



# **NEGOTIATING ETHICAL CONSUMERISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE**

by

**Tracey Bedford**

**RESOLVE Working Paper 13-11**



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## **Abstract**

This working paper is the re-production, in full, of a chapter from my 1999 Ph.D. 'Ethical consumerism: everyday negotiations in the construction of an ethical self'. The chapter is based on interviews with female ethical consumers, conducted in 1997-8. The interviews utilised a 'cupboard trawl' methodology, whereby interviewees explained their choice of purchases across the three product areas studied: food, cleaning products and personal hygiene products.

The paper argues that ethical consumerism has to be negotiated in different social contexts, with different expectations of the consistency of the performance of the three ethics studied. Moreover, ethics are differently practised across product areas depending on the cultural coding of the product and on the ability to maintain socially accepted standards of hygiene, convenience and grace. Moreover, thrift and hedonism, as contemporary values of consumer society, act as challenges to the more niche values of the ethical consumer. What emerges from the study of the everyday negotiations undertaken by ethical consumers is a picture of individuals unable to fully re-produce their ethical concerns within the norms, systems of provision and rewards of mainstream consumption. This is particularly true where ethical consumerism is performed in contexts outside the home.

**Key Words:** Ethical consumerism; values; everyday practices

## **Explanatory Foreword**

This paper is the re-production, in full, of one of the unpublished chapters from my 1999 Ph.D. 'Ethical consumerism: everyday negotiations in the construction of an ethical self'. Whilst the findings are now out of date, and could perhaps be more consistently theorised through a values and social practices framing, we felt the general analysis of how ethical consumers negotiated socially constructed performances of different ethics in different contexts fitted within the remit of RESOLVE. It is interesting to note the speed at which some of the consumption practices studied here have become 'normal' even if they remain niche interests. The marginalisation of the interviewees as deviant (mad, over-emotional, extreme), which was a characteristic of the ethical consumers' world in the mid-90s, no longer seems applicable. Indeed, 'ethical consumerism' has become a less recognisable social movement. The provision of fair trade, organic and vegetarian options has extended. In this, the specifics of the empirical findings no longer resonate with contemporary realities as much as they illustrate the process of negotiating niche behaviours in mainstream contexts and social structures.

The empirical findings are based on interviews with fifteen ethical consumers. The ethical consumers were self-defined as such, responding to a request for ethical consumers to take part in a research study. All of the ethical consumers had environmental and fair trade ethics; most had animal welfare ethics. The first interview covered the individual's history of 'becoming' an ethical consumer, their explanations as to their ethical positioning and what this necessitated in consumer practices. The second interview was conducted in the interviewee's home and

involved a 'cupboard trawl' covering three different product categories: food, cleaning products and personal hygiene products. This gave a more accurate picture of the extent of ethical consumption for each of the three product areas. Interviewees gave explanations and justifications for their consumer choices. This chapter is based on the analysis of those explanations.

Previous chapters had explained how the three ethics had different genealogies, norms of behaviour, levels of social acceptability and entry points into ethical consumerism. They had suggested that an individual's belief about the appropriate performance of ethical practices was socially constructed but personally negotiated. Thus some of those who had concerns about farming practices adopted a vegetarian position, which did not reflect their concerns but was a recognisable social role. Fair trade, animal welfare and environmental ethics were practiced differently, with interviewees finding green consumer practices to be more confusing and less efficacious than buying fair trade or being vegetarian or vegan. Each ethical consumer had their own stated set of consumer preferences, practices and commitments, although these were recognisable manifestations of the socially constructed norms of ethical consumer practice. This chapter looks at how these are negotiated and performed within everyday life.

LESLEY: When I came to think about it I thought well I am not really an ethical consumer in many ways, because you can see what it is that you want to do and you want to be selective and everything, but actually, practically, in everyday life you can't quite meet your ideals.

AMY: You don't have a choice ... I hadn't realised it to such an extent until I really started to look at what we did buy and what our beliefs are, and a lot of the things we buy they don't really match our beliefs.

## 1. Introduction

If the two previous empirical chapters can be summed up as consumers' explanations as to why they "do their bit", then this chapter can be viewed as the tempering of ethics with the knowledge that in the real world an individual can "only do so much". There is little doubt that there is a difference between what the consumer would ideally choose for themselves in a perfect world, and what can be chosen when everyday life interacts with idealism. As Lesley and Amy demonstrate in the quotes above, many of the ethical consumers apologised for their choices and their overall failure to fulfil their ethical positioning. Indeed, most of this chapter is written through the stories that people tell to justify actions which can be viewed as inconsistent with their beliefs (Billig, 1989, Taylor, 1989, Campbell, 1994, Singer, 1993). And yet ethical consumerism is often a triumph of belief over structural adversity, and this chapter will hopefully also act as a celebration of this fact. Much of the consumers' narratives about ethical choice were talked through in terms of ease and difficulty, with certain products and issues being easier to ethically consume than others, depending on the context. I traced all of the consumers' explanations of the choices they had made across the three product areas. The discussion is somewhat hampered by the gross imbalance in academic writings surrounding the product areas, with food attracting phenomenal attention, but personal hygiene products (which, as I will show, contain similar, although at times opposite, concepts of inside/outside, natural/synthetic and pleasure/duty to those involved in food) and household cleaning products have attracted almost no academic interest at all.

I wish to continue the debate started in the last chapter concerning the role of absolutes, priorities and thresholds. In short, I will suggest that although the consumer has a clear idea as to the "correct" consumer behaviour resulting from their ethical positioning, in practice all values are open to degrees of flexibility, dependent upon the context of their performance. Because of this an interviewee who categorically states that she would never patronise McDonalds moments later tells a story about what she allows her children to eat when they visit the local McDonalds. Some of the barriers to ethical consumerism are structural, such as lack of time and resources. Many are culturally constructed, for example notions of value for money. Others are the intervention of different values and ethics. Telfer (1996: 23) contends that there are four factors which limit our obligations to follow an ethical code: preserving the integrity of another ethic; giving precedence to those we care about; providing for our own happiness; and having a worthwhile life. All these negotiations are apparent in the chapter. I have taken the reflexive explanations of the ethical consumers' choices to suggest that other needs, values and ethics ensure that actions are always *situated* rather than unconditional and constant. From this I wish to claim that the ability, and desire, to ethically consume is contingent upon product, issue area and milieu, and cannot be understood outside of these complexities.

All the product areas I selected for study were chosen upon the premise that they contained well publicised and extensively available ethical goods. This then should be the perfect place to view the impact of the diversity of other factors that complete

the complex fabric of the ethical consumer's world of consumption. Whether we approach consumer choices from the position of traditional cost/benefit analysis, contemporary consumption studies, values or ethics, what is clear is that choices are made by considering a variety of different contingencies. This chapter is an examination of some of the more important factors, examining the roles of money, convenience, health, pleasure and place in determining the choice of products for private consumption.

## 2. Money

Regardless of income levels price and money were discussed by all the interviewees. I have deliberately named this section money, as opposed to cost or price, as ethical consumption is characterised by the strategic deployment of money. Rather than the forgotten commodity in chains of consumption (Desforges, 1998), ethical consumers show an awareness that money is not just something which purchases goods, it is also something which provides producers and retailers with their *raison d'être*. Because of this price does not necessarily affect choice adversely. Certain more expensive, unnecessary products are bought to support "worthy" causes, whereas some companies and countries are boycotted wholesale, the implicit understanding being that profit is the bottom line in determining production practices.

The first and most obvious point to make about ethical consumerism is that, with the exception maybe of vegetarian and vegan products, internalising the externalities and offering a fair price to producers necessitates paying a higher price for goods. This fact had not escaped the interviewees:

CHERRY: I think that if you've got loads of money you go out and buy all of your overpriced organic veg. It never fails to amuse me that, the fact that all of the processed food is really very cheap [right]. You go to the supermarket and you buy fake mashed potatoes and you buy them for 20 pence a packet and you wanna buy organic bread you gotta pay £1.20, you know what I mean? It never fails to baffle me. I'm sure it's just a food conspiracy with the government. But I think that ethical consumerism is a real luxury, you've got to have loads of time and you've got to have loads of money to just walk into the local health food shop and buy what you want to buy, do you know what I mean?

JANE: All that matters to me is that there are no vegan products in it, that is the most important thing and then if I can afford to I'll buy green things, but I find that the price is so ridiculous [right], I find that just because it is environmentally friendly it's four times more expensive and I do resent that.

RUBY: Yeah [organic meat] is very expensive. Chicken is £15 as opposed to £4, but I just close my eyes and I write my cheques. And I feel like, you know, people say "how can you spend that kind of money?" and I feel like I want to support this, you know, some people give to charities. Like I say the consumer dollar is so powerful. People just don't understand

that the pound of theirs can make such a difference. They just look at the smaller picture and think “I don’t want to pay £15 for a chicken”, you know, but if everybody did there would be a lot more organic chicken farmers you know.

All the quotes above relate to environmentally friendly products, and this was the one issue area where higher costs proved to be a huge consideration. For animal welfare products price was simply not mentioned, except by Jane who claimed that as long as you stay away from “pretend” animal products veganism is the cheapest way to live. Fair trade products, whilst obviously more expensive than their conventional counterparts did not attract the same annoyance as environmental products, perhaps because the cause of their higher pricing appears to be more transparent, and perhaps because of the links between buying fair trade and giving to Third World charities<sup>1</sup>. Cost means that the consumer can only afford (or only wishes to dedicate so much of their income to) a limited amount of products. Cherry and Mary explain how they make the choice as to which products to buy on their limited incomes:

MARY: ... organic fruit and veg, because of it being a lot of my diet, I couldn’t afford to buy all my veg for the week organic ... I bought this [toothpaste] because it’s not tested on animals and it has animal free ingredients. And again that is the sort of thing I can afford to buy that way because, well, because mainly I don’t use it so quickly and because toothpaste is the sort of thing you only buy once in a while. So even if it is a bit dearer I only have to buy it once every two months or whatever.

CHERRY: ... if I was going to go for a health conscious diet I would be spending about three times as much as I am spending at the moment on food [um] and I can’t afford to eat all organic and I am very much an all or nothing person, so if I am going to be drinking organic tea, yet eating bananas that have been fucking pelted by herbicides and pesticides then it would be a bit strange.

Surprisingly, whereas it was food that attracted the most commitment for animal welfare and fair trade products, because of the large premiums on organic food and the necessity to purchase in quantity the possibility of regular purchase was limited. Environmentally friendly products for household cleaning and personal hygiene were generally the most consistent buys due to the infrequency of purchase<sup>2</sup> (although not where health was a primary motivation for the interview - see health

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<sup>1</sup> Many of the interviewees were involved in Third World campaigning, fundraising and sponsorship.

<sup>2</sup> Rules which apply to goods based on the frequency of purchase rumble all the way through this chapter. Whether something is a “sensible” buy is not just related to the factor being considered, but more to the factor under consideration in ratio to the likely amount of times the specific product will be bought. See, for example, points under health, pleasure and checking ingredients.



section). This finding is in keeping with Mintel (1992) findings about which products people are most willing to pay price premiums on for environmental products, and helps to explain why household products are one area fully supplied by a range of environmentally friendly goods. The exception to this rule was Lisa, who claimed that as she had a house kitty for such things it was unfair to expect others to pay for her values.

Obviously the consumers I have talked about so far have all managed to afford to consume ethically in the first place, but times of poverty and the priorities of need formed a common part of the discourses surrounding money. Generally, the interviewees had all spent time on the dole, as students or had children, and they talked through how money and ethics had to be negotiated:

RACHEL: ... I was still very sensitive about money around the middle of last year, because I was still unemployed, whereas my husband is like "we must buy Ecover" and that sort of thing, and I am looking at the prices and thinking "that is really expensive", but now we can afford it comfortably because I am earning again it is not an issue; I would just buy it anyway.

JO: ... it is very satisfying to see [organic food] coming in, but you have to be prepared to pay a lot more for it, sometimes double, and if I had my family young and at home no way could I have afforded that. But I suppose I can buy it now because my needs are far less.

Those ethical consumers who had limited finances still deployed some money for ethical purchases, as shown by Cherry and Mary, but these funds tended to find specific channels for outlet. Animal welfare would be the area most likely to have money ploughed into it by the vegetarians and vegans, even for the products, such as free range eggs, which commanded premiums - adding to the notion of identity ethics as being those most consistently performed. There was a strong feeling amongst all the consumers that if they had more money they would buy more ethical products, but the extent to which this would actually happen has to be questioned. At what point does money begin to be in surplus large enough to allow the consumer not to consider cost? Miller (1995: 37) points out that consumption is balanced against thrift, which is both a virtue<sup>3</sup> and an end in itself rather than simply a means to an end (1998: 49). In practice this would mean that even after the whole need/want argument engendered by the limits of income has been succeeded by the luxury to afford all basic necessities (probably accounting for most of my interviewees), the role of price would be no less important. Whether something costs too much is determined upon relative rather than absolute price. In other words, paying too far over the odds is as frivolous as buying an unethical product:

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<sup>3</sup> The notion of thrift as a virtue seemed to be borne out more by the older interviewees who appeared to hold the moral high ground when it came to comprehending the meaning of shortage of money, and having to make do.

MARY: I mean I don't buy the Whole Earth baked beans because they are a pound a tin when you can buy them for 20p in the supermarket"

LIZZIE: Something like this [a plastic tub of tomatoes] I would never normally buy, but it was reduced to 30p, and I would normally buy five tomatoes for 60p and then I thought "oh you get a whole tub".

Whilst Mary does have a shortage of money, and may be unable to afford a pound for beans (though perhaps if all beans were a pound the price would not necessarily mean she could no longer afford beans), Lizzie's budget does not preclude her from being able to pay her usual price for tomatoes. What in fact prevented Lizzie, a consumer who will put in an inordinate amount of effort to secure environmental products, from buying the more environmentally friendly option was the lure of the bargain. Miller (1998: 61) claims that for some consumers the thrill of shopping was in the purchasing of bargains, and in this case Lizzie displays her talent for shopping through her recognition of bargains. Bocock (1993: 54) argues that we are not natural consumers, we have to be socialised into desiring modern levels of consumption: the scarcity of money ensures that much of that socialisation involves the learning of appropriate prices for goods. Some products it is fine to pay more for (labelled trainers), others should be judged by their lower price - although cheapest is not always synonymous with best. Rather than a straight-forward cost/benefit analysis consumers find that whether the benefits are worth the cost is often subject to cultural coding. Because of this the increased prices consonant with ethical products can be viewed as creating both a structural and a cultural limit to the likely amount of ethical consumption a consumer would be willing to undertake. For ethical consumers the twin processes of the ethics of thrift and the ethics of concern come to be played out, at times almost arbitrarily, through notions of "the cheapest or the best"; where the best signifies the most ethical:

SUSY: You see there are definite boundaries where I can't be bothered with that sort of stuff. I was going to buy some shampoo or something, actually it was conditioner, and I was looking and there was the really right on one for lots of money and the cheapest, non-right on one, so I thought "The cheapest non-right on one", which is all right.

CHERRY: All of the beauty products that I buy are either the cheapest I can get my hands on, and never mind the rest, or it's pretty right on really, products that are really alternative and healthy.

### **3. Convenience**

The second thing the ethical consumers generally agreed about was that ethical consumerism was inconvenient and took a lot of time and effort to undertake. In addition to the huge demands made by the need to find out issue and product information, many of the products are either only available from specialist shops, or have only just become available in supermarkets, requiring organisation of shopping time, and trips to several shops:

RACHEL: I usually have to go into a health food shop once a week and quite a lot of my food comes from health food shops ... having sort of blitzed the health shop and spending far too much money we would probably just go to a supermarket ... There is a butcher in Holland Park, Lidgates, which is a quality [organic] butcher and that is where I normally go, because it is on the Central Line and so is my job, but um, sometimes at the weekend we go to the Queensway area and we go to Planet Organic sometimes and that is very good as well.

JO: I always go out of my way now to support a local shop that is er, but you don't live in the area so you don't know, I have to go a little bit out of my way, but I try to work it in when I go to give lessons to one of my students in Chingford. I stop by the shop and buy things from him because all his stuff is organic so you know that it is just about everything that he has, so my washing powder, my washing up liquid, my cleaning materials, candles, your dried fruit, your cereals, he has everything. Not that I only buy from him, because it is inconvenient, but whenever I can.

Whilst nearly all of the consumers used a variety of shops to do their weekly grocery shopping, only one of the interviewees claimed never to use a supermarket<sup>4</sup>: Cherry stated that she would rather pay double than go through the stress of visiting a supermarket. For the rest, the supermarket was seen as a necessary (and not particularly unpleasant) evil. Indeed, much of the convenience of shopping at a large store had an ethical explanation:

LESLEY: [You can't meet your ideals] ... I suppose partly with the products it is due to availability, um locally and maybe, I remember the place I was living before you could walk down to Stratford and there was a shop there where you could buy Ecover and things like that ... I was thinking about if it was a case of getting on a bus and buying something, then in a way you are kind of defeating the object.

JULIE: We both go shopping together and we have got a range of wheeled vehicles including a shopping trolley that we use for lugging shopping back, or of course we carry it which is good exercise, and helps fight off the risk of osteoporosis for women: weight bearing exercise. We also tend to drop off our recycling on the way round to the supermarket, so we set off with a couple of plastic bags of empty bottles, and perhaps a newspaper, box of newspaper, whatever. We don't get much in cans, but every now and then we have cans to drop off. But it is useful having the recycling bins on the trek down to the supermarket... of course the

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<sup>4</sup> And this was reflected throughout the findings of the questionnaire survey as well. In retrospect the questionnaire was poorly worded, asking where the consumer regularly bought "ethical" products. From this wholefood/healthfood shops came out top with 81%. However, supermarkets still attracted 76%, making them the second most popular ethical retailer.

supermarket is the regular for the weekly stock up. It's the only shop for instance within walking distance that actually sells wholemeal bread, and so that is the main thing that we go for there. It is also the only organic and free-range supplier within walking distance.

So, supermarkets - they're cheap, they're convenient, they also sell a wide ethical range and are health inducing: hardly surprising that there is no other retailer to touch them in the country. It is the combination of convenience, choice and price that make them so irresistible to the ethical consumers. Mary says that she would love to see a store which already had checked all their products and had a full range under one roof - unfortunately those stores that have managed to do this and were mentioned, for example Bumblebees and Out of this World, were often referred to as costly. In the end the consumer does not buy all ethical products and, as I will explain later in this chapter, the consumer does not even wish to buy all ethical products. So a store which only deals in ethical products ends up becoming inconvenient, and loses its ethical trade to the conventional store where the consumer has more options open to them.

Once inside a shop or supermarket, ethically consuming can once more become time consuming, depending upon how much effort the consumer is willing to put in to checking the potential ethicality of their purchases. There was a variety of different levels of ethical screening, but all of the consumers admitted to being label conscious at some point in their shopping routines. Lizzie was possibly the most devoted all round ethical consumer I interviewed, and she put large amounts of effort into her ethical consumerism; Rachel admits to being more motivated by her own health; whereas Lesley was a dedicated vegetarian and fair trader, but was more flexible in her consumption habits. Here is how they describe their commitment to checking ethicality:

LIZZIE: ... you know when we were supermarket shopping, I'm used to spending hours lingering in a supermarket, and it doesn't really bother me because I love food and I love cooking and I love experimenting, and Angela just likes to go in, get out, cook breakfast, the most basic thing, doesn't really like cooking - she just likes eating. And I would stand there checking ingredients and she'd say "Oh God it is so boring, you've been standing there for half an hour" and I'd be like "Oh, sorry".

*ME: Do you tend to read all the ingredients on your products?*

RACHEL: Um, yes, I think. If it is going to become a staple food, definitely. If it is just something that is a frivolity, like a funny looking ice-cream for a treat, I am less bothered if I am only going to eat it once or twice, but by and large I can taste the additives and I just think "this is disgusting". But yeah I am quite wanting to know what is in stuff, so if I consume stuff with additives in it is knowingly, but thinking "I don't do this often" sort of thing.

LESLEY: ... I might buy a one off thing without necessarily thinking or taking in who the company is that I have bought, but after buying one product I would think about it, and then I won't buy it again when I sort of realise and look at the small print and think "Oh dear, it is that, you know, it is made by Rowntree or whatever".

The difference in commitment to checking the ethicality of a product was matched by the amount of inconvenience the consumers would put themselves to in order to secure an ethical product. Stories of tracking down particularly elusive environmentally friendly goods ran through several of the transcripts. The willingness of different consumers to expend time and energy (especially that of the greenhouse gas creating type) are demonstrated by the explanations provided by three consumers as to their choice of washing powder. Lizzie and Suzy are flatmates and provide two sides to the same story. Mary obviously feels like she has acted against her principles, but not quite through her own fault:

LIZZIE: The other week I couldn't do any washing for a week, because I could not find a washing powder that was environmental. I went to the big Sainsbury's, I work in Chiswick and there is a huge Sainsbury's there and they always do a green care range, but for some reason they don't do it any more, and I eventually had to wait until Saturday so that I could come up to Euston and go get some washing powder and I was so furious. I had been to four supermarkets and none of them you know, Sainsbury's, Tesco's, Safeways and in none of them could I find a washing powder that was environment and animal friendly. They tend to be one thing or the other. Loads of them are environment friendly, so they say, but still tested on animals, and I just find the fact that they don't think about these things in conjunction very strange. Whereas Susy just thought Sod it and went out and bought some of Sainsbury's own brand. ... sometimes it gets to the point where all three of us can't be bothered, me less so than the others, but I think that it is just because I have been doing it for longer.

SUSY: ... the last washing powder that I bought was Sainsbury's Novon because they didn't have any of the other stuff. Lizzie didn't, Lizzie surprised me, it was sort of like "wow, that is really good". She needed some washing powder that was environmentally friendly so she didn't buy any, whereas I needed the washing powder so I just bought the other stuff, so yeah.

MARY: Oh God, I did buy some Radion the other week. I went to the shop and it was closed so I had to like buy this powder. It's the first time I've ever bought any washing powder like that, but I was stuck. ... But I had to buy it because my cat pissed on my bed, so I had to buy some.

*ME: So you feel guilty?*

MARY: Yeah, I feel really quite bad about it.

Clearly then, the consumer develops their own standards for behaviour. Some consumers, such as Lizzie, are determined to try to live up to her ethical ideals as much as possible in terms of the effort she is willing to put in to her shopping, whereas other consumers are relatively happy to allow themselves some leeway to live a simple life. The interviewees displayed differences in their levels of commitment to ethical consumerism, and each had a particular area which they felt precluded them from ethical consumerism and used this area as a justification for lack of action. For Cath, and to some extent Jane, the problem was time and convenience - an obvious issue for mothers with young children. The problems of sparing the time and energy to shop ethically with kids were mentioned several times in the interviews:

JANE: Sometimes Bumblebee's drives me mad ... the laid back attitude in there, when you just want to whizz in and out, and I am always rushing, especially with children and everything. Sometimes I love supermarket shopping, I can just dash round ...

CATH: I did have a list of all the companies I had to boycott, and you would go round the supermarket with the kids and you would have to remember to bring it, and there is only so much you can do. When I get more time I will probably get more into it.

Convenience as efficient products is at a premium when children are involved, and Cath tells of the realities of motherhood ousting ethical considerations:

CATH: Before I had Jane, you know, it was going to be cloth nappies and there were a few companies that would deliver and take-away. But motherhood took me by surprise and erm, I was a bit ill after Jane as well, I had severe anaemia which just left me totally exhausted, and the thought of having to wash nappies as well. You can change them 12 times a day when they are little, you know, and I was like "God, I wasn't aware of this". And that was my one like luxury, I suppose, and then I thought I will do it again with Anne.

The inconvenience of inefficient and time consuming products was constantly mentioned by the interviewees. Some of the problems created seemed acceptable to the consumers, such as Mary who continued to live with a limescaled toilet rather than pay the environmental cost of cleaning it efficiently, but other areas were deemed to be absolute necessities. The first of these I shall discuss is organic box schemes. Delivered to the door, certified organic fruit and vegetables, at first glance this would appear to be the ultimate in convenience shopping. However, the reality for the many interviewees who had joined a box scheme (Jane excepted, who continues to be very happy with her scheme) was that the situation quite quickly became untenable.

CATH: I used to have a box scheme, but it was all a bit dodgy.

LIZZIE: I was part of an organic, well getting vegetables delivered from an organic supplier and they were disgusting. [Really?]. Yeah, a lot of them were off by the time we got them, which really annoyed me because they were expensive, but the worst thing was they could only tell you that they would deliver some time between 4pm and 10pm on a Wednesday and I don't get back from work until 7, "Woo, we can't guarantee it, we'll leave them outside the front door" and I wasn't living here then, I was living in a much more dodgy place and they would just get nicked and I am not going to spend 16 quid on vegetables which would just get nicked. So I had to give up, which was a pity because the vegetables that weren't off were really delicious.

The second area mentioned where ethics underwent a stark reality check was the absolute necessity of remaining the only species calling your house "home". Lisa is a strict vegan, and Lesley is a vegetarian. Here is what happened when their homes became invaded by ants:

LISA: We did buy some stuff a few months ago because we became infested with ants in here, and um, it was absolutely horrifying and I felt really bad because a couple of my flatmates had just moved in. I thought "I can't have a flat full of ants" and so I just went straight, without even thinking about it, I thought "right, I am going to buy some ant powder and get rid of them". As far as I can tell it was a deterrent rather than something that killed them, because I put it down and they never came back. I mean I don't try to set out to kill insects, but I despise insects and I wish they would all disappear. Nevertheless, I think it is immoral to try and kill them.

LESLEY: There is some ant killer that Andy bought, to my horror, but um a couple of summers ago there were loads of ants coming into the house, that, I don't know, because I feel a bit um, because I wouldn't go out and buy something like that, but in a way I am relieved that Andy will go out and buy something like that.

The sanctity of an animal welfare ethic is called into question here, and when the overwhelming desire to dominate and destroy certain unwelcome visitors comes into play it is wise to kill first and offer a sop to the conscience later. Despite Lesley's protestations that she would never kill ants herself, no doubt she would have made a push to "deter" them, as Lisa did, if her husband had not been about. An animal welfare ethic does not necessarily preclude killing, it simply draws the hazy line of compassion further down the food chain. Lisa and Lesley described killing ants as an unpleasant, but necessary fact of life, in pretty much the same way as many of the consumers who had ceased to be vegetarian described eating meat - with the same reflexive portrait of the imposition of some contingency making their actions necessary.

The problems of inconvenience and absolute necessity might be overcome if it were as simple as mouldy vegetables and killing ants, but at the point where taste and pleasure intercept, comes the issue of “what is the point of buying something to eat if you don’t like the taste or look of it?”. Thus whilst many people may praise the wonderful taste of organic vegetables, Rachel confesses that she often does not buy them because they do not look as good as conventional vegetables. And when it comes to a nice cup of coffee... Here are two explanations from people involved in fair trade. The first, Rachel, works for a fair trade organisation, and was happily telling me how she buys fair trade coffee when her husband intervened. The second, Pam, talks about trying to sell early fair trade coffee to Quakers, and the reasons for its failure:

Peter: Well, if push comes to shove we will use the Cafe Direct, but I would much rather not because it is not particularly good.

RACHEL: But you are using the Percol one.

Peter: We are using the Percol one. And there is one that is fair traded and organic.

RACHEL: And we liked that one.

Peter: That one was good.

RACHEL: So what we have been doing is experimenting with the fair traded coffees to find one we like and now that we have found one we like we would buy that one if we could, but we would resort to a Cafe Direct.

Peter: At the end of it we would resort to a non-fair trade, non-organic one because at the end of it we are up for a decent cup of coffee.

PAM: Well, I was a Traidcraft rep and I took the Traidcraft stuff into meetings and I actively tried to persuade the meeting to switch to Traidcraft coffee and in those days having had the campaign coffee, which wasn’t very nice and there was a reaction against it because it didn’t taste very nice, and I used to make statements like “we need to convert our tastebuds to conform with our principles, not the other way round”, um, but you don’t win converts that way you only offend people, and they think you are stuck up and it doesn’t work, it is not effective. But when they got the newer coffee and I persuaded them to buy that and then that worked, because it was nice coffee and so on.

The truth about ethical products, particularly food and personal hygiene products (and I will return to this in the health section), is that they need to be as efficient or as good as conventional products for the majority of ethical consumers to buy them. Cath has a succinct question: “Why can’t fair trade taste good?”, and there seems to be no reason why not (unlike removing certain chemicals from cleaning products where it is more obvious how that could limit performance). So whilst the consumer may accept clothes without a bluey whiteness, coffee, fruit and vegetables are expected to taste as good as conventional products. It is no coincidence that organic food is so successful when it is portrayed as tasting better than food sprayed with



pesticides. Apart from the higher cost, limiting to many consumers, it is a win-win situation - better health, better taste, better ethics.

#### **4. Bodily duties**

Although I had not originally anticipated the large role that health and the body would play in the narratives of the consumers, in retrospect the discourse appears obvious. Diet now forms a central strand of government health campaigns (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 46) and media interest in health issues has increased steadily over the last three decades (Warde, 1997: 78). The expert advice about what constitutes "healthy" is reminiscent of the expert formulation of environmental risk (Beck, 1992) and those fearing one set of risks to the self are likely to fear the other. Moreover health issues offer validity to many of the ethical consumer arguments (for example vegetarianism and BSE). Following through the consumers' discourses on health and ethical consumerism shows how the body's dictates can both strengthen and negate the consumer's ethical constructs. Furthermore, the differences apparent across the product areas show the cultural construction of the meanings of healthy and natural, and call into question some of the literatures in this area which have concentrated solely on food.

Nearly all the consumers agreed that they tried to make healthy eating part of their dietary regime. The exception to this was Lesley, a nurse, who obviously felt that it should be taken into account, but accepted that it was not really a primary concern and she enjoyed sweet things. However, she appeared to be under the impression that this transgressed some sort of code of ethical lifestyle practice, and apologised for not sprouting beans, drinking herbal tea and other "healthy", "ethical" practices. Whilst there was considerable consensus about what constituted healthy eating in general - olive oil (found in *all* the respondents cupboards) the epitome of healthy; organic food being unanimously agreed as good; processed food being perceived as less healthy; and alternative medicine a more natural way to health - when it came animal products there was no agreement at all. Health issues appeared to be a motivating factor for certain diets, but were also evidently being used as practical support for the chosen diet. The remarkable variety of "expert" opinions as to what constitutes the best nutritional value for the body was never more emphasised than in the plethora of "healthy diets" demonstrated by the interviewees.

AMY: [The osteopath] says that meat consumption is really bad for anybody who has eczema so we went vegetarian for a year... this time I stopped eating red meat because I had terrible gut problems and when I stopped eating red meat my gut improved.

LIZZIE: I went through a stage when I was doing my finals of eating fish and I think that was because I needed brain food.

JANE: ... I've met lots of vegan doctors and whatever, and I now really believe that it is the healthiest diet to be a vegan.

Believing in the healthiness of particular foods and diets because of the vitamins, minerals and properties of the food showed the interviewees' awareness of the discourses of diet as primary healthcare. But if the quotes above sound as though the interviewees are taking expert views to clarify their own beliefs and fit in with their own desires, then this becomes even clearer in the following quotes. The consumers often used the body as a natural indicator as to what was necessary to the self as an individual. Even Amy (who placed phenomenal faith in the opinions of doctors and suffers from M.E.) disobeyed the nutritional advice given to her because of the more important indications of what she claims to be the needs of her body:

AMY: I have developed a yen for fish in the last few months, and I don't know why because it doesn't bother me usually, so it must be something to do with my health. I've actually been going down the hill again for the last six weeks, so I try and intuitively go with what I need, so I've had some fish today.

RACHEL: When I don't have animal protein when I am working full-time I don't seem to have that stamina that I need, so then that wins out and I try to eat a bit of meat every other day.

SUSY: I do have a sweet tooth and it usually happens when I have got my period and I have pangs for chocolate, and last time I think I bought chocolate ice-cream and this time I got chocolate spread.

The belief that it was possible to derive efficient information about dietary needs from bodily desires reflects Lupton's research findings (1996: 83). The body was similarly capable of discerning undesirable food stuffs, the worst offender being artificial sweeteners - going some way to conflict with the standard discourse that sugary foods were bad<sup>5</sup>.

LIZZIE: I don't like, I can't stand artificial sweeteners. I avoid them like the plague actually. I just think they are really bad for you and they taste disgusting as well, and I try to buy things without too many additives in, just because I don't think you need them.

CATH: Some of the things they put in food. I read the ingredients and I just can't eat it. I think having eaten fresh, and you know freshly prepared food and you go back to eating frozen food and I think "Oh God", you know it tastes so artificial.

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<sup>5</sup> There was little in the transcripts to suggest that the ethical consumers did view sweet foods as bad. Although the interviewees frequently talked about having a sweet tooth as though this was in contrast to a healthy diet, there was a very real belief that always eating "good" things was damaging and all foods were needed within limits. In fact I gained the impression that rather than unhealthy, sweet foods were viewed as falling outside of the pressures imposed upon women to conform to society's standards, and therefore naughty, in a very rewarding sense. I will talk more about this in the next section.

Generally frozen foods were avoided in favour of fresh foods. A high value was placed upon cooking from first principles, viewed as creating naturally better meals. In keeping with other research findings the interviewees did regard processed food as less natural and less healthy than fresh food (Lupton, 1996: 61, Bell and Valentine, 1997: 46), in particular, processed cheese, which frequently occurred in vegetarian narratives as an especially unpleasant, synthetic and valueless food substance. The problem of artificial food was rarely clarified though. Apart from leading to vitamin deficiencies, only Lizzie verbalised any personal concern about the effects of processed food upon the body, making the impacts of the unnatural explicit in a manner akin to Mary Douglas' notion of impurity as matter out of place (Douglas, 1984):

LIZZIE: I worry about preservatives, because I wonder what happens to our bodies after we die if we have had loads of preservatives, maybe just take years to decompose.

For the vegetarians and vegans interviewed ready-meals appeared less disgusting than for the meat eaters. Lizzie claimed that vegetarian processed food was less unhealthy than meat food, due to the very constitution - vegetables perceived as a more constantly healthy product than meat. However, I think the reluctance to condemn processed food out of hand stemmed more from the fact that vegetarian cooking was seen as more time-consuming, with less variety. For those who had been vegetarian or vegan for long periods of time, edible frozen meals are a relatively new invention off-setting the downsides of a limited diet, and therefore holding a greater premium than processed meat products.

Interestingly, the vegetarian/vegan discourses surrounding what constitutes healthy food, and the arguments about the exact nature of the harm that unhealthy foods do to the body at no point found those products particular to vegetarian/vegan animal food substitutes in conflict with their concerns. Despite the close links between the biotechnology industry and vegetarianism through the production of novel foods, this was never mentioned as a problem or a possibility for boycott. It is not inconceivable that without any media comment on these products, the ethical consumer had failed to understand that consumer demand for novelty foods in the form of meat alternatives helps to drive the unpopular agrochemical business. Similarly without a public debate, the ethical consumer who makes the unpleasant link could allow themselves to ignore it as a necessary evil. Hence, it seems logical to conclude that what is acceptable both morally and bodily has been culturally produced and then personally negotiated to be in keeping with the consumer's own values.

Many arguments have been put forward about the role of culture in determining what is naturally edible (Eder, 1996, Lupton, 1994), and emphasis has been placed on the uniting of inside and outside through safe food being allowed into the body, assimilating the external into the internal (Atkinson, 1983, Fischler, 1988, Falk, 1996). Natural foods become synonymous with health, due to the assumption that all food

has medical significance, being the primary point of deliberate self-intervention with the body (Fischler, 1988: 280). Because of this the self can become polluted from the inside by transgressing the oral boundary (Lupton, 1996: 113). These theories may appear so rational that they become obvious, but when research into ethical consumerism is extended past the field of food and into bathroom products, including the medicine cabinet, startling contradictions are apparent. Firstly, the constituents of healthy products and associated discourses become confused. Secondly, the segregation of inside and outside, and the boundaries of the body, are seen to have far more complex workings. I wish to engage in these debates, but this is first and foremost a thesis on the performance of ethics. I will, therefore, return to clarify my findings after tracing the differences in ethics across the product areas.

When questioned about personal hygiene products, it quickly became apparent that the ethical consumers did not apply their ethics consistently across all areas. Whilst the consumers had been strong in their ethical commitments when applied to food (and cleaning products), in general the strength of commitment was considerably less in relation to personal hygiene. Most of this laxity was due to the efficacy of “natural”, ethical products, especially where bodily discourses were relevant. Food is often singled out as a substance applicable to pressures for bodily surveillance, with ascribed health and self-control indicators, and for balancing the nature of health and indulgence. And yet all of these understandings apply equally to personal hygiene products, with attitudes to body odours and blemishes as culturally controlled as body size, the health of skin, teeth and eyes being daily personal hygiene concerns and the interviewees talked about the same sort of pleasures derived from pampering the self in the bathroom as they did through food. Given the similarities between the two areas, where better to view consistency of ethics and cultural discourses.

Lisa was a strict vegan, and viewed with displeasure anything that involved animal products. However, having avoided all animal food products, her bathroom revealed a contradictory set of values, with a variety of animal tested products. I asked Lisa about this, and although she tried to justify her purchase it became apparent that she simply did not take animal testing into consideration for certain products:

*ME: Do you worry about animal testing for your contact lens solutions?*

LISA: No, I don't think about it to be honest. Yeah, I am not as keyed up on all things as I could be. I am, I don't know whether these are, I can't imagine that saline solution is particularly harmful to, well I am sure the solution is not particularly harmful to whatever it is tested on.

*ME: Are you as concerned about animal testing as you are about animal farming?*

LISA: I am, yeah.

*ME: So do the two go together?*

LISA: Yes, I think they do, but I think that unconsciously I have considered them differently because, um, if I had been buying a particular chemical or something for, um, years I tend to carry on doing it

without really thinking about it, but you know if you are vegetarian then you always have it in mind when you go shopping for food or whatever.

It would be easy to write off Lisa's comments as revealing an area of consumption which is devoid of the lifestyle coding of veganism, but this pattern of contradiction was common across the consumers for certain products, namely contact lens solutions and medicines, especially painkillers. Lizzie, having gone so much out of her way to buy washing powder that was environmentally friendly, but not tested on animals, because in her words "I can't bear the thought of it next to my skin", buys animal tested contact lens solution and painkillers. Why?

LIZZIE: It is the same as the medical thing. To me this is a medical thing.

Personal health takes priority other ethics. Vegetarian food is seen as unlikely to cause physical harm, putting substances into the eyes which are untested may well do so. Wearing make-up which has not been tested on animals is one thing, taking medicine that has not been tested on animals is something quite different. Conventional medical products are technologically produced, and contain chemicals, unlike most foods. The law, therefore, requires them to be tested efficiently, and that means on animals primarily. And whilst the consumers tended to be in agreement over the more natural and, therefore, desirable nature of alternative medicine, it was viewed as unreliable in practice. In contrast to natural meaning healthy in food, natural had more than one meaning in those products which could be coded as medical (including toothpaste).

There is a whole range of "natural", ethical personal hygiene products, as characterised by the replica Body Shop goods - Boots even call their range "the Natural range". These products were generally regarded as efficient and more pleasant than their conventional counterparts. The threshold to the "natural is good" discourse for non-medical products was quite high, but inevitably came at the stage where bodily surveillance required a very efficient product. For example, the deodorants chosen, whilst generally not animal tested, were not the more earthy of the available choices. Lesley explains why:

LESLEY: For quite a while I didn't use any deodorant, at least I don't mean that, for quite a while I tried to use a Friends of the Earth crystal thing and I just didn't find that it worked at all. Maybe if I was doing a less active job it wouldn't be a problem, but I've tried all different things from health food shops and nothing actually works. So something that says on it, like Sure 24 hour, that is very tempting to buy and so that is what I actually use.

Natural may well be valued culturally, and ethically, when it involves food which is healthy and effective at keeping the body in socially correct maintenance, but it has no cultural value at all when it allows the body to sweat, rot or ail. Where there is no cultural value and no cultural discourse, there is always going to be a limit to the ethical action it can command. At this juncture culturally constructed bodily dictates

are of more import than animal or environmental dictates, and the consumer feels legitimate in allowing themselves to forsake their ethical constructions.

On the other hand, where an ethic holds strong, the body can then become a potential site of contamination: through the skin from touching, the lungs from smelling and stomach from eating. This contamination is often caused by the polluting of a vegetarian or vegan by animal produce, with even the smell of dead flesh becoming repulsive in the same way that the body rejects poisons. The consumers talked about becoming more sensitive, undergoing wholesale physical changes, emphasising the culturally (and psychologically) constructed nature of edible/poisonous. However, as can be seen, in contrast to Lupton's (1996: 113) claims that pollution can happen after substances pass the oral boundary of the mouth, the body can be polluted in a variety of ways:

LISA: I don't think I expected when I became a veggie that that would have any effect on my olfactory senses or whatever. I have noticed and my veggie friends have noticed that when you become a vegetarian and far more when you're vegan, you develop a keener sense of smell and things start smelling completely different as well. If I smelt a steak cooking it wouldn't smell like steak it would smell like dead. And if I go past a butchers or near meat I would feel like my lungs were unclean, which is surprising to me because only a few years ago I enjoyed that smell. Now I feel like I have got a disease if I smell it... Once at work one of the containers of meat was partially open and I got blood all over my hand and it was terrible. I felt like I was holding a dead animal. I had to run off and scrub my hands.

LIZZIE: Yeah, the smell is just revolting. I mean I got on the tube last night, it was the last tube going back from Leicester Square, you know what it's like, and this guy was eating, I didn't know what it was but my stomach was literally retching. It turned out to be Kentucky Fried Chicken and I thought "oh my God, I'm going to be sick, I'm going to be sick" ... I was actually holding my breath for four stops until he got off.

Whilst the belief that the very essence of dead animal can pollute the body will undoubtedly raise cynical responses in those who have other ethics, the contaminating nature of chemicals is somewhat more accepted: take medical evidence of the carcinogenic impacts of certain pesticides for example. However, many of the interviewees claimed to suffer from allergies from environmentally unfriendly chemicals, and the psychological nature of their revulsion to animal products has to bring in to question the nature of contamination. If cleanliness is a modern obsession (Lupton, 1996: 114), then it is one that is hampered by environmental concerns. Instead of germs as the enemy, the ethical consumers had a greater distrust of chemical cleaners:

SUSY: I am very conscious of, for example, using non [environmentally friendly] stuff in the bath. I did clean the bath once, and we had some

non stuff or did we, I can't remember. But I do have a recollection of cleaning the bath and being pedantic about making sure all the cleaning stuff was washed away, as I could see it as being an irritant.

Some of the consumers used green products, some used conventional products as infrequently as possible, and several used no bought products at all, resorting to hot water, vinegar and lemon juice. It was striking that these consumers who had become anxious about all sorts of things had decided that cleanliness was not a necessity. Jane claimed that her flat had been so unclean that her friends had come round to clean it and Lesley, the nurse, said that she believed that having your own germs in your own home was beneficial to building up immunity. Whilst none of the consumers lived in a pigsty, their calm attitude towards a "natural balance" between dirt and cleaner (otherwise known as germicide/pesticide) showed that they placed ethics of health above the moral discourse of cleanliness.

What I have aimed to show in this section is the tenuous relationship of healthy-natural claims. Where the ethical consumer perceives natural products as healthy, then this helps to stimulate ethical consumerism. Where the ethical consumer sees natural products as opposed to the best possible health, then ethical consumerism will be diminished. What is a healthy natural product is negotiated through public discourses and private imaginings of bodily impacts. Rather than food containing a separate health discourse to other areas of consumption by being a uniquely liminal substance, capable of uniting inside and out, the narratives of consumers show a huge range of nebulous discourses, which has the lungs and the skin as bodily parts which can be affected by "poisonous" contaminants, from which the body develops extreme measures of revulsion to ensure that the individual avoids contact. These "poisons" are culturally and psychologically derived, and show little constancy - with chemicals bad in food, but good in medicine. It was never my intention to conduct a study into health concerns, and I have indulged in these debates because they have relevance to the ability to consume ethical products. I do however suggest that those theorists dealing with bodily discourses surrounding food take the time to examine other consumption areas, because on the strength of this minor cross-over of theories I have developed serious doubts about single product area studies.

## **5. Pleasure**

Ethical consumerism is often perceived as the very anathema to pleasure. It has an image of denial, and as Schultz (1997: 39) points out, denial in consumer society is seen as ascetic and painful self-immolation on the altar of duty. The current morality of the market is one of self-satisfaction achieved through taking as much as possible, rather than denying the self anything which it desires. In this climate, where the ethical consumers were aware that the practice of ethical consumerism is viewed as one of renunciation, complaints about lack of choice and doing without were downplayed in favour of dispelling the unhappy associations of ethical identities. Pleasure ultimately came to play a part in justifying actions through making the self happy - the imperative of any consumer - with emphasis placed on re-finding the joys of novelty in everyday goods, and taking a break from ethics as a purely hedonistic act of indulgence in the pleasures of the unethical.

Perhaps paradoxically for a section entitled “pleasure” I have chosen as the starting point the stories told about the problems encountered by the consumers through the lack of ethical choice. Most often, the complaints about lack of choice and self-denial were told for a particular reason, such as the consumer trying to demonstrate her dedication in the face of unpleasant deprivation. The points were rarely dragged out, being more of a passing comment. The same consumer was almost certain to offer the opposite claim at some point in the interview series, in an attempt to show that ethical consumerism was not in fact a difficulty, seemingly unaware that they had contradicted themselves:

LIZZIE: When I went home my sister had bought arctic rolls and I couldn't eat that because there was gelatine in it and that really annoyed me. ... Cakes would be nice to eat, but they nearly all have gelatine in.

JO: There is never the choice [in organic produce] that is available in the rest of the other produce.

JO: I still have my choices. Before the produce was not organic, unless you happened to be out in the country and you would see these farm shops and you would stop and buy and you would know that it was fresh, or you could go out and pick, but that was only a couple of times a year. Now that it is coming into these little shops I know it is available, and also it is being stocked in the supermarkets.

It is apparent to me that rather than this representing an attempt to conceal the fact that the consumers find ethical consumerism an unhappy and ascetic experience, it expresses two different notions of pleasure that the interviewees have achieved through their consumption choices. The first is the joy of feeling good about themselves as ethical beings. The second is the very real pleasures that are derived from restricted choices.

The fact that the consumers complain about the lack of choice when trying hard to defend their actions, suggests that they are taking the opportunity to enjoy the feeling of self-worth gained by choosing not to consume certain products. Fiske (1989: 24-26) puts forward an argument about the derivation of pleasure from consumption which takes as its basis de Certeau's and Williamson's theories of resistance and empowerment. At any given moment, Fiske contends, the consumer (especially the female consumer) who is normally disempowered in the economic system, assumes control. The amount of goods rejected compared to the ones selected allows the consumer pleasure from the feeling of empowerment. The ethical consumer can, therefore, achieve satisfaction from their deliberate construction of a paucity of choice, which helps to off-set the disappointment of constraint. The idea of empowerment crosses both the aforementioned ways of deriving pleasure through ethical consumerism, but to begin with I will quote some of the interviewees' comments about the positive gains to self-esteem which are created by feeling in control:



LESLEY: I would like to say, as well as a feeling of guilt there is also a satisfaction that at least I am trying, so it is not something that you are doing that you don't feel happy about.

CATH: I still enjoy it you know. If I can find a product that is fairly traded and organic and tastes great I think great you know, and I will carry on buying it. ... I suppose I see it as a challenge. A hobby maybe.

*ME: Do you, I mean is it something that you actively enjoy, going to visit all these things, is it interesting or ...*

LIZZIE: Yes it is. It's feeling like you are actually doing something - really, actually making a difference.

RACHEL: I thought [if I was to be able to buy fairly traded clothing] unless I spend £300 I am not going to get something I like, and I thought "I can probably manage without" and I quite like that feeling.

Feelings of efficacy and the image of the self as someone who has made, or at least tried to make, a difference and is therefore all the better for their consumption choices, fit in with Campbell's (1987) idea of hedonism as the basis for consumer desires. Campbell believes that both the senses and the emotions have to be stimulated to experience pleasure from consumption, and that constructing morally idealized self-images in day-dreams, to be fulfilled through consumption, form the root of that pleasure (1987: 213-214). I have reservations about the likelihood of dreaming of the self as "the great and the good" as a motivation for ethical consumerism; I do, however, believe that reflexively enjoying the feeling of being good is one of the positive gains of ethical consumerism.

The second strand of pleasure, that achieved through the surprising effects of paucity of choice, also contains echoes of Campbell's (1992) theory of consumer desires - that of the role of novelty. In general novelty is perceived as a drive of consumerism, through providing a consumer with a new canvas upon which they project their fantasies about self-fulfilment from consumption. Ethical consumerism, however, provides a re-working of the concept of novelty: having given up certain desirable products, the newly created ethical alternative provides immense pleasure for the consumer. The rewards for ethicality are at their greatest here, with those long lost treats restored to the ethical consumer (especially vegetarians and vegans), and enjoyed all the more for knowing what it is that has been missed. Instead of being a novelty in the strictest sense, a new ethical alternative is a return to novelty, and is less likely to prove to be the disappointment assumed to fuel conventional consumerism:

LIZZIE: Heinz have just started doing baked beans with vegetarian sausages which everybody is so excited about it is ridiculous, and so I have suddenly started looking around that shelf again and thinking ohh what else can you get, you know. .... Marks and Spencer's tarte de

citreon, we ate it once and then discovered it had gelatine in and I was really furious because it was delicious. That was five years ago and I spotted it in Marks and Spencer's the other day and they have made it vegetarian which really pleased me.

None of the stories of deprivation of choice should be taken as implying that the ethical consumer does not buy products which transgress their ethics out of sheer desire. Just as consumers are notorious for supplementing healthy diets with cream cakes, the ethical consumer lets themselves indulge in certain "treats". As one of the interviewees puts it "you can't have a conscience all the time, otherwise you couldn't be happy". Showing strong similarities with the interviewees in Miller's sample (1998), the ethical consumers described the treats they allowed themselves - generally cakes and sweets, or alcohol - which showed clearly that there were times when ethical thresholds were gladly (and surreptitiously) reached. Miller (1998: 48) sees a treat as an extravagant buy that frames all other shopping as mundane and other orientated. The ethical consumers' ideas of treats would easily fit in with this description, and moreover fit in with the cultural ideals of a treat as a sticky cream-cake or bar of chocolate. These naughty but nice products seemed to be the areas which the ethical consumers were lax about both because of an overwhelming desire for the goods, and because they already stood outside the notion of "good", "sensible" shopping.

Arriving at Amy's house for the second interview she confessed to having just been shopping and buying lots of cakes containing ingredients outside her ethics. She said her first impulse had been to hide the cake, but then thought better of it in favour of an honest interview. This inevitably led to a frank discussion of the limits to ethical concerns:

*ME: You said you eat things like biscuits and cakes, is that where you slip, on the pleasure, where there is almost like naughtiness there?*

AMY: Yes, I think it is, isn't it. Because I like naughtiness, yes, definitely. My daughter and I always go out in term-time and we make sure we "squadgy [cake] and tea" and they have got to be as disgusting as possible. I have always enjoyed that. I have always enjoyed squadgy cakes, so yes, I slip up on the nice things. ... When you go to a tea place there is no list of ingredients on the piece of gateau that is there, so you don't know what you are eating, so yeah I go for what I fancy and enjoy it.

This pattern of treating the self was repeated across the consumers, both for ethical concerns and health concerns, and where the two meet. There is little doubt that a great deal of the pleasure to be derived from these "treats" came from the feeling of doing something "naughty", of breaking one's own rules. Whilst Amy had decided to be open about her sheer delight in being unethical and unhealthy, many of the consumers felt obliged to offer some form of defence of their actions, and tried to minimise either their involvement or the consequences. Here is another truly wonderful explanation of treats from Rachel and her husband:

RACHEL: Frozen ice-cream, we buy that for two months in the summer for a treat. And we are not going to buy the junk ice-cream any more because it is rubbish ...

Peter: Give away words on the lid "frozen dessert", rather than ice-cream.

RACHEL: So, we will go back to buying the quality ice-creams which are more expensive, but that is because they are made with fresh ingredients, but they probably still have additives in, but it is a treat.

ME: *So you eat ice-cream, but not dairy products?*

RACHEL: That's right, this is my blip, my treat. I mean I haven't had one ice-cream out, I have had one this summer, I mean some people probably have one every other day or something. These are like, I allow myself from time to time ice-cream when it is very hot. It is a treat, but it is probably going to be twice a week when it is hot, which is allowing myself quite a lot of treats, but I am not eating other sweet things like biscuits and cakes.

Peter: I think that everything we do is tinged with pragmatism and we are not obsessive about things, and the whole process I suppose could be described as one of mitigation.

RACHEL: So we have a sort of core stock of things and then we have treats.

A whole variety of things come before ethical consumerism on the list of consumer priorities: the claims of family, shortage of money and the absolute necessity to have an efficient product. These are all accepted as reasonable grounds for placing the needs of the local above the individual before the claims of distant others. However, when it comes to the consumer straight-forwardly desiring a product not in keeping with their ethics, and therefore with no justification available to the ethical consumer for the product's purchase, the partial nature of knowledge across the commodity chain comes in handy as an excuse. Cherry, the radical environmental activist, railed against the impacts of transnationals throughout her interviews, and especially Coca-Cola who she saw as one of the worst offenders. She at first claimed she would never drink their product because of this, then admitted that she loved Coca-Cola, and saw it as something special, her personal treat. She added:

CHERRY: If I ever buy a can of Coca-Cola it will be on my own, it won't be with any of my friends. I'm sure that, well I'm not sure at all actually. I don't know enough about Coca-Cola as a company to know who they shit on, and my dad's just got back from Australia and said that the Aborigines in the National Park were performing to the tourists and he got to talking to them and discovered that they were sponsored by Coca-Cola.

From having previously accused Coca-Cola of destroying rainforests and paying their workers very low wages, Cherry now uses the uncertainties prevalent in the global market to free her from her already acknowledged duty of avoiding Coke. The

interview took place prior to the said Aborigines being used as part of Coca-Cola's marketing campaign, and I imagine Cherry has to be more cynical about the good intentions of the sponsorship now. However, more generally the contradiction of the shifts between boycott and happy consumption has long fascinated me with regards to ethical consumerism - I have to confess it was the contradiction of vegans having such a radical pattern of consumption, and yet drinking Guinness (well known in ethical consumer circles for containing fish) that was one of the things that intrigued me enough to pursue a PhD in ethical consumerism in the first place. So I asked Jane, the first vegan I interviewed, what she tended to drink in the pub and she told me it was Guinness - admitting that she knew it was not vegan. In the next interview she returned to the subject:

JANE: Actually we were laughing about that Guinness. All this weekend we seemed to be drinking Guinness. All vegans, well not all vegans, some vegans, and I was saying to my friend Doris, who is a member of the Vegan Society, and we were saying that God, we hadn't really thought about the drink thing so much, but other vegans would be really strict on that. We know that there is one can or the bottle that is, but we haven't even bothered to look it up, so we are obviously not that bothered about it. So we've been thinking about that, but if there wasn't a label on it, and I wasn't absolutely sure I would possibly have it. Like there were these chocolate doughnuts where [my daughter] goes for her dance class and you know they were just at the corner in the bakery and I could not resist. And I quite enjoyed eating that cos I had no idea what was in it.

So for products an individual desperately wants to consume it is helpful to be able to disconnect from the impacts of that consumption. Therefore, not having a list of ingredients allows the consumer the extra room to locate themselves within the uncertainties created by the gaps in consumer knowledge. Alongside this repositioning of the self as an uninformed consumer, comes the placing of the self as a small cog in a vast commodity system:

JANE: I think it's just the reason I'm doing it is to avoid the animal cruelty and I know that one little thing isn't going to make any difference. Right, but I am also doing it as a consumer and I know it is a very small difference. I'm only doing it for my conscience I suppose, so in those cases I'm not bothered about a tiny bit of that in my system and I know it is not going to make a huge difference.

At the point at which the consumer no longer wishes to consume ethically then, this narrative of making little or no difference anyway was a common occurrence. In contradistinction to arguments in the last chapter about an empowered ethical consumer impacting on the commodity chain through their choices, the consumer now sees action as irrelevant because it has such a minimal impact in the first place. This pattern of justification only appeared when the consumer was unable to explain her actions through "reasonable" thresholds to action.

## 6. Negotiating ethics in space and place

It is impossible to examine behaviour outside of context, and indeed the ethical consumers spent a considerable time explaining the differences in ease and difficulty of being an ethical consumer in certain spaces. In this section I will look at the effects of context and ethic on the consumer's desire for consistency or to appear to others as consistent, whilst at the same time having to constantly negotiate social and spatial constraints. I have taken four different, although highly generalised, locations to examine the change in behavioural practices, namely home, work, eating out, and eating at friends, thereby moving the analysis away from the limitations of single sites of consumption (Jackson and Thrift, 1995: 211). The emphasis is mainly placed on food because the consumers' narratives outside the home purely concentrated upon that one product area, as though none of the other areas were consumed, or required any ethical consumption, in any other space than the home.

Women are rarely seen as having complete control, even in their own homes. Academics have regularly recognised the gendered segregation of the undertaking of household duties. Shopping is viewed as a female skill (Jackson and Holbrook, 1995: 1925, Lupton, 1996: 39), and women are far more likely to cook than men (Warde and Hetherington, 1994: 759, Murcott, 1995: 92). However, few of my interviewees lived in nuclear families and of those who did only Cath still had young children. Out of all the ethical consumers for whom household negotiations, in terms of partner or children, could be seen as applicable only Cath did the majority of the shopping or the cooking. The rest of the interviewees were quick to point out that their partners, or grown up children, took an equal share of the cooking and shopping chores. Much of this was due to the ill health of ethical consumers in families, such as Pam and Amy who said that they found shopping especially tiring. However, for those with no health problems, there was a clear understanding of the need to endorse their alternative (and more politically correct) lifestyles with an image of an empowered female within the home<sup>6</sup>. So Julie was quick to justify her reasons for always doing the cooking, and some of the ethical consumers emphasised the role of their partners by stressing that they were the more capable chef:

JULIE: We have a division of labour. John is in charge of tidiness and I am in charge of nature. Cooking comes under nature, washing up comes under tidiness, that sort of thing.

LESLEY: Andy cooks more than I do. Mostly the cooking we do is sort of chopping it up and putting it into a pan or whatever, but Andy does it more creatively than me. He likes lots of spices and things like that.

RACHEL: I suppose we take it in turns [to cook] and do about half each roughly.

Peter: You do the bigger half then!

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<sup>6</sup> See 'In defense of shopping' (Douglas 1997) for a fuller debate about the links between attitudes within the home to attitudes in general.

RACHEL: Yes, but if Peter cooks he is a bit more adventurous than me, and you might get a sauce or something more exotic, whereas I am really not interested in creating washing up and I am really not interested in cooking very much, so I will make salads and pasta-ry things. Whereas Peter will make some strange sauce with mustard, or something that is very bad for you and I will be forced into eating it.

Annabel's household was particularly unusual, in terms of the relationships of the members (her sister, her son and her mother all resided with her), their democratic attitude to household chores (all shared tasks equally, as a consensual decision with no pressure) and their general agreement as to the food eaten. As all held roughly the same ethical opinions, the menu for the week was drawn up in advance, and then the members of the household would take it in turns to shop, cook and clean. This may not appear on the surface to be an extraordinary set-up, but it was the only household across the sample which had such unanimous agreements on all subjects. More often the decisions taken within the household were a question of negotiation, compromise or the agreement to disagree and buy multiple products. All of which, however, showed that every household revealed "...a particular and unique culture which provides the basis for the security and identity of the household or family as a whole, as well as that of its individual members" (Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley, 1992: 18), and thereby displayed the moral economy of the household.

Many of the ethical consumers had permanent partners who shared similar thoughts on ethical values. However, this is not to say that even those who claim that one of the reasons that you develop a partnership is the sharing of common beliefs agreed totally on the best way to put those beliefs into action. Pam, whose husband has strong development concerns, but a far more Marxist and revolutionary interpretation of his ethics, talks about the difficulties she has experienced trying to negotiate an ethical position within the household which accounts for the values of both partners (and the now grown children). As everyone shops and cooks she has no direct means of imposing certain foods:

PAM: I have wanted not to have beef in the house, because it is the most inefficient food in terms of the conversion food value to the amount of grain, but it was only with BSE I was able to enforce it quite frankly. I mean up until that time we still had, chilli-con-carne is one of our basics and of course that was cheap, but my husband likes to make stews and he likes to make beef stews, and I prefer lamb stew on ethical grounds. But after BSE I put my foot down and said I didn't want beef in the house and I hope I can keep it down.

Pam's story represents the two individuals negotiating, and ultimately hoping to force, an acceptable position. This differs from the situation so often represented by academics studying household duties, who point out that men and children often have a greater say over food choices than the woman of the household (Delphy, 1995: 34, Mennell et al, 1992: 108).

Whilst some households agreed a compromise position to share meals, other households were unable to come to a mutual agreement and ate separately, or had two lots of shampoo or even three different types of milk. There were a number of households where the two partners or the older children held different tastes and ethics, or felt it only fair occasionally to treat their young children to products that they would be unwilling to buy for themselves. As these differences in tastes or ethics could not be resolved into a mutual position, the households decided to purchase multiple varieties of commodities. Here is how three households resolve their health, belief and taste differences (as well as personal niggles) by buying multiple types of milk:

RACHEL: I, myself, don't eat dairy products except a little bit of cows milk in coffee, so I have soya milk ... We have a computerised list of things that we generally buy all the time. And it is very silly because this is Peter's milk, milkp, and I am soya milk, milkr.

CATH: My husband has started having soya milk in his tea or coffee [along with daughter who has milk allergy], but I hate it. I am sorry, but I hate soya milk. I will have black coffee, but tea, I really love my tea in the morning, it just tastes so bizarre. I have cut back, but I don't think I could cut it out altogether.

AMY: My husband has either soya milk or this Lima 3 which is delicious. I usually have goats milk. My daughter drinks [skimmed milk].

ME: *Sorry, why is this milk thing, why is everybody drinking different milk?*

AMY: Because that is what we like. I like this Lima 3, but he annoys me because it is three different milks. There is soya, rice and oat mixed together, and if you don't shake it you get the heavy dark oat left in the bottom. And he pours the nice rice milk and has this nice breakfast, and then I come along and there is all this heavy stuff in the bottom and I say "You didn't shake this up at all". Whereas if you had ordinary milk you wouldn't have all these irritations.

It seems likely that I did not obtain the whole story about the processes of compromise and the tensions caused by ethical consumerism within families. It became startlingly apparent to me as I analysed the transcripts that the ethical consumers who had partners with opposing beliefs said nothing about disagreements over the raising of the children, and I think that this would provide an interesting area for further research. Moreover, I was told several unsolicited stories about huge family arguments about what was eaten at Christmas, and although literature regularly points to shared meals as a point of conflict at Christmas (Lofgren, 1993: 218, Lupton, 1996: 63, Charles, 1995: 105) it seems unlikely that the subjects of the arguments had no premise outside of that moment in time.

The transcripts of the consumers then built up a complex pattern of compromise or of the agreement to purchase multiple products. The consumer obviously tries to negotiate a position where she is allowed a high degree of control in the practice of

her ethics, and home is the place where the most committed acts of ethical consumerism are undertaken. Negotiating with the family or flat mates however means that there may well be products within the house to which the consumer objects, especially (and almost paradoxically) when partners and children take some of the responsibility for the cooking and shopping. This can then cause problems for the consumer in terms of appearing to be a consistent ethical consumer, especially as the home is *not* as Saunders suggests "... where people are off-stage, free from surveillance, in control of their immediate environment" (Saunders cited in Valentine, 1998: 320). Pam told me that every so often when her husband or one of her children goes shopping they bring home a jar of Nescafé, much to her annoyance:

PAM: I know how angry I get when I see a jar of Nestlé product on the table. I immediately rip the label off and then [my family] say I am being hypocritical.

Earlier in the interview Pam had talked about the need for "internal consistency", which she explained as being equivalent to integrity, and it was clear that the notion of consistency for Pam was often informed by the surveillance of ethical others<sup>7</sup>. Billig (1989: 192) in his theorisation of rhetoric suggests that rather than the inconsistencies between belief and action being the root of the problem, it is the internal and external criticisms stemming from inconsistency which make us feel obliged to offer justifications for our actions. In the case of the ethical consumers it is necessary to appear consistent both to a community with shared values, and to protect the self from the critical comments of those with opposing beliefs. This desire to appear consistent continues even when the consumer recognises the reasonableness of their inconsistencies, as in the case of another family member purchasing an unethical product. Pam's defence of her consumption practices in what is ostensibly "private" space was repeated across the interviewees:

CATH: ... 20 years ago we bought some mahogany bathroom fittings, we have still got them. Luckily most people don't realise, they don't think about it. Anyone who is a little bit environmental I have to apologise to before they go up there.

MARY: Yeah, I feel really quite bad about [buying Radion]. I feel just a bit ashamed of myself. Spouting off to my friends "buy this" and then I just [buy conventional washing powder].

Once outside the home consistency is judged by completely different standards, reflecting the lack of opportunity to perform ethical consumerism in public space. Cleaning products, and to a large extent personal hygiene products, have little relevance outside of the home, and so the narratives are mainly involved with food -

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<sup>7</sup> Pam regularly mentioned that she was less ethically committed in her purchases now that she was no longer working for the Quakers, and told stories about other Quakers asking her about her new clothes, which she immediately sent back to the retailer, opting to buy fair trade clothes instead.



a product area which is not just frequently consumed outside the home, but has a high degree of visibility. By necessity eating out requires that the ethical consumers be “easier” on themselves, asking fewer questions about the ingredients and sources of the food they are purchasing. There are real structural problems which force the consumer to choose certain products they would avoid having in their own home - it is simply not possible to exert the same controls in the public domain that one can in private. This may appear to be self-explanatory, but beneath the obviousness of the statement, some more profound reasonings of behaviour are happening. Ethical consumerism as performed by my interviewees was largely restricted to the choice of location: it must be remembered that no self-respecting ethical consumer would frequent McDonalds (at least in principle). Apart from the choice of eatery it was only vegetarianism and veganism that were continued with any constancy in the public arena<sup>8</sup>. That this should be the case has become so acceptable it is easy to miss the significance of the phenomenon. To understand more fully the unreflexive performance of different ethics that it demonstrates though, I have included an extended section from Mary’s transcript:

*ME: What if you were out somewhere, would that bother..?*

MARY: If it wasn’t organic? No, it wouldn’t.

*ME: What about the coffee if you were out?*

MARY: Well, I wouldn’t, if they had it in the shop I would go for [the fair trade] one, but they don’t most of the time, so if I’m out I’ll drink whatever.

*ME: Why do you not, this sounds silly, is that just for ease or what?*

MARY: Well a lot of it is just like if you are in a cafe or restaurant say, if you say “Oh have you got this fair trade coffee?” and they’d just look at you like, you know. So most of the time it is not available.

*ME: Right, what about something like soya marg, I mean if you were..?*

MARY: Oh yeah, if I was out I just can’t eat, I mean if I go into a cafe I have to ask them not to put butter or whatever on my bread if they give me a sandwich, or whatever..

*ME: Okay, so why’s that? I mean is that because it’s easier to remain vegan when you are out than to buy organic, or because you feel it more important to stay vegan than to keep buying organic things when you are out, or why?*

MARY: Um, it’s because I’m a vegan and I can’t eat it. I mean I can drink coffee whether it is organic or not, I know it is better if I drink organic, but it is not going to interfere with my diet.

So for Mary, eating organic or fair trade food does not constitute a diet, a regime, or any form of ritual: whereas eating vegan food is an absolute - she simply “can’t eat” anything else. That she found my questioning so bizarre, and her own answers so straightforward, shows quite how powerfully the acceptance of an intransigent vegan ethic, by both the ethical and conventional consumer, has acted in constructing consumer practices. The ethic has become so embodied that it would be necessary to

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<sup>8</sup> Keanes and Willets (1995) found that if vegetarians broke their ethics then it was generally done outside the home - although this was not mentioned by my interviewees.

undertake a highly considered act of conversion to allow Mary to break her coded behaviour, underlining why I have called vegetarian and veganism identity ethics. In common with the rest of the consumers, this means that only her inability to eat animal products limits her lifestyle in any way. All other ethics are contingent upon the freedom to be ethical, and are apparently free from external criticisms of inconsistency. For the vegetarians, the large grassroots vegetarian movement has ensured that it makes good business sense for cafes and restaurants to offer vegetarian alternatives, and most people claimed that eating out was no longer a problem. For the vegans however, the decision to remove all animal substances from their diet has definite limitations:

JANE: Restaurants are more difficult. You really have to select where you are going. Yeah, probably going out for me is quite difficult. I just end up going out to Indians all the time, which is brilliant, but um..

Despite her obvious desire to portray veganism as a pleasant lifestyle choice, Jane has to admit that it makes certain areas of life almost impossible. Lisa finds that eating out as a vegan has more possibilities than those stated by Jane, and can include Thai and Pizza without the cheese - in fact Lisa goes as far as to state that there is no problem eating out. However, eating out as an expression of the self (Finkelstein, 1989: 4) becomes reduced to the self as an ethical being, as opposed to the whole range of values and desires which can be performed through an unlimited choice of eating locations. It comes as little surprise then that for ease and enjoyment of practice, ethical consumers felt their consumer values were not imperative when part of the "captured market" (Wrigley and Lowe, 1996: 26). Notions of the captured market may be limited to airports or motorway services for conventional consumers, but for the ethical consumer it represents the majority of public places. Indeed, if the consumer did not relax their ethics, consuming would become an impossibility in the public domain. To demonstrate the structural barriers to ethical consumerism inherent in cafes and restaurants, here is an example provided by Ruby, who due to environmental illness has to avoid all pesticides and toxic chemicals including candles:

RUBY: It is very difficult because the rest of the world doesn't live the way I do. And um, so in order for me to go places and do things, you know, sometimes I can't be places because they have candles. Restaurants, I can't eat in them anyway, but I can't even sit in them and talk with my friends ... It is very limiting and frustrating and limits my social life significantly.

I asked the interviewees if they were aware of anywhere to eat which sold either organic or fair trade food, and only Cath knew of an organic restaurant. The lack of eateries catering for the ethical consumer compels the individual to limit much of the performance of their ethical values to the home, unless they wish to become as restricted in their movements as Ruby. Whilst there are small things that the consumer can do to overcome the structural barriers to ethical consumerism, such as Rachel eating only vegetarian food when she is out, so that she does not have to eat

meat which is not organic, for the majority of fair trade and environmental issues, the restaurant industry simply offers no solutions. Whether, as the number of people concerned about organic food and fair trade increases, there will eventually be a corresponding rise of businesses addressing those issues remains to be seen. However, as the ethical consumer displays little of the constancy associated with animal welfare ethics for any other ethic, it is impossible to know whether they would transfer their loyalties to environmentally friendly, fair trading eateries if they were no longer constrained to eat in conventional restaurants by being part of a captured market.

Eating at somebody else's house effectively represents another form of a captured market. Accepting this fact, the ethical consumers who had no animal welfare diet spoke about the reasons why someone else's cooking did not create a qualm of conscience:

PAM: If you are at somebody's house and they offer you a cup of coffee then there are other factors other than whether or not it is Traidcraft coffee that comes into play, and one of them is being gracious to the person that is feeding you and things. And you know there are other things which come into account.

RACHEL: And eating with friends, whatever they give me I would eat. I wouldn't make an issue out of it, unless I can choose what I would have, but I would not impose my values on them. If they ask me if I am vegetarian I would say yes.

As Telfer (1996: 22) suggests, there are other ethics which precede certain consumer ethics in priority of sanctity. The most obvious explanation for the eat-what-you-are-given attitude of the interviewees is the primacy of grace<sup>9</sup>. Being gracious to a hostess is both a scripted form of civility, so socialised that at times it is likely to be unreflexively performed (Finkelstein, 1989)<sup>10</sup>, and a more conscious realisation of the necessity to place people's feelings above personal values. It is unlikely that any hostess would understand a request for organically grown food to be served at a table, especially when it is purely a question of personal beliefs about the rights and wrongs of environmental and health issues. More understood are the relatively circumscribed and strictly policed vegetarian and vegan ethics, accepted by meat eaters as less transgressible than other consumer ethics. This is why Rachel, above, says that she will tell hostesses that she is vegetarian even though she is not, so that she does not have to eat non-organic meat. The vegetarians felt that things had become a lot easier in this country over the last few years, with most people willing

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<sup>9</sup> I have used the term "primacy of grace" quite deliberately, as I suggest that the implied moral value is one which is more scripted than the majority of consumer values (animal welfare diets withstanding), and therefore precedes the performance of other ethics at an unconscious level, as opposed to holding greater priority in any reflexively determined sense.

<sup>10</sup> Finkelstein and Bauman (1993: 80) see these socialised moralities as devoid of any personal ethical reasoning, and therefore devoid of real moral substance.

and able to cook vegetarian food, but they still felt bad about putting people out. Those with an animal welfare diet talked about how touched they were by the huge amount of effort that friends regularly made to accommodate their ethics. Of all the impositions though, the most nightmarish scenario was accompanying someone who had failed to tell the hostess that their partner was a vegetarian:

LESLEY: When I first started going out with my husband, I was taken to this friend's house and he thought this friend was vegetarian so he did not bother telling her that I was, and then she presented me with this fish, cos of course she was vegetarian, but she still ate fish. And that was really awkward because I didn't know her and I didn't want to offend her. But I mean I did tell her that I didn't eat fish, and quite surprisingly she was a bit off about it.

LIZZIE: [I had gone to my partner's parents for a meal, and he had not told them that I was vegetarian, so when his mother served up the meal it was chops]. His mum was dishing up and she just turned to me, and she said afterwards that she didn't know what made her say it, "Do you eat meat" and I went "no" ... It must have been the desperation in my face, and it was great. She said "I'll give you double helpings of vegetables, is that all right?", and I just thought "Great. No 'bloody hell I'll have to make an omelette'." She just didn't care, you know, just extra vegetables, salad and bread... and it was like "oh thank God, no fuss". It was wonderful.

Having an animal welfare ethic which has been transformed into a clear set of behaviours makes the consumer less willing to act in opposition to her beliefs, even in circumstances where there is little choice available. So the animal welfarists felt unable to eat meat even though they were aware of breaking social codes, and felt personally uncomfortable with the situation. As well as feeling embarrassed about causing difficulties for the hostess when she has been uninformed of dietary choices, the ethical consumers were unhappy about offending a hostess who has gone out of her way to cook a vegetarian meal, but has failed to comprehend the minutiae of the regime:

SUSY: I don't know if you would consider this to be a lapse, but say for example that someone is cooking something and it has a chicken stock in it and they say it's vegetarian, and then "oh no, but it has got chicken stock in, you don't mind do you?", and I am like "oh, ah, oh, ah". But chicken stock, if they had tried to be vegetarian then I don't mind.

LIZZIE: But it is really difficult, things like vegetarian cheese you know, people have really gone out of their way to cook for you and taken their time. If people have gone out of their way to cook vegetarian and there is normal cheese in it I just have to grin and bear it. And it is very hypocritical really, because I mean eating non-vegetarian cheese is the same as eating meat. If someone put a slab of meat in front of me I would

say “oops, sorry, no”, but because it is made with non-vegetarian, because you can’t see it, it is much easier to go “oh thanks”.

The vegetarians expressed themselves as willing to relax their ethical behaviours to a greater or lesser extent, depending strongly on the strength of their ethics or their ability to distance themselves from the animal which has been cooked. Lizzie, who was very strict about her vegetarianism, would eat cheese, but it is unlikely that she would have eaten anything with chicken stock in even though she wanted not to offend the hostess. There is then a negotiation between the consumer’s ethical positioning and the primacy of grace. Inevitably, as with all other negotiations, each individual will have different priorities and ethical thresholds, but for the consumers I interviewed eating at others represented the greatest level of negotiation.

The notion of the primacy of grace is an important one for understanding ethical consumerism. I would argue that, apart from the odd debates with conventional consumers about appropriate behaviour, ethical consumerism is a polite revolution. It is the revolution of the perennial optimist, who believes that change can be achieved not just bloodlessly, but hopefully without really upsetting anybody along the way. It matters to the ethical consumer that the ethics they pursue are those which society as a whole condones, even if the action is abhorred - ensuring that the lack of understanding which surrounds the consumer’s behaviour is due to the hypocrisy of society, rather than the confused morality of the individual. And whilst much of the efficacy and enjoyment of ethical consuming comes from remaining in the forefront of the consumer movement, holding marginal ideas about appropriate behaviour, it remains an objective of the ethical consumer to secure action with the minimal negative impact on conventional consumers.

The final site I want to look at is the workplace. Whilst Sack claims that there was a lack of control over consumption practices in the workplace (Sack, 1992: 155) he, along with other theorists, accepts that work is an important area for the fulfilment of life projects (Du Gay, 1997, Casey, 1995). In order to fulfil a life project in which ethical values hold such a prominent position, most of the ethical consumers were involved in some form of related work. For those ethical consumers whose work fell outside of any ethical field, it appeared that the desire for ethical continuity meant that they tried hard to introduce certain practices in the office. Recycling was an obvious example, and probably easily understood and accepted by the rest of the organisation, as it involves little compromise on the part of colleagues. Furthermore, the workplace has often been a target of campaigns to introduce more ethical and environmental practices, ensuring that it is viewed as a space open to ethical conversion. This explains Annabel’s assertion that she can still do her bit in the office.

Lesley was unique amongst the interviewees. She had a job which caused her immense problems in trying to unite her working self and her consumer self. As a nurse, the discourse of an ethic of care suffused her work identity. However, the practices involved in delivering that care ensured that several of her personal ethics became confusingly unworkable:

LESLEY: I am still exploiting animals for part of my job really, and I can never see [that changing] unless I change jobs. That is why I wouldn't describe myself as alternative ... because the drugs are animal tested. And also as part of my work, but related to using resources and things, that for all the treatments we have, it is all plastic and all used once. So at home I am buying things that I know I can recycle or refill or whatever, whereas at work in many ways I am acting as a totally separate person, you know, totally different person cos I am throwing out all these plastics and stuff.

Rather than successfully operating through a range of ways to practice her values, Lesley found that she was unable to unite the notion of a caring work identity with her desire to exercise consistent ethical consumerism. Psychological theories would see her dissonance limited by changing her beliefs about ethical practice to fit in with her job (Festinger, 1957). Or perhaps if the work had in itself been in contradiction to Lesley's ethics, or she had had difficulties in uniting two social identities she could simply have changed her job or her ethics to reduce dissonance<sup>11</sup>. Lesley tried to reduce the inconsistencies in her behaviour by introducing schemes to send used medical equipment to the Third World, but the scheme proved unworkable. She describes the realities of acting in opposition to her environmental and animal welfare ethics in order to relieve human suffering as making it harder for her to once again step back into her role as an ethical consumer:

LESLEY: You are kind of having to do [things in opposition to your ethics], so at some times you are trying not to think of things. So say I have been at work all day, and then dashed around the shops to buy something, I might not be so thoughtful as I had been on a day off.

It is impossible to understand whether Lesley's perceptions of appropriate ethical behaviour have begun to become a little bit smudged at the edges after practising contradictory ethics all day, or whether this simply shows the difficulties attached to what is assumed to be the smooth switch between different identity performances. Either way, it demonstrates that the change of ethical performances over various contexts is representative of the necessary negotiations of structural constraints, rather than values themselves being negated by context. Those theorists who believe in a reductionism to a purely contextual self have, as suggested in particular by Greenwood (1994), failed to appreciate the inflexibility of personally held values. That those values may be preceded by other, and more scripted values, such as the primacy of grace is not in doubt. That the performance of those values in practices has to be negotiated, at times becoming almost impossible, due to certain contextual constraints may show that the ethic does not represent an absolute. But it does not mean that the individual does not still hold an ethic even as they act to transgress it - too much effort is put into trying for constancy to suggest that it is a meaningless

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<sup>11</sup> In her survey looking at the practices of consumption across spaces and their meanings for identity Harbottle (1998) found that vegetarians in her sample had changed jobs or ethics to achieve continuity in the face of identity dissonance and criticism.

concept in a post-modern, depthless society where membership necessitates a loss of all permanence of being. It does, however, suggest that personal values are not the most important determinant of how someone will perform a variety of different practices.

## **7. Summary**

This paper has looked at how consumer ethics are practised in different contexts and across a range of product areas. It has demonstrated that opportunities to make ethical choices are context dependent and limited outside of the home. However, these limitations do not result in a consistency of ethical performances across the three consumer ethics studied. Whilst fair trade and green consumption practices command little need for continuation when subject to constraints, the identity ethics of vegetarian and veganism are expected to be consistently performed, even if this means the individual cannot eat. Carrying a defined social role and set of norms, these identity ethics are not only subject to high levels of surveillance, they also have a degree of social acceptance whereby a host would not expect the guest to reject their ethical position. This is in contrast to valuing organic food, which it would not be deemed acceptable to demand of a host; even though rationally there is no reason why one ethic should be viewed as more morally demanding than the other. Moreover, as an embodied ethic, whereby the transgression of the ethic may elicit undesirable bodily responses, animal welfare concerns highlight how different values and ethics can become psychologically and socially differentiated in their manifestation.

Notwithstanding the consistency of animal welfare ethics around food choices, an investigation of other product areas suggests not all products are subject to ethical coding. Thus concerns about animal testing do not limit the consumption of goods viewed as being necessary for health purposes. More generally the maintenance of contemporary social standards of hygiene, convenience and grace means that some areas of consumption become sites of negotiation for ethical consumers. Similarly other consumer values, such as thrift and hedonism, challenge the consistency of ethical performances, demonstrated by shopping choices being enacted through the principle of being the 'cheapest or the best'.

What becomes apparent from this examination of consumer ethics is that personal values and ethics can be transgressed in everyday life, often unreflexively, as different contexts, social situations and patterns of cultural coding for products render consistency not just undesirable but quite literally unthinkable. However, the differing performances of the three ethics, dependent upon their genealogy and defined format, suggests inconsistency lies partly within the scripting and embodiment of the ethic rather than simply in the social and provisional structural constraints the consumer has to negotiate in everyday life.

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