not add to extra ecological impact) or absolutely (the economy would grow, but ecological impact keeps on decreasing). Again, a strong emphasis is placed on the salvaging function of technology. An added advantage is that the more we use land and resources intensively through technology, the more room is left for untouched nature. This, they add, is out of respect for both nature and human development.⁴⁸ Ecomodernists thus rely on a very strict separation of nature and culture, and wish to intensify this separation as much as possible to salvage both.

There is, however, some ambiguity about the ecomodernist political vision. On the one hand, they deny the reduction of modernity to ‘capitalism, corporate power, and laissez-faire economics’. However, after some words on the benefits of productivity for (having more resources for) ‘better human health, greater human freedom and opportunity, arts, culture, and the conservation of nature’, they ironically give a near-textbook definition of neoliberal capitalism:

‘Accelerated technological progress will require the active, assertive, and aggressive participation of private sector entrepreneurs, markets, civil society, and the state. While we reject the planning fallacy of the 1950s, we continue to embrace a strong public role in addressing environmental problems and accelerating technological innovation, including research to develop better technologies, subsidies, and other measures to help bring them to [the] market, and regulations to mitigate environmental hazards.’⁴⁹

The ‘public’ (or state’s) role in addressing problems and stimulating innovation should primarily be to bring commodities to the free market: not only private actors are seen as market parties, the public sector itself now also becomes an actor on the free market as investor, since it should stimulate new market parties. Geographer David Harvey states that precisely the alignment of state-level decision-making with free-market transactions (rather than the state as power on its own) through public-private partnerships is a defining feature of neoliberalism.⁵⁰ Moreover, the spread of such forms of governance to various societies, supposedly ‘liberating’ them from gendered oppression, agricultural labour, oppression of groups and ‘arbitrary governance’, comes interestingly close to the description of the creation of world markets by

⁴⁸ John Asafu-Adjaye et al., *An Ecomodernist Manifesto*, <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5515d9f9e4b04d5c3198b7bb/t/552d37bbe4b07a7dd69fcdabb/1429026747046/An+Ecomodernist+Manifesto.pdf> (April 2015) consulted on May 1, 2019, passim.

⁴⁹ Asafu-Adjaye et al., *Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 28-30. Block quotation on page 30.

⁵⁰ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press Inc., New York 2005) 76-77.

Marx, which we encountered earlier.⁵¹ Even if they do not reduce modernity to capitalism, corporate power and laissez-faire economics, they rely strongly on all three.

Moreover, there seems to be a tension between the supposed liberation of the individual versus the insistence on technological solutions as ‘fundamental’ to ‘meaningful climate mitigation’.⁵² Of course, this is fully consonant with the ecomodernist narrative, but it does not address the political power that is brought in to a small group of technocratic decision-makers (I assume that the authors will not argue that all citizens will get their own technology lab). Harvey highlights this as one of the main contradictions in neoliberal governance: in a world in which there is supposedly no intervention (but the free processes of the market), the insistence on expertise creates strong interventionist relations.⁵³ Ecomodernists are thus more aligned with currently dominant modes of governance than they initially are willing to admit, also incorporating already existing contradictions.

Yet the ecomodernist could reply that indeed, there are still problems ahead, but these problems mainly persist because technology is not used to its fullest potential: we might manage to centralise all aspects of human society into large, climate-neutral cities through advanced technologies and industry, if we only allow public-private partnerships and markets to do their job. The problem is that this assertion relies on a very big ‘might’ and ‘if’, an argumentative step which Alfred Nordmann criticizes as being an ‘if-and-then syndrome’. Whereas most ethical discussions on the risks of new technologies consist of the choice between patiently awaiting the arrival of issues or carefully assessing the ethics of emerging technologies, the if-and-then syndrome constructs an image of *possible issues of prospective, highly-advanced technologies* as already happening.⁵⁴ Ecomodernists do relate to the current state of technologies, yet they present highly advanced and hypothetical versions of them as if they are already close to materializing. As example in product differentiation, we might see Bruce Friedrich’s promises of cheap and mass-produced meat substitutions on a global scale as such an ecomodernist tactic, since Friedrich takes as morally relevant a technique which by far has not developed to such an extent. When this potential future is questioned, one could be forced into accepting ethical implications of an ‘unknown and unknowable future’ through reversing the burden of proof to the sceptic. To Nordmann, the more plausible option is to focus on the historical (and contemporary) contingencies of the technologies we are trying to assess.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Asafu-Adjaye et al., *Ecomodernist Manifesto*, 28-29. For the Marx reference, see page 22 of this research.

⁵² *Ibidem*, 21-22.

⁵³ Harvey even links this to a distrust of democratic governance, see: Harvey, *Neoliberalism*, 69-70.

⁵⁴ Alfred Nordmann, ‘If and Then: A Critique of Speculative NanoEthics’, *Nanoethics* 1 (2007) 31-46, 34.

⁵⁵ Nordmann, ‘If and Then’, 39.

The ecomodernist perspective is thus problematic for two reasons. First, it reproduces many problematic relations in modernity, technocracy and capitalism, and second, when the ecomodernist would insist on the promises of modern technology to mitigate these problematic relations, a fallacy of presenting a potential future as already happening is committed. In its enthusiastic valuation of technology, ecomodernism becomes too uncritical of both the current situation of modernity and modernity's promises. Let us now move to the rather different perspective of the Dark Mountain Project (DMP).

The DMP is a movement of artists and former climate activists. Where ecomodernists are very positive about the role modern society can play in tackling environmental damage, members of the DMP are highly sceptical about the possibilities of modern society. They assert that individuals as diverse as Hume, Marx, Thatcher and Lenin all miss the fact that they rely on a 'myth of civilization' and its accompanying 'myth of nature': that nature is something we subsumed and conquered over the years of civilization's progress, and that civilization and nature exist separately. Different civilizations tell themselves different stories, and this is the one we inherited. While modern civilization expands, soil, air and water become increasingly polluted, leading to an untenable situation. Hence, 'it is time to look down' to the fundamentals of this story, to start a movement to rewrite this story. 'It is through stories that we weave reality', and the mode of storytelling uncovers the root of our current problems. Our approach towards these problems thus cannot be met with a problem-solving approach. What we need, the DMP's members claim, is a cultural movement of 'uncivilization', an attempt to break the dichotomy between nature and culture, asserting that 'keyboards should be tapped by those with soil under their fingernails', whilst being mindful of civilization's 'flaws because [we have] participated in them'.⁵⁶ Participants in the DMP seem pessimistic about what civilization has to offer, but more optimistic about the chances of resistance to it.

One might worry that when a structure such as 'civilization versus nature' is so omnipresent, that we are nevertheless embedded in it. Although participants in the DMP seem to be aware of this problem, tackling it more fundamentally remains largely disregarded. To form a 'counterculture' completely distinct from the dominant culture is not only problematic, but also more fundamentally impossible. One is committed to the beliefs that one can break away from society, and that a radical rupture in the development of civilization is possible. Such assessments would fully deny the legitimacy of engaging with actions such as product differentiation, as it would be deemed as another attempt of modern society to save itself.

⁵⁶ The Dark Mountain Project, 'The Manifesto', <https://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> (Summer 2009) consulted on May 2, 2018.

The belief in such sudden ruptures are interestingly related to a deeply rooted individualism, which Alasdair Macintyre interestingly ties not just to liberalism but also to Marxism. The description of communism as free associations of individuals embedded in the common ownership of the means of production, is re-described by Macintyre as seeing humans as (potential) ‘socialized Robinson Crusoe[s]’, people who are suddenly fully able to enter free associations without an explanation of how this happens. This is one of the reasons why for Macintyre, Marxism, just like other modern political ideologies, forms a depleted tradition, as it has delved too much out of the source of individualism. Hence, we need to rediscover sources of more communal aspects of social life.⁵⁷

The more ‘communal’ source from which we might draw in the following sections, is the potential persistence of shared social circumstances, which are constantly changing, yet which we cannot simply break away from. This will also keep discussions closer to the contemporary situation rather than a dystopian or utopian future. We thus need a framework able to avoid the pitfalls of a too strong optimism regarding modernity on the one hand, and a pessimism which is grounded in the overtly individualist assertion of ‘breaking’ with the past or with society, on the other. I will now argue that a critical-reflective attitude is capable of meeting these requirements.

A critical-reflective answer

I agree with ecomodernists and the DMP that the environmental problems we are facing are in dire need of structural responses, yet they offer clear positions for murky issues, and both judge the contemporary situation from a quite distant utopian or dystopian future. A critical-reflective assessment will engage more with the contemporary situation (‘more’, as hypothesizing about the future might still be worthwhile for other purposes), in our example product differentiation, whilst maintaining a critical attitude towards it. I will now elaborate on the various aspects of a critical-reflective attitude.

The ‘critical’ refers to a focus on the contradictions, anomalies and invisibilities in the stories that shape our societies. This corresponds to the way in which we treated the practices of product differentiation. We focussed on what is contradictory in some product differentiation practices, what the anomalies are in product differentiation (using product differentiation in a

⁵⁷ Macintyre, *After Virtue*, 261-263.

specific way which evades commodity fetishism, for example), and through our critical lenses, we located which issues remain invisible in product differentiation.

The ‘reflective’ refers to what these contradictions, anomalies and invisibilities can tell us. ‘Can’ more specifically refers to what is conceivable *to us*, where ‘us’ as referring to a social and cultural group might be susceptible to change, but is now loosely assumed to be ‘(post-)industrial societies’. What is conceivable to us, no matter how critical we are, is shaped by the social and cultural environment we inhabit, the stories we tell ourselves about society, and the categories and practices we maintain. The reflective step, then, relates our criticism back to our cultural environment, which might inspire change: sometimes more radical, other times smaller.⁵⁸ Although we saw how many aspects of product differentiation were problematic in terms of their contradictions and invisibilities, we still worked with the concepts of product differentiation and found ways to find adequate responses to commodity fetishism and greenwashing within the concept of product differentiation. It entails accepting being in a situation, without uncritically accepting its conditions. This underlines the comparative advantages with regards to both ecomodernism and the DMP approach: it avoids both an uncritical acceptance of our current situation and the untenable idea that we can fully escape the contingencies of our current situation. The ‘critical-reflective’ connection points to the assertion that both steps never occur in isolation but in interaction. In the following assessment of the larger context of plant-based product differentiation, I attempt to maintain a critical-reflective attitude.

2.2 The animal-agricultural industry and other issues in food production

First I will briefly summarize the issues we encountered when assessing the claims of plant-based product producers, issues which these producers claimed could be solved mainly through the production and consumption of plant-based products. I will summarize these issues as expressing three kinds of relations: animal-human relations, critically engaging with the animal-agricultural industry, animal-human-environment relations, dealing with environmental as well as with social issues, and inter-human relations, dealing with social and economic issues.

⁵⁸ One might see a commonality with Rudolf A. Makkreel’s critical hermeneutics. For comparison, see: Rudolf A. Makkreel, ‘The role of judgment and orientation in hermeneutics’, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 34-1 (2008) 29-50, *passim*.

I will not attempt to give elaborate assessments of the issues within these relations. Rather, I intend to show where plant-based products will not be effective as agents of change, and where different kinds of (collective) actions and discussions are necessary. Finally, I will refer back to the specific place where experiential overridingness, as ‘best practice’ in product differentiation, can play an adequate role. I will now focus on a critical-reflective engagement with animal-human relations, especially regarding animal-agriculture.

Animal-human relations, or critical-reflective engagements with animal agriculture

All plant-based product producers we have encountered attempt to engage critically with animal agriculture, implicitly or explicitly. We might say that solely from the assertion that animal agriculture is here to stay for at least a significant period of time, we ought to engage critically with it. Yet not only is it here to stay for the coming years, it has also been part of industrial or post-industrial societies for many years. We should then not just critically engage with it out of a commitment to animal-ethical, economic and environmental issues, but also reflect on how it has been a part of our lives, and how this reflection might inspire change.

One proposition is to implement sustainability ratings (through for example labelling) for products. Any organization responsible for such ratings should be independent, as this would evade the chance of ‘greenwashing’ as much as possible through ascertaining that such ratings would not be part of greenwashing itself.⁵⁹ However, from a critical-reflective perspective, two objections might be raised. First, behind the idea of labelling still rests the assertion that many issues can mainly be solved through commodities, which we already asserted to be problematic. One might say that farms with a higher concern for animal welfare might receive a more positive product rating. Also, as animal agriculture inefficiently uses resources (as much resources are needed to produce animal calories), lowering the scale of production might result in a higher positive product rating. Yet this would likely only involve a handful of producers, and a small, dedicated (and financially better-off) group of consumers who are already concerned about issues in animal agriculture. Moreover, despite a less positive rating and reputation, it is very likely that a large group of consumers, who also still enjoy their meat, with less money to spend than those able to afford expensive sustainable meat products, will still buy the cheaper meat. Actions other than product differentiation are necessary here.

⁵⁹ Béatrice Parguel et al., ‘How Sustainability Ratings Might Deter ‘Greenwashing’: A Closer Look at Ethical Corporate Communication’, *Journal of Business Ethics* 102 (2011) 15-28, passim.

A second problem concerns the language of animal welfare assessments. As Jes Lynning Harfeld argues, animal welfare science is mostly aimed at merely minor welfare improvements, which are only implemented when it also produces economic efficiency benefits (getting as much products out of an animal as possible). This involves a view on animals which is only focussed on how animals are part of an industrial production line for human and economic benefits. It involves a ‘de-animalization’ of animals, where it is not even attempted to understand the animal more on its own terms, and the moral relevance of those terms.⁶⁰

We have recognized two problems regarding the proposal of labelling through critically assessing how (I) labelling might result in an overstatement of commodities as agents of social change, and (II) how the language of animal welfare has involved a de-animalized conception of farm animals. In critical reflection, we can assess how the analysis of such problems might inspire a different approach.

Regarding economic incentives, we might consider a positive role for government subsidies on plant-based products, making them cheaper, while taxing meat more heavily, always being mindful of how it affects the budget of people. Additional government-invested research in plant-based meat substitutions or lab-grown meat might deal with the lasting desire of some to continue consuming meat.

For a higher standard for animal agriculture, we might point to a respect for animal flourishing in terms of being able to express their natural behaviour. This also allows us to deal with possible scepticism regarding whether we can know what the animal wants, since observing natural behaviour implies human interpretation. As Harfeld asserts, we might reasonably argue (or assume) that the ‘goals’ of a good animal life can be expressed in natural behaviour. Respecting the good animal life would require a strong scaling-down of animal agriculture, where animals have enough space and opportunity to express natural behaviour.⁶¹ Of course, the new and difficult task then becomes to determine what we view as natural behaviour contributing to a good animal life, as it is reasonably expectable that not all natural behaviour contributes to a good life. Nevertheless, It could provide governments with a rationale to implement much higher welfare standards in animal agriculture: if we wish to respect an animal’s natural behaviour as necessary for a good animal life (where a ‘good’ life must indeed be more specifically defined), we are inclined to the radical changes in animal

⁶⁰ Jes Lynning Harfeld et al., ‘Seeing the Animal: On the Ethical Implications of De-animalization in Intensive Animal Production Systems’, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 29 (2016) 407-423, 408-409.

⁶¹ Jes Lynning Harfeld, ‘Telos and the Ethics of Animal Farming’, *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 26-3 (2013) 691-709, passim.

agriculture mentioned above. Such propositions involve more collective forms of action than the production and consumption of commodities, which is more concerned with stressing individual responsibilities.

My aim here is, again, not to provide detailed assessments on possible courses of action, but rather to point into different, more collective forms of action which differ from a mere focus on the individual production and consumption of plant-based commodities. I also hope to show that such actions are necessary for the changes that producers of plant-based products purport to desire. This also shows where the social agency of commodities ends, and where the agency of more collective action begins. I shall continue to follow this approach when discussing issues in animal-human-environment and inter-human social relations, before I briefly return to the question what commodities *can* do.

Environment, economy, humans and animals, and some final words on commodities

We have already asserted earlier that, regarding climate change and environmental issues, there are questions of global political power asymmetries, responsibilities, and the weight of various other contributing factors to pollution and climate change to be assessed.⁶² This might be used as a criticism towards an overstatement of what plant-based products can effectively achieve in tackling these issues. Many of these issues require more collective political actions and decisions that are too manifold to discuss in detail here.

In reflecting on possibilities of change and amelioration, we might also need to think of assessing the proper balance between humans, animals and environment. Deep Ecology is one example. Deep Ecologists try to find a balance between human, animal and environmental flourishing through advocating for a *moderate interference* in natural processes: some interference in environments and exploitation of non-human animals by humans might be necessary, but it should be done at the minimum of vital needs (as its main thinkers admit, this is a deliberately vague term to keep it open to different contexts and discussions).⁶³ An implementation of this idea would be mixed-crop farming, where biodiversity is brought back to the farm fields, allowing natural predators to do the work of chemical crop protection, or a return to mixed farming, where a much lower amount of animals is fed with the crops of the farm, implying a strong decrease in meat production and consumption, land use, and CO₂

⁶² See page 24.

⁶³ Patrik Baard, 'Managing Climate Change: A View from Deep Ecology', *Ethics & the Environment* 20-1 (2015) 23-44, 33-35.

emissions.⁶⁴ Both options imply a moderate interference in nature and *coexisting* with natural processes. As we see, questions on the production and consumption of food are also accompanied by more fundamental questions on how to conceptualize animal-human-environment relations. Implementing the insights from these questions will require many forms of (collective) political deliberation.

Inter-human relations, specifically issues of global poverty and related economic problems, offer a comparable picture. As described earlier, issues of global poverty are also issues of political power asymmetries, and the production of cheap plant-based products by rich countries for poorer countries will not alleviate such asymmetries: it might even perpetuate them.⁶⁵ The critical-reflective question then becomes what the main contributing factors to global poverty are, how they function, and how the assessment of these contributing factors might result in perspectives for change. If one would assert that global poverty is systemic, i.e. linked to private property regimes and a global capitalist economy, many routes might be taken. Joshua Cohen, for example, describes the problematic relations in capitalism as problems of democracy, in the sense that the private ownership of workplaces and the centralization of capital in private ownership create unequal divisions of political power (as the ‘voice’ of large corporations might be heard louder through their prominent role in current economies). As an ‘economic basis’ of deliberative democracy, Cohen mentions a form of worker’s self-management and a stronger parliamentary democracy as possible solutions, to evade the danger of both too authoritarian forms of ‘public’ control and too decentralized socio-economic relations.⁶⁶ From this perspective, one could argue for more democratic structures within companies as a way to foster more equal economic relations, locally as well as internationally.

The former story implies a stronger denial of the legitimacy of private property and a capitalist economy in general. A less negative assessment of private property regimes is for example made by David Schmitz, who argues that the notion of the original appropriation of resources, land, anything that can be turned into property, is an effective mechanism for governing property, but also open-ended in its arrangement. One might opt for a sort of regulated commons, public property, or private property, yet all property regimes share the

⁶⁴ Wageningen University, ‘Op zoek naar nieuwe weerbare productiesystemen’, <https://subsites.wur.nl/nl/show/Op-zoek-naar-nieuwe-weerbare-productiesystemen-1.htm> (February 11, 2016) consulted on June 4, 2019 ; Pier Vellinga, Terug naar gemengde landbouw, *De Ingenieur* (January 14, 2016).

⁶⁵ See page 24-25.

⁶⁶ Joshua Cohen, ‘The Economic Basis of Deliberative Democracy’, *Social Philosophy & Policy* 6-2 (1989) 25-50, passim.

inclusion of certain groups or individuals and the exclusion of others.⁶⁷ Here, one might defend the right of poor countries to publicly control farm land, protecting their population against high food prices, while not arguing against the legitimacy of private property regimes and capitalism per se.

This short elaboration shows that assessing inter-human relations, in the realms of economics and democracy, require large-scale political-economic questions to be answered. Answering these questions might require multiple forms of collective action and political deliberation, instead of a sole focus on the production and consumption of commodities.

We have shortly engaged in contextualizations of the production of plant-based products. Products are in many cases not the relevant ‘level’ of discussion, as their social agency in the various issues we mentioned is limited. Here, the relevance of political deliberation, decision-making and collective action comes into view. Presenting products as a pleasant experience of good food with ethical considerations in the background, corroborates our contextualization of plant-based food production, as it implies that products play a relevant but small role in a certain political, economic, environmental and ethical regime (expressing ‘end-stations’ of production perhaps). In order to change such regimes on a larger scale, we cannot simply look to commodities for help, but rather to the relevant ethical background we only dimly see in experiential overridingness PDAs, and to the manifold political deliberations and (collective) actions this background implies.

2.3 The research so far, in terms of psychological advantages

The proposed framework might be shortly summarized as attempting to show the various kinds of responsibilities that come into play once larger issues are addressed. We have seen that the advocacy of a more plant-based economy mostly implies a dedication, at least a performed dedication, to many different issues like the treatment of animals, environmental and climatological issues, and issues of global poverty. A second step has been to show how a mere focus on commodities will not help to tackle these issues, and that besides the more or less individual responsibilities of consumption and commodity production, more collective forms of responsibilities become relevant to take into account. To close this chapter, I shall briefly focus on how commodity fetishism is not only inaccurate in its proposed problem-solving, but

⁶⁷ David Schmidtz, ‘The Institution of Property’, in: David Schmidtz (ed.), *Person, Polis, Planet : Essays in Applied Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2008) 193-210, passim.

also inaccurate from the perspective of (moral) psychology. Emphasising a multiplicity of responsibilities can then also be seen as potentially psychologically advantageous, at least in terms of motivation.

As Yoon-Na Cho points out, people seem to assess sustainable products more favourably if the personal impact of purchasing such a product is emphasised.⁶⁸ This could mean that an overstatement of actual impact (of which the chances are quite high) might result in disappointment and a feeling that such purchases are insignificant. A more plausible and accurate description of where personal responsibility and agency begins and ends will then become important in light of (moral) psychology and motivation.

What certainly does not help is holding individuals directly accountable, either implicitly or explicitly, for the problems of animal agriculture through the consumption of animal products, even in its mildest form.⁶⁹ As recent research by Florian Maite Cramwinckel points out, people who observe a moral refusal to eat meat already respond negatively to the moral refuser, especially when the observers regard themselves as moral persons. They feel as if their behaviour of eating meat is morally questioned, triggering a process of self-reflection and a negative assessment of the moral refuser. A simple act of physical cleansing, e.g. washing your hands, already helps to mitigate this response.⁷⁰ Our assessment so far would corroborate Cramwinckel's research, in the sense that it has denied both the plausibility and desirability of holding individuals directly accountable for the problems in animal agriculture. The focus on the pleasant experience of plant-based food, or allowing oneself to enjoy good food, might be a substitute for the physical cleansing, as allowing oneself enjoyment might be seen as good self-care (as is the case with physical cleansing).

What we must also evade, however, is making issues too 'shared' and 'collective', which might result in a full-blown tragedy of the commons. In recent psychological research, it has been shown that spontaneous self-distancing reduces emotional responsiveness to negative memories, but also enhances capabilities of reconstructing memories instead of reliving them, which means a stronger engagement in problem-solving behaviour, hinting at increased adaptive self-reflection.⁷¹ If the analogy is allowed, one might say that distancing oneself from the problems in animal agriculture has the potential effect of not only reducing

⁶⁸ Yoon-Na Cho, 'Different Shades of Green Consciousness: The Interplay of Sustainability Labeling and Environmental Impact on Product Evaluations', *Journal of Business Ethics* 128 (2015) 73-82, passim.

⁶⁹ For an example of this tactic, see: Anonymous for the Voiceless, 'About Us', <https://www.anonymousforthevoiceless.org/about-us> (publication date unknown) consulted on May 15, 2019.

⁷⁰ Florian Maite Cramwinckel, *The Social Dynamics of Morality* (Off Print, Utrecht 2016) 33-60.

⁷¹ Özlem Ayduk and Ethan Kross, 'From a Distance: Implications of Spontaneous Self-Distancing for Adaptive Self-Reflection', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 98-5 (2010) 809-829, passim.

emotional responsiveness to those problems, but also the ability to critically reflect on the problems. The latter would mean that there are potentialities of critical reflection, assessing where individual responsibility ends (where the individual can distance oneself from larger problems) and collective responsibilities begin (tackling the problems in a balanced fashion). Using this potential source of reflection might lower the risk of a tragedy of the commons.

All in all, our critical-reflective framework, and the attempt to map the proper place of individual and collective responsibilities, is corroborative with recent insights in (moral) psychology. In the following chapter, I will recapture the research, show the relevance of the research in light of the broader virtue-ethical framework, and assess how it might stimulate further research.

Conclusion

This research has aimed to answer the question what the status of product differentiation is as tactic to achieve a decrease in our dependency on animal products. I have focussed specifically on meat and plant-based alternatives or substitutes for meat, i.e. the products which are differentiated through their status as alternative or substitute for meat. Its plant-based status would imply that through such products, animal-ethical concerns, environmental pollution, climate change, resource waste, the entrenchment of global poverty through high food prices, and sometimes, problems of large industrial scale, or alienation from nature, are evaded or mitigated. This list of arguments is not exhaustive, but they are the main assertions defended by the producers of plant-based products.

As a first step, I focussed on four PDAs. I looked into companies who either present themselves as producing plant-based alternatives or substitutes, the latter implying a more critical evaluation of large-scale industry and a commitment to smaller-scale, more localized production, compared to the former. I also assessed plant-based 'lifestyle' presentations, which rely on a strong rejection of the (post-)industrial contingencies of modern society, and is more appreciative and positive about a closer relation to nature. I then analysed specific ways in which the previously mentioned PDAs claim to change society strongly through the production and consumption of commodities. I asserted that because of a tendency towards commodity fetishism, and in some cases, corporate greenwashing, these PDAs are unsustainable in terms of claiming too much social agency for commodities.

Concluding the first chapter, I maintained that experiential overridingness as PDA is a more defensible option. Experiential overridingness relies strongly on the direct experience of a product, but asserts the critical perspectives associated with plant-based products as necessary background. This allows products to be open to contextualization: to be embedded in a context of larger-scale political narratives, and various collective and individual actions. This openness might however also be a pitfall. Therefore we must be very clear about the precise context in which we use experiential overridingness.

Hence I elaborated on the context of experiential overridingness in the second chapter. I first asserted that a critical-reflective approach towards the context of modern society, in its relations to nature, evades the shortcomings of sheer optimism and pessimism towards modern society, and is most corroborative with other frameworks used in this research. Through a critical-reflective lens, I outlined a context of various actions necessary to implement the changes which various producers of plant-based products claim to be able to

do chiefly through the production and consumption of plant-based commodities. In other words: I looked into the boundaries of the agency of products, and which kind of collective and individual actions could fill in this agency-gap with regards to the large-scale issues associated with animal agriculture. Conclusively, the potential psychological benefits of this approach were outlined.

In sum, the status of product differentiation as tactic to decrease our dependency on animal agriculture is that of an *important but limited contributor*. Moreover, a contributor which tends to overstate its capacities. Hence it should function in a diverse context of collective and individual actions.

Given these arguments, we can now look more closely into its implications for the aspects of the good life I outlined at the beginning of the research. The first aspect of the good life I mentioned is living together with other animals in harmony. In this thesis, I have not attempted to arrive at a definite account of living together more harmoniously with animals, but I have tried to outline the different issues associated with our engagements with animals, especially in animal agriculture. We roughly encountered two kinds of issues: the treatment of animals, and the view we have of animals. The main contention has been that although through welfare measures, some improvements regarding the treatment of animals in animal agriculture have been made, we nevertheless define the animal and its welfare in terms of how useful the animal is to us. Here, we might attempt to regard animals more on their own terms, i.e. what the animal needs to live a good animal life, for example in terms of their natural behaviour.

Highlighting the importance of the view of the animal and animal welfare might allow us to reflect on the more general pursuit of a less animal product-based economy, or potentially a fully plant-based economy. Even if we stop using animals for food, clothing, et cetera, we might still be stuck with an underdeveloped view of the animal and its welfare needs. A comparable analysis in the area of animal rights can be found. Some animal rights activists focus too much on negative rights for animals (in the form of ‘abolitionism’) and less on positive rights (appreciating mutual relations between various animals and humans).⁷² A critical-reflective attitude towards our conception of a less animal product-dependent economy, in terms of reflecting on the reasons why and how we should strive for it, will thus remain important.

⁷² Sue Donaldson and Will Kymlicka, *Zoopolis. A Political Theory of Animal Rights* (Oxford University Press, New York 2011) 4-10.

The second aspect of the good life consisted of viewing humans as living in societies as well as in nature. As we have seen, another important aspect of the critical-reflective attitude is the assertion that we are embedded in, and shaped by, our current situation and its history, while at the same time being mindful of the contradictions, anomalies and invisibilities of our current situation. This means that despite being embedded and historically formed by our context, we should not take it for granted. We thus cannot have an indefinitely positive or negative view of either culture or nature, but we have to accept our embeddedness in our relations with culture as well as nature.

Moderate interference might point into such critical-reflective directions, where we allow space for humans in nature, but where we aim to keep our interferences moderate, attempting to *coexist* with nature as much as possible. This could be expressed in for example mixed farming or mixed-crop farming.

The investigation into product differentiation might also be testimonial in terms of critical reflection. Despite strong criticisms of many different PDAs, I tried to engage with our current predicament by picking a less problematic PDA, experiential overridingness, and showing how placing it in a certain context might allow us to find inspirations for changing our current situation. It again entails the acceptance of being in a situation without taking it for granted.

The critical-reflective attitude should not be understood as a perceived road to perfection. Rather, maintaining the *attitude* of critical-reflection accepts the necessity of critical reflection to engage with our surroundings. In other words, precisely because every situation will know its contradictions, anomalies and invisibilities, critical reflection will be necessary to accept the imperfections of ways of life, to show ways of understanding how these imperfections work in ever changing circumstances, and how we might find ways of tackling imperfections through the inspirations gained from reflection. Critical reflection entails fostering the capacity to reflect rather than to perfect, which brings me to the last aspect of the good life.

The third aspect of the good life we argued for is that discussions on the good life should be as democratic as possible. In order to keep discussions on the good life democratic, adequate assessments of the contingencies we inhabit are necessary. This would also relate to keeping information asymmetries as small as possible. This research has attempted both. First, I have attempted to separate the manifold issues of food production, and the accompanying diverse responsibilities and actions necessary to tackle them. As we have seen, through PDAs which are more prone to commodity fetishism and greenwashing, the diversity of issues and

potential courses of action are sometimes lost, as the production and consumption of products is presented too much as a solution for various larger and smaller issues. We might also use the more Marxist phrasing that the presented social agency is *alienated* from more realistic expectations of what products can do, offering a confused image of the social agency of products. This assertion also relates to the (second) issue of information asymmetry. As a public is confronted a lot with PDAs prone to commodity fetishism, the information on the variety of issues and accompanied courses of action might be lost to an increasing amount of people. This information asymmetry might deepen when we consider inequalities in cultural capital or the capacity to understand and appreciate issues. Here, confusion might turn into moral wrong, if we consider democratic deliberation, and an open access to the means of deliberation (e.g. information), as morally relevant with regards to leading a good life. Hence this research has aimed to tackle both confusions on the agency of commodities and the resulting information asymmetry.

The three assumptions on the good life, developed throughout this research, are thus intimately related to the critical-reflective attitude. Regarding living together with animals harmoniously, we saw the ongoing necessity of critically reflecting on our relations with animals and the conceptions of those relations. Assessing how humans live in societies as well as in nature, has shown us how in various parts of the research, we accepted being in a certain situation as well as being formed by it, yet without uncritically accepting the situation itself, always mindful of the necessary imperfections in ways of life. From this necessary imperfection, we asserted that debates on the good life should remain as open as possible, yet that these debates require good information to function, which might be gained through the process of critical reflection. All in all, through critical reflection, we have seen how our assumptions on the good life should remain in constant development.

Given previous assertions on critical reflection, and the purported goal of separating various economic, environmental and animal-ethical issues, being open about the limitations of this research, and about areas where other research might pick up the discussion where I left it off, is of key importance. I left many adjacent topics untouched throughout this research. I focussed solely on meat products and their plant-based contenders. Further research regarding other animal products like milk, leather or eggs might be conducted using the concepts coined in this research. Relating closely to the question of how other products might be analysed using comparable concepts, is the significance of the distinction between vegetarian and vegan products.

Regarding the concepts themselves: one might look into other requirements for critical reflection and its wider ethical and political significance, or how it might compare to comparable concepts such as hermeneutics.⁷³ Another interesting topic might be to widen the scope on the many reasons one might be interested in reducing our dependency on animal products at all. An interesting area might be how the consumption of meat might relate to gendered conceptions, as meat is often associated with a masculine conception of strength and toughness.⁷⁴

We also discussed many issues which were merely mentioned, instead of being more fully brought into a certain view. We mentioned problematic relations in conceptions of animal welfare and the animal itself, due to their adherence to human needs. The implied solution is attempting to take the view of the animal. Of course, this might be epistemologically problematic for various reasons. One mentioned solution was to focus on animal behaviour, using it as a basis for defining a good animal life and specifying a specific animal's needs. Yet many issues in this perspective remain unanswered. As we already briefly asked: is all animal behaviour beneficial to the animal (group behaviours might harm individual animals, and so on), and if not, how do we determine which behaviours to pick?

We mentioned climate change and environmental pollution as issues which needed more elaboration, regarding possible ways to tackle both. One might think of questions on international cooperation, differences between developed and developing economies, the myriad ways in which we impact negatively on the environment and how these impacts interrelate, et cetera. Even merely outlining the relative issues more completely would require its own set of essays.

Another set of issues we outlined are economic issues. We asserted that resource waste is a very complex problem. Even if we only concern ourselves with the production of food, we are dealing with multiple kinds of food, but also with the use of plastics and other food packaging. Here, we might add that the problem of resource waste also expands beyond the buying and selling of food. Another complex problem is global poverty, which we already asserted to be related significantly to relations of various forms of power, and the highly disproportionate distributions of power between developing and developed economies, not just to higher food prices because of animal agriculture. This is however only one aspect of

⁷³ See footnote 58.

⁷⁴ RTL Nieuws, 'Waarom eten mannen zo veel vlees?', <https://www.rtlnieuws.nl/nieuws/nederland/artikel/4492631/waarom-eten-mannen-zo-veel-vlees> (version: November 22, 2018) consulted on May 23, 2019.

the problem, and many more, such as (structural) relations between environmental pollution and poverty, might be mentioned here.

All of these issues prompt questions of a systemic nature: what is the role of production scales in our current predicament? Or a more fundamental question: what is the role of capitalism in not just these economic issues, but also the environmental, climatological, and animal-ethical issues we mentioned? The research and its used concepts would imply that capitalism and the latter issues are very much related, but more elaborate assessments are necessary to arrive at a more sophisticated rephrasing of this implication. Answers to these questions are in any case important with regards to moral responsibility. If the mentioned problems are of a less systemic nature, we might hold individual producers accountable for both the information gap regarding complex issues and their contributions to the issues. If the problems are (more) systemic, accountability and possible solutions might require more in-depth assessments, where personal accountability is only a part of the story.

Then again, it has not been my aim to provide fully elaborated accounts of the mentioned issues. Such an enterprise would require a book of its own. My aim has rather been to show what the status of product differentiation is in decreasing our dependency on animal products. The main assertion has been that touching upon our dependency on animal products entails touching upon a wide range of economic, environmental, climatological and animal-ethical issues, and an even wider range of possible ways of tackling those issues, both collectively and individually. Moreover, this main assertion implies that we should be more appreciative of our sociability instead of merely focussing on the individual. I have tried to outline ways of engaging with this diversity of issues and possible courses of collective and individual action. Yet before we can tackle any issues at all, we must first acknowledge both their existence and their complexity, and to acknowledge both is precisely what I intended to do.

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