

Pièce de resistance: Sartrian existentialism in small-scale farming

Julien Dugnoille

Abstract

In this article, a Sartrian existentialist framework will be applied to the experiences of human-nonhuman animal intersubjectivity related to me by a handful of small-scale farmers in England and France. Applying a Sartrian lens to these accounts reveals that when animals resist their own commodification, both the farmer (the 'resisted') and the nonhuman animal (the 'resistant') become engaged in a mutually constitutive existential exchange. The article features the argument that some farmers have their subjectivities challenged through the process of animal resistance to their own commodification, and that Sartre's existentialism is a very potent framework in which to explore not only the psychological struggle but also the transformation process that some scale-farmers experience as a result of this resistance. The article shows that these farmers see themselves as witnesses to the fact that individual animals do matter beyond their mere substance, and that awareness needs to be raised for other farmers who face a similar existential struggle.

Introduction

Since 2012, I have conducted fieldwork in small-scale farming communities in England and France. Among the dozens of participants I have interviewed over the years, it was not uncommon to hear individual farmers specifically engage with the idea of 'animal resistance' and the existential qualities of the nonhuman animals (henceforth 'animals') they helped to commodify. In this article, I focus on a small sample from this pool of participants, in order to

take a closer look at animal resistance itself, and make a case for the suitability of a Sartrean lens on the analysis of human-nonhuman intersubjectivity in small-scale farming. The aim of this article is not to suggest that the findings should be generalized to the farming profession in these parts of the world. Rather, it is to reveal that Sartrean existentialism is a particularly useful lens to articulate the impact that human-animal intersubjective exchanges may have on the wellbeing of small-scale farmers and animal dealers. Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest, that existential crises are far from rare among those who commodify animal individuals they have previously met as subjects. Thus, with this study, not only do I wish to bring a potent analytical framework to the forefront of anthrozoological research on human-animal intersubjectivity, but I also hope to raise awareness of a potentially widespread mental health issue among small-scale farmers, which has arisen as a result of turning sentient beings into commodities.

In this article, occurrences of animal resistance and human transformation will resonate with some of the themes explored in this topical collection on animal resistance to their own commodification. I will argue that the realization that animals “exist” in a Sartrean sense (1943, pp. 11–36) has had moral implications for the participants in my studies who, as a result of this realization, have had their own identities as accomplished farmers challenged, and have experienced acute feelings of anxiety. Inspired by their own existential crises, these farmers now see themselves as the bearers of an important message: not only do they want to act as witnesses to the fact that individual animals do matter beyond their mere substance, but they also wish to help other farmers who might suffer from a similar traumatic transition into a form of farming which does not commodify animals. In order to articulate these resistance and transformation processes within an existentialist framework, a few Sartrean concepts need to be unpacked.

Firstly, a Hegelian distinction structures Sartre's ontology: 'Being' (*l'être*) is composed of the unconscious being ('in-itself') and the conscious being ('for-itself'). The 'in-itself' (*l'en-soi*) designates the part of one's being which is not conscious of itself (Sartre, 1943, pp. 30–36). There is no difference between appearance and essence within consciousness because the in-itself is not conscious of being conscious. The in-itself is fixed and has no ability to change. The 'for-itself' (*le pour-soi*), however, is conscious of itself (Sartre, 1943, pp. 115–149). It is conscious of being conscious and thus realizes that there is a difference between consciousness and being. The for-itself is aware of its own consciousness, but it is also always already incomplete and under construction. For Sartre, this incompleteness is what defines (human) existence. Since the for-itself has no predetermined essence, it is forced to create itself from 'nothingness' (*le néant*). For Sartre, nothingness is the characteristic that defines the for-itself in the sense that it constantly haunts the self, i.e. the for-itself is always conscious of what it is not, which is an infinite series of existential states (1943, pp. 58–84). Then, when a being is facing nothingness, it faces a choice as to whether or not it should take action to become what it is not. This 'negation' (*la négativité*), i.e. the distance between what one is and what one is not, Sartre tells us, is experienced by humans as 'anxiety' (*l'angoisse*). Anxiety takes many forms, such as depression, humiliation, desire, regret, etc. Moreover, Sartre believed that this ability for one's being to position itself in contrast to what it is not, is where 'freedom' (*la liberté*) lies. It is by realizing that one is not what one is not, that one is conscious of the responsibility one has in putting a plan into action, in order to construct one's "being-in-the-world" (*être-au-monde*). This is also the key to reaching what Sartre sees as "authenticity" (*l'authenticité*) (1943, pp. 508–642).

Secondly, in the some seven-hundred pages of his philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre explored his ideas by taking the perspective of a self (which

he refers to as 'I') in relation to an "Other" (*autrui*). I will follow suit by applying the same terms to human-animal intersubjective exchanges and to which my participants have referred to in their own narratives. Thus, 'I' will often be the perspective of the farmer, while '*autrui*' will be that of the animal. However, this does not mean that this article is entirely anthropocentric: Sartre's philosophy takes 'I' to explain the irremediable conflict of consciousness between a 'self' (*moi*) and an 'other' self (*un autre*) but his conclusions can be universally applied to any self facing any other self (Sartre, 1943, pp. 275–367). My participants' perspectives suggest that they believe animals take part in intersubjective exchanges. Thus, by applying a Sartrian lens to their perspective, the self, 'I', could also be that of animals.

For the avoidance of doubt, the animals will be described in the exchanges described in this article as Other to the farmers (*autrui*). This is to indicate that they resist their commodification, and demand that the farmers (I) look inwards to find reasons to believe in them, acknowledging their existence as Other to them. Nonetheless, in a Sartrian sense, this exchange is mutually constitutive: By exchanging a look with *autrui*, I (the farmer) am (is) objectified by *autrui* (the animal) as Other to me (them). In that sense, I become the object of *autrui's* consciousness. Not only does this result in the fact that I am suddenly at risk of being reduced to an objectified entity for someone else's consciousness (i.e. an in-itself, a pure and fixed immanence), but also that I meet *autrui*, first and foremost, as a subject whose consciousness is able to objectify me. In that sense, *autrui* exists as a subject, and what I can conclude about myself should also be applied to *autrui* as a subject. Thus, what I can theorize about myself (the farmer) would also be true if *autrui* (animals) was I (the farmer). As a result, 'I' could be the animal and '*autrui*' could be the farmer.

Thirdly, intersubjective exchanges are explored by Sartre in terms of “conflicts” between existing beings (Sartre, 1943, p. 431). These conflicts take many forms, one characteristic being that, in such conflicts, each subject ‘resists’ (*résiste*) being reduced to mere immanence by the other subject. Existential conflicts have widely been explored in academic circles with regard to human intersubjective exchanges (Dolezal, 2012; Grene, 1971; Hartmann, 2017; Van der Wielen, 2014; Webber, 2011). However, with regard to human-animal exchanges, especially when animals are reduced to pure immanence (i.e. when they are turned into mere objects, commodities, substances, etc.) by human subjects, the existential quality of animal resistance has been overlooked. This is surprising, as in the context of farming, the commodification of animals is particularly well suited to exploring the Sartrean intersubjective exchange, especially since animals are by default conceptualized as what Wilkie refers to as “sentient commodities” (Wilkie, 2010, pp. 115–128), i.e. they live as live subjects among farmers but only to be, in the end, reduced to a pure immanence, a fixed substance, a commodity. Yet, as this article reveals, farmers often meet the animals not just as commodities but as subjects who resist this objectification. By resisting their reduction to mere immanence, animals claim their existence in the face of their commodifiers and, following Sartre’s theory of intersubjectivity, thereby also reduce their commodifiers (the farmers portrayed in this article) to a fixed immanence themselves (i.e. to an ‘in-itself’). Sartre’s overall perspective on animals (or lack thereof) is explored in more detail in the next section.

Finally, a Sartrean analytical framework would suggest that if animals can be met as *autrui*, not only can they be met as subjects but also as subjects facing anxiety and distress when reduced to being mere objects. This realization, explored in depth in this article, is what challenged the identity of my participants as accomplished farmers, and made them question

their own freedom and responsibility. As a result, some of these farmers not only transformed their livelihoods but also changed their overall perspective on animal commodification.

Do animals exist?

French philosopher Florence Burgat, has highlighted that, as a general rule, Sartre showed a lack of interest for animals themselves. Sartre usually explored the topic of animals either as metaphors or so as to clarify a point in his writing (Burgat, 2015). At best, Sartre was ambiguous about animals (Messaoudi, 2016), at worst he was indifferent, yet he was never overtly hostile towards them. As a matter of fact, in *Being and Nothingness*, where he laid out in great detail his existential theory of intersubjective exchanges, Sartre hardly mentioned animals at all. Of course, this is not entirely surprising considering how Sartre's philosophy of existence centers on revitalizing humanism as a form of existentialism (Sartre, 2009), which indeed entails exploring 'human' existence. Yet the rationale as to why that is the case is left unexplained to the reader of *Being and Nothingness*: Everything unfolds on the basis of a speciesist premise about human exceptionalism, which Sartre never really concerned himself with explicitly justifying. This absence of consideration for nonhuman existence has led philosophers of animal studies to refer to the place of animals in Sartre's intersubjective exchange theory as a "blind spot" (Calarco, 2008, p. 13).

There are nonetheless some indications in *Being and Nothingness* that animals occupy a different space from other nonhuman beings. For instance, when Sartre explored the uniqueness of human qualities, as opposed to those of other-than-human beings, he never did so by taking animals as comparative points. Pure immanent existence is reserved for

‘inanimate beings’ such as rocks, tables, chairs, lamps, cups, though never animals.¹ However, his ideas, in particular about anxiety and the look (see next section) provide scholars of animal studies with a very fertile ground on which to articulate the ethical, emotional, and psychological components of such exchanges. Indeed, in the context of small-scale farming in particular (though not exclusively), Sartre’s existentialism could also have helped anthropologists to articulate the anxiety that some small-scale farmers experienced while they reconciled the meeting of beings who showed existential qualities with these beings’ transformation into pure immanence. Moreover, it could also shed light on the dynamics and mechanisms of identity transfiguration and the feelings of guilt, self-hatred, as well as psychological isolation sometimes expressed by small-scale farmers and animal dealers in ethnographic accounts of their practice (Dugnoille, 2018; see e.g. Wilkie, 2010).

Take, for instance, the example of Virginie, a sheep farmer in her thirties working in the Cotentin region of France. In the late 2000s, Virginie left her job in the entertainment

¹ Moreover, there is one passage in another of Sartre’s works where he indicated that he may have, after all, believed that animals ‘exist’ in the same way humans do: Indeed, in *L’idiot de la famille* (1983), Sartre entertained the idea that domestic animals might experience ‘something like’ a for-itself and did not explicitly exclude/include animals from/in human existence. In particular, Sartre explored the consciousness of a companion dog that was being talked about by the humans in the room. As he heard his name and realized that he was the topic of discussion, the dog temporarily moved beyond his usual immanence. Through that experience, Sartre showed that the dog reached something akin to human existence because he understood he was excluded from human culture and language, and as a consequence was floating, in spite of himself, in an in-between world (Burgat, 2015, p. 176). The dog was implicated in something that escaped him (Burgat, 2015, p. 176) because the use of human language was apparent to him, yet he could not use it himself to understand what was being said about him. Sartre then contended that dogs often bark and yap when being discussed by humans, which he saw as an indication that dogs are frustrated at their own in-betweenness and are awoken from their immanence to the realization that they are not what they are not. To be human and to understand what has been said about them become denied possibilities for dogs, a very core characteristic of (human) existence: By not understanding human culture and the meaning of human language dogs experience ‘nothingness’ (*le néant*), i.e., they experience what they are not; in this case, a human. In that sense, dogs show they ‘exist’ because they resist human culture and language. They express a desire to transcend themselves. While Sartre, sadly, stopped his analysis there, this small passage suggests that the French philosopher at least entertained the idea that dogs are capable of experiencing something like human anxiety as a result of realizing they are not what they are not (i.e. human). By extension, it could suggest that the lives of animals may not be sheer immanence after all, since they demonstrate the ability to escape their own “determinate state” (Burgat, 2015, p. 178)

industry in Paris and bought a piece of land in *les prés-salés* where she has subsequently been raising sheep both for wool and meat. A self-proclaimed 'neo-rural' farmer, Virginie's transformation from a busy urbanite to sheep farmer, as well as her integration into the local farming community, have been everything but smooth. Moreover, as an urbanite who seldom thought of the animal lives behind her food, she initially found it challenging to relate to her sheep as commodities. Indeed, through observing Virginie, this manifested in the way she selected sheep for slaughter, as Virginie would purposely refer to the sheep as numbers, even though I knew she had previously given some of them individual names. It was as if she were consciously blocking out anything that reminded her of prior intersubjective exchanges she had had with her sheep. When I asked her about what motivated this approach, Virginie told me this was a positionality she needed to adopt so as to distance herself from those she would send for slaughter, since otherwise "things would get too messy, too emotional. In the end, I have to see them as income, as commodities. Otherwise, how can I even do this?"

Similarly, Virginie would also demonstrate some conflicting emotions with the idea of trapping sheep into the trailer she would use to take them to the nearest abattoir, unless they showed some resistance. In her words: "When sheep resist, they try to get away, they scream, they kick, which actually makes the job easier. You don't want to get hurt in the process, so you speed it up and you don't think about what you are doing". However, selecting and trapping sheep that did not resist, seemed to be an entirely different story for Virginie:

"You feel bad for being trusted by individuals that you will eventually drive to their death /.../ They trust you. They are not frightened, they look at you... I really don't like when they look at you. You know, when they look at you, it makes you hesitate and you think about the whole process, and you can't think about the whole process, so I hate that, because I have got to do

my job and I feel I can't do it because of it... In my mind, I have to see them in terms of the quality of the meat they can provide for my customers.”

As she assessed her sheep in terms of their substantial qualities and prepared them for their last journey, Virginie avoided their look. This ‘look’, according to her, was what disarmed her, what made her hesitate and think about the process. It was what eventually made her consider she could not do her job properly. A Sartrean analysis of ‘the look’ (*le regard*) is useful here, to unpack the situation that seems to occur between Virginie and the cooperative sheep, as well as the emotional impact Virginie experienced before and during she took them for slaughter. In particular, a Sartrean approach to Virginie’s exchange with the more cooperative sheep will reveal that it was, in fact, the sheep Virginie saw as resisting the least, that might have ‘resisted’ her the most.

The look

Autrui for Sartre is the mediator between ‘me’ and ‘myself’. ‘I’ am just as *autrui* sees me. I do not constitute *autrui* but I meet it. I cannot absorb *autrui* in me, nor constitute it as pure object because as I try to fix *autrui*, it is *autrui* who fixes me in itself. *Autrui* proves to me that my foundation is outside of myself. This is why the original fall, according to Sartre, is when I meet *autrui* (1943): Through the look, *autrui* appears as pure subject to me and, simultaneously, through the look, I become an object to *autrui*’s consciousness (Sartre, 1943, pp. 310–367). After this first moment, I realize that if I am reduced to an object by *autrui*’s consciousness, it must also be that *autrui*, through this exchanged look must too, feel objectified by my own consciousness. If I perceive *autrui* as a subject (first and foremost) and feel objectified by it, the same must also be true of *autrui*. The look, in that sense, makes me

empathize with *autrui* as it feels objectified by me in the same way I feel objectified by it. In this case, when Virginie referred to a form of hesitation when selecting sheep and herding them onto a trailer as quickly as possible, it may have revealed that she knew that avoiding exchanging a look with the sheep helped her to commodify whom would otherwise demand to be regarded as subjects. The quicker the deed, the fewer opportunities there would be for Virginie to meet the sheep's gaze and, thus, any of them as existing subjects.

It is worth noting that the look and other forms of conflicts in 'human' intersubjectivity happen every day (Sartre, 1943, p. 311). As a subject who meets *autrui*, I am necessarily a social subject (Dolezal, 2012, p. 25) which means that I have met other *autrui(s)* before exchanging a look with yet another *autrui*. It is not a mystical encounter that only happens at significant times of my life; it happens to me as I move through the world and meet human Others. However, this probably applies differently in the case of human-'animal' interactions, especially in post-domestic societies where most humans have learned to disengage from animals and seldom seek to exchange glances with them. As Berger explained in *About Looking*, the look between human and animal has largely ceased with modernity in post-domestic societies, in which the way humans engage with animals is either constructed or performed in absentia (Berger, 1991). We have learned not to look at the animals we commodify and instead engage with them as mere substance (meat, wool, leather, scientific data) or we see them in contexts where they are reduced to beings whose subjectivity is denied (as 'wildlife', as specimen, etc.). In most post-domestic societies (Bulliet, 2007), these elaborate exonerative belief systems are also enabled by the segmentation of the many steps that transform a living animal into mere substance. A process referred to by Vialles (1994) as a spiral of avoidance (see also Carter & Charles, 2011; Pachirat, 2013; and Buller & Roe, 2018). However, for some individuals, in professions that require a greater degree of contact with

animals as individuals such as small-scale farming, the likelihood of a look being exchanged between human and individual animal is much greater.

For farmers, looking at animals as substance-to-be or as specimen only is much easier said than done. For instance, Wilkie has explored the internal turmoil experienced by small-scale farmers in England who meet, know, and treat their animals as subjects on a daily basis, and struggle with saying goodbye to singularized animals (2010). While there are common narratives around hardening the self against sentimentality as a sign of an accomplished farmer, it is easy to see that many of Wilkie's informants (and many of mine) care deeply about the animals they farm and have, at times, difficulty reconciling meeting them as subjects and seeing them as a source of income (2015). This is where Sartre's reflection on action and freedom might be useful in making sense of this struggle.

Sartre explains that as I meet *autrui* as a subject, I realize what I am not, i.e. I realize that *autrui* is other-to-me. This is when I acquire full consciousness of my own freedom: I get to choose who I am or, rather, who I think I might become by choosing my own actions. My actions, in that sense, define who/what I am and I must take responsibility for choosing one action over another. Indeed, Virginie's conflicting emotions emerged at the intersection of considerations of her own actions, her responsibility, and her own identity as an accomplished sheep farmer. By wishing the deed to be over quickly, it was to avoid exchanging a look with a sheep, an event which would trigger the conflict I sometimes observed her in. Exchanging a look with *autrui*, explained by Sartre and confirmed by Virginie, is a time when *autrui* resists me. The look hits me "right in the heart" with the uneasy feeling (*malaise*) that *autrui's* existence cannot and should not be denied (1943, p. 334). In that sense, this Sartrian lens provides an interesting analysis of Virginie's struggle. While there is a strong case to be made about Virginie being far less responsible for the killing of these sheep than

the customer who will eventually consume them, she nonetheless blamed herself for it. In particular, she blamed herself for hesitating and for letting herself be affected by the subjects she ought to be commodifying; in other words, blaming herself for failing to be an accomplished sheep farmer. Virginie's hesitation indicates that, at least for a moment, she contemplated other 'possibles' that might have led to a different outcome.

The body, nausea and the dead

Conflicting emotions are not uncommon among those who have met animals they have either killed or sent for slaughter. There is no need to go to France to hear similar stories to Virginie's. Take the example of Peter who has farmed bovines all his life on his Derbyshire farm in England. He is married to Jenny who has lived on the farm with Peter for the past ten years. Before their time, because of the British Second World War campaign *Dig For Victory* which placed an emphasis on agricultural efficiency, Peter's grandfather and then father became obsessed with improving productivity. During the *Dig for Victory* campaign, landowners were charging their tenant farmers excessive rents, which caused animal welfare to take a backseat as farmers scrambled to make ends meet. When Peter took over the farm, things started to gradually change. Eventually, in 1997, the farm became an organic beef farm and in 2016, Peter and Jenny stopped beef farming altogether. About a year later, they gave away over seventy cows to an animal sanctuary. Some seventeen cows remain with them to this day, and will not be slaughtered.

Peter explained to me that it was always difficult for him to see his animals as just flesh. He shared that giving up farming stemmed from a

“feeling of repugnance at eating the animals that you'd cared for and got to know.

Once you'd recognized them as individuals which is inevitable if you don't put up the

barriers. That lump of meat in the butcher's window, you start to mentally build the rest of the animal around it... You are aware that it's part of an animal."

Peter also mentioned having difficulty coping with the mere idea of the distress that must have been experienced by the animals he sent for slaughter: "It must be a very distressing, horrific experience and I couldn't make them go through that anymore" he told me. While Peter never actually saw the process of slaughter, he remembered gazing at skips filled with offal from the cows, and was obviously well aware of the process. Similarly, Jenny recalls being disgusted and upset driving past the pens from which the animals were loaded, where she could see the animals lined up in single file. The memories of individual animal bodies and the animal subjects she had met throughout her life are intertwined in her mind. Jenny explicitly expressed regrets about her lifestyle: She claimed that not only did she now have to live with having sent animals for slaughter, but also had to cope with the mental images she retains of the cows chopped into pieces. Jenny believed this was a widespread source of anxiety, and 'a very very big thing for farmers to face up to: what they have done to livestock all their life'.

These narratives, too, can be made sense of using a Sartrean framework. For Sartre, intersubjectivity was mediation through the body (1943, pp. 368–430). The body of *autrui* not only refers to the Other as a vulnerable Other, but also to my own vulnerability as body-for-*autrui*. The first revelation, as I mentioned above, in an intersubjective exchange is that *autrui's* existence is not constituted by me; rather, I meet *autrui*. They are not only there for me, but they exist as subjects. The second revelation concerns the fact that I am being fixed by *autrui's* consciousness and that *autrui* makes of me an object, which also implies that I have an exterior, or an 'outside', that *autrui* meets me through. Thus, I exist for *autrui* also in

the flesh, my flesh, which is vulnerable and factice. *Autrui* can objectify me in this vulnerability and in this facticity (i.e. the seen body (Dolezal, 2012)). In that sense, Sartre broke away from traditional dualisms which consist of thinking that body/phenomenon and soul/consciousness exist in isolation, and posited that consciousness is always consciousness-of-the-world and being is always being-in-the-world. Thus, bodies and consciousness are two sides of the same coin and there is a continuity between the two. Thus, if a body is vulnerable and in a state of danger for the consciousness of that being, and if that being is a subject, then affecting their bodies is affecting their consciousness and it puts them in situations of great anxiety and fear.

Important theoretical anthrozoological work about intersubjectivity (Merleau-Ponty, 2016; Milton, 2005; Regan & Singer, 1989) explores how an individual infers an understanding of another individual's behavior, whether human or nonhuman, from their own perception that this Other is "like me" as opposed to "like us". In line with this, Sartre's concept of 'nausea' (*la nausée*) can explain empathy at the level of both consciousness and the flesh (1943, p. 404). As I realize that *autrui's* body is vulnerable and is made of fragile physiologies which could easily put an end to their existence, Sartre explained, I realize that my own body and thus my being is just as vulnerable as that of *autrui*. This is what triggers my feelings of disgust and my physiological reaction to the rotting body of others (rotting flesh or skips filled with offal for instance), according to Sartre. In this sense, the body of *autrui* offers some resistance because it always implicitly refers to my own body and my own vulnerability or facticity (Sartre, 1943, p. 410). Using this Sartrian framework, it could be argued that it is because the body of their cows always came to Peter and Jenny as a second occurrence (i.e. after their subjectivity) that, no matter how hard they tried to compartmentalize, Peter and Jenny could never see them as mere substance. Moreover, the narratives adopted by Peter and Jenny also

indicate that it is this repugnance for the vulnerability of animal bodies that led them to empathize with their animals' fate as existing subjects and, as a result, to experience a great deal of anxiety in relation to their own professional livelihood, as I shall explore in the next section.

Anxiety

Anxiety (*angoisse*), according to Sartre, emerges from the realization that living my life as though my being is secluded to the in-itself I fix for myself is an illusion. And indeed, in remembering how they felt before transitioning to vegan farming, Peter and Jenny deployed narratives of 'living a lie', 'maintaining the illusion', or 'not being true' to themselves to describe how 'being a farmer' (in other words, the in-itself they had fixed for themselves) generated a lot of anxiety. Similar narratives were also marshaled by Kevin, another farmer who, just like Peter and Jenny, gave away his flock of sheep to a rescue center after experiencing deep internal conflict and acute feelings of anxiety. Kevin very clearly recalled the moment he stopped farming animals: His daughter had called him one day to remind him that several of his lambs were ready to be sent for slaughter and that he should make a decision very soon as to when to take them to the abattoir; the market value of the lambs would be reduced otherwise. This was the moment, after years of feeling trapped, Kevin decided he had had enough. He contacted several animal sanctuaries to see if they had room for his sheep and, once he had secured a home for the lambs that would otherwise have had to be sent for slaughter, he renounced his identity as a meat farmer. Until the rest of the flock found a home in another sanctuary, Kevin continued to rent the land, despite the sheep providing him no financial benefit. For the first batch of sheep he saved, Kevin waited until

the very last minute to ask the landowner for his signature (the latter needed to sign off the sheep transport paperwork for traceability reasons). Only as he signed the papers, did the landowner realize that the sheep were not going to the slaughterhouse but to an animal sanctuary.

Kevin told me he was reluctant to let the landowner know too far in advance because he felt his identity both as a farmer but also as a man would be discredited. He felt isolated from the rest of the farming community which he described as being characterized by a 'laddish culture', in which his decision to quit farming would be deemed sentimental, not masculine enough, and at odds with the main purpose of the job. It took Kevin ten years of internal conflict to finally 'come out' to his peers. The concept of the hardy farmer, one who does not show emotion or demonstrate any attachment to an animal, is still widespread (Wilkie, 2010) and certainly influenced how Kevin perceived himself as a man and as a farmer. This led Kevin to isolate himself:

"I struggled for over ten years, internal struggle between me and myself, because if I say I am not going to take them for slaughter, then I am not a man and I am not a farmer, then what am I?"

However, Kevin felt his new identity had a positive effect on how his remaining sheep interacted with him: "Now, they trust me". Kevin saw this as the aftermath of an inner transformation, which even affected his own body language. Before, Kevin handled the sheep more roughly, and resisted seeing them as subjects because he was eager to perform his identity as a farmer as quickly as possible. Perhaps, commodifying sheep was hard to reconcile with how he felt as a result of having met the sheep as *autrui* who resisted him and

demanded to be recognized as subjects. In his new identity, he explained he felt calmer, could focus on taking care of their wellbeing, and the sheep, he claimed, responded to that too.

Sartre reminded us that anxiety and freedom only reveal themselves through reflection, as opposed to when I am caught up in the action (1943, pp. 508–642). This sheds light on why Kevin wanted to tend to animals in as little time as possible, i.e. to be caught in the action and avoid any space for reflection. It is also reminiscent of Virginie, who resented her hesitation which drove her away from the action and, thus, made her think about her own actions and, more importantly, about the possibility of choosing a different course of events. Being caught in the action, Sartre tells us, gives me the illusion that I am obligated to obey (he refers to “psychological determinism” (1943, pp. 228–234)). However, by meeting *autrui*, I realize that I am the one who gives meaning to all these actions. In the end, I am the only one responsible for producing values in the world. I am responsible for realizing the world and, thereby, living ‘authentically’.

Ethical anxiety and authenticity

Peter, Jenny, and Kevin shared with me stories of other farmers in their respective communities in whom they confided about their transition and who responded by sharing their own negative feelings about animal commodification, and that they too experienced great psychological distress when animals showed resistance in the process. All three of them believed there are many more farmers like them in England and elsewhere, and wish to be positive examples of successful transitions into vegan farming. They wanted to show other struggling farmers that there is a way out, as ‘feeling trapped in farming’, they claimed, is a very common narrative in the farming profession. Jenny and Peter were looking into transitioning to oat milk production, while Kevin wished to go back to South Asia to start an

awareness campaign and develop training programs about organic vegetable crop production for farmers in South Asia.

However, transitioning into vegan farming, far from providing these farmers with a fixed identity, further embeds them in a world of existential uncertainty. Indeed, Jenny, Peter, Kevin, but also Virginie, experienced something reminiscent of what Sartre defined as “ethical anxiety” (*l’angoisse éthique*): Realizing that my anxiety leads to my freedom is the foundation of adopting one set of values over another (1943, pp. 75–76). Anxiety is what leads to freedom in the sense that it highlights that to choose one value or another is based on my own freedom to engage with one possibility or another and, thus, that any set of values I have adhered to can be replaced by another. Furthermore, I realize that all these adherences to values are not intuitive but the product of a choice I make, and that I can always choose to go for another set of value. From this flows the idea that there is not anything intrinsically right or wrong which leads to ethical anxiety. What these farmers described is very similar: After meeting animals as subjects, as *autrui*, they cannot help but feel divided between the set of values inherent to farming, which is a *sine qua non* condition to their own identity as farmers, i.e. that animals are, eventually, commodities; and the set of values that sees animals as subjects, with fears, desires, consciousness, and intentionality. Perhaps the greatest anxiety these participants have experienced is the fact that only their own freedom can decide which set of values is right or wrong, and that they are not determined to make one choice over another. This was apparent in the fact that all of them expressed their overall stance to eating meat with difficulty and uncertainty. Peter, for instance, kept his vegetarianism a secret among his farming friends for many years. Even after several interviews with Kevin, Jenny, and Peter, it is still not entirely clear whether any of them fully identifies as vegan, although this may be due to much uncertainty around the exact meaning of the term.

This uneasiness towards a meat-free diet needs also to be explored through British farming's privileged relation to 'the past' in the form of heritage and tradition. Peter mentioned that there is a sense of responsibility that farmers feel for their land because of a pressure to continue the family identity forged by farming ancestors. Thus, affirming freedom and renouncing identity for a farmer can be especially difficult, considering what they have to renounce is not only their own identity but that of an entire lineage. Furthermore, there is a feeling of letting go of an important patriotic duty. Peter described how, in the Second World War, farmers could not leave their role and join the armed forces as farming was a reserved occupation: They needed to feed the country. This led farmers to experience feelings of guilt at the mere idea of seeking another life for themselves. As a result, it was seen as their duty to work hard on the farm, even "a badge of honor" in Peter's own words. Furthermore, as Jenny observed, farming is seen in Britain as having a role in maintaining the "green rolling hills" which are perceived to be part of Britain's national patrimony, and more so than nonagricultural land or land in its natural form (e.g. forests). Thus, in giving up farming, not only does a farmer experience acute feelings of guilt for renouncing the identity of their own family, but also for threatening the identity of their entire country.

Sartre, again, will be useful to analyze this further. Sartre indicated that for life to have a past, life must have a consciousness of having been. Thus a rock at the bottom of a river does not have a past and is always already an in-itself. Those that have a past, however, are always already a for-itself because they have a consciousness of their past as an in-itself that constitutes their being, and that will eventually transform them into a pure in-itself at the time of their death. From then onwards, there is no possibility for transformation: they will be full in-itself and, hence, a great sense of anxiety at the idea of my own freedom. I am responsible for forging that past and it is not only my past, it is the past of those *autrui* that I

have met in the world. For Peter and Jenny, their past is entwined not only with the existence of the animals they farmed, but also with that of their family and of the entire country itself. It is perhaps because, in their case, '*autrui*' crosses species boundaries that Jenny and Peter felt as though they did not fully belong to any of *autrui's* worlds and instead perceive their own identities as deeply uncertain. However, a Sartrean perspective on this undefined identity would see this in a positive light: Sartre posited (1943, pp. 190–200) that I am both in-itself and for-itself at the same time because of the very nature of the for-itself which is to be in the world and, thus, constantly under construction. It is by being able to perceive what I am not that I constantly undergo a process of self *ex-tasis*, i.e. I am always already 'outside of myself' and while embracing this realization makes me anxious, it also makes me free and existentially authentic.

Conclusion

In line with a Sartrean take on ethical anxiety, Kevin, Peter, and Jenny were well aware that their identities would keep changing and were ready to embrace a world of possibles and probables. Peter and Jenny, in particular, even entertained the idea of giving up their vegan diet in the future because climate change may prevent both them and the farm staying vegan.

Living an authentic life is a consequence of having met *autrui* in the world. According to Sartre, this only applies to me when I meet a 'human' *autrui*, yet as mentioned earlier in this article, this is a postulate that Sartre never fully justified in his work on intersubjective ethics. As the ethnographic exploration of Sartre's framework among a handful of small-scale farmers suggests, this realization and embracing an authentic life can also occur after meeting an 'animal' *autrui*. The implication is that animals showed resistance to their commodification, and revealed themselves to my participants as subjects. And as subjects, from my participants'

perspectives, they too must experience anxiety at the idea of being reduced to a fixed identity, in this case, as meat, as substance, as a commodity only.

In *Existentialism is a humanism* (2009), Sartre developed the idea that existence precedes essence: None of us has a predefined nature; we are free to define for ourselves what our projects will be. We exist first, then we meet ourselves as we emerge from the world. This means that there is no transcendental norm that dictates what one should do. We are free, we are freedom itself, and there is nothing else than what we do. This also means that there is no set of values that we should decide to embrace. We set these for ourselves. After meeting animals as existing subjects, Kevin, Peter, and Jenny decided that not commodifying subjects was the set of values they wanted to embrace, knowing full well that these values might also change. Virginie, on the other hand, decided that she needed to commodify her sheep at greater speed, so as to avoid unwanted hesitation in her resolve. In the end, whether or not we agree with the choices made by any of my participants, this exploration of their lived experiences through a Sartrian lens reveals that existentialism is a very rich framework not only to articulate some of the psychological distress experienced by small-scale farmers, but also to highlight the importance of human-animal intersubjective exchanges in revealing animals as existing subjects. Even though Sartre made it implicit that it was only applicable to human-human intersubjective interactions, it seems that there may be grounds to claim that existentialism may not, after all, only be a humanism.

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