

# “It’s an ‘and/and’ thing”: Legitimation Work amongst Ethical Consumers in Rotterdam

A study by

**Changerism**  
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# “It’s an ‘and/and’ thing”: Legitimation Work amongst Ethical Consumers in Rotterdam

## ABSTRACT

This article presents a study of what resources of knowledge consumers use to legitimate ethical consumption patterns. Employing a multi-focal approach to this object of study, it challenges theories that understand legitimation of such consumption in epistemologically one-dimensional ways. Interviews with 16 ethical consumers in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, show that five different resources of knowledge are mobilized to legitimate ethical consumption. They are scientific, experiential, religious-spiritual, Romantic, and moral-ideological knowledge. The interviews also make veritable ‘legitimation work’ – the dynamic process of how participants gravitate towards, switch between, and concurrently use the various knowledge resources. Finally, these findings instruct recommendations for future research on the phenomenon of legitimation work.

*Key words:* • ethical consumption • legitimacy • reflexivity  
• consumer culture • knowledge • sustainability

## Introduction

‘100% Goodness! Nothing artificial!’ reads Holy Soda’s bottle label. Tony Choclonely informs us: ‘Underway to 100% slave-free chocolate and now you’re helping out tastefully’. The package of Celestial Seasonings Sleepy Tea assures: ‘By buying this product, you’re supporting ethical trading practices that benefit the people (...)’. La Tulipe’s Bourdeaux Rosé Contrôlée’s labeling promises: ‘This wine is O.K. We produce our wine (...) with respect to the environment’.

Nowadays, producers of a wide range of mainstream consumer goods use texts such as these to imbue their products with an aura of moral soundness that can persuade people towards ethically motivated consumption. Such moral appeals are often centered around healthism, concerns about the ecological condition, social responsibility, and animal treatment. Products featuring these appeals continue to enjoy enormous international popularity even during our times of economic crisis. Global retail sales of Fair Trade certified products (offering consumers a choice to buy socially and ecologically responsible goods) for example reached 4.9 billion euros in 2011, a 12 per cent increase on the previous year (FLO, 2012). The scale on which such moral appeals are employed, the public enthusiasm for products featuring them, as well as their salience in categories of prosaic and mass-produced

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consumer goods such as foodstuffs, makes it possible to differentiate their presence as a significant dimension of advertising in contemporary consumer culture.

Ethical consumption patterns centering around moralized products have inspired an ever growing body of academic research, gaining interest from the behavioral sciences, political geography, marketing-, business-, and consumer studies (Barnett et al., 2005; Carrigan et al., 2004; Cowe and Williams, 2000; de Pelsmacker et al., 2005; Ozcaglar-Toulouse et al., 2006). Yet, as Adams and Raisborough (2008) rightfully point out, (cultural) sociology has had surprisingly little to say about this increasingly salient phenomenon. As a result, the still fledgling topic of 'ethical consumption' (see Harrison et al., 2005; Soper et al., 2009; Spaargaren et al., 2012) is in need of more fundamental sociological research.

This is particularly so, because much of the current research on this object of study mainly scrutinizes peoples' *motivations* to consume ethically. These studies often limit the analysis to its psychological foundations (Mosiander, 2007) or (un)intentionally scrutinize only certain subsets of its motivations (like concerns about animal welfare (e.g. Harper and Makatouni, 2002)). This attention to (fragments of) motivations typically leaves no room for attempts to thoroughly assess the complex ways in which they are socio-culturally ingrained. This situation is increasingly being questioned by scholars (Freestone and McGoldrick, 2007: 446; Lewis and Potter, 2011: 18; Pecoraro and Uusitalo, 2014: 46-7).

One way to uncover such socio-cultural embedding is to study what resources of knowledge people use to legitimate their ethical consumption patterns, for it shows what cultural repertoires *underlie* the motivations to consume ethically in the first place. To make more sociological sense of this, it is important to depict the ethical consumer as a social actor who uses various cultural contexts as 'toolkits' of meaning upon which lines of action are constructed (Swidler, 1986; 2001). There have been scholarly contributions emphasizing the rationales that help generate legitimacy for ethical consumption (Beck, 1992[1986]; Campbell, 2007). However, they utilize a very one-dimensional approach to this topic of enquiry, potentially allowing for only a limited understanding of legitimation practices by ethical consumers. This study aims to address these gaps by employing a multi-focal enquiry into the resources of knowledge used to legitimate different forms of ethical consumption, thusly asking: *What resources of knowledge are used to legitimate ethical consumption?*

In seeking to answer this question, this article draws upon interviews with ethical consumers in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, to generate an understanding of what resources of knowledge are used to legitimate ethical consumption. The main theoretical context consists of scholarly positions of Ulrich Beck (1992[1986]) and Colin Campbell (2007) who link the popularity of ethical consumption to reflexivity on risks that spring from modernization processes. Point of departure is a review of Ulrich Beck's position in *Risk Society* (1992[1986]).

## **Modernity and ethical consumption**

### *Ethical consumption: Scientized reflexivity?*

In *Risk Society*, Beck argues that constituencies of contemporary societies increasingly are of opinion that science and technology, as fruits of rationality, do not bring about societal change that can be unambiguously described as 'progress' (1992[1986]: 200-3). Instead, more

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and more it is becoming clear to people that techno-scientific development gives rise to new, 'modern risks'. They are global, imperceptible, indiscriminatory and multigenerational-lasting hazards that endanger all plants, animals, people, and our environment. Storage of radioactive waste, poisonous fumes, pollutants, and toxic elements in air, water and foodstuffs are only some of the examples that according to Beck result from the unhindered proliferation and ongoing embracement of rational thought during modernization (ibid., 21-4). This has the effect that while previously the defining domains of modernity like chemistry, genetic technology and so on were perceived to be embodiments of the promise of progress, they are now increasingly seen as unpredictable sources of danger and the implementation of their discoveries are often met with criticism and protest (ibid., 51). The epochal attitudinal change Beck understands as 'reflexive modernity' is thus formed by the growing awareness that the advancements of science and expert systems, as key institutions of modernity, are systematically fabricating risks by the very application of rational thought and because of this aren't indisputably progressive in character anymore. Although earlier they emancipated us from a pre-modern world with a nature which had to be known and mastered to a modern world, it is argued that now we reflect on the faults of these institutions and on this ground move from a modern world to a *more* modern world - a process that is reflexive as it generates a consciousness of new 'risk positions' that come along with it.

Throughout *Risk Society* Beck characteristically argues that the increasingly widespread reflexive attitude is objectivist at heart. Only when claims about the existence and effects of modern risks are based on scientifically validated proof do they hold any purchase to the public and can they legitimate conduct with regards to our new risk positions. This holds true during the initial process of defining risks, as well as for the ensuing process of their social recognition (ibid., 26-32, 53-61). Indeed, critique of and protest against modern risks is therefore thought to be necessarily 'scientized' (ibid., 161-2):

'Sooner rather than later, one comes up against the law that so long as risks are not recognized scientifically, *they do not exist* (...) No amount of collective moaning can change this, only science. Scientific judgment's monopoly on truth therefore forces the victims themselves to make use of all the methods and means of scientific analysis in order to succeed with their claims.'

(Beck, 1992[1986]): 71, emphasis in original)

Of course, this means that the relationship between reflexivity and science is a bittersweet one - science has generated risk positions but it also allows for their social recognition and attempts to counteract them. Yet for Beck the cross-pulling mechanisms of increasing skepticism towards science *vis-à-vis* the need for scientific research to legitimate concerns about modern risks *always* plays out in favor of the latter.

In contemporary consumer culture, reflexivity on such modern risks takes shape in the form of ethical consumption. Put in Beck's terms, this practice could be described as buying into moral appeals that contrast products against what are considered to be unethical ramifications of modern production processes. These ramifications regard one's health, the ecological condition, other peoples' social-economic position, and animal-treatment (ibid.,

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21). In the grocery store examples of such risks surface upon application of (for example) modern ingredients,<sup>1</sup> new ways of transport and packaging,<sup>2</sup> the workings of global economy,<sup>3</sup> and ever more efficient ways of animal processing.<sup>4</sup> Evincing his objectivist approach to conscious shopping behavior, Beck expects such ethically reflexive consumers to undertake a 'cognitive approach and 'collect data and arguments' to 'become small, private alternative experts in risks of modernization' (ibid., 61).

At the same time within industries '[p]ublicity people, the 'argumentation craftsmen', get their opportunity' as well. For if the industry wants to 'win back the trust of consumers [when a risk producer is identified] [g]ood arguments become a condition of business success' (ibid., 31-2). Indeed, one can tentatively argue there is a marked attempt to legitimate moral appeals found in the market place by accompanying them with external, objective certifications of ethical responsibility. This is indeed in line with what Beck's theory on risk society would implicate: because consumers are expected to have a need to scientifically legitimate their choice for products featuring risk-denouncing moral appeals, antagonism against such risks showcased in moral narratives on product packaging needs to be grounded in a perceived objectively attained truth about them. From this perspective, expert validations in the form of 'Fair Trade' logos, 'Grass Land Milk', 'Caring Dairy', and 'Free-Range-Chickens' labels, or stamps of organizations such as the 'Marine Stewardship Council', the 'Rainforest Alliance', 'FSC certified carton', and of many other 'conscious' organizations represent consumer desire for objectively validated verifications of moral appeals.

### *Ethical consumption: Spiritual reflexivity?*

*Risk Society* implicates that ethical consumption patterns are legitimated according to the demands of a scientized type of reflexivity. But in light of an increasingly troubled relationship with science, Beck unsatisfactorily explains why skeptics would always automatically and unconditionally turn to it yet again to search for a scientific conviction on how to deal with modern risks. Other scholars also see how general cultural unease and distrust of science go hand in hand, but they argue its effect is a turn *away* from using scientific insights as a moral compass (e.g. Houtman et al., 2012). Similar critique of Beck has been taken up in reflexivity-related debates as well, as it has been suggested that his thoroughly 'objectivist' approach should be abandoned and a more cultural type of reflexivity acknowledged (Alexander and Smith, 1996). But what other veritable type of reflexivity, if not a scientized type, can help people in contemporary societies legitimate their growing enthusiasm for ethical consumption? Although at first sight it may seem improbable, Campbell's *Easternization of the West* (2007) contributes to answering this question.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dole Fruitcups' packaging: 'Live well. No sugar added, no artificial colors or flavors'.

<sup>2</sup> See Innocent Smoothies's packaging: 'We never air freight and don't want to needlessly waste a lot of cartons'.

<sup>3</sup> See Celestial Seasonings Sleepy Tea's packaging: 'buying our tea helps support ethical trading that benefit the people'.

<sup>4</sup> See Deepblue Salmon's packaging: 'Treating fish ethically'.

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In a nutshell, Campbell argues that by the middle of the twentieth century, for many people the Western world lacked a coherent, credible, and morally satisfying comprehensive meaning system (ibid., 320). For the countercultural movements of the 1960s this entailed a decreased level of theodical satisfaction that could not be remedied by any monotheistic religion of the West, any dominant secular political ideology at the time, or the rational project of Enlightenment. To counter this condition, these three Western cultural traditions were fundamentally reformulated to become, as Campbell puts it, 'Easternized'. The result was an unopposed spreading of an Eastern type of spirituality in contemporary societies.

Campbell implicates reflexivity on modern risks is not legitimated with the use of scientific knowledge, but rather by this increasingly popular Eastern type of spiritual tuition. To understand this, it is important to further analyze a crucial reformulation in the religious domain that took place in the West. Campbell argues this reformulation to consist of the 'replacement of a personal, transcendent creator-god with the idea of an immanent and impersonal divine life-force or power' (ibid., 322). Such a radical change in the perceived essence of the divine was accompanied by a worldview that sees the whole of creation in a new light:

'For it is to see mankind, nature, and indeed the cosmos as a whole, as united through their shared participation in this divine force. Naturally this leads to a new view of nature and of mankind's relationship to the natural world, with the "natural" necessarily acquiring some of the attributes of the sacred.'

(Campbell, 2007: 74-5)

For Campbell, the mobilization of these central spiritual tenets – the belief that everyone and everything shares in the same divine 'energy' or 'life-force', and the belief that 'the natural' is sacrosanct whilst modern human ingenuities are profane – is the primary way in which every day ethical reflexivity is legitimated. This manifests itself also in consumption patterns that are in agreement with diverse, yet all spiritually inspired movements of the second half of the 20th century. These movements are the whole food movement, the environment movement, the human potential movement, and the animal rights movement (ibid., 68-111). A short discussion of how Campbell sees these movements inspire ethically reflexive consumption makes vivid how different Beck and Campbell approach the epistemological conviction to shop consciously.

Firstly then, Campbell argues that members of the whole food movement prefer natural products over what, by contrast, are judged to be processed, convenience, or artificial foodstuffs. Consuming them is spiritually regressive and avoiding them becomes an important component of the spiritual will to rehabilitate nature (ibid., 83; see also Hamilton, 2001: 499 in Campbell, 2007: 82). Secondly, members of the environment movement aim (for example) to stop using dangerous chemicals and promote the use of renewable energy (ibid., 84-90) in a spiritually inspired attempt to respect 'the well-being and flourishing of nonhuman life on Earth' as they are perceived to have 'value in themselves' (Porritt and Winner, 1988: 240 in Campbell, 2007: 88). But then members of the human potential movement believe in the idea that 'all people are, "by nature" as it were higher or spiritual beings, gods, or goddesses' (Heelas, 1996: 19 in Campbell, 2007: 121). Inspired thusly, for

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some shopping becomes an opportunity for spiritual enlightenment. As consumers they attempt to tackle (for example) social risks that have resulted from the global market - itself of course one of the prime fruits of modernity (Doran, 2009; 2010; Heelas, 1993: 105-9 in Campbell, 2007: 121). Finally, members of the animal rights movement see 'human and nonhuman animals as fellow creatures animated by essentially the same inner spirit', and dispatch the idea of mankind's moral or spiritual superiority over animals (Campbell, 2007: 79). Accordingly, protest against (for example) live animal exports, factory farming methods, and the use of animals in experiments are in this way rooted in spiritual belief in an all-permeating immanent life-force (ibid., 77-9).

### *Ambiguity about the legitimacy of ethical consumption*

This brief review of how spiritually inspired movements are related to ethical consumption makes clear that Campbell sees consumers to reflect on similar types of risks as those suggested by Beck in *Risk Society*.<sup>5</sup> However, whereas the latter suggests that the legitimation of ethical consumption is drawn upon only a *scientific* resource of knowledge (e.g. Beck, 1992[1986]), 162-3), the former quite contrarily argues that it is firmly grounded in predominantly *spiritual* knowledge (e.g. Campbell, 2007: ibid., 134-5).

Other scholars take various positions within these two opposite ends of what could be called the 'science-spirituality continuum' of suggested resources of legitimacy for ethical consumption. Thompson (2004) for example argues it is the combination of elements of both an objectivist worldview *and* mythical belief that helps to legitimate consumption patterns centered around modern-risk-denouncing products (through mobilization of Gnostic and Romantic mythoi). Although Aupers' (2012) work on conspiracy culture focuses mainly on how they are used as an overarching system of meaning for constituencies of contemporary societies, he, too, sees how its scientific *and* metaphysical components together offer legitimacy to ethically reflexive consumers (ibid., 26).

Of course, this continuum evinces in only one way the scholarly ambiguity that exists around how ethical consumption is legitimated. Other contributions for example suggest that any study on this matter should focus on the utilization of a moral-ideological knowledge system for legitimation purposes (Sylvan and Bennett, 1994), or acknowledge that an experiential knowledge system is mobilized in this quest (Kristensen et al., 2011).<sup>6</sup> Yet, the continuum discussed here is valuable theoretically because it can serve as a springboard to make veritable a multitude of resources of knowledge used to legitimate ethical consumption. It has this quality because discussing its radically dissimilar poles with participants can foster a multi-focal enquiry into their legitimating efforts.

In addition to employing such a multi-focal approach, it should be noted here that it is important to avoid using a fragmentary definition of 'ethical consumption'. Such definitions focus on only one articulation of the phenomenon, and because of it may only allow for a limited view on the diversity of knowledge systems used for legitimation purposes (e.g. Dupuis, 2000; Harper and Makatouni, 2002; Moisander, 2007; Napolitano et al., 2010). In this

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<sup>5</sup> That is, risks posed to one's health, the natural surroundings, other people's social-economic situation, and animals.

<sup>6</sup> Note how these, too, are largely one-dimensional approaches of the topic of concern here.



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research ethical consumption is therefore understood in the same, broad way as implicated in Beck's and Campbell's work. Thusly, it is taken to refer to discourses and practices of consumption in which the consumer somehow takes into account the possible direct or indirect effects of modern production processes on one's health, the ecological condition, peoples' social-economic situation, or the treatment of animals.<sup>7</sup>

## Research Setting

The research was carried out between January and June 2014 in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. Given the explorative character of this study, purposive sampling (e.g. Gilbert, 2008) was applied to select subjects who considered themselves to be frequent ethical consumers at the 'Gimsel Natuurvoedingssupermarkt' (Gimsel health food store). Emerging themes from initial interviews were then developed and elaborated more fully using theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2007). Ethical consumers of food products were chosen as the target group because food is traditionally imbued with many different symbolic meanings and as such allows ample opportunities for its consumers to mobilize a variety of resources of knowledge for legitimation purposes.

In total 16 in-depth interviews were carried out. The interviewees had various occupations and eight different ethnic backgrounds. They were aged between 23 and 67 and included seven men and nine women. All but one had high levels of education, ranging from vocational degrees in applied sciences to university grade doctoral degrees. The empirical variety of the sample allowed the researcher to build a deep understanding of what resources of knowledge underlie ethical consumption patterns.

The participants were recruited in front of Gimsel Natuurvoedingssupermarkt, the oldest and largest health food store in Rotterdam. Although there are two other health food (or organic food orientated) supermarkets in the city, in comparison Gimsel goes to greater length to explicitly position itself as an ideologically engaged, 'conscious' grocery store. Their website reads, for example: 'By respecting and supporting the cycle of nature Gimsel offers a wide range of organic and biodynamic products that are good for humans, animals, and the planet'. Also, their manifesto states their 'mission and belief' is that 'a healthy lifestyle goes hand in hand with a healthy earth', and elsewhere they inform us how their suppliers 'don't work against but with nature', and how farmers get the 'fair price they deserve'.<sup>8</sup> Recruiting in front of the Gimsel would thusly heighten the probability of including participants into this study who are emphatically engaged with different dimensions of ethical consumption. To further include particularly these type of consumers, people leaving the grocery store were invited for an interview only if they carried away (at least) two fully filled shopping bags, and transported them in already owned, non-plastic, non-single-use shopping bags.

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<sup>7</sup> This understanding is inspired by Harrison et al.'s (2005) conceptualization of the phenomenon (in Pecoraro and Uusitalo, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Last retrieved on August 18th, 2014 from <http://www.gimselrotterdam.nl/persbericht/> , <http://www.gimselrotterdam.nl/missie-visie/manifesto/> , and <http://www.gimselrotterdam.nl/gimsel/onze-producten/>

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The interviews lasted between one and one and a half hour and mostly took place at the adjacent café or the participant's home. They were recorded and transcribed for later coding. During the interviews, questions were asked pertaining to the motivation of the participants to consume in an ethical fashion and developed into questions on the origins of the legitimacy of such motivations. To this end, the theoretically assumed significance of a scientific resource of knowledge and spiritual knowledge for consuming ethically was explored as dialogue starting points. However, in an attempt to carry out a multi-focal research they were not used as borders within which to restrict the search for any other paths of persuasions which depend on entirely different resources of knowledge for legitimacy. In this light participants were also asked to, for example, talk about potential changes and inconsistencies in their ethical consumption patterns, whether they acted individually or more collectively, whether and why they made affirmative choices for certain products or avoided others, how they approach new products in the store, and so forth. Furthermore, at the end of the interview the participants were always asked to expound on any other topicality that was thought to be able to elicit previously overlooked ways of legitimating their ethical consumption patterns. The questions were also partly inspired by the information on product packaging in the store and by many of the short conversations the researcher had with shoppers there.

Data analysis was aimed at identifying underlying resources of knowledge that function to legitimate ethical consumption. To this end, the transcripts were read, coded, and analyzed multiple times using the constant comparison method so that grounded arguments could be built from it (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The final analysis is based on 192 pages of interview transcripts. The participants were given pseudonyms and the quotes were translated from Dutch.

## Findings

The interviews made veritable five different resources of knowledge that were used by the participants to legitimate their ethical consumption pattern. They are: scientific, experiential, religious-spiritual, Romantic, and moral-ideological knowledge. Although they are discussed apart from each other here, as will become clear, a central finding of this study is that participants often 'work' the different resources into eclectic mosaics used for legitimation purposes.

### *The informed consumer: Scientific legitimacy of ethical consumption*

My [shopping] behavior is mostly guided by factual knowledge of what is 'good' and 'bad' for your health. I really look up information about ingredients (...) Online, but I also buy books [of which some are not] written especially for scientists or medical people, and stuff that basically tells you what's good. So I choose the more 'conscious' products on grounds of these facts I have discovered (...) [b]ecause I want to understand why it is bad (...) [I]t's important to understand the dangers of ingredients and on grounds of this knowledge pick your products.

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These remarks come from Lisa (28, financial specialist, university degree). For her, shopping in an ethically responsible way is firmly grounded in scientific knowledge. More participants (seven) similarly explicitly referred to scientifically validated facts to provide a rationale for their conscious consumption pattern. Ara (28, philosopher, doctoral degree) for example feels “fortunate” she recently read a fact-laden book about the ethics of vegetarianism: not only can she now “rationally substantiate” why she abstains from consuming meat, but the newly attained knowledge also gives her solid reasons “to become a vegan in the future”.

The sources of such scientific knowledge were books, research papers, televised and internet news items, documentaries, or educational curricula. At first glance, such accounts seem to unambiguously corroborate Beck’s point that ‘[t]he diagnosis of the threats [of modern risks] and the struggle against their causes is often possible only with the aid of the entire arsenal of scientific measurement, experimental and argumentative instruments’ (1992[1986]), 162-3). Indeed, Sophia (51, manager in the health sector, doctoral degree) says:

I am a scientist myself. My doctoral research was about inflammation of brain membranes and lungs. So I want to see why [certain foodstuffs] work in a certain way in your body (...) There are scientific papers arguing organic products are more healthy, so that is for me a valid reason to go for them (...) There is an increasing amount of studies that show that GM-food does in fact do something to your brain, so I don’t choose products containing GM-ingredients.

However, the data generated from the interviews is at odds with the central assumption in Beck’s objectivist approach to reflexivity on modern risks, which is that critique of such risks has to be scientized *at all times*. As will become clear in the next sections, the participants quite contrarily make veritable how particularly cultural, non-scientific resources of knowledge serve to legitimate ethical consumption just as well. In this sense, the critique that Beck fails to acknowledge that acting out against risks posed to humans, animals, and the planet does not occur in a ‘cultural vacuum’ will show to be empirically grounded (e.g. Alexander and Smith, 1996). Moreover, the recourse to such alternative knowledge systems is sometimes even indebted precisely to having acquired scientific knowledge at all. Leanne (54, social security worker, applied sciences degree) for example once read how flower bouquets at grocery stores were no more than “pure chemical waste” and on grounds of it decided to dismiss them for good. Yet at the same time, she feels it is wise to be aware of how expert marketers target ethical consumers like herself, because these scientists “have researched how to best seduce conscious consumers”:

[A] study showed that using earthy color tones [in-store], and certain interior design [of grocery stores] can give the feeling ‘this [product] is OK’. So you can’t always trust the experts, because it can also be not OK at all.

In other words, although she does consume ethically on grounds of scientific knowledge she simultaneously understands that experts - what Beck calls ‘the argumentation craftsmen’ - are to be wary of since their intentions can exert manipulative power over one’s preferences.

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*The emotional consumer: Experiential legitimacy of ethical consumption*

As a solution to the problem of not always being able to trust scientists when shopping responsibly, Leanne distinguishes between ethical (or 'good') and unethical (or 'bad') products in a more emotional way which is profoundly based on experiential, rather than scientific knowledge:

Recently I held this piece of meat in my hand [at the grocery store] and I just visualized how the animals this meat came from must have lived. So since then I have assigned myself to 'visualize' this when I hold meat products (...) [T]hen you really get a feeling of 'Ugh [disgusting]'. That's why I can't eat chicken anymore. Ieww, no. Well I can tell you - this visualizing is effective. You will buy [more ethical] meat because of it!

Five other participants also smoothly 'switch' from using scientific facts to one's own feelings and bodily experiences when they evaluate the moral soundness of products and in this way aim to legitimate their consumption patterns. This stands in utter contradiction to Beck's prediction that some 'tragic' existential affair would ensue if one would try to 'disembed' from 'the power of definition of expert systems' when acting out a reflexive attitude (Beck, 2006: 336). In short, he assumes that although the public may come to understand the judgment of science cannot be always trusted, they still *must* because there is no other source of legitimacy to drive one's reflexive attitude in risk society. Most certainly then, attempts to 're-embed' ethical reflexivity in a non-expert knowledge system - particularly an experiential one - is expected to lack any perceived legitimating quality and therefore thought to be a failed attempt from the start (ibid.).

However, Leanne's remarks aptly show this is not at all the case. She is not alone in quite easily summoning a more experiential type of knowledge when troubled by scientific insights. Similar to her, Jacquio (51, guitar teacher, applied sciences degree) is also "aware" that "labels are manipulated" and as a result looks for "emotional conviction" that the products of his choice have ethically sound intentions. For him, this approach is worth pursuing because when one is convinced of the sincerity of the social or ecological intentions of a product, he notices "you just feel good. In your heart and head". Leia (33, philosopher, university degree) also feels "blessed" to have access to a lot of scientific information via her university (where she is a PhD candidate) on the one hand, but finds it a "curse" on the other hand as she finds the authority of some sources doubtful and because of this is not sure what all the knowledge should mean for her shopping behavior. In the end, she feels looking for factual information can be overly "exhausting" and therefore thinks it is important to:

[L]isten more to your body. In the sense that if you eat something [responsible], you will just notice it (...) And you can say it is placebo because you might just think you're eating [responsibly] although you don't really know for sure. But if you feel fine and your body likes it or you get signs your body likes it, then it's worth continuing this way.

In various ways then, these participants use emotional signs or clues in the form of bodily experiences and feelings to legitimate their consumption pattern. For vegetarians Ara and

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Phoenix (23, biodynamic agricultural specialist, intermediate vocational degree), this manifests itself in an extreme form. They physically express a sense of utter disgust when presented with the idea of eating meat. Describing this reaction as an “instinct” they feel to *have* to subject to such a powerful and clear bodily imperative when shopping.

Congruent with this finding, Kristensen et al. comes to the understanding that critical consumers grant their bodily experiences the status of ‘secure proof’ (Kristensen et al., 2011: 209) according to which to act, and Eden et al. suggest how organic-food orientated consumers ‘cited evidence of their own sense’ and ‘bodily experience’ as ways of knowing how to maintain their consumption pattern (Eden et al., 2008: 1048). However, like many other contributions they also seem to neglect the possibility that other resources of knowledge are used to legitimate ethical consumption as well.

### *The metaphysical consumer: Religious-spiritual legitimacy of ethical consumption*

With participants indicating to mobilize scientific as well as experiential knowledge systems in their project of ethical consumption, the question arises whether there is any room left for metaphysical ideas to be drawn upon as well, such as the spiritual one expounded on by Campbell (2007). One could doubt this because firstly, as is shown, participants do use scientific knowledge for legitimation purposes. This contrasts with the idea that ethical consumption is grounded in a profoundly un-scientific, inner spiritual tuition as proposed by Campbell. Secondly, the *emotional* consumers described above – although particularly driven by inner tuition – do not signify their bodily experiences in terms of their spiritual quality, something also at odds with Campbell’s work as they lack any spiritual grounding (Campbell, 2007: 134).

However, even with such ‘competing’ resources of knowledge being mobilized by the participants in this study, two of them also legitimate their ethical consumption using the spiritually central tenet of holism. Lalita (37, university degree, life-coach) explains how the concept of holism is crucial to her approach of doing groceries:

We are all energetically connected. There is an exchange of energy that takes place between me and the outside world. That is so because we are all condensed energy, or rather spirit in matter. So when I act according to a love I have for nature and animals, actually I also love myself at the same time. That is why I buy consciously by choosing organic products, and meat-free products: I feel like I serve myself and – at the same time – the outside world through this consumption pattern.

Acting with respect to the flow of this ‘energy’ is a hallmark expression of spirituality, for it makes manifest the acknowledgement that all existence around us is interconnected through an all-permeating divine life-force. Phoenix similarly grounds his consumption behavior in the spiritual idea that flows of energy can travel through everyone and everything:

I sometimes use Buddhism to explain why I’m vegetarian and eat organic food. Buddhism assumes all life is spiritually interwoven. If I cause something to happen, it will bear consequences for the entire world (...) So you should look more consciously what your effect on the world is (...) It’s ‘action-reaction’, really. When I eat something

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'bad', like something that has poison in it, I believe I hurt the world because it's all connected. And so by hurting the world, I hurt myself (...) [T]his kind of realization makes me even more enthusiastic to consume in the way I do.

Participants also turn to other spiritual guidelines to metaphysically ground their ethical consumption pattern. Phoenix notes he finds it important to employ spirituality in shopping, because "Buddha, in his Lotus Sutra, states it is important to live out your spirituality in everyday life", and Sophia chooses products that respect the Ayurvedic approach to health because it "focuses on the balance of your body, and emphasizes the positive" which she feels is in line with her spiritual inclination.

Spirituality is however not the only way in which a metaphysical knowledge system is used to legitimate ethical consumption. During the interviews, two subscribers to monotheistic faiths did so as well. In particular, they explicated how the *religious* belief that humans should be stewards of all of God's Creation impacts their consumer choices. Eve (67, therapist, university degree), a Christian, is "absolutely motivated" by her religion to remain vegetarian, because "[w]e merely have the Earth on loan and shouldn't subject animals to human will". Plissken (31, financial expert, university degree), a Muslim, similarly applies a sense of religiously informed stewardship of the Creation to his life as a responsible consumer:

[All of God's Creation] is so beautiful, so good (...) Especially we as consumers have a responsibility for it. In this, 'having love' is central because if one has love for His Creation, it flourishes (...) So my religion gives me reasons to consume ethically. One Hadith for example says: 'On a hot day a dog got stuck in a pit. A man walked by and filled his shoe with water to give to the dog'. The Hadith said that for this act alone the man could go to heaven or be otherwise rewarded.

The above makes clear that an Eastern style spirituality is indeed used by ethical consumers to legitimate their shopping behavior (through the concept of holism). However, it also shows that a one-dimensional attempt to understand ethical consumption as a principally spiritually informed phenomenon, fails to account for the diversity of knowledge systems used to legitimate it. The *informed* consumer for example uses a non-spiritual resource altogether and even though the *experiential* consumer is guided by an 'inner voice' to evaluate his choices at the grocery store, its moral authority springs from very corporeal - and not spiritual - experiences. Furthermore, 'spirituality' as such does not cover the diverse ways in which metaphysical rationales are employed to ground ethical consumption. Religious participants use tenets of Christianity and Islam to legitimate their habit of consuming more consciously.

### *The mythical consumer: Romantic legitimacy of ethical consumption*

According to Campbell, at the core of spiritual reflexivity on modern risks in consumer culture stands a spiritually informed sanctification of 'the natural' and a deep contempt of 'the artificial' (Campbell, 2007: 74-5). Although discourses centering around a reverence for the 'natural' is indeed employed by participants in this study (six) and for them functioned

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as an important resource legitimating their ethical consumption patterns, it is never embedded in a spiritual (or religious) context. Instead, their preference of 'natural' products over those judged to be artificial foodstuffs runs more along the lines of a Romantically inspired myth which holds all that is natural to be essentially 'good' and worth pursuing *as an end in itself*. This finding strengthens the notion that Campbell's approach, like that of Beck, is too limited to account for the diversity of knowledge systems used for legitimation purposes by ethical consumption.

A disdain for scientific rationalization of nature in combination with a high regard of nature and all natural processes is part and parcel of the Romantic myth that nowadays is so often commodified (e.g. Houtman et al., 2010; O'Neill et al., 2014; Wilk, 2006). Arnold (45, aerospace engineer, doctoral degree) mobilizes this cultural heritage to dispatch GM-food and simultaneously provide a rationale to justify his preference for unprocessed foodstuffs:

I steer clear from GM-food, because I just don't like manipulation (...) Unprocessed food can't be bad (...) This is more of a value I feel. Even if clinical tests would show GM-food to have no negative effects on the body, I would still choose non-modified food over it (...) I like the idea that we live with what we can produce under natural circumstances. Because it is our system: our earth has [naturally] evolved over billions of years and it is stable. Now we come in and modify genes ... How can you say what happens in 100 years? We don't know.

Likewise, it can be Romantically understood that Mike's (30, insurance specialist, university degree) "alarm bells go off" when he sees certain candies, because "that weird plastic kind of structure, in bright purple - there is no way that can come out of nature". But then it is Arnold's and Mike's usage of another element in their remarks that makes them truly veritable as being informed by the Romantic myth. This element is what Thompson calls the 'revenge-of-nature trope' and deems to be 'one of the most influential and enduring aspects of the Romantic legacy' (Thompson, 2004: 166, see also Alexander and Smith, 1996: 164-165). In short, it entails a fear that techno-scientific advancements will eventually backfire and introduce a plethora of unforeseen problems threatening (for example) global public health and the environmental condition of Earth. This 'Romantic fear' of modern ingenuities running amok is conveyed by Arnold when he is not sure of the long-term ecological consequences of GM-food, or when Mike states:

It is not that I know for sure that this or that ingredient leads to this or that disease. For me (...) things that are from nature are probably not as harmful as things that are from factories, produced with all kinds of chemicals. You're not sure, but chances are it is less harmful.

Others also gave expression to a great veneration for the natural and deep suspicion of potential dangers of techno-scientific progress. Leia makes clear how this Romantic mythical knowledge system legitimates her preference for more "safe" organic food:

Whether [GM-food is] in fact really dangerous for us, I don't know (...) I am no biochemist to be able to tell it is, and so far there has been a lot of consumption of GM-food and it doesn't seem to have any consequences to me. But, again, I am not sure it isn't

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bad for you either. So I avoid it to be sure and instead I just go for organic food. So basically, [this choice] is more an act of faith because I believe that the more, so to say, 'natural' or organic food is safer.

Earlier it was shown how scientific knowledge about modern risks can lead participants to successfully 'disembed' from it. Quite contrary to Beck's line of reasoning the *experiential* consumer for example showed how, in light of scientific ambiguity on what to define as a risk and how one should act against them, one can indeed turn away from science and come to rely on bodily experiences to legitimate an ethical consumption pattern. Such consumers do not experience a Beckian 'tragic affair' of existential crisis upon the realization that science does not necessarily provide uncontested insights which can serve as a clear guideline to go by when shopping. Instead, they simply 'switch' to another resource of knowledge and with it, another source of legitimacy.

With the mobilization of the Romantic myth, this is no different. Arnold, Mike, and Leia (and more participants) also switch between knowledge systems to give shape to their desire to be responsible consumers. Here, too, this sometimes occurs after they answer the question 'Who to believe?' (e.g. Macnaghten, 2003: 68). However, this time they turn to a cultural myth of a presumed 'goodness' of nature.

#### *The political consumer: Moral-ideological legitimacy of ethical consumption*

Some participants (six) expressed that part of what underlies their motivation to consume in an ethical way is a political worldview that aims to address problems related to public health, and ecological-, social- and animal wellbeing. Central to this worldview is a moral-ideological (and secular) sense of stewardship that presses for an active contribution to the betterment of conditions surrounding those endangered entities. This phenomenon is and continues to be a well-researched topic in the sociology of consumer culture (e.g. Cabrera and Williams, 2014; Eder, 1996; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012; Sylvan and Bennett, 1994).

Emilie (27, social sciences education worker, university degree) "take[s] responsibility" as a consumer through such political sorting of 'good' and 'bad' products.

When I go shopping, I think what is central in my thought is: 'How can I bring about change for the better?' In my case I avoid products from Israel, because I want to see the social economic condition of Palestinians improve. [The conflict between them] is a political situation where a lot of my values about what is 'good' and 'bad' come together (...) Take dates, for example. I avoid them because chances are they are grown on occupied territories (...) OK, I don't factually know if this is the case with *all* dates that say 'made in Israel', but avoiding them altogether is a precautionary measure. At least I know I am not contributing to something I don't stand for politically.

For Emilie, ethical consumption means to bring about social-economic change for the better. This is an imperative she acknowledges is induced by a political-moral worldview which is grounded in a sense of social stewardship.



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Other participants also employ narratives focusing around attempts to bring about politically motivated 'change'. Alfred (61, civil engineer, applied sciences degree) buys Fair Trade products because he is "just against anyone's social-economic exploitation" and wants to ensure farmers get a more honest price for their products. Sarah (49, physical geographer, university degree) says "the Earth is beautiful and you have to take care of it. We are exhausting it, and buying organic food [at Gimsel] helps me counteract that".

The application of such political knowledge systems in the grocery store is not always grounded in factual knowledge about its effectiveness. Emilie is not sure *all* dates made in Israel are grown on occupied territories. Likewise, Sarah simply "assume[s]" that in order to attain the goal of taking care of Earth, one can "best" buy organic food, although according to her it is "not 100% proven that pesticides are bad". To put the usage of a political knowledge system in Beck's perspective then, one can argue that just like *experiential* and *Romantic* consumers, also these *political* consumers do not necessarily go about ethical consumption on grounds of scientific arguments. Instead, they all legitimate their consumer behavior according to very cultural appropriations of modern risks - be it emotionally, mythically or indeed politically.

### *Legitimation work*

So far, it has been made veritable that there are different resources of knowledge used to legitimate ethical consumption. Another key finding of this study is that the participants pick-and-mix these resources of knowledge to create individual patchworks of legitimation. Exploring this 'legitimation work' allows us to better understand the dynamic process of how participants gravitate towards, switch between, and concurrently use the various knowledge resources described so far.

Socialization processes and specific biographical events give insight into these aspects of legitimation work. Emilie for example describes how the culture she grew up with made her prone to mobilize a Romantic myth when shopping consciously, but after becoming ill developed a need to also use scientific knowledge to choose 'conscious' products:

[In the country of my father's origin] (...) when you'd get sick, you'd get rosewater sprinkled on your head. When you'd catch a cold you'd drink natural herbs mixed with honey and warm water. I grew up with that culture (...) So there is a different relationship with 'pure' food and I think some of that carried over to my way of [doing groceries] (...) I only started to be interested in the whole 'objective' side when I became ill. [Then] I started to develop an interest in (...) what exactly is in our [food] - about pesticides and its effects, and so forth.

Earlier it was shown how Emilie also uses moral-ideological knowledge to legitimate her ethical consumption pattern (in avoiding dates produced in occupied territories by Israel). She explains how she is able to combine these diverse resources of knowledge:

Sometimes science doesn't really help to choose the more 'righteous' products. When I have two identical dates, but the one is produced in the occupied territories and the other isn't, science can't tell me which is better for my consciousness, because they are the exact

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same type of date. Then I use my political view to make sure I avoid the 'wrong' one. And you can't find out politically whether an artificially sweetened product is 'good' or 'bad'. It just can't help with finding that out. So then I just choose its naturally sweetened variant because I read that it is better for your health.

Quite differently, Sophia has learnt to always look for scientific legitimacy of her ethical consumption pattern because of her past life as an academic researcher. Eventually, doing research introduced her to a spiritual worldview. For her, these two resources go well together because they answer different questions. Whereas science answers the question *what* products are more ethical for humans, animals, or the planet, spirituality helps her answer *why* certain products can be seen as more ethical. This is why she says about her legitimation work that "[i]t is not an 'either/or' thing. It's an 'and/and' thing". Plissken also uses both religious and scientific knowledge to consume ethically. He clarifies why this does not lead to difficulties in using these resources of knowledge concurrently:

Grounding yourself in [facts] and [religion] is no problem for me. As far as I am concerned, they are the same (...): all is created by God, so all laws of nature are also created by God (...) this means that, for me, research showing what is bad for the earth, animals, or humans only unveils this divine element and - in principle - can't contradict it. So when I refer to some research to explain my choice for a product, in reality I refer to my religious conviction at the same time.

Phoenix' case shows a different course of life events and legitimation work. When he worked for a farm-cum-health store he started eating biodynamic foodstuffs. During this phase of his life he used experiential knowledge to legitimate his newly acquired preference, as "[he] just felt good inside [his] body" upon consumption of this sort of food. Eventually, the practice led to vegetarianism. He had a difficult time as increasingly he found himself having to legitimate being a vegetarian during discussions with his peers. Since then he found the holistic tenet of Buddhism to help explain to himself and others why biodynamic and meatless products felt so good earlier in his life. Like Sophia, Phoenix too, uses spirituality to answer *why* certain products are more ethical than others. But for him, instead of scientific knowledge, bodily experiences prove *what* are to be thought of as ethical products.

Besides biographies having their effect on the usage of the various resources of knowledge for legitimation purposes, participants switch between them also according to the *trust* these resources enjoy. It has already been shown how Leanne and Leila started using experiential knowledge partly as a result from their lack of trust in scientific experts. Leanne found out they use knowledge to manipulate one's preferences, and Leila doubted the authority of certain biochemists. However, they do not ban altogether using scientific knowledge to generate legitimacy for their ethical consumption pattern. Instead, they explicate to still aim to also ground their consumer choices in facts - besides relying on their bodily experiences. They do this simply by shopping specifically at Gimsel, trusting the objective research they assume its management has done for them so that only more righteous products are offered. In this way it can be understood that Leanne "outsource[s]" the "tiresome process" of finding out what e-numbers are bad for your health. Similarly,

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Leila feels she “share[s] responsibility” with its owners because she believes they have already “filtered out” unethical products for her on grounds of factual evaluation.

The data shows more examples of the intricacies of legitimation work, but these should already illustrate that any one-dimensional theory about how consumers deal with modern risks is bound to overlook the ways in which diverse and sometimes even seemingly opposed knowledge systems are in fact concurrently mobilized by ethical consumers.

## Conclusion

Despite its increasing salience in contemporary consumer culture, ethical consumption is still a fledgling topic within sociology. As a challenge to this situation, this study aims to contribute in generating fundamental understanding of what resources of knowledge are used by ethical consumers to legitimate their conscious shopping behavior. In addition, it hopes to unveil how the different resources are ‘worked’ into eclectic mosaics used for legitimation purposes.

It is necessary for any inquiry into these dimensions of ethical consumption to not focus on the motivations it rests on. For scrutinizing them does not allow systematic observations to be made about the underlying *loci* of epistemological legitimacy for ethical consumption and the legitimation work that pertains to it. Although Beck’s (1992[1986]) and Campbell’s (2007) work do carry implications with regards to the topics scrutinized in this study, they have shown to have two shortcomings of their own. Firstly, their one-dimensional approach does not reveal the variety of resources of knowledge used by participants of this study (scientific, experiential, religious-spiritual, Romantic, and moral-ideological knowledge). Secondly, as a result of this, their analysis is unable to uncover the intricacies of how ethical consumers gravitate towards, switch between, and concurrently use those different resources of knowledge to continuously manage the legitimacy of their conscious shopping behavior. This dynamic process of legitimation work simply remains out of sight.

Naturally, the data these results is based on is in some ways limited. The number of participants taking part in this study is small, they are almost all highly educated, live in the same one city in the Netherlands, and were first contacted at the same one health food store. The findings are therefore not representative and necessarily speculative. Nevertheless, they serve as explorations into the study of legitimation work carried out by ethical consumers, and as such can function as tentative anchor points for future research into this topic.

One theme is how the idiosyncratic results of legitimation work shown here should be interpreted within contemporary culture. Is the ‘pastiche legitimacy’ found in ethical consumer culture an expression of a broader social phenomenon that nowadays, people cannot but use multiple cultural narratives to give shape to (ethical) life? Such a postmodern sociological phenomenon has been addressed by various scholars who argue ‘liquid’ or ‘influx’ individuals (Bauman, 2000; Lash, 1993) continuously make a ‘bricolage’ of (Luckmann, 1979), or ‘cycle through’ (Turkle, 1995) different (configurations of) equally valuable resources of knowledge to act out an ever changing identity.

If so, this contrasts sharply with the implication of Beck’s and Campbell’s work that there is still one particular narrative (based on a respectively objectivist and spiritual worldview) that is especially able to authoritatively give shape to ethical life in

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contemporary society. This 'modernist naiveté' is remarkable in light of the fact that the scholars themselves recognize that since the second half of the twentieth century, detraditionalization in contemporary societies has been systematically eroding the particular relevance of various cultural narratives. For Beck, this is evinced by his position that socio-economic predetermination of life-courses is increasingly irrelevant for more and more people (Beck, 1992[1986]: 91-155) and for Campbell this is evinced by his argument that there has been a marked demise of the cultural meaning of Western religions, political ideologies, or the project of Enlightenment for giving shape to moral life (Campbell, 2007:250-340). Yet, in spite of this recognition of the decreased significance of certain meaning systems, they are both generous in assigning particular power to yet other (i.e. scientifically or spiritually reflexive) narratives that are used to construct all-encompassing lines of ethical action.

More thorough research has to be carried out to convincingly argue whether or not the *à la carte* legitimacy of ethical consumption seen in this study can be thought of as being postmodern. However intriguing this question may be, it should be noted its thematic has only been able to surface as a result of an inquiry into the intricacies of legitimation work carried out by ethical consumers.

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