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### When foods become animals: Ruminations on Ethics and Responsibility in Care-full practices of consumption

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# When foods become animals: Ruminations on Ethics and Responsibility in Care-full practices of consumption

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**ABSTRACT** *Providing information to consumers in the form of food labels about modern systems of animal farming is believed to be crucial for increasing their awareness of animal suffering and for promoting technological change towards more welfare-friendly forms of husbandry (CIWF, 2007). In this paper we want to explore whether and how food labels carrying information about the lives of animals are used by consumers while shopping for meat and other animal foods. In order to achieve this, we draw upon a series of focus group discussions that were held in Italy as part of a large EU funded project (Welfare Quality®). In the focus group discussions we addressed how, when or if, claims made about the lives of animals on food labels intervened in what the participants bought and ate. We contend that such labels bring the lives of animals to the forefront and act as new 'subjectifiers' (Latour, 2005: 212) that offer a new tool for becoming an 'ethically competent consumer', who cares about the lives of animals while shopping for food. However, this offer is not always easily accommodated within existing competences and previous commitments, as it requires a reassessment of existing, and often intimate, practices of shopping, cooking and eating. We argue that new labels carrying welfare claims, with their intention of increasing market transparency, produce two contrasting outcomes: they open new spaces of action, which offer an opportunity for investing in new competences and for engaging with animal welfare issues, in short, they allow an 'ethically competent consumer' to emerge, but they also produce another outcome, or a collateral casualty (Bauman, 2007), namely the ethically non-competent consumer.*

'In daily matters, be competent'  
(From *How to live ethically, the Tao Te Ching*)

## Introduction

Eating may look like a very mundane, daily routine, that in many respects we take for granted, but in recent years, many aspects of this unglamorous practice have come under scrutiny and have given rise to increasing moral and ethical questioning. Anxieties are spreading about the dubious nutritional properties of 'junk food',

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about overeating and keeping control of weight, and about the long-term unknown and disquieting implications of eating GM foods. Moreover, whilst the intensification of animal breeding and rearing has made meat and animal products cheaper and more accessible to the vast majority of ‘Westerners’, the environmental consequences of intensive animal farming and the slaughter and suffering of farm animals, has raised new issues about the ethics of eating the *flesh* or other *products* of animals’ bodies (Stuart, 2009; Cole *et al.*, 2009). These concerns are not entirely new, and in antiquity (for example, in Greek philosophy and in the writings of the political and intellectual elites of the Roman Empire) there are many examples that emphasize that what we eat and how we eat, is part of how we should live a ‘virtuous’ life. Marguerite Yourcenar, in her book, ‘Memoirs of Hadrian’, presents Hadrian as pervaded by a pre-modern and a post-human sensibility that embraces all living beings, including the sheep and the grass:

*In the school of philosophy, where it is well to try once for all each mode of life, I have experimented briefly with abstention from meat; later, in Asia, I have seen the Indian Gymnosophists avert their eyes from smoking lamb quarters and gazelle meat served in the tent of Osroës. But this practice, in which your youthful love of austerity finds charm, calls for attentions more complicated than those of culinary refinement itself; and it separates us too much from the common run of men in a function which is nearly always public, and in which either friendship or formality presides. . . As to the religious scruples of the Gymnosophist and his disgust at the sight of bleeding flesh, I should be more affected thereby if I had not sometimes asked myself in what essentials the suffering of grass, when it is cut, differs from the suffering of slaughtered sheep, and if our horror in presence of murdered beasts does not arise from the fact that our sensations belong to the same physical order as theirs. (Yourcenar, 1954: 21)*

In Roman times, these reflections were limited to the intellectual/religious or political elites of that world. Nowadays ethical questioning about eating has become a widespread concern in many affluent countries (Bennett, 1996, Bryant and Goodman, 2004, Barnett, Cloke, Clarke and Malpass, 2005, Miele and Parisi, 2001, Miele and Bock, 2007). But the difference between the contemporary and the ancient debate about the ethical implications of eating animals is not only limited to the broadening of the number of people concerned about animal suffering, it is also about the broadening and deepening of the concern itself.

The *Indian Gymnosophists* and Hadrian abhorred the cruelty of the death (and *only* the death) of animals for human consumption and these concerns were largely linked to hunting practices. In our time, ethical questioning about eating animals and animal products is predominantly linked to concerns about the *lives* of animals in factory farming and to the growing (environmental and health) risks associated with these systems of production. An example of this anxiety is offered by Clive Aslet, in his commentary of the new bird flu scare:

*‘There is something biblical about modern farming. One calamity seems to follow another. Plagues sweep through livestock with terrifying speed. Barely had we got*

*used to television images of sick cows, staggering with BSE, than our screens filled with the pyres of thousands of dead animals, incinerated in an attempt to stop the spread of foot and mouth. The numbers are barely comprehensible by anyone not involved in the industry. Foot and mouth saw the destruction of seven million sheep and cattle (quite unjustifiably, but that's another story). (The Observer, 4th of February, 2007: 27)*

The series of 'calamities' that have fallen on the farm animal population of Europe in the last decade have led to a 'crises of consumer confidence' in the European animal farming industry and these worries are echoed in recent studies<sup>1</sup> and in two recent Eurobarometer surveys of public attitudes towards farm animal welfare (carried out in 2005 and repeated in 2006)<sup>2</sup>. The vast majority of EU citizens interviewed in these large public consultation exercises declared that they were concerned about farm animal welfare. Concerns were expressed about the living conditions of laying hens in battery cages, about broiler chickens and about pigs, while the welfare of dairy cows was not considered to be a problem. A significant minority of people, predominantly living in old rather than new member states, declared that they thought about animal welfare while shopping for meat and other animal products and a high percentage of these people declared that they were willing to pay a (small) premium for animal products obtained in a welfare-friendly way.

A significant proportion of those interviewed (62%) declared that they would be willing to change where they shopped in order to find animal friendly products. They also mentioned the lack of availability of animal friendly products in ordinary shops and many lamented the lack of information provided on current food labels. However most respondents also believed that the welfare of farm animals was better in the EU than elsewhere. These statistics look contradictory, but they might indicate consumer awareness of both the crises in the animal farming population (BSE, FMD and Bird Flu) and the recent initiatives taken by the EU, and by several national governments in Europe, to address these problems. For example, new institutions, such as the Food Standard Agency (FSA) in the UK and the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)<sup>3</sup> have been created to assess the safety of food and the risks associated with technological innovations relating to food, but also to provide a forum for the expression of consumers' interests, and to promote research for evaluating the benefits that consumers could gain from food innovations (all of which helps to prevent future crises in consumer confidence)<sup>4</sup>.

The above mentioned crises of the last decades have also promoted a number of more diffuse interventions, led primarily by the food retailing sector, in order to restore a positive image of the European animal production industry. While up to the 1970s in Europe animal welfare issues were addressed mostly by changes in EU regulation (in particular, by raising the minimum permissible standards for animal welfare), since the 1990s there has been a proliferation of new animal welfare standards in the market. These were linked to the introduction of specific 'farm assurance schemes' (Ransom, 2007, Miele *et al.*, 2005, and Roe *et al.*, 2005). Organic, free range, freedom foods<sup>5</sup>, quality 'own' brands: all these products make claims about the quality of life of farm animals, and their logos have gained more visibility and more shelf space in large retailers, even in discount stores that traditionally

focused on price policies (for example Wal Mart introduced several lines of organic food at low cost in 2006<sup>6</sup>). This form of intervention has become particularly important in the UK, where the BSE and FMD crises had the most dramatic impact on the farm animal population. Here, according to Susanne Freidberg (2004), the environmental and animal rights/ animal welfare NGOs and the popular media joined in exerting pressure and succeeded in making the top supermarkets undertake 'ethical' reforms of their global supply chains. Furthermore, a growing number of supermarkets have addressed animal welfare concerns in their Corporate Social Responsibility policies, and have included 'animal welfare' claims in their own brands. This is often achieved by obligating their suppliers to join specific farm assurance schemes. This type of intervention is not new and it reproduces the modality through which the main supermarket chains, since the 1990s, have actively constructed their own products' brand quality in the UK (see Flynn *et al.*, 1998 & Busch, 2007), however these strategies are being adopted increasingly in other EU countries, including Italy.

Several explanations have been offered for the proliferation of these types of welfare standards communicated through labels. For example, Ransom (2007) has interpreted this proliferation as mostly due to a mechanism of emulation of the best practices adopted by the most competitive companies<sup>7</sup>, rather than being caused directly by consumer demand (Ransom, 2007). Similarly, Miele *et al.* (2005) describe an emergent governmentality of animal welfare issues, where the traditional role of the state in regulating animal farming is replaced by a new form of governance in the agro-food sector, where retailers have a more proactive role.

Addressing the welfare of farm animals through labelling has lots of purchase in contemporary political and academic debates. The expectation is that labelling will deliver improvements in the welfare of farm animals by promoting a demand pull for 'animal friendly' products, which will lead to technological changes in animal supply chains<sup>8</sup>. An example of this faith can be found in Singer and Mason's recent book *Eating: What we eat and why it matters* (2006). In this book they follow three American families in their food shopping trips and trace back all the animal products that they have bought in order to reveal the 'ethical' status of the majority of animal foods that are available to American families. The thesis of the book is that the American public is kept uninformed about the reality of animal farming practices and this lack of market transparency allows large retailers to offer plenty of foods, everyday, at low prices, but it also prevents ordinary consumers from asking for more 'ethically' produced products. These authors see the market as the new political arena and 'voting at the supermarket' as the way forward for the transformation of the global agro-food sector. They look to Europe for examples of a more 'ethically' developed food market. Their book has been written from an utilitarian perspective, as a shopping guide for orienting 'conscientious consumers' and it proposes a specific model of ethical/environmental education. It reminds consumers to think about the consequences of their shopping behaviour and it encourages them to engage in an active search and use of 'ethically produced, fairly traded, local and environmentally friendly products' in their everyday food practices. In the authors' view, food labels are the new medium for consumers' moral conduct on the market, and they suggest that 'all it takes is enough informed, ethically concerned consumers' (Singer and Mason, 2006, ix).

In this paper we want to move in another direction, one that is concerned with understanding what labels with claims about the lives of animals actually *do* once they start to appear on supermarkets' shelves and join the other vast array of claims and devices (price, packaging, weight, sell by date... and so forth) that are already there to inform consumer choice. We are interested in what animal welfare labels do, and what they can offer to consumers, because our theoretical orientation regards the 'ethos' of eating and shopping for food, not as a trait of the 'individual' that indicates her/his moral character, but as a set of competences and commitments that are developed while engaging in practical activities, such as doing the shopping, cooking and eating (Latour, 2005: 209–210, Hobson, 2006a and 2006b, Shove, 2003a and 2003b). Therefore, we set out to explore what these labels offer to food shoppers, whether and how they are used and interpreted by both 'ordinary' and 'ethically informed consumers', and what competences it takes to become one of the latter. In fact, recent literature regarding 'ethical consumption' (Alkon, 2008, Belasco, 2005) has suggested that what is often defined as 'ethical food consumption', may refer to the shopping strategies of a group of very 'skilful consumers', an example of what Campbell (2005) has defined as 'craft consumers' – people who are well-informed and up-to-date with the latest information on health issues in the media and who are aware of how larger social, health and ethical issues relate to the complexity of their own food choices.

In our examination of the effects of food labels carrying claims about the lives of farm animals, we started by exploring the practical everyday *reasonings, commitments and competences* of ordinary consumers around food. Then we examined how these new food labels, these new *ethical devices*, intervened with the situated logics surrounding shopping for food and eating. In order to unfold some of these ethical reasonings, we use excerpts from the dialogues and the accounts about shopping and eating practices given by participants in focus group discussions held in Italy, as part of a large EU funded research project called *Welfare Quality*<sup>9</sup>. We use these discussions to illustrate how labels with animal welfare claims can affect and upset previous *intimacies* of eating and shopping for food. However, we contend that this power to affect consumers is weaker than one might expect, because the labels can function to divide participants into two groups: one of *enthusiastic* consumers and one of *inactive* consumers.

The first group of *enthusiastic* consumers welcomed such labels for the increased market transparency that they offered and for enabling them to make better informed product choices. Indeed, they felt empowered as consumers, as they were able to both reward virtuous products/producers/retailers and to punish unethical ones. The second group of *inactive* consumers shared an attitude of non-engagement and inattention. This attitude was sometimes coupled with feelings of dismay and contempt for their own perceived inadequacy and lack of competence in interpreting the claims that these labels carry. We suggest that these labels do two things: they allow the 'ethical consumer' to emerge (Michael, 2006) and, conversely, they also create the 'ethically non-competent consumer'. In so doing, they bring about two desires: one for increasing '*transparency*' and one for maintaining '*opacity*'. However, before we go more deeply into the workings of these two concepts, we would like to address how we organised the focus group discussions and how they were specifically engineered to shed light on the above-mentioned issues.

### How to perform (and explore) food consumption practices

Consumption practices have often attracted dichotomist thinking, for example simplistic divisions between nature and culture are often used when defining the objects of consumption. In the case of food this is exemplified by understanding food as either an organic material that can satisfy nutritional needs, or by focusing on the immaterial qualities of food that function as communicators of identity, class and lifestyle (e.g. Bourdieu, 1984). But binary thinking has also permeated many discussions about the nature of consuming, with part of the literature celebrating individual consumer agency and another part of the literature stressing the determining role of the system. This dichotomist thinking has been identified well by Gabriel and Lang (2006) in their review of the many representations of the 'consumer'. They argue for a characterization of the consumer as 'un-manageable' and criticise current representations of this figure as either a hero, endowed with infinite agency and knowledge (e.g. as in the case of neoclassical economics), or as a dupe, a puppet whose moves are completely determined by some obscure social forces (e.g. as in critical sociology).

Echoes of this dichotomist thinking can be found in some of the literature on ethical consumption<sup>10</sup>. In Singer and Mason's (2006) presentation of the shopping practices of the three American families that they followed, the consumers are either the heroes, who stand for the animals' rights while shopping for food, or the dupes, kept ignorant and in-active by the system. They propose that food consumption practices are, or ought to be, about individuals making ethical and political statements regarding the lives of animals, which implies both a high level of reflexivity, on the side of the consumer, and a full moralization and politicization of animal foods. But this representation of food consumption practices is remarkably distant from the findings of recent studies (Everts and Jackson, 2009), and, as Gronow and Warde (2001) contend, it neglects the fact that a large part of the substantive field of consumption is 'ordinary' and involves activities '*... which require little reflection, which communicate few social messages, [and] which play no role in distinction*' (2001: 2). Other recent literature in the sociology and geography of consumption has endorsed this more practical approach, for example Thrift (1996, in Miller *et al.*, 1998: 6) believes that consumption should be viewed as a practical-moral and contextually specific activity and he wants to replace traditional consumption vocabularies of *rationality*, *choice* and *representation* with new vocabularies of *joint action* and *embodiment*. Adopting the same line of thought, numerous studies of food consumption have also highlighted the importance of taking into account the more embodied dimensions of food consumption practices (Probyn 2000, Bell and Valentine 1997, Miele and Murdoch 2002, Roe 2006). These studies underline that we do not simply reflect upon food in an abstract cognitive fashion, rather we physically ingest it into our bodies and our sensual experience of food (the smell, the look, the texture, the flavour, etc) can affect the way in which we think about it and the way in which we judge its qualities, including its moral quality. These studies suggest that approaches to (ethical) consumption which focus solely on explicit and representational notions of ethics (as exemplified in the utilitarian-reflexive-labelling model of food consumption) are likely to miss many of the more tacit, ethical imperatives, which inform and guide everyday practices (e.g. care, nourishment, conviviality, economy, etc.).

Furthermore, in contrast to the utilitarian question of how we encourage more consumers to ethically reflect upon their food choices they offer up a more fruitful line of enquiry, namely to explore the *practical effects* of food labels and how they function to create both active and in-active (hero and dupe) consumers?

### *Organising the focus group discussions*

Inspired by this more practical approach to consumption, we used a series of focus group discussions to start our investigation into ordinary consumers' ethical reasonings about animal foods. We aimed to use the focus group discussions to explore any traces of the numerous influences that affected consumers' food competences and commitments. This ranged from the domestic milieu and culinary traditions to the various sites, discourses and events through which these competencies can be moulded, altered and even transformed, for example via the moralizing discourses circulated by the media on healthy eating and the environment and via the immense array of devices available in supermarkets (such as labels, leaflets, adverts, shelf position, price, etc.), *'each having the capacity to provide you with the possibility of carrying out calculations somewhat more competently'* (Latour, 2005: 210). Our intention, therefore, was to understand the principles for organising these localised shopping and eating practices and to explore which skills and competences the participants in our discussions considered important to learn, and to invest in, in order to perform them to the standard that they perceived to be appropriate. Then we wanted to explore *if, when and how* a concern for the quality of life of farm animals becomes part of these reasonings.

We were eager to recruit 'ordinary' consumers for the focus group discussions (and by this we mean ordinary citizens in their role as food consumers and food shoppers), rather than people who were already explicitly highly motivated by animal welfare concerns, therefore we included many participants who only had 'a bare minimum level of interest in either farming or animal welfare'<sup>11</sup>. We thought that focus group discussions would be particularly useful to ask about food habits and shopping practices in a colloquial, friendly context and we hoped that they would be able to produce a 'natural conversation' where opinions are formed and attitudes are revealed. As noted by Miller *et al.* (1998: 63), we also perceived focus group research to be: *'a more creative method than one-to-one interview or survey research as the discussion evolves through a dialogic process where participants generate and exchange common meanings and shared knowledge. Common knowledge relies on the presence of shared concepts and themes that might be replicated across groups within a locality...'*

The main motivation in constructing the criteria for the selection of the groups (table 1) was to address the most important socio-demographic differences that have been shown to be important in previous studies (i.e. education and gender<sup>12</sup>) and to ensure that people from a range of different lifestyles and backgrounds were included in our analysis, so that this would provide us with an opportunity to explore a wide range of different attitudes and opinions associated with animal welfare and welfare-friendly food products. We also wanted a sample of participants with



**Table 1.** Selection criteria for the consumer focus groups

Group	Selection criteria
All participants	Aged 18–70, meat-eaters who eat meat at least once a week (except for group 6), must have at least a <i>bare minimum</i> level of interest in either animal welfare issues or farming
Group 1: Urban mothers (UM)	Female, aged under 50, with children (50% with at least one child under 5, 50% with at least one teenage child), urban dwellers
Group 2: Rural women (RW)	Female, aged under 50, must live in or have grown up in a 'rural' area, must not be farmers or farmers' partners
Group 3: Married or living with partner but without children (MLPNC)	Mixed gender, 50% aged over 40, childless, or no children living at home at present, married or living with a partner, urban dwellers, must do at least 50% of food shopping
Group 4: Seniors (S)	Mixed gender, aged 55–70, must do at least 50% of food shopping
Group 5: Young singles (YS)	Mixed gender, aged under 35, single, urban dwellers
Group 6: Politically active and vegetarian consumers (PAVC)	Mixed gender, 50% of the participants should classify themselves as vegetarians (vegans should not be included), 50% of the participants should be 'politically active' consumers (as defined in the recruitment questionnaire)
Group 7: Country specific group (G)	Groups that are of particular interest within specific study countries (e.g. gourmets in Italy (G), hunters in Norway, ethnic minorities in France and so forth)

different levels of involvement and familiarity with animals, therefore we looked for a certain number of pet owners and we sought people with different levels of familiarity with farming (we included one group consisting of people who either currently lived in rural areas<sup>13</sup> or who had been brought up in the countryside, while all the other groups consisted of people living in urban areas).

#### *The themes that we proposed to the focus group participants*

We started the focus group discussions by asking the participants to describe all the meals they had consumed the day before. This helped to firmly route the discussion within everyday food consumption practices. This technique of framing discussions within everyday practical contexts was continued throughout the duration of the focus groups and, in particular, we tried to ensure that any discussions about animal welfare food labels were framed within the context of participants' current food practices.

We then addressed the issue of the quality of life of farm animals and we used examples of labelled products (carrying welfare claims) as stimuli for the discussion. The products chosen were amongst the most commonly available in local supermarkets and included; organic beef, organic and free range eggs, organic milk, free range and organic chicken and pork, organic yoghurt and butter. For each of these products we provided several different brands, choosing the ones that were most widely available in the three Italian cities (Milan, Pisa and Bologna) where the focus groups were conducted<sup>14</sup>.

While several themes were addressed during the discussions (see Evans and Miele, 2008 for a full list of themes), here we focus attention on two. The first theme revolved around eating, the preparation of meals and shopping habits. The second theme introduced several topics, including: the provision of information about farm animal welfare; 'political consumption' and participants' levels and means of involvement with animal welfare issues; barriers and ethical dilemmas associated with the purchase of ethically labelled products; and human /animal relationships<sup>15</sup>. In the following sections we draw on excerpts from selected focus groups to examine participants' everyday food consumption practices and to illustrate their attitudes towards products with animal welfare claims.

### The intimacies of eating, cooking and shopping for food

It became immediately evident that the various daily occasions for consuming food attract different levels of attention and commitment. For all the participants, meal times were 'pleasurable appointments' of their days if shared with other members of their families or with friends: these meals were cheerfully and proudly described with details of the ingredients, the recipes and the care that had gone into their preparation. On the contrary, quick meals, without other family members (e.g. at work) often were not considered to be 'proper' meals, and they fell into an area of inattention and disengagement.

*'I do not know how to cook; lunch for me is not about 'eating', it is to fill my stomach. For my work I am always in different places and it is difficult to plan lunch, so I eat whatever is available, wherever I happen to be. It can be a sandwich or a dish of pasta or a slice of pizza...for supper I eat at home as God wills! My wife decides and cooks dinner...'*<sup>16</sup>

Cooking was regarded as an important activity and the 'quality' of products and the 'variety' of ingredients and dishes were often mentioned as a strategy for promoting good health. Cooking was considered something to 'thank' your partner for, a 'hobby' to invest time in, or 'fun', and as a way of sharing time and sustaining relations with other members of the family:

*'Every day I am invited to lunch and to supper by my wife. I am in charge of the food shopping or, sometimes, we go together. Last night we had carpaccio<sup>17</sup>, a salad and beetroots. For lunch we had lasagna riccia with 'cime di rapa' and ham and salami. We change everyday, we eat either meat or fish or cold cuts... given that we are retired... it is our hobby<sup>18</sup>.'*

*'When I am at work I have lunch in the canteen and my goal is to have very light meals. However in the evening I have fun... very often I invite my father and my son'<sup>19</sup>...*

The majority of participants experienced no ethical dilemmas in eating meat and other animal products and did not see any issues around the 'ethical status' of the animal foods available in everyday shopping and eating out contexts. Shopping for food and cooking were informed by an ethic of care for family and friends. The ethical status of food in-itself was not questioned within these practices, rather it was a means to an end, a tool for caring about important others. All the questioning and concerns around food were in relation to the meals that they wanted to produce. They perceived a difference between different shopping outlets and they considered it to be important to learn where to shop and who to trust (Kjarnes *et al.*, 2007) for assessing the quality of the food that they were buying. Indeed, discussions around the *quality of food* attracted lots of attention, because 'assessing the quality' of products, especially in the midst of the vast assortments available in supermarkets, and 'engaging with the search for the right quality products', in specialised shops or alternative outlets, were two common descriptors of what shopping, or competent shopping, consisted of. Each participant had a very specific idea of quality. For some, quality coincided with proximity (*local, fresh*), for others, quality was intrinsic to the method of production (*organic, natural*) or processing (*typical, regional products*) but most often it was expressed in relation to the flavour of the products:

*'I prefer quality... in the sense that if a product does not taste good I stop buying it even if it is organic'<sup>20</sup>.*

In other cases the quality of the product was not in its intrinsic taste, or in its other characteristics, but in its 'capacity' to become a good meal, once skilfully cooked:

*'When I go to the supermarket... if I read 'free range chicken' I assume it is the best, and maybe it is, but I also look at the price, because using this excuse of organic status and similar [they overcharge on the price]... I also look at the properties of the product... because I have my experience and I can tell the quality... I really like to go shopping for meat'<sup>21</sup>.*

Investment in these competences, for example learning to assess quality, searching for dedicated products, and all the attention devoted to producing successful meals, was often described as being expressly directed towards others, as a way of caring for members of the family:

*'When my nephew comes for lunch I pay more attention and I go to buy the meat from the butcher, it is more expensive but there is a difference'<sup>22</sup>...*

Shopping for food also comprised some anxieties and ambivalence, especially when conducted in ordinary supermarkets. Most participants indicated that supermarkets were the usual outlets for the majority of their food purchases. But most of the

participants mentioned that for a minority of more ‘important products’ they would go to different shops (even though higher prices and inconvenience made these visits infrequent). Several declared that they preferred specialised shops for cheese and cured meats and the butcher’s shop for their most important meat purchases, especially when they were buying meat for special occasions. The traditional butcher’s shop was preferred by many, as it was perceived to offer a richer shopping experience (more dedicated local products, more personalised service, a chat with the butcher on the best cut of meat for a particular dish, etc.) but also because it was perceived to make it easier to gather a variety of different information about products (e.g. the provenance of meat, the assurance that there were no additives, an explanation about a new product or a new brand, etc.).

In supermarkets all this information is often lacking (most meats, milk and eggs do not have labels which provide information about their origins), furthermore when information is available it is not communicated directly by a person (e.g. a butcher or a shopkeeper) but it is distributed across a vast array of different ‘devices’ (e.g. labels, packaging, position on the shelf, price, etc.) each of which offers only a partial clue about the very specific qualities sought after by consumers. Latour has pointed out that a supermarket can be seen as a place that ‘has formatted you to be a consumer, but only a generic one. To transform yourself into an active and understanding consumer, you also need to be equipped with an ability to calculate and to choose’ (2005: 209). He suggests that a supermarket offers a set of ‘circulating devices’ to which you can subscribe to become locally and provisionally competent:

*‘If you look at a supermarket in this way, a bewildering array of devices is underlined, each having the capacity to provide you with the possibility of carrying out calculations somewhat more competently. Even when one has to make the mundane decision about which kind of sliced ham (sic!) to choose, you benefit from dozens of measurement instruments that equip you to become a consumer – from labels, trademarks, barcodes, weight and measurement chains, indexes, prices, consumer journals, conversations with fellow shoppers, advertisements, and so on. The crucial point is that you are sustaining this mental and cognitive competence as long as you subscribe to this equipment. (Latour, 2005: 210)*

But to subscribe to and to keep up with this equipment (which is becoming increasingly complex) requires work, it requires effort to interpret and to translate all that ‘standardised information’ into relevant clues for identifying the specific *qualities* that are important to ordinary consumers. It also entails cunning to discover what these devices make visible and what they keep invisible and all the burden of this work might generate anxieties, especially for less well ‘equipped’ consumers. These issues are well illustrated in the next section, as we turn to examine the ways in which animal friendly labels were discussed within the focus groups.

### **What does a label say about the life of an animal?**

When presented with samples of animal products with different welfare claims on their labels, a few participants recognized several products and prized the information offered by them (e.g. a local regional brand of eggs and milk,

a national brand of organic chicken, some of the main supermarket chains' own brands of animal products<sup>23</sup>). Many other participants complained about a number of labels, as they lacked information concerning those aspects that they considered to be important for evaluating the product's 'capacity' to become a good meal (e.g. indications regarding provenance, or the 'maturation' of meats). The actual information provided, either on the labels or on the packaging, was often described as 'incomplete', 'unreadable', 'confusing', or even 'misleading'. Here is an example of the many sources of uncertainty and anxiety that some labels brought about:

*'For me this label is unreadable, I wear my spectacles but I cannot read it... claims written so small should not be allowed, I get angry...'*<sup>24</sup>

*'... yes you are right, it is poorly done, here it says that the animal was 22 at the time of slaughtering, but what does it mean? 22 years, 22 months'*<sup>25</sup>?

*'In my opinion the information provided is absolutely insufficient, especially as they don't guarantee that the products I buy for my children are free from growth-promoters and antibiotics; for this reason I use organic products, specifically the Demeter brand, which relates itself to an anthroposophist culture and it guarantees me that the product is not hyper-stimulated, that it is part of a natural cycle and that it goes hand in hand with children's psychological development'*<sup>26</sup>.

These uncertainties and anxieties increased when we addressed the issue of animal welfare. When asked whether they were looking for information about the lives of farm animals while shopping for food, and if animal welfare considerations would influence their purchases, some of the focus group participants showed that they invested time and effort in gaining information about the quality of life experienced by animals in contemporary intensive systems of production. Furthermore, they were knowledgeable about the main animal welfare issues described in NGO campaigns (*a chicken in intensive production lives only 33 days and never goes outdoors... hens in battery cages live in a space not bigger than an A4 sheet of paper, ... mutilations are routinely practiced to avoid cannibalism in hens and aggression in pigs... calves used in veal production are separated from their mothers straight after birth and are kept in individual crates*), which were available on the internet, or in more technical magazines. Some of them also dedicated time and effort to finding information about more animal friendly producers:

*'I dedicate lots of time to look for information on the internet and there you can find them. There is not enough in the ordinary newspapers, but on internet you can find much information on producers who say how they keep their animals'*<sup>27</sup>.

Furthermore, one particularly dedicated participant even decided to make a clear statement with her shopping, to give a signal to the supermarket that she wanted to reward certain type of producers:

*'Yes, I think about animal welfare when I go shopping and I try to have an influence for example by using a 'fidelity card'. In this way the supermarkets*

*obtain information about my age and my purchasing choices and they generate some statistics on the basis of this information. . . therefore, if I want to be traced as a consumer attentive to certain issues, I use the fidelity card<sup>28</sup>.*

If care is some kind of engagement that implies a reaching out to something other than the self, something that implicitly suggests that it will lead to some type of action for maintaining, continuing and repairing the world in which we live and for living in it as well as possible (Tronto, 1993: 102–103), then, for these consumers, shopping for food is an act of care that encompasses and sometimes prioritises the welfare of animals. However, the majority of participants felt surprised, somehow unprepared or ill-equipped to answer such questions, they felt almost betrayed (as if they were thinking. . . ‘we were talking about food and shopping, something I am competent and confident about. . . why do we have to talk about animals now?!’). From this viewpoint, the information about the lives of animals in intensive production, circulated by the other, more informed participants, was received with shock and dismay:

*‘I never thought about animal welfare. . . I feel I am a bit cruel for this. . .’<sup>29</sup>*

*‘Honestly not much, after today I will certainly be more careful, but so far, I must say, I was just aiming at the highest possible quality, I never thought much about animal welfare. . .’<sup>30</sup>*

*‘. . . I do not think about it when I go shopping. I realise that as consumers we could do something, but the regulators could/should do more<sup>31</sup>.’*

Such information made them realise that while they were ‘caring for important others’, they were not ‘caring for’ farm animals, and the food that they were buying for creating happy daily meals was probably produced via the suffering of other beings, who also needed their attention. The surprise and the sense of dismay that several participants expressed during the focus group discussions was not only about the presence or absence of welfare claims on food labels, but much more about the realization of their lack of understanding of what contemporary animal farming entails and the difficulties in identifying or accessing the sites where relevant information about the lives of farm animals was circulated (e.g. the internet, NGO leaflets, technical magazines, certain dedicated television programmes, etc.). Access to those sites and to that information was considered crucial for making sense of the ‘standardised messages’ offered by food labels and also for perceiving what information was missing from labels. Several participants pointed to how limited labels were as a means of communication and how they lacked the ability to properly address animal welfare problems:

*‘. . . but even if you look for information. . . you might read the label and that is all you get, if you want to know more or what it means, who do you ask for? . . . We should have different institutions, with independent experts (vets, doctors. . .) who give information. . . not the retailers<sup>32</sup>.’*

*'... Information on animal welfare is scarce and difficult to find... they should make it available to a public of non-expert people, presented in an accessible and clear language'<sup>33</sup>.*

### Acting on the market for promoting the welfare of animals

Singer and Mason, in the final part of their book, alert consumers that *'In supermarkets and ordinary grocery stores, you should assume that all food – unless specifically labelled otherwise – comes from the mainstream food industry and has not been produced in a manner that is humane, sustainable, or environmentally friendly. Animal products, in particular, will virtually all be from factory farms, unless the package clearly states the contrary'* (2006: 268). By proclaiming that the majority of animal products available on the market have been obtained in an ethically unacceptable way, they suggest that consumers need to engage in 'ethical shopping' to change the 'system'. But do labels carrying welfare claims have the charm to engage and to attract all the consumers who are concerned about the lives of farm animals? Do such labels have the efficacy to adequately communicate the quality of life experienced by the animals that generated these products? In the focus group discussions with Italian consumers the efficacy of the labels seemed quite limited.

Labelling food products in accordance with their animal-welfare credentials can open up new spaces for 'ethical shopping' and can encourage consumers to reflect upon the links between the lives of farm animals and the food they buy (Shaw *et al.*, 2006). Indeed we found examples of this moral landscape and this way of interpreting shopping activities (as in the case of the above mentioned consumer who used a fidelity card to communicate her preferences to the supermarket, with the aim of influencing the kind of products that they should offer). These 'ethically competent consumers' can be highly engaged with food labels, some of them even go on the internet and trace the codes that indicate who produced and processed given products. They are familiar with the concept of *traceability* and they use it to verify where products come from and they check how many sites an animal has visited before arriving on the supermarket shelf. Finally, they welcome more market transparency and more explicit information on product labels, that would empower them to exert greater 'influence' and to promote the welfare of farm animals via shopping, either through *'buy-cotting'* virtuous products or by *boycotting* unethical ones.

In contrast, the majority of participants in our focus group discussions described a very different approach to shopping, one where they sometimes pay little attention to what is written on food labels and where the investment is in all those competences that are required to evaluate the products as food: to assess their qualities or their 'capacity' to become a good meal. The ethos of these competences revolves around the needs of, or the care for, important others, especially family members. As Barnett *et al.* (2005: 20) state: *'... if ethical is taken, in a Foucauldian sense, to refer to the activity of constructing a life by negotiating practical choices about personal conduct, then the very basics of routine consumption – a concern for value for money, quality, and so on – can be understood to presuppose a set of specific learned ethical competencies'*. These 'ordinary' consumers perceive animal welfare as an issue that (regrettably) they have not been

‘trained’ to care for, and that there is little opportunity to be reminded about, or to engage with, while shopping for food. The focus group situation offered these ordinary consumers the opportunity to talk with other people who shared their consumption practices about their apprehension and discomfort (*I never thought about animal welfare, I feel I am a cruel person*), their sense of powerlessness (*as consumers we can do something, but the regulators could/should do more*) and about their feelings of being ill-equipped to judge the ‘welfare status’ of the animal products available in ordinary shops. It revealed that there are other beings in need of care, but it also posed new questions about how to care.

Many participants pointed out that they did not want to be responsible for ensuring high animal welfare (and punishing low animal welfare) through their ordinary purchasing practices and they asked for more guarantees, e.g. that ‘un-ethical’ products should not be on offer in the market in the first place. They also asked for more intermediaries (between them and the labels) to help them to understand information about the positive and negative aspects of animals’ lives. They mentioned initiatives such as ‘*education campaigns on how to interpret labels or information about what animal welfare actually is and what was important for the lives of animals*’ or other devices that would reduce the burden of engaging with a growing multitude of messages and labels that cannot properly explain the problems of contemporary animal farming: ‘*a logo that indicates that certain products are approved by a consumers’ association*’, ‘*a supermarket policy that guarantees that all the available products are obtained from suppliers who conform to a certain standard of animal welfare*’.

Whilst previous authors (such as Serpell, 1986) have viewed non-engagement with food related animal welfare issues as a form of denial on the part of consumers, we believe that the reasons behind certain ‘ordinary’ consumers’ failure to engage with animal welfare labels (something which we would term a desire to maintain ‘opacity’) are far more complex than this. First, the scope of ethical consumption exceeds narrow utilitarian models of representation via labels and ethical action via individual consumer choice and encompasses an enormously diverse range of everyday caring practices and competencies. Thus, a desire to maintain opacity might reflect the privileging of alternative modes of care rather than a simple lack of care. Second, a desire to maintain opacity might reflect consumers’ lack of faith in the power of food labels and their ability to re-present the complex lives of farm animals to a largely non-expert public. Finally, a desire to maintain opacity might reflect the fact that many people do not believe that consumption is the correct arena through which these types of common goods should be negotiated. Quite interestingly, in dialogues between ‘ethically competent consumers’ and ‘ordinary’ consumers, *transparency* and *opacity* were not perceived as being animated by alternative ethics or to reflect a greater or lesser concern for the lives of farm animals, rather, they emerged as complementary interventions, as a set of procedures and tools that would make available to ‘ordinary’ consumers a mode of care for farm animals that now is enacted only by the ‘ethically’ competent ones.

## Conclusions

The discussion on the concept of ethical consumption prompted by the book by Singer and Mason leads to some final considerations. From the conversations with



Italian consumers, it emerged that labels carrying claims about the lives of farm animals created two groups of consumers: the 'ethically competent consumers' and the 'ethically non competent' consumers, or simply the consumers that remain 'ordinary', because they do not engage with this new activity. The former engage quite enthusiastically with the opportunity offered by food labels to pursue what they perceive to be 'more ethical' consumption practices. However, the same opportunity is less appealing to 'ordinary consumers' because their ethos of shopping is about the qualities of food, it is about maintaining relationships and accommodating the desires of their loved ones and not about making statements about the lives of animals on the market. Increasing transparency and providing more information about the lives of farm animals in the form of food labels does not necessarily imply that these consumers would be competent enough or even inclined to accept this responsibility. Their uneasiness, discomfort and sometimes resentment of the discovery that products available in ordinary shops might be produced in a way that is 'unethical' and that causes the suffering of farm animals, points to the fact that the welfare of farm animals, for a long time, has been considered and regulated as a *public good* and, until recently, it was considered to be a non-competitive issue, in the animal supply chain (and still is, in many cases, because labels are 'scarce' and 'partial'). The new emerging governance of the animal farming industry in Europe is a recent innovation and a demanding one, because it requires the direct involvement of consumers. This direct involvement is not easy to achieve for every type of consumer. The call for creating new *intermediaries* or for mechanisms that maintain the *opacity* of the market, while devising new forms of accountability in animal supply chains, as proposed by the ordinary consumers in the focus groups, underlines that this new governance might create new anxieties, and a sense of erosion of previous certainties, such as the responsibility of the state for improving the quality of life of all farm animals. Furthermore, ordinary consumers' desire for market opacity can be seen as a new call for taking more traditional forms of collective action and for sharing responsibility to ensure high animal welfare standards. In this sense, Singer and Mason's proposal to rely on food labels to make the agri-food sector more 'animal friendly' fails to acknowledge the limits of this approach and the amount of additional support work that would be needed for this strategy to succeed. It also neglects one of its effects, namely, the new classification of consumers that it generates. By proposing '*consumption-scape(s)*' as the new places and spaces of responsibility and care for animals (Popke, 2006), it creates a new 'product': the *ethically non-competent* consumer, who is left in-active by the labels. In doing so, it might also unwittingly relegate to a residual space the possibility of envisaging and fostering more collective actions, where mass-consumption, or the very availability of '*masses*' of cheap animal foods (rather than only the specific ethical *qualities* of selected animal friendly produced products) are questioned.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Miele, Kjarnes and Roex, (2005) Welfare Quality® Report No. 1 for an overview.

<sup>2</sup> Eurobarometer 2005 and Eurobarometer 2007; see Law (2009) for a discussion on the use of surveys for addressing public opinion.

<sup>3</sup> In the UK the Food Standards Agency is an independent Government department set up by an Act of Parliament in 2000 to protect the public's health and consumer interests in relation to food.

See [http://www.food.gov.uk/aboutus/how\\_we\\_work/originfsa](http://www.food.gov.uk/aboutus/how_we_work/originfsa) for a mission statement and details on this organisation. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) was set up in January 2002, following a series of food crises in the late 1990s, as an independent source of scientific advice and communication on risks associated with the food chain. EFSA was created as part of a comprehensive programme to improve EU food safety, ensure a high level of consumer protection and restore and maintain confidence in the EU food supply (from [http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa\\_locale-1178620753812\\_AboutEfsa.htm](http://www.efsa.europa.eu/EFSA/efsa_locale-1178620753812_AboutEfsa.htm)).

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion on issues of trust in the food industry in Europe see Kjarnes *et al.*, 2007

<sup>5</sup> Freedom Food is the label developed by the RSPCA in the UK.

<sup>6</sup> Liza Featherstone (2006) 'Is Wal-Mart Big Green or Big Mean?' *The Nation*, Sept. 1st available at <http://www.alternet.org/story/41008/> and [http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/mar2006/nf20060329\\_6971.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/bwdaily/dnflash/mar2006/nf20060329_6971.htm)

<sup>7</sup> A mechanism called *isomorphism* in political science as Elizabeth Ransom explains.

<sup>8</sup> For an example see Mayfield *et al.*, 2007 and the EU Action Plan on Animal Welfare 2006–2010, [http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/com\\_action\\_plan230106\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/food/animal/welfare/com_action_plan230106_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> These particular focus group discussions were chosen from among the ones conducted within the Welfare Quality project in seven EU countries (The UK, Italy, Norway, France, the Netherlands, Sweden and Hungary) in 2005. Welfare Quality (2004–2009) is a large EU integrated project funded under the VI Framework where over 50 University and research labs in Europe and in Latin America cooperate in order to develop an EU standard on Animal Welfare. As stated in the project description the standard will define an on farm assessment and a monitoring system of animal welfare that will be validated by current animal science findings, but it should address the main concerns of the EU citizens in their role as consumers and it should represent a workable tool for the EU stakeholders (see [www.welfarequality.net](http://www.welfarequality.net)). Focus group discussions were used at the beginning of the research to inform the following phases of the investigation (consumer telephone survey, citizen juries) as well as for providing information about the main concerns of the EU public to the animal scientists who were developing the assessment system and the on farm measures of animal welfare. For a full description of the methodology of the focus group with consumers and the results in each national case and the cross countries comparison see Evans and Miele, eds (2007) 'Focus Group Report, part 1: National Cases' Welfare Quality Report Series N.4, Cardiff: Cardiff University, and from the same authors, 'Focus Group Report, part 2: Comparative Report' Welfare Quality Report Series No. 5, Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> For a review of the literature on ethical consumption see *The Ethical Consumer* edited by Harrison, Newholm and Shaw (2005).

<sup>11</sup> Several previous studies addressed the question of the nature of consumers concerns about farm animal welfare, but most often they surveyed consumers who clearly stated that they were concerned about the welfare of farm animals. See Miele and Parisi (2001) and Harper and Henson (2001) among others.

<sup>12</sup> See Miele and Parisi (2001), Harper and Henson (2001) and Miele and Roex (eds.) (2005) 'Consumers' attitudes towards farm animal welfare', Welfare Quality Report Series No.1, Cardiff University.

<sup>13</sup> Even though we excluded farmers and farmers' spouses/partners.

<sup>14</sup> For a full description of the products presented to the Italian consumers see the 'Italian Focus Group Report', in Evans and Miele (2007).

<sup>15</sup> There was a third theme, which addressed the more specific problem of what *is* animal welfare and which criteria and measures they would consider relevant to assess and monitor it. This last part of the focus group discussion was a task specifically designed to give feed back to the animal scientists working on developing the principles/ criteria and measures for assessing and measuring the welfare of farm animals on farm.

<sup>16</sup> (FG IT MLPNC, Interv. n. 7, M., 60).

<sup>17</sup> Carpaccio consists of thin slices of raw beef dressed with lemon and various seasonings.

<sup>18</sup> (FG IT MLPNC, Interv. n. 6, M., 66).

<sup>19</sup> (FG IT MLPNC, Interv. n. 4, F., 43)

- <sup>20</sup> (FG IT RW, interv. F., 43).  
<sup>21</sup> (FG IT S, interv. n. 2, M., 65).  
<sup>22</sup> (FG IT MLPNC, interv. n. 1, F, 35).  
<sup>23</sup> Coop Italia and Esselunga  
<sup>24</sup> FG IT MLPNC, n. 7, M., 60.  
<sup>25</sup> FG IT MLPNC, n. 3, F., 41.  
<sup>26</sup> FG IT RW, n. 6, F., 37.  
<sup>27</sup> FG IT MLPNC, n. 4, F., 43.  
<sup>28</sup> FG IT RW, n. 1, F., 37.  
<sup>29</sup> FG IT S, n. 7, F., 56.  
<sup>30</sup> FG IT S, n. 2, M., 65.  
<sup>31</sup> FG IT RW, n. 5, F., 42.  
<sup>32</sup> FG IT MLPNC, n. 7, M., 60.  
<sup>33</sup> FG IT MLPNC, n. 3, M., 41.

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