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When practice performances stop making sense: a practice-based study on moral conflicts in plant-based food consumption

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ABSTRACT

This study advances understanding of how morality can disturb the maintenance of sustainable practices. Focusing on plant-based eating, we analyse how moral conflicts catalyse misalignments in the teleoffective structure of plant-based food consumption practice. We conceptualise teleoffective misalignments as disconnects between the normative ends, beliefs, tasks and emotions considered appropriate within a practice's teleoffective structure. Utilising a large set of qualitative data from self-reported vegan and vegetarian consumers, our analysis reveals that moral conflicts disrupt smooth performance of the practice, leading to situations in which the practice does not make sense to its practitioner. We contribute to practice theoretical consumption research by clarifying the conceptualisation of teleoffective practice misalignments from the viewpoint of morality. Furthermore, the study provides an empirical account of the practice of plant-based eating becoming vulnerable or temporarily failing to perform, addressing how moral ideals continuously shake the successful performance of consumption practices.

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Introduction

The complex dynamics between consumption and morality continue to be of interest to consumer researchers (e.g. Askegaard et al. 2014; Kristensen, Boye, and Askegaard 2011; Thompson 2011; Wilk 2001). Research has particularly examined how moralised discourses lay the groundwork for what is understood as sustainable (Gonzalez-Arcos et al. 2021), ethical (Cherrier 2007; Gram-Hanssen 2021) and healthy (Halkier and Jensen 2011; Silchenko and Askegaard 2020) in mundane consumption. This is also the case in the context of food consumption, which is inherently marked by contradictions, tensions and conflicts that reflect morality (e.g. Aboelenien and Arsel 2022; Cronin et al. 2014; Halkier 2020; Leipämaa-Leskinen 2007; Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004). Hence, food and eating provide a potential arena in which to examine contested moralities in consumption.

A specific context that demonstrates the complexity of morality in eating is plant-based food consumption (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021; Weckroth and Sutinen 2025), which refers to “a dietary pattern in which foods of animal origin are totally or mostly excluded” (Hargreaves et al. 2023, 1117). While plant-based eating is intertwined with moral meanings related to animal ethics, planetary well-being and healthiness (Ruby 2012), it also contradicts the norms of Western consumer cultures, in which meat eating is not only socially acceptable but encouraged (Bryant, Prosser, and Barnett 2022; Weckroth and Sutinen 2025). The acceptability of rejecting the meat norm varies

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across groups, meaning that social influence and group norms can either support or hinder changes in eating habits (Cheah et al. 2020). Moreover, similar types of moral conflicts continue to emerge in daily performances as consumers try to navigate what is “right” and “correct” in relation to mundane eating (Andersen 2011; Pecoraro and Uusitalo 2014). While studies have insightfully demonstrated moral conflicts in the adoption of more sustainable and ethical food practices (Bryant, Prosser, and Barnett 2022; Fuentes and Fuentes 2022; Laakso et al. 2022; Storz 2022; Twine 2018; Wendler 2023; Williams et al. 2023), we lack more rigorous insights into the role of moral conflicts when performing the practice following its habituation and routinisation.

To address this research gap, we draw on practice theory, especially on Schatzki’s (2001b) theorisation of the teleoaffective structure of a practice, which allows us to combine morality and mundane performances. As Schatzki (2001b) explains, the teleoaffective structure is an organising framework that connects doings and sayings by outlining what ends, tasks, beliefs and emotions are considered appropriate or correct within a given practice. Thus, the teleoaffective structure, by definition, gives a sense of oughtness and rightness to a practice. Sometimes, this structure becomes disorganised due to *teleoaffective misalignments* that disturb the smooth performance of a practice (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024). To illustrate, in the context of plant-based eating, teleoaffective misalignment might occur in the form of emotional distress when a vegetarian meal option does not reflect the ideals of healthy eating pursued with the practice.

To further explore the appearance and nature of teleoaffective misalignments, this study analyses *how moral conflicts catalyse misalignments in the teleoaffective structure of plant-based food consumption practice*. Our empirical data are based on three qualitative datasets. Altogether, 48 self-reported vegetarian and vegan consumers produced autobiographies, consumption diaries and interviews to elucidate their plant-based food consumption practices. The participants had been vegetarians or vegans for an average of 14 years, ensuring that each was habituated with plant-based eating.

Our study adds to practice theoretical consumption research by detailing how misalignments take place in the teleoaffective structure of plant-based food consumption. In particular, our study clarifies the conceptualisation of teleoaffective misalignments. In their study of exercising mothers, Spotswood and Gurrieri (2024) define a teleoaffective misalignment to exist “between the beliefs and understandings in pre-performative practices and the teleoaffective structure of a practice” (84). We build on their insights and introduce the concept into the moral domain of consumption. Accordingly, we define teleoaffective misalignments as involving disconnects between the ends, tasks, beliefs and emotions considered appropriate within the teleoaffective structure of the practice (Schatzki 2001b). Second, we provide empirical accounts of the practice of plant-based eating becoming vulnerable or temporarily failing to perform due to its disordered teleoaffective structure (Thomas and Epp 2019). Finally, the findings extend the understanding of practice disruptions by accounting how conscious moral reflection reshapes and disrupts practices (Christensen et al. 2024; Edirisingha, Parsons, and Cappellini 2026; Phipps and Ozanne 2017). By considering the roles of sociocultural normativities and ideals (e.g. the morality of food), we answer calls for further research exploring the organisation of teleoaffective misalignment in relation to these normativities and ideals (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024).

This paper is organised as follows. First, we discuss how morality intersects with plant-based food consumption; then, we elaborate on the practice theory literature on teleoaffective misalignments. Next, we introduce the methods. The findings demonstrate how moral conflicts fuel misalignments in the teleoaffective structure of the practice of plant-based eating. The discussion further theorises this conceptual thinking, and the conclusions highlight key theoretical contributions.

Theoretical foundations

Moral conflicts in the practice of plant-based food consumption

All consumption, by its very nature, raises moral questions regarding issues of fairness, self versus group interests and immediate versus delayed gratification in the consumption process (Wilk 2001).

This study is grounded in a sociological view of morality – more precisely, in a *constructivist perspective* of morality, which views morality as a socially constructed process (Caruana 2007) in which “norms are being dialectically (re)defined and (re)negotiated between the social factors and the individual making the moral choice” (Silchenko and Askegaard 2020, 4). Ultimately, this approach focuses on the “discursive process” through which moral negotiations are reproduced in the social processes of marketplace actors (Caruana 2007).

Food, in particular, is a highly moralised topic in contemporary consumer culture (e.g. Moisio, Arnould, and Price 2004; Silchenko and Askegaard 2020). In many cases, the morality of food stems from ideals of what a good life is (Biermann and Rau 2020) in relation to what individuals strive for with their consumption practices (e.g. to contribute to a sustainable future). Moreover, food moralities evolve through moral negotiation and marketplace contestations. For instance, Kristensen and colleagues (2011) illustrated that the morality of milk is contested through “counter-mythologies” that oppose narratives positioning milk in the centre of a healthy life.

Thus, previous research has supported the idea that consumers face conflicts when aiming to consume morally. In essence, moral conflicts emerge when an individual strives for morally “good” food choices but faces moral contradictions in realising them (Wilk 2001). Research has shown that moral conflicts arise at multiple levels of society. First, tensions exist at the macro level, where consumers are exposed to varied sociocultural recommendations and representations of good eating (Askegaard et al. 2014; Weckroth and Sutinen 2025). Second, conflicts are based on socially shared norms negotiated in social groups (e.g. Laakso et al. 2022). These norms categorise certain food items as more “ethical” or “healthier” than others, leading to a moral dichotomy between “good” and “bad” food items (Askegaard et al. 2014; Grauel 2016; Silchenko and Askegaard 2020). Third, conflicts are connected to an individual’s own ideals and daily actions of eating, such as pursuing healthiness but ultimately eating ready meals (Jallinoja, Pajari, and Absetz 2010). Consequently, this study approaches moral conflicts as manifesting in multiple ways: They can occur as conflicting sociocultural representations of good eating, as dilemmas in socially shared norms of food consumption and as mixed feelings related to daily eating situations that disrupt the eating routines. By *moral conflict*, therefore, we refer to the ideals (personal, social and cultural) of a consumption practice contradicting the daily performance of that practice.

In attempts to navigate the ideals of good eating, some consumers habituate new food consumption routines, such as plant-based eating (Bryant, Prosser, and Barnett 2022; Laakso et al. 2022). Prior research has insightfully illuminated the challenges that arise when a consumer learns to practice a plant-based diet, including psychological barriers, social challenges and tensions related to challenging norms (Bryant, Prosser, and Barnett 2022; Jabs, Sobal, and Devine 2000; Twine 2014). However, the moral conflicts that continue following the routinisation of such a diet have received less attention. As a notable exception, Greenebaum (2012, 2018) illustrated how practitioners continuously negotiate the contradictions and boundaries of the vegan lifestyle and how race and ethnicity can cause tensions in veganism, since practitioners can experience stigma from both the vegan community and their ethnic communities. Some plant-based eaters cope with social conflicts by avoiding such stigmatising labels as vegan or vegetarian (Randers, Grønhoj, and Thøgersen 2021). Additionally, although plant-based eaters list motivational reasons to avoid meat, the practitioners vary based on how strictly they stick to their dietary limits (de Boer, Schösler, and Aiking 2017). For instance, some vegetarians deviate from their diets to avoid tensions in social interactions, such as being a burden to others or not fitting into a group (Rosenfeld and Tomiyama 2019). Building on these insights, we explore moral conflicts in the habituated practice of plant-based food consumption, focusing on practice misalignments.

Practice theory and teleoaffective misalignments in plant-based food consumption

Utilising a practice theory approach, we conceptualise plant-based food consumption as a social practice performed by vegetarians and vegans through shared action patterns as routine-based

non-doings and repetitive refusals of animal-based foods (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021, 4). This conceptualisation leans on the basic premise of practice theory; that is, practices represent the primary entities of the social world (Schatzki 2001a), with consumers seen as *practitioners*. It follows that the unit of analysis is a practice, not an individual consumer or their attitudes, intentions or behaviours (Hargreaves 2011).

Acknowledging that there is no unified practice theory approach, our use of practice theory follows a human-centric approach (Laitinen et al. 2025; Schatzki 2001a). This approach relies heavily on Schatzki's (2001a, 2001b, 2002) theorisation of the mental side of practices. Seeing practices as arrays of human activity, Schatzki (2001b) discussed the practical intelligibility that structures the relationship between intentions and doings, defining practical intelligibility as people intending knowingly to perform actions that make sense to them to perform (Schatzki 2001b). He further proposed the concept of the *teleoaffective structure* (Schatzki 2001b), which combines *teleology* (i.e. "the sense of orientation to particular goals and ends") with *affect* (i.e. "the emotions and motivational engagements enjoined by such orientations"; Welch 2020, 64). Hence, it is an organising and coordinating element of practice that links 'doings and sayings' together by providing a range of "acceptable or correct" ends, tasks, beliefs and emotions for the practice (Schatzki 2001b). In addition, the teleoaffective structure provides a sense of "oughtness and rightness" to the practice (Schatzki 2001b; Tse and Gheorghiu 2023). As Schatzki (2001b) explained:

What makes sense to a person to do largely depends on the matters for the sake of which she is prepared to act, on how she will proceed for the sake of achieving or possessing those matters and how things matter to: thus on her ends, the projects and tasks she will carry out for the sake of those ends given her beliefs, hopes, and expectations, and her emotions and moods. (60)

Though Schatzki (2001b) did not explicitly refer to morality, he saw the teleoaffective structure of a practice as normative by nature. The teleoaffective structure outlines what makes sense to meet the aspired goals and what emotions and moods are associated with the performance of such a practice (Reckwitz 2016; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Further, it embeds practices into certain contexts (Schatzki 2001b), providing a means to understand how a practice connects with its normative ends, beliefs, tasks and emotions. While Schatzki (2001a) outlined a practice as consisting of understandings, rules and teleoaffective structures, our view of practice elements leans on Woermann and Rokka's (2015) conceptualisation, in which a practice consists of *material setup*, *bodily skills and routines*, *teleoaffective structures*, *rules* and *cultural understandings*. This anatomy allows us to examine material setups (e.g. available food products) and bodily skills and routines (e.g. cooking skills), which are essential when performing the practice of plant-based food consumption. Further, in this context, teleoaffective structures may relate to the goal of animal welfare, rules may manifest in dietary restrictions and cultural understandings may guide what is considered ethical in terms of food.

Practice researchers agree that the alignment of practice elements is not straightforward; rather, these elements may be misaligned (Epp, Schau, and Price 2014; Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024; Thomas and Epp 2019; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Practice misalignments refer to situations in which practice elements are not aligned with one another, causing practice instability (Thomas and Epp 2019, 564), leading to negative consumer experiences (Woermann and Rokka 2015) and threatening successful practice habituation (Epp, Schau, and Price 2014) and practice performance (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024). Misalignments are commonly caused by external threats (Phipps and Ozanne 2017) or practitioners' life-stage transitions (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024; Thomas and Epp 2019). To illustrate, Spotswood and colleagues (2024) investigated the adaptation of training practices after Covid-19 closures prevented gym training; Spotswood and Gurrieri (2024) explored the mothering body and misalignments in exercise practices and Thomas and Epp (2019) analysed how new parents fail to habituate parenthood practices.

While most prior works have focused on misalignments in the anatomy of a practice, our work builds on Spotswood and Gurrieri (2024), who introduced the concept of *teleoaffective*

misalignment as “a misalignment between the beliefs and understandings in pre-performative practices and the teleoffective structure of a practice” (84). Studying exercising mothers, they showed that teleoffective misalignment fuelled a cycle of body evaluation and projection, eventually leading to the unsuccessful performance of exercise. Our conceptualisation of a teleoffective misalignment zooms into the constitution of teleoffectivity, as we consider teleoffective misalignments to actualise as disconnects within the practice’s teleoffective structure. Leaning on Schatzki (2001b), we define a teleoffective misalignment as a disconnect between the ends, tasks, beliefs or emotions considered appropriate within the practice’s teleoffective structure. For example, a teleoffective misalignment might occur when the sustainability goals of plant-based eating clash with the ideals of good mothering (AbiGhannam and Atkinson 2016), thereby disconnecting the practice from its emotional engagements and sense of orientation towards a better future.

To conclude, our conceptualisation takes a more fine-grained look at the teleoffective structure of a practice, whereas previous work has primarily examined misalignments between pre-performative practices and the teleoffective structure (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024). This allows us to consider more explicitly the appropriateness of the ends, tasks, beliefs, and emotions embedded within a practice. Ultimately, this reveals the complexity that arises between the practice and the perceived morality of its performances.

Methodology

Our study builds on three qualitative data sets: autobiographies, consumption diaries and in-depth interviews. All data were generated in 2022 and 2023. In total, 48 self-reported plant-based eaters participated in the study (see Appendices 1 and 2). The participants were recruited in Finland, where consumers are increasingly informed regarding the harmful environmental and health effects of high meat consumption, but where meat remains an integral part of the national diet (Koskinen 2023). To gain an in-depth understanding of possible moral conflicts, we recruited participants who varied based on age, gender, occupation, family structure and type of plant-based diet (e.g. vegans and vegetarians). Further, to focus on conflicts emerging within the habituated practitioners, we selected participants who had adopted the diet some time ago (average duration: 14 years, median: 7.5 years) and identified as being vegetarian or vegan. However, as later demonstrated in the findings, some participants occasionally consumed meat or fish while maintaining a vegetarian self-identity. The data collection followed procedures approved through the ethical review process at the authors’ institution, and informed research consent was obtained from all participants.

First, autobiographies (Eriksson and Kovalainen 2008) were collected from 20 self-reported vegetarian participants using purposive sampling and snowballing. The participants were instructed to write about their experiences of becoming and being vegetarians, including the difficulties they faced during their journeys (see Appendix 3). Use of written autobiographies facilitated positioning of the events within a wider life context and reflection on the participants’ corresponding emotional states. This approach allowed us to witness not only major moral conflicts that shaped the participants’ eating practices but also how practitioners continued to negotiate the morality of their actions after the (failed) performances. In total, the participants produced 25 pages of single-spaced text for analysis.

Second, to observe mundane food practices and possible moral conflicts, we recruited 28 new participants to keep consumption diaries on food-related consumption situations: namely, eating, cooking, buying groceries, planning meals and having food-related discussions. The participants were recruited through a newsletter of a customer loyalty programme of a large Finnish restaurant franchising company. The consumption diaries allowed us to explore how consumers structure daily plant-based meals and navigate within morally charged eating conventions (Marshall 2005). The participants were assigned to keep consumption diaries for two weeks, preferably writing at least one diary entry each day. To stimulate the writing process, the participants were

encouraged to add self-generated photographs to their diary entries (Moisander and Valtonen 2006). Each diary included 10–64 entries, for a total of 441 diary entries.

Third, we organised semi-structured, in-depth online interviews with 11 volunteers from among the consumption diary participants. We began by interviewing volunteers whose diaries included moral conflicts and continued the interviews until theoretical saturation was reached. The purpose was to allow the participants to elaborate on their diary entries and to ask questions regarding the intersection of consumption practices and morality. The interviews lasted approximately 30–70 min and included such open-ended questions as “how would you describe your household’s eating routines” and “how do you solve food-related challenges and conflicts?” In total, nine hours of interview recordings were transcribed for analysis.

The analysis was developed through an iterative process of reading the data and theory (Spiggle 1994). Following data familiarisation, we coded the three datasets using NVIVO15. First, we reviewed all the material and identified the situations in which moral conflicts emerged in the data. We then utilised Woermann and Rokka’s (2015) model of practice elements and Schatzki’s (2001b) teleoffective structure to identify what happens in practice elements when moral conflicts emerge, specifying that moral conflicts fuel misalignments. We started by coding the data according to the practice elements (e.g. meat-free food items as material setup and plant-based cooking as the bodily skills and routines). We continued by looking for misalignments in the practice’s teleoffective structure. Finally, we interpreted how these misalignments challenged smooth practice performances. Our analysis constantly moved back and forth between data and literature, triangulating across data sets and, thus, producing an understanding of how successful practice performances are disturbed by conflicts with morality.

Findings

In this section, we begin by outlining the aligned teleoffective structure of plant-based food consumption practice, illustrating how it supports successful practice performance. We then elaborate on how moral conflicts fuel teleoffective misalignments, disconnecting the practice from its normative ends, beliefs, tasks and emotions. We then delineate how teleoffective misalignments disturb smooth performance by depicting outcomes of practice performances.

Aligned teleoffective structure of the practice of plant-based food consumption

Well-aligned practice configurations are guided by a teleoffective structure that provides a template for mental conditions, such as the normative ends, tasks, beliefs and emotions of the practice (Schatzki 2001a, 2001b; Woermann and Rokka 2015). Our participants spoke of shared end goals related to the well-being of non-human animals, the planet, other humans or the self. Practitioners were aware of the tasks that needed to be performed to meet the desired end goals, such as using healthy plant-based ingredients or avoiding buying unnecessary items. They also shared the normative belief that being a vegetarian or vegan might help them eat healthier and make more sustainable and ethical choices (Ruby 2012). Finally, the participants commonly associated plant-based eating with positive emotions, such as joy, pride and happiness. The following narratives illustrate the aligned teleoffective structure:

I have gradually become vegetarian as the world around me has changed. I wanted to change with it and renew my habits in ways that I consider important for the environment, society and the future. [...] Consequently, I have shaped my lifestyle to be more environmentally friendly while increasing my vegetarianism. However, I feel that vegetarianism and veganism are the environmental choices that I am most committed to in my daily life. This is likely because modifying my diet was easy, effortless and enjoyable for me, and I don’t feel like I have given up anything because of it. (Kerttu, vegetarian for 6 years, autobiography)

We [my partner and I] discussed our reasons for stopping the use of meat in our diet, and they were the same as before: animal rights and welfare and the sufficiency of food in the world and ethical and ecological reasons.

Back then, people were already talking about the ‘greenhouse effect.’ For the well-being of the planet and ourselves, it felt like a good solution. We also aimed to utilise the natural resources around us. We collected wild vegetables, mushrooms, berries. My partner built a dryer with which we dried, for example, fireweed leaves to use as a green addition in baking. [...] Nowadays, it feels like, with the younger generations, vegetarianism is becoming, if not mainstream, then a significant action for the well-being of the world, climate change and nature. I’m happy about that. (Maria, vegetarian for 40 years, autobiography)

These two narratives demonstrate that consuming plant-based food “makes sense” when the doings and sayings of the practice are supported by an aligned teleoffective structure. For Kerttu, the ends, tasks, beliefs and emotions associated plant-based food consumption with an “easy, effortless and enjoyable” way to enhance environmental sustainability. Maria’s ethical and ecological goals relied on tasks of harnessing natural products, such as berries and mushrooms, in a sustainable manner. The consumption diaries also depicted mundane consumption situations supported by a well-aligned teleoffective structure, giving daily food habits a sense of purpose and framing plant-based cooking as “joyful” and “inspiring.”

Negative emotions associated with meat consumption further strengthened the sense of normative rightness surrounding practicing plant-based eating. For instance, Kirsi explained that she decided to stop consuming meat when she *“didn’t detach [herself] emotionally from the suffering [she] saw,”* leading to the reflection that she *“hadn’t allowed [herself] to feel compassion for those animals or to feel distress or sorrow about [their suffering].”* Similarly, Tuisku’s *“concern about the climate was so strong that [they] saw no other option”* than adopting a vegan diet. These narratives reflect how the teleoffective structure also provided a template of strong negative emotions and moods oriented towards meat, leading to relatively strict rules against the use of meat or other animal-based products.

Despite the well-aligned orchestrating of practice elements, our analysis shows that mundane consumption situations were filled with moral conflicts, causing misalignments in the teleoffective structure of the practice. These conflicts caused practice instability. As discussed below, in such situations, consuming plant-based food no longer made as much sense.

Moral conflicts catalysing teleoffective misalignment

When the teleoffective structure is misaligned, it fails to provide a sense of orientation towards the ends of plant-based eating, bringing negative affective intensity into practice performances. Here, we describe how moral conflicts catalyse disconnections within the teleoffective structure.

Practice disconnects with its normative ends

First, conflicting moralities catalyse disconnects between the practice and its normative ends. In such situations, the practice is disconnected from its sense orientation towards its goals (Schatzki 2001b). In our data, the disorientations often involved the health-related goals of plant-based eating. Take Elisa, who experienced such a disconnect when dining in her workplace lunch cafeteria:

It annoys me right away – like, why isn’t there at least some protein in this vegetarian dish to make it a bit better. And then, quite often, I get this uncomfortable feeling, having to spend time thinking about whether I should be flexible and eat a chicken dish or just take the [vegetarian] pasta, which only has cream and grains, or whether I could somehow compromise and try to make that vegetarian dish better. (Elisa, lacto-ovo-vegetarian for 15 years, interview)

Here, Elisa experienced a moral conflict when the vegetarian option did not align with her understandings of healthy eating. The plant-based pasta did not contain any recognised source of protein, while the chicken-based dish met the ideals of a good and balanced meal drawn from nutritional recommendations. Her reflection also illustrates that moderate consumption of meat products is not necessarily considered unhealthy (de Boer, Schösler, and Aiking 2017). Disconnects with the health-related normative ends of the practice were commonly related to protein intake (as

Leena says “*well, it’s still about protein [...] I see it as a problem*”), but also involved other nutritional values, as discussed by Tiina:

The salt content in the [vegan] foods is alarming. [...] The only ready-made item that ends up in my shopping cart is hummus. Why? Because all the others are heavily salted – not just barely over the 1.0% threshold, but far beyond it. I don’t want to include these products in our quick everyday meals because the daily salt recommendations would be exceeded significantly. It’s frustrating again. [...] It [would be] wonderful and encouraged that vegan products could also be ‘child-friendly’ and, more broadly, suitable for anyone to eat without an increased risk of cardiovascular diseases. (Tiina, vegan for 11 years, diary entry)

For Tiina, vegan consumption was detached from the purposes of healthy living. This was catalysed by understandings of healthy eating that associated salt with being unhealthy and by consumption experiences that positioned vegan food items as highly salted. Therefore, vegan consumption became associated with health risks, such as cardiovascular diseases, and with an inappropriate diet for children, thereby detaching the practice from the normative ends of good health.

Practice disconnects with its normative beliefs

Second, our analysis illuminates how moral conflicts work as a trigger, breaking the links between the practice and its normative set of beliefs. In these situations, practitioners’ personal ideals of eating clashed with social expectations challenging the oughtness and rightness of plant-based eating. For instance, it was quite common to negotiate what was socially acceptable as a guest (Twine 2014; Wendler 2023), since “*hosting vegetarians can cause extra stress and pressure*,” as Matti pondered in his consumption diary. Several participants discussed the social expectations related to food practices:

What made things difficult was that the same food could no longer be prepared for all eaters. [...] The situation made me feel uncomfortable, as if I were somehow an extra burden to the person cooking. (Ronja, pescovegetarian for 30 years, autobiography)

The challenge [for a vegan guest] is that bread is sometimes the only vegan option, since even the spreads aren’t vegan. However, anyone could easily replace the spread [to a vegan option]. Mainly, the easy thing is to drink water. [...] I often have my own snacks, so it’s not that easy to just go [to visit relatives] like a non-vegan would. (Dan, vegan for 4 years, interview)

Both narratives demonstrate that the socio-culturally constructed norms for visits involved avoiding imposing an unnecessary burden on the host. The moral conflict between being a good guest and sticking to one’s own values created disconnects within the teleoffective structure, as the practice that the participants believed to be the right thing to do suddenly seemed to cause trouble. In her narrative, Ronja embodied discomfort related to the worry that her dietary requirements may be burdensome for the host, who would have to cater additional dishes. Dan, on the other hand, illustrated the burden for practitioners themselves, who must either cope with limited offerings or engage in prior preparations, such as assembling snacks.

Similarly, moral ideals related to good parenting generated conflicts. For instance, Heli, who had practiced vegetarianism in her early adulthood, felt that “*a mixed diet was easier and more acceptable during the time of having a young family*.” Similarly, Tiina, a vegan for 11 years, experienced conflict between being a good parent and being a strict vegan:

With the third child, time is limited, and once again, I open a jar of ready-made baby food with meat for lunch and dinner. It’s a conflicting feeling. When my previous child was a baby, there were options like lentil stew for 7-month-olds in the stores, but now the only vegetarian options are couscous with vegetables in tomato sauce or vegetables in a milk-based sauce. [...] It’s frustrating, but I simply don’t have the time in this daily routine to cook homemade meals for my 7-month-old baby who still has no teeth, and plain vegetable purees are no longer enough. (Tiina, vegan for 11 years, diary entry)

Tiina pointed out that the market currently does not offer suitable plant-based baby foods. As a busy mother of three, she questioned the oughtness of cooking vegan baby food from scratch, as that time detracted from other needs of her family. Overall, these extracts illustrate how

sensemaking of the practice is disturbed by moral conflicts when the connections between the practice and its set of acceptable beliefs become destabilised.

Practice disconnects with its normative tasks

Third, moral conflicts may disconnect a practice from its set of normative tasks. When that happens, performing the practice-related tasks (e.g. cooking with plant-based ingredients or choosing a vegan option at a restaurant) no longer makes sense, since these tasks no longer help achieve the end goals. For Minni, meal planning, cooking and going to restaurants started to feel difficult because of the effort she had to make while practicing plant-based food consumption:

The decision [to become vegan] felt really good, like a burden had been lifted off my shoulders, and finally, my lifestyle was more in line with my [ecological] values. However, I got used to it, and at some point, planning meals and cooking started to lose its charm. The downsides began to emerge: Eating at restaurants was difficult because waiters and even chefs often had no idea what veganism entails, and cooking took a lot of time because there were no suitable ready-made meals. (Minni, vegetarian for 6 years, autobiography)

Minni's narrative shows how she was, at first, happy with her new diet; however, the daily tasks gradually started to cause extra work, which then extended to the whole practice. Similarly, Ronja, who did not enjoy cooking, felt that her vegetarian diet *"forced [her] to prepare meals"* instead of eating the same food her non-vegetarian partner had prepared. These cases show how a misaligned teleoaffective structure disturbs the coherence between practice-related tasks and aspired end goals. Eventually, these misalignments may lead practitioners to question why they should engage with the practice.

Practice disconnects with its normative emotions

Finally, our analysis illuminates how moral conflicts trigger disconnects between the practice and its normative emotions. For instance, Linda, a vegetarian for 12 years, explained in her diary that *"the limited selection is frustrating on almost every shopping trip, especially the range of plant-based protein sources"*. Hence, during exposure to socio-material arrangements configured to facilitate and normalise the consumption of animal products (Fuentes and Fuentes 2022), the practice lost its motivational engagement and the comprehensibility of performing it declined. Similarly, the data revealed the emotions of annoyance:

The options [in a restaurant] were rather limited, which easily causes annoyance – as if vegetarians only wanted to eat pizza or tomato pasta. (Reetta, lacto-ovo-vegetarian for 27 years, consumption diary)

The participants' references to limited selections underline how plant-based food consumption practice is performed in a context that normalises meat consumption. This disconnects the practice from its normative emotions, as described by Minni:

I also felt a sense of unfairness growing in my mind that I spend so much time and energy on this while so many people are destroying the planet as fast as they can and don't care at all. The first turning point in my story was when my favourite chocolate bars were on sale at [a grocery store], and I couldn't buy them because they contained milk. I held back tears in the store, feeling that it was so incredibly unfair that I have to deny myself "everything" while most people don't care. (Minni, vegetarian for 6 years, autobiography)

Minni's narrative shows that when the teleoaffective structure is misaligned, emotions become detached from the pride and joy originally felt when living according to one's goals, such as sustainable values. Minni struggled to make sense of the effort and discomfort she experienced when attempting to practice plant-based consumption, since other people continued to consume wastefully. Overall, our data illuminate that misalignments embody affects, which generated negative feelings of frustration, boredom and distress, in practice performances (Reckwitz 2016).

Outcomes for practice performances

Having identified how moral conflicts catalyse teleoaffective misalignments in practice, we continue by analysing two alternative outcomes in situations involving disconnected links: vulnerable

practice performances and failed practice performances. We also show that misalignment of the teleoffective structure jeopardises smooth performance of the practice, since people intentionally pursue the performance of practices that make sense at a particular point in time (Edirisingha, Parsons, and Cappellini 2026; Schatzki 2001b).

First, our data demonstrated that when the teleoffective structure was misaligned and failed to provide a sense of oughtness and rightness to the practice (Schatzki 2001b), practitioners continued successful practice performances, but in a vulnerable manner. This outcome was related to the practitioners' previous experiences, personal goals or social relationships, which supported continuing with plant-based food consumption even when its morality was questioned.

At the church coffee gathering, they were serving sandwich cake. But guess what happened! When I finally got to the serving table, it turned out they only had ham-filled sandwich cake. Well, a long-time vegetarian can handle this kind of disappointment, but it was still a bit of a letdown to chat with friends with a dry mouth [...] This is how sticking to your values can come at a cost. (Matti, vegetarian for 11 years, consumption diary)

Despite experiencing negative affective intensities, Matti still could successfully perform the practice (i.e. refuse to eat food with meat) because, as a long-time vegetarian, he had experience coping with disappointment and navigating challenging situations, even when socio-cultural norms fostered certain behaviours (e.g. eating a piece of cake with coffee). However, due to these disconnects, performing the practice did not make as much sense, since it came "at a cost," and the performance was no longer smooth.

Second, disconnects with the normative nature of the practice sometimes led to failed practice performances. In these situations, the links between the practice and the teleoffective structure were broken; thus, performing the practice no longer made sense, at least in the given situation. This was the case with Kerttu, whose family "*found it challenging if [she] ate food that was different compared to the others,*" so she felt it was "*easier to compromise on [her] own diet rather than complicate things for everyone else.*" Moreover, our data showed that failure to perform the practice did not always solve the teleoffective misalignment; rather, it continued to be disturbed by a morally conflicted state:

[I]f I eat that can of tuna, I think about how there's probably aluminium in the can and that [the fish] is an animal, but, on the other hand, sometimes it's just so easy [as a way to get protein]. Just because it's easy. So, I feel a bit like, 'Damn, I shouldn't be doing this'. (Leena, vegetarian for 45 years, interview)

I also ate chicken salad because I was hungry and didn't want to be impolite by refusing one of the main dishes. I took a portion of the salad that had as few pieces of chicken as possible. I don't like the taste of chicken. The thought of eating a dead animal makes me feel disgusted. (Linda, lacto-ovo-vegetarian for 12 years, consumption diary)

Here, Leena was left with a conflicted emotional state when faced with the prospect of eating canned tuna, which was considered an easy source of protein but did not align with the ecological and ethical goals of plant-based eating. It also did not align with the rules of plant-based consumption – as Leena pointed out, as a vegetarian, she should not eat fish. Linda, on the other hand, felt (morally) disgusted about eating a dead animal; yet, she did so in order to follow the social norms of a gathering. Both outcomes – that is, a vulnerable practice performance and a failed practice performance – make the practice more fragile and may eventually lead to practice abandonment, as happened with Ronja:

I became pregnant with our first child, and at that point I realized that my diet needed some kind of adjustment – [the diet] was too one-sided. One reason for this was that I still wasn't enthusiastic about cooking, and to be honest, I didn't feel like spending much time fussing over vegetarian dishes just for myself. At that time, I added fish to my diet, which I felt helped diversify my meals. (Ronja, pesco-vegetarian for 30 years, autobiography)

Ronja had previously struggled to make sense of the oughtness of cooking separate dishes for herself and the rightness of being a burden to others due to her diet. As new moral conflicts emerged when she became pregnant, she ultimately abandoned her practice (vegetarianism) and

started to follow a pesco-vegetarian diet. Next, we discuss how these findings relate to prior literature.

Discussion and theoretical contributions

In the following, we further analyse the conceptual relationship between teleoffective misalignments and morality in the practice of plant-based food consumption. Figure 1 theorises this relationship, showing how moral conflicts catalyse teleoffective misalignments and challenge ideal practice performance.

In Figure 1, the moral conflicts are depicted as shaking the ends, beliefs, tasks and emotions within the teleoffective structure, potentially unbalancing the structure's coherence by disconnecting the practice from its normative and acceptable ends, beliefs, tasks or emotions. These are the teleoffective misalignments that disturb the smooth organisation of the teleoffective structure (Schatzki 2001b). Eventually, these misalignments might break the links between practice elements (i.e. materials, bodily skills, understandings and rules), thus complicating practice performance.

Performance of the practice can be complicated in various ways, as discussed in previous practice theoretical consumption studies (Laakso et al. 2022; Thomas and Epp 2019; Woermann and Rokka 2015). While our findings are closely aligned with those of these prior studies, our explicit connection between moral conflicts and the teleoffective structure further shows that misalignments may lead to either vulnerable or failed practice performances. These destabilised performances generated feelings of failure, frustration or anxiety among practitioners, showing how non-routine forms of affects can momentarily unsettle the sense of normality of practices (Reckwitz 2016). In most cases, the vulnerabilities and failures were temporary, and the individuals returned to the practice after a while. However, as demonstrated in the findings, broken links could ultimately lead to practice abandonment, if they continued to not make sense to the practitioners (Edirisingha, Parsons, and Cappellini 2026; Thomas and Epp 2019). Hence, teleoffective misalignment not only disturbs everyday practice performances but also poses a threat to practice continuity.

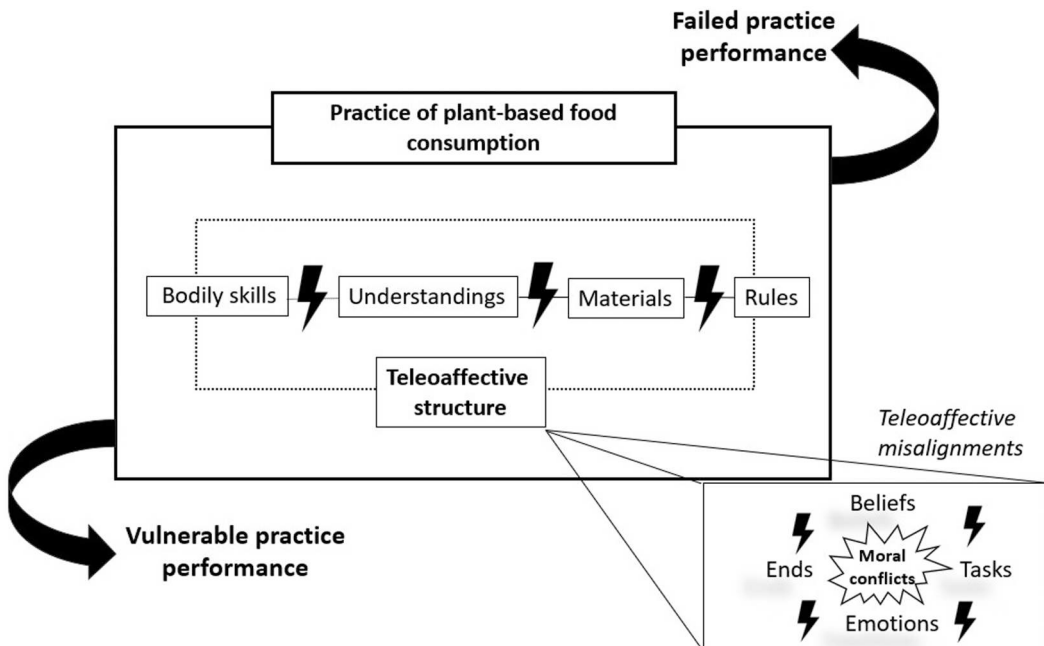


Figure 1. Moral conflicts and teleoffective misalignments in the practice of plant-based food consumption.

We provide three main theoretical contributions based on our analysis. First, we clarify the current knowledge on practice misalignments (Phipps and Ozanne 2017; Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024; Thomas and Epp 2019; Woermann and Rokka 2015) in the field of consumption research. We introduce the concept of teleoaffective misalignment into the moral domain of consumption. In particular, we show how teleoaffective misalignments are linked to morality and define them as disconnecting the practice from its normative ends, beliefs, tasks or emotions (Schatzki 2001b). In so doing, we argue that contested moralities might break the links between a practice's teleoaffective structure, eventually leading to disconnected practice elements. Therefore, it is important to understand how morality intertwines with the socio-material structuring of practices, because it helps in identifying the conditions in which sustainable practices, such as plant-based eating, may fail to be maintained.

Second, we respond to the calls to examine how moral conflicts are managed within practices. Prior works largely agree that everyday consumption is a site of negotiating morality (Caruana 2007; Silchenko and Askegaard 2020); however, the entanglement of explicit moral concerns with daily routines has been understudied. We provide an empirical account of this issue by examining how consumers handle moral conflicts in habituated food consumption practices, an analysis that further allows us to observe the varied outcomes to practice performances. While previous studies have found that misalignments might lead to practice defection (Spotswood and Gurrieri 2024) or to new practice habituation, vulnerable practices or practice abandonments (Thomas and Epp 2019), our findings show that practitioners either continued to perform plant-based eating in a vulnerable way or temporarily failed to perform the practice.

Third, our paper contributes to discussion about practice disruptions (Edirisingha, Parsons, and Cappellini 2026; Phipps and Ozanne 2017). Considering a context in which practitioners are reflexive about their actions allowed us to address the reality that practices are not only sustained by tacit knowledge and routine but can be disrupted or reshaped by conscious moral reflection. Even after habituation, practices such as plant-based food consumption are shaken by moral conflicts and practitioners continually negotiate which forms of variation in performance are intelligible and acceptable within the practice (Christensen et al. 2024; Hui 2016). Hence, our study reveals explanations for why consumers may fail to carry on with their sustainable and ethical dietary habits in everyday life (Bryant, Prosser, and Barnett 2022; Rosenfeld and Tomiyama 2019). In essence, we suggest that practice theoretical studies should account for agency and reflexivity when (moral) ideals are at stake.

Conclusions

This study extends practice theoretical consumption studies by illuminating how moral conflicts can catalyse teleoaffective misalignments, thereby serving as a mechanism for practice change or breakdown. Our analysis of 48 experienced vegetarians' and vegans' daily food practices shows how teleoaffective misalignments disturb practice performances and may risk practice continuity. Understanding how morality disconnects a practice from its oughtness and rightness helps in identifying what socio-material arrangements could potentially support smooth performances and continuity. For instance, more representations of vegan parenting and better availability of ready-made vegan foods for children would reduce moral conflicts between parenthood and vegan consumption. Similarly, educating non-practitioners about plant-based food items and cooking skills and normalising serving a vegan option for both omnivores and plant-based eaters could help reduce conflicts related to social gatherings. However, more information is still needed on how practitioners themselves solve these misalignments and rebuild linkages, thus stabilising the practice after teleoaffective misalignments.

Additionally, this study sparks interesting avenues for future research. Since food practices are visible and social, they are also morally complex by nature. Hence, future researchers might examine whether the teleoaffective misalignments observed here emerge in other domains of moral consumption (e.g. sustainable energy use or anti-consumption practices), where consumers' actions

may not be as visible or morally legitimate. In addition, future studies could examine how these dynamics play out in different sociocultural contexts involving different moral norms of food. Overall, we call for more attention to the moral aspects of consumption practices, since their ethical clarity is rarely absolute, but their practice performances – both failed and successful – trigger reflections on what is right, ought and just in consumption.

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Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

During the preparation of this work the authors used Microsoft Copilot in order to check the language of the interview quotes since they were not originally conducted in English. After using this tool, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant profiles (biographical narratives)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Current diet (self-reported)	Years of practicing a plant-based diet
Evianna	36	F	No red meat or fish	23
Minni	30	F	Vegetarian	6
Saara	66	F	Vegetarian	8
Anne	32	F	Vegetarian	5+
Heli	53	F	Vegetarian	5
Tuula	54	F	Vegetarian	5
Kerttu	25	F	Vegetarian	6
Sinna	19	F	Vegetarian	4–5
Viljami	67	M	Vegetarian	48
Maarit	71	F	Vegetarian	48
Ronja	49	F	Pesco-vegetarian	approx. 30
Suvi	20	F	Vegetarian	20
Kirsi	32	F	Vegan	10
Mira	41	F	Vegetarian	25
Maria	65	F	Vegetarian	40
Jukka	34	M	Vegan	3–5
Aada	20	F	Pesco-lacto-ovo-vegetarian	6
Helmi	24	F	Vegetarian	6
Annemari	46	F	Pesco-vegetarian	26
Viivi	27	F	Vegan	14
Tuisku	37	-	Vegan	14

Appendix 2. Participant profiles (consumption diaries and interviews)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Diet (self-reported)	Years of practicing diet	Family type	Different diets in the family unit
Wilma	30	F	Student	Vegan	17	Couple	Yes
Tiina ^a	42	F	Strategist, parental leave	Vegan	11	Family with children	No
Anna	22	F	Unemployed	Vegan	6	Lives with parents	Yes
Reetta ^a	41	F	Business and product development manager	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	27	Couple	Yes
Leena ^a	59	F	Chauffeur	Vegetarian	45	Single	N/a
Emma	43	F	Self-employed	Vegan	2	Family with children	Yes
Tuomo	44	M	Media assistant	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	23	Single	N/a
Elisa ^a	47	F	Marketing manager	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	15	Family with children	No
Jenni	29	F	Psychologist	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	8	Couple	Yes

(Continued)

Continued.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Diet (self-reported)	Years of practicing diet	Family type	Different diets in the family unit
Harri	46	M	Software architect	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	5	Family with children	Yes
Johannes ^a	30	M	Stock clerk	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	2	Couple	No
Matti	36	M	-	Lacto-vegetarian	11	Family with children	No
Monica	19	F	Customer service	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	7	Single	N/a
Ulla ^a	66	F	Retired	Vegan	5	Single	N/a
Mika	24	M	Student	Vegan	3	Couple	No
Sofia	35	F	Chef	Vegan	19	Single	N/a
Roosa	35	F	Passenger Services officer	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	20	Family with children	Yes
Peter ^a	63	M	IT and media specialist	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	30	Couple	No
Jens ^a	34	M	Consultant	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	1	Family with children	No
Thomas	33	M	Head of development	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	6	Couple	No
Julia	44	F	Sign language and communication instructor	Lacto-vegetarian	31	Family with children	Yes
Steven	26	M	Graphic designer	Vegan	4	Single	N/a
Kerstin ^a	30	F	Construction engineer	Vegan	7	Couple	Yes
Kasper	30	M	Product manager	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	7	Couple	Yes
Anton ^a	34	M	Student	Vegan	4	Couple	No
Daniel ^a	47	M	Product designer	Vegan	4	Family with children	Yes
Netta	34	F	Product manager	Vegan	6	Single	N/a
Linda	26	F	-	Lacto-ovo-vegetarian	12	Couple	Yes

^aParticipated in interview.

Appendix 3. Assignment for biographical narratives

Dear Recipient,

I kindly ask you to answer a few background questions and write a story about how you became a vegetarian. Below, you will find the background questions and more detailed instructions for writing your story.

1. Background Questions:

Gender:

Age:

City of residence:

How many years have you been a vegetarian? (Answer 0 if it has been less than a year):

2. Story Assignment:

Please write a story about how you became a vegetarian. You can personalise the story and write it in any style you prefer.

Please address at least the following points:

- Why did you want to become a vegetarian?
- How did you adopt a vegetarian diet, and what stages did it involve?
- What kinds of difficulties did you face, and how did you overcome them?
- Was anything particularly easy for you, and why?
- Do you feel that something else in your life changed after becoming a vegetarian? Why or why not? For example, in relationships, lifestyle, values?

Your story can be as long as you like, but please write at least 250 words. **Please also give your story a title.** Please return your story and background information by email to [email address] by [date]. All responses will be handled anonymously and confidentially. Thank you very much for participating!

Appendix 4. Assignment for consumption diaries

Diary entries – Everyday situations related to food and eating

Write descriptions of moments related to food, such as when you eat, buy, or prepare food or when you dream about or talk about food. Use the guiding questions below to help you and describe the situation as thoroughly as possible. There is no word limit. You may write in any style and use language that feels natural to you. Please address, for example, the following aspects in your entry:

- What kind of food-related situation was it?
For example, enjoying a lentil stew at the workplace cafeteria, eating soy yogurt as a snack, preparing macaroni casserole, making a shopping list for the upcoming week.
- What happened?
Describe in as much detail as possible the events and circumstances during the situation.
- Were others present? Who?
How did others participate in the situation, and what kinds of interactions took place between you?
- How did you feel during the situation?
Describe your feelings related to the moment.
- How typical is this situation for you, and does it involve any routines?
How did you come to adopt these routines? Or was the situation unusual and required learning something new?
- What kinds of choices were involved in the situation?
Were they easy or challenging? Describe the decision-making process in detail and how you arrived at your choice. The choice could involve, for example, selecting between food products, ingredients, or places; between homemade and ready-made food; or even between eating and not eating.

When possible, please include photos you've taken of the situations along with your entries.

Try to make one entry per day. You can also write multiple entries in one day, and it's okay if you skip a day. There's no upper limit to the number of entries, so feel free to record as many situations as you like!

On the next page, you'll find a template for the diary. You may freely modify it to suit your preferences.