The Employee as 'Dish of the Day': The Ethics of the Consuming/Consumed Self in Human Resource Management

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Abstract This article examines the ethical implications of the growing integration of consumption into the heart of the employment relationship. Human resource management (HRM) practices increasingly draw upon the values and practices of consumption, constructing employees as the 'consumers' of 'cafeteria-style' benefits and development opportunities. However, at the same time employees are expected to market themselves as items to be consumed on a corporate menu. In relation to this simultaneous position of consumer/consumed, the employee is expected to *actively engage* in the commodification of themselves, *performing* an appropriate organizational identity as a necessary part of being a successful employee. This article argues that the relationship between HRM and the simultaneously consuming/consumed employee affects the conditions of possibility for ethical relations within organizational life. It is argued that the underlying 'ethos' for the integration of consumption values into HRM practices encourages a self-reflecting, self-absorbed subject, drawing upon a narrow view of individualised autonomy and choice. Referring to Levinas' perspective that the primary ethical relation is that of responsibility and openness to the Other, it is concluded that these HRM practices affect the possibility for ethical being.

Keywords Autonomy · Choice · Consumption · Ethics · Human resource management (HRM) · Identity · Performance · Levinas

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Mise-en-Scène: Milliways, the 'restaurant at the end of the universe'.

"[Waiter]	Would you all like to see the menu, or would you care to meet the dish of the day?
[Arthur]	Meet?
[Trillian]	What is it?
[Waiter]	It's an Amiglion Major cow. I'll bring him over.
[Zaphod]	OK, we'll meet the meat. That's cool!.
[Dish of the Day]	Beugh… A-hem… (RUSTIC ACCENT) Good evening, madam and gentlemen, I am the main dish of the day. May I interest you in parts of my body?
[Trillian & Ford]	Huh?
[Ford]	Oh, well.
[Dish of the Day]	Something off my shoulder, perhaps? Braised in a white wine sauce?
[Arthur]	Your shoulder?!.
[Dish of the Day]	Well, naturally mine, sir. Nobody else's is mine to offer! The rump is very good, sir. I have been exercising and eating plenty of grain, so there's a lot of good meat there.
(HE MOOS)	
[Dish of the Day]	Or a casserole of me, perhaps?
[Trillian]	You mean this animal actually wants us to eat it?
[Ford]	Me? I don't mean anything.
[Arthur]	It's the most revolting thing I've ever heard!.

[Zaphod]	What's the problem?
[Arthur]	I don't want to eat an animal that's inviting me to!.
[Zaphod]	It's better than eating an animal that doesn't want to be eaten.
[Arthur]	That's not the point. Well, maybe it is the point. I don't want to talk about it. I'll have a green salad.
[Dish of the Day]	May I urge you, sir, to consider my liver? It must be very rich and tender by now. I have been force-feeding myself for months.
[Arthur]	Green salad, please.
[Dish of the Day]	A green salad!.
[Arthur]	Is there any reason why I shouldn't have a green salad?
[Dish of the Day]	I know many vegetables that are very clear on that point, sir, which is why it was decided to cut through the whole tangled problem by breeding an animal that actually wanted to be eaten and was capable of saying so clearly and distinctly. And here I am!.
[Arthur]	A glass of water…?
[Zaphod]	Listen, we want to eat! We don't want to make a meal of the issues. Four rare steaks, please.
[Dish of the Day]	Very wise choice, sir. I'll just nip off and shoot meself.
[Arthur]	Oh, God!.
[Dish of the Day]	Don't worry, sir. I'll be very humane".

From the screenplay to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, originally from the books by Douglas Adams.

Introduction

This article examines the ethical implications of the growing integration of an 'aesthetics of consumption' (Bauman 1998, pp. 23–25) into the heart of the employment relationship. A number of commentators have noted the confluence of modern management practices with consumer and market oriented values (e.g. Willmott 1993; du Gay 1996). Here, I examine how human resource management (HRM) techniques and rhetorics increasingly draw upon the values and practices of consumption. Employees are tempted by the apparent 'customer' choices of 'cafeteria-style' benefits and development opportunities, with organizations portraying themselves as 'the employer of choice'. Korczynski (2007, p. 8) argues that HRM has made use of the 'enchantment' of consumption to gain greater 'buy in' of the employee to

organizational goals through the 'fetishization of individual choice'. This has significance because consumption is a central social process in modern societies, not simply as economic exchange but as an embodied, material process involving meaning- and self-construction (Lodziak 2002). In this article, I seek to take this link between HRM, individualisation and consumption further by turning Korczynski's argument through another twist: that employees are not just offered up a menu for their own choices, but they have themselves become items of choice on a corporate menu. At the same time as HRM appeals to employees as if they were consumers, they are being consumed as resources by the organization. It is, of course, a characteristic of the employment relationship that employees are commodified, since they 'sell' their potential to work in an asymmetrical economic and social exchange. The appeal to consumer identity is in some ways but the latest in a line of managerial attempts to gloss the nature of this relationship. However, the novelty of this commodification within contemporary HR practices is the extent to which the employee is expected to *actively engage* in the marketing and commodification of themselves.

The characteristics of the simultaneously consuming/ consumed employee may be elucidated through the image of the living, talking 'dish of the day' in the extract above from Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Comparing the employee to the 'dish of the day' reflects both sides of the HRM dilemma, as encapsulated in that oft-repeated mantra: 'people are our greatest asset'. Employees are simultaneously a commodity akin to other assets, but valued because of their very 'human' qualities, which are the antithesis of commodification. Debates about the meaning of 'HRM' point to this central tension between the using up of a 'resource' and the corporate advantages of developing and capturing more of the renewable 'resourcefulness' of employees (e.g. Costea et al. 2008; Van Buren et al. 2011, p. 212). Under HRM, employees are expected to market themselves like the 'dish of the day', pointing out their best parts, which they have worked on developing. They are expected to articulate their active, consenting role in being consumed. Such a dish even obscures the unequal nature of the power relationship inherent in self-commodification by shooting itself 'humanely'.

An example which illustrates the employee as 'dish of the day' can be seen in the HR strategy of a multi-national energy company. There is a clear orientation towards consumption in their flexible benefits package, 'My Choice', where employees can 'choose from a range of options to create the package that best suits them: for instance, trading part of their package for more holiday, childcare and retail vouchers, or travel and medical insurance' (E-ON UK, Corporate Social Responsibility Report (CSR) report 2005,

http://www.eon-uk.com/about/crarchive/1827.aspx). The focus on consumption continues in their 'Employee Deal', which makes explicit the dual nature of consuming/consumed in the relationship between employees and the company. The 'Employee Deal' is: 'Designed to foster a high-performance culture, its goal is to help each one of us to achieve our potential by giving us more control of our life at work. The Deal has four areas—Wellbeing, Reward, Career and Learning and Development'. Without a trace of irony, the document goes on to state: 'At its heart is the idea that each employee is their own "brand". "Brand Myself" is a concept that helps employees to manage and market themselves as individuals understanding their own values, strengths and development needs' (E-ON UK, CSR Report 2005, http://www.eon-uk.com/about/crarchive/1829.aspx).

The 'dish of the day' analogy draws attention to the significance of employee subjectivity in the contemporary employment relationship. Consent is a central part of the identity of the 'dish of the day', integral to how it constructs meaning about its place in the world. In articulating its purpose to its 'consumers', the 'dish of the day' performs this identity through its social interactions. It is not enough for it to be willingly consumed; it has to be "capable of saying so, clearly and distinctly". Similarly, in many modern organizations and occupations, *performing* an appropriate organizational identity is a necessary part of being a successful employee. It is no longer sufficient to do one's job competently within working hours: one is expected to believe in the organization and its goals, and (whether one does believe or not) to visibly demonstrate this commitment and enthusiasm (e.g. Grey 1994; Dale 2005). In this performance of corporate identity, subjectivity is negotiated and reproduced through embodied and spatialised social interactions with others, and with the physical and symbolic landscapes of social and organizational life (Dale and Burrell 2008).

This article explores the consequences of bringing consumption values within employment practices for the very possibilities of *being* ethical—of being an ethical subject—in relation to others. Much work on business ethics is focused on how ethical values and principles may be applied to organizational actors and their decisions. However, this article argues for the need to consider the organizational conditions and social relations which are prior to any ethical code: that is, how the ethical subjectivity of the employee is constructed in relation to HR practices. Individuals do not come to the workplace with a fixed, determined identity upon which ethical choices can be overlaid. Rather, the social identity of the individual is an ongoing negotiation between the social actor and their relationships and situation. Thus, as Clegg et al. (2007, p. 115) argue: 'The crucial issue is that ethics as practice concerns processes of self-formation amongst people at work'. This is not to suggest that subjectivity is determined by the workplace, by HRM or by consumption, and there are obvious limitations in applying the analogy of the 'dish of the day' to employees. People constitute themselves in the context of these powerful discourses and embodied practices, including in opposition, resistance or even indifference to them. Yet subject formation is not a deterministic.

Central to the discourses of consumption is a potent appeal to freedom and choice. Here notions of autonomy become more ambivalently connected to a restricted set of values and practices linked to consuming. The paradox at the centre of the corporate appeal to autonomy has been powerfully critiqued by Willmott (1993, p. 527) as a redefinition of autonomy as obedience to corporate values. Fleming and Sturdy (2009) have furthered this argument by considering 'neo-normative' control which appears to offer employees the 'freedom' to 'be themselves'. In this article, I seek to develop this as an ethical critique of autonomy defined in relation to consumption practices within HRM.

In ethical terms, the use of humans as commodified resources has implications for the treatment and experiences of employees, even where to a greater or lesser extent they are given the opportunity to 'develop themselves', further their career or make choices about their remuneration package. For as Greenwood (2002, p. 264) has pointed out: 'HRM practices are a way of intervening in an employee's life in order to get employees to sacrifice more of themselves to the needs of the organization'. Evoking the positive associations of consumption choices within work is one way in which HRM practices try to both secure this intervention and obscure the sacrifice expected (Burawoy 1979). Furthermore, I argue that the 'ethos' (Foucault 1992) which underlies these contemporary HRM practices produces the conditions which foster self-reflecting, self-absorbed all-consuming selves. This has consequences for ethical subjectivity. In contrast to this, I offer Levinas' (1999) argument that the primary ethical relation is that of responsibility and openness to the Other.[1] Brueggemann (1999, p. 1) describes this as 'othering', where '"Other" is not simply a counter-object, but it is the risky, demanding dynamic process of relating to one who is not us'. These HR techniques cannot be simply dismissed as superficial, as managerial tools of isolated interest within the sphere of employment as, in blurring the boundaries and identities of production and consumption, they have

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[1] Throughout the text I use 'Other' capitalised to indicate Levinas' reading of the Other as the radical alterity of another being, who is ultimately irreducible to self and sameness.

ethical implications for selfhood and social relations within the organization and beyond.

The paper starts by examining how consumption has been brought within the employment relationship through HR practices, then considers what this means for employee identity. A case study of insurance giant Aviva illustrates how consumption, HR and corporate ethics are brought together in practice. The second half of the paper explores the ethical implications of this by looking at what sort of self-formation is encouraged through consumption practices. I draw upon Levinasian concepts to understand ethical subjectivity and to consider the possibilities for ethical disturbance in the face of the Other.

The Consuming Organization

It is perhaps not surprising that consumption has gone to the heart of many organizations. Much has been written about the centrality of consumption in modern societies. Some of these accounts celebrate the opportunities of consumption, whilst others lament its effects on society and individuality (Campbell 1987; Baudrillard 1998). On the whole though, it would seem that the very idea of consumption has become attractive and valued. Indeed, it has come to be seen as a prime driver of modern life: 'consumption moved from a means towards an end—living—to being an end in its own right. Living life to the full became increasingly synonymous with consumption' (Gabriel and Lang 1995, p. 7). Yet consumption has a dark side, which even in modern culture still throws a shadow. Williams (1976, pp. 78–79), states that the word 'consumer' derives from the sixteenth century, meaning someone who uses up, destroys, lays waste and devours. It is only in the twentieth century that 'consumer' attains the positive associations with which we are now familiar, including being closely coupled with notions of autonomy through the ideal of 'consumer choice'.

These associations with autonomy and choice characterise the consumer as an *active* social agent. Identity as 'a consumer' has more positive connotations than that of the identity of 'an employee'. Whereas the image of the employee traditionally is of one in a dependent and hierarchical relationship, the 'consuming self' appeals to notions of freedom, choice, autonomy, pleasure, desire and self-fulfilment. Thus it is not surprising that HRM draws upon these aspects of consumer identity to incorporate the individual into the organization. Indeed, it could be seen in part as an extension of the human relations tradition, although it has distinctive contemporary aspects, such as the 'neo-normative' emphasis on 'being yourself' (Fleming and Sturdy 2009).

Whilst recognizing that 'HRM' is a highly contested term (e.g. Legge 2005; Guest 1990), two key characteristics associated with HRM as a distinctive approach to the employment relationship are relevant to this article. First, HRM has been presented as explicitly attempting to integrate 'human resources' within the business goals and strategies of a company. Second, this alignment between 'human resources' and organizational goals, is to be demonstrated through greater employee commitment and identification with the company (Walton 1985; Fombrun et al. 1984). The insertion of consumption into the management of the employment relationship is closely related to these characteristics. As Legge (2005, p. 272) points out, the rhetoric of a 'quality' employee ('well-trained, skilled and committed') is the necessary corollary to the business rhetoric of quality goods and services that can better satisfy customer desires. Initially this centred on a change in attitudes towards customer service, which required HRM interventions such as training and employee participation.

Although this 'rhetoric' of customer service did not necessarily translate directly to better training, skills development or motivation and involvement, it still affected organisational life. From an outward-facing preoccupation with the customer through brand image, quality and customer service, consumption turned inwards to penetrate the organization through changing language and relationships. Organizational functions become 'services' that employees now 'sell' to one another. Other departments became redefined from being colleagues to 'internal customers', and relationships between them changed from bureaucratically framed procedures and structures, to quasi-market relations around budgets, service level agreements and 'added value'. The HR function has fully entered into this, re-defining its relationship with employees and especially with line managers as 'business partnerships' (Wright 2005). It is, of course, particularly useful for the HR function to define itself in a marketized role, as it has traditionally found itself side-lined by being perceived as peripheral to organizational performance and business success. As part of this alignment of HR with business values, it brokers the relationship of employees as consumers (through development opportunities for 'soft skills' and 'flexible benefits' packages) *and* encourages them to commodify themselves ('communicating to employees what is required for them to be successful in creating value' (Ulrich and Brockbank 2005, p. 201)).

Thus far, I have considered how HR practices appeal to the sorts of choices, desires and freedoms we seem to have as consumers, engendering a positive association with employment rather than evoking the traditional constraints of the position of employee. I now turn to consider how these very choices and opportunities involve the consumption of

the employee by the organization, and the individual's active part in a process of self-commodification.

Consuming the Employee

Before examining employee self-commodification, it is helpful to relate HR practices to two broad changes in the employment relationship: individualisation, and what has been described as a 'turn to the self' (e.g. Heelas 2002; Giddens 1991). HRM has been central to an individualisation of the employment relationship as processes of collective representation and negotiation have increasingly been replaced with rewards related to individual performance and commitment; through the growing use of techniques such as appraisal, mentoring and coaching; well-being provisions aimed at individual performance and integration; and direct communication with individual employees. The individual has become the direct *object* of managerial intervention, and also the *subject* who is expected to align themselves to the goals of the company. These changes in the employment relation can be connected to wider trends of economic individualism, global competition and labour market deregulation (e.g. Lasch 1980; Giddens 1990).

Greater individualisation relates to the second change within the employment relationship: a concern for employee identity, which then becomes conflated with a process of 'identification' between individual and organization. This latter is often seen as a need for employees to perform an appropriate organizational identity, for with individualisation frequently comes the 'unitarist' belief that all members should share the same interests as those of the organization (Fox 1985, p. 31). The 'turn to the subject' also reflects broader social characteristics. Rose argues that contemporary individuals are encouraged 'to live as if running a project of themselves: they are to work on their emotional world, their domestic and conjugal arrangements, their relations of employment and the techniques of sexual pleasure, to develop a style of being that will maximise the worth of their existence to themselves' (1996, p. 157). This 'project' itself involves an assumption that the individual has the high degree of autonomy and choice required to fashion themselves, despite the ways that the structure and power relations of the wage nexus often belie this (cf. Grey 1994). The whole idea of the 'project of the self', then, shares many characteristics with our relationship to consumption.

Within employment, this means that the individual must work on them*selves* to achieve success in organizational terms. This takes place through an active form of self-commodification, whereby we all become responsible for our own consumption by the organization. HRM discourses and practices are key to this. Within employment we see the shift from being employed to being 'employable'. Employees are exhorted to 'identify your assets' and maximise them. Individuals are expected to 'choose' to ensure they have the required bundles of qualities, qualifications, attitudes and experience to be bought at the highest price possible in the labour market. The concept of 'career' itself is often constructed within HRM, as within wider culture, as a process of individual choice. Bauman (2000a, p. 73) notes that 'everything in a consumer society is a matter of choice, except the compulsion to choose' and social relations such as employment become akin to shopping where 'we "shop" for the skills needed to earn our living and for the means to convince would-be employers that we have them' (Bauman 2000a, p. 74).

More and more of the employee's identity is drawn into the performance of their work roles, particularly where employees are the conduit for consumption processes. These include 'emotional labour' and 'aesthetic labour', where employees' emotions and embodiment are used and managed as part of their work (e.g. Hochschild 1983; Hancock and Tyler 2000). Thus, there is a consumption and commodification of greater aspects of personhood. If employees cannot 'become' the appropriate organizational identity, or at least give a convincing performance of it, then they must suffer the consequences of cognitive dissonance, stress or being 'managed out' of the company altogether (e.g. Coates 1994; Grey 1994). These internalised identities are activated through the practices of HRM via recruitment policies, training courses, manuals, performance management and payment schemes, and the repercussions are managed via so-called 'wellness' initiatives, performance management and disciplinary/termination procedures.

What we are seeing is nothing less than the 'branding' of the employee, as they have to become living breathing parts of the company image, encouraged by HR initiatives such as the 'Brand Myself' one referred to above. For example, airline workers in Hancock and Tyler's (2000, p. 117) study are told to 'act as a system of *recognition* for staff and customers; to establish a tone of *voice* that accurately reflects how the airline conducts its business; and, to create a flexible *personality* for the airline'. In this way, the organization itself is embossed upon the body of the employee and they are 'forced to emit signs' (Tagg 1993, p. 11). In a recent article, the managing director of St Luke's Creative Agency describes employees' as necessary for 'living the brand' (http://www.campaignlive.co.uk/news/1043277/St-Lukes-Living-Brand/, accessed 3rd March 2011). St Luke's itself has used such techniques as a 'commitment line' where staff have to bodily place themselves on a line from 1 to 10 according to their commitment to the company, as well as to read out statements about their feelings about the company (Channel 4 documentary 1998). Thus, as an integral

part of the consumption system of the organization, employees become akin to the 'dish of the day', speaking out its willingness to be consumed. This dyadic focus on self and its relation with the requirements of the organization has ethical consequences.

The Marketization of HRM and Corporate Ethics: A Case Study of Aviva

In order to examine the ethical consequences of the integration of consumption into HR, I discuss the case of the insurance giant, Aviva. Aviva has very strong employee development, engagement and corporate social responsibility practices. The ways in which these are intertwined illustrate the ethical dilemma for HR practices even when, perhaps especially when, a company overtly engages 'ethical' policies.

Aviva appears to give employees choices over how they define their very relationship with the company through an HR 'talent management' initiative called 'the Real Deal^TM' (the 'trademark' here certainly suggests a commercial imperative). The 'Real Deal^TM' uses a set of playing cards, which have statements that give a range of options through which employees relate to the company. The Aviva report explains: 'Designed like a set of playing cards but carrying a range of descriptive statements, Real Deal^TM helps people to reveal their hand to others in a supportive way, offering meaningful insight into what is important to them….We've progressively used Real Deal^TM cards in reviews, team meetings and even job interviews. In a new development this year, we have adapted Real Deal^TM for online use'. An employee demonstrates their enthusiasm and commitment by commenting: 'Playing the Real Deal^TM cards has helped me to home in on what I really care about at work. "Exceeding goals" and "Being in a great team" give me the most satisfaction. My deal breaker is "Flexibility" and luckily Aviva gives me that, as I am able to work remotely' (http://cr.aviva.com/index.asp?pageid=42). Although this appears (and may be experienced) as a fun and satisfying way of expressing one's 'choices' as to how one engages with the company, it obscures the parameters of these choices whilst requiring the employee to articulate their consent in this self-commodification. We can see even further the consequences for the employee as 'dish of the day' when we examine the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities of Aviva, which simultaneously tie the employee into performing the values of the company whilst subordinating them to the ultimate values of the market and profitability. I do not want to imply that Aviva is somehow an exceptional case, though it has deliberately made its CSR programme high-profile, nor do I wish to criticise Aviva's active ethical programmes as such. Indeed, there is much

that I find very appealing about their involvement in the Street to School campaigns in the UK, India and Turkey for example (http://cr.aviva.com/index.asp?pageid=49).

Aviva's Corporate Social Resposnsibility policy (http://www.aviva.com/library/pdfs/cr/csr_policy.pdf, accessed 7th March 2011), as is common practice, explicitly links and subordinates business ethics to corporate goals. It includes the proviso that all ethical initiatives must: 'Be clearly relevant to Aviva's aims and brand values…Offer opportunities for communication both globally and in key local markets'.

Aviva also 'offers opportunities' for employees to volunteer for community projects and to donate to charity. However, these are not stand-alone, ethical choices for employees, but are tied into the twin business goals of brand extension and employee engagement (i.e. aligning employees with company goals). Aviva's CSR report of 2009 says:

> Giving colleagues the opportunity to support charities and local communities was an important part of Aviva Day and 'Becoming One Aviva', *as we call our brand journey* (online at http://cr.aviva.com/index.asp?pageid=52, accessed 7th March 2011, emphasis added).

Equal to and linked to the importance of the 'brand journey', is the way in which the ethical choices of employees are part of the cultural engagement programme entitled 'bringing our employees with us':

> Our 'Becoming One Aviva' engagement campaign…. was to engage employees in our new brand promise of 'no one recognises you like Aviva' and our 'One Aviva, twice the value' vision (http://cr.aviva.com/index.asp?pageid=40),

where events included 'brand showcases' around the UK, using interactive touch screens and personal video diary clips from employees. The report includes employee comments such as: "It was an amazing experience…this was the first time ever we really felt like one company—a global village."

This is all quite seductive—perhaps until one looks at the ways that employees are consumed by the company as well as being constructed as ethical consumers within it. In the context of Aviva's operations as a global business, employees may be seen as having fewer choices. The 2009 Annual Report states: 'We have reduced our costs by £500 million and Aviva has 19 % fewer employees than two years ago'. This is on a reported size of 46,000 employees, and would therefore suggest that job losses have been substantial. Much of this, claims the CEO, comes from responding to customer preferences to use online systems, and has resulted in an increased amount of customer satisfaction. The contrast between valuing the external customer and the internal customer/employee is stark (Fleetwood

2008). The 'dish of the day' has willingly presented itself through engaging in Real Deal cards, community 'volunteering', 'Aviva Day' and so on, thus contributing to 'shooting itself humanely', since ethical activities are juxtaposed with and partially obscure business goals (cf. Rhodes et al. 2010). In addition, these activities have worked together to tie employees (including managers) into the organization in particular ways which encourage self-reflection turned inwards towards an organization-self dyad, shaping a subjectivity consumed by the needs and desires of the self and its relationship with the organization.

The Ethos of HRM: The Consuming and Self-Consuming Employee

In what I have discussed thus far, it is clear that ethical issues arise from the integration of consumption values and practices into the employment relationship, producing greater commodification of the employee, who is expected to actively perform an organizational identity. This self-commodification is further obscured by HR practices which position the employee as a consumer, with apparent choices and autonomy in how they relate to the organization. In this section, I explore what this means for the self-formation of the employee. However, I am not only interested in what the HR-consumption relation means for employee identity, but what consequences this has for the underlying conditions of possibility for ethical relations in organizational life.

In furthering this argument, I move from a dominant understanding of ethics as a set of moral values and conducts to what might be seen as being prior to any particular set of moral judgements and actions: our 'ethos'. 'Ethics' is in part derived from the Greek word 'ethos', which means both 'character' and 'dwelling'. Diprose (1993, pp. 18–19) connects these meanings of ethos together to show how they might be seen as mutually enacting:

> Dwelling is both a noun (the place to which one returns) and a verb (the practice of dwelling); my dwelling is both my habitat and my habitual way of life. My habitual way of life, ethos or set of habits determines my character (my specificity or what is properly my own). These habits are not given: they are constituted through the repetition of bodily acts the character of which are governed by the habitat I occupy. From this understanding of ethos….the understanding of ethics I am evoking recognises a constitutive relation between one's world (habitat) and one's embodied character (ethos). Such an account of ethics *takes into account how the individual is constituted within a social context* (emphasis added).

Following Foucault, Diprose sees '"ethos" as a manner of being and 'ethics' as a practice, a technique of self-formation', which is distinct from 'morality' 'as a set of values and rules of action' (1993, p. 25).

In what follows, I argue that the 'practices of self-formation' which are fostered through the values and practices of consumption brought within the employment relationship encourage (though do not determine) an organizational subject which is primarily self-reflecting, self-referential and self-absorbed. The discourses of consumption, with their emphasis on possession and autonomy through actioned choice, suggest a form of self-hood which is individually produced and sustained: we are each in charge of developing our *own self*.

In terms of ethos being produced through the habits of the 'repetition of bodily acts' (Diprose 1993, p. 19), we can see the significance for ethics of the embodied performance of organizational identity. It can also be related to the growing integration of consumption spaces *within* organizations, where the shopping mall has been rebuilt at the centre of employment relations. For example, British Airways Waterside Headquarters in London has a central 'internal street', the intention of which was to 'both facilitate a change in the way BA staff behave at work and to support a more customer-led culture' (Myerson 2004, p. 200). Other corporate buildings encompass gyms, cafes, bars and even whole 'townscapes'. The relevance of these hybrid workspaces lies in the understanding that processes of consumption are not solely about purchasing and ownership of goods, but self-reflection (Falk and Campbell 1997). The engagement with the materiality of potential purchases involves a process of individual introspection and social projection. The consumer implicitly interrogates themselves with questions such as 'Am I like that?', 'Could I be like that?', 'Do I want to be like that?' The same process of self-reflection is engaged in HR practices such as appraisal, development and employee engagement programmes, which encourage the perception of autonomous choice, along with the need for the employee to speak out their corporate self-identity (Townley 1994). The self-reflection produced in the experience of consumption is, although socially oriented in some ways, essentially an inward self-related process (Falk and Campbell 1997, p. 4), since it 'articulates the "feeling" of one's self—both as an emotional state and as a physical (sensory) experience'. Thus, although shopping malls and their workplace counterparts appear to be collective social spaces, the sort of sociability which is produced could be described as 'street sociability' (Lehtonen and Mäenpää 1997, p. 156) where

people are present together but often are self-absorbed and indifferent to one another.

Bauman (2000a, p. 74), too, suggests that processes of self-formation are linked to consumption. On the one hand, we learn that our happiness depends upon our own efforts and competence, that we must be self-reliant, but, that on the other, we can never put in enough effort or be competent enough to satisfy the desires of consumption. In terms of paid work, we can see how this self-directed but ultimately insufficient 'self' facilitates self-commodification, our willingness to be consumed. On the one hand we see ourselves as self-producing, as having the autonomy to make our career choices and make our-selves. On the other hand, the constraints and inequalities of the employment relationship reinforce the need to conform, fed by the insecurity which comes from the always potential, but ultimately deferred, 'success' of the consuming self.

Although consumption is directed inwards to the satisfaction of the self, this satisfaction is never complete. Indeed, Bauman (2000b, p. 15) talks of the 'double instant satisfaction' required in a consumption-based society. The satisfaction to the consumer should be immediate, but should last for the minimum time possible, requiring yet another experience of consumption immediately. As he comments, the primary experience is not about the pleasure of acquisition, but about the gathering of sensations through a compulsive cycle of desire (2000b, p. 16). HR continually produces opportunities for the employee to engage in a series of 'projects of self', reproducing this cycle of satisfaction and desire through positioning the employee as simultaneously consumer within the organization whilst commodifying themselves for the organization. Thus, although not deterministic, it would seem that the integration of consumption values within HRM practices constructs particular ways in which people might relate to each other, themselves and the organization. HR practices and rhetorics that appeal to the employee through their identity as a consumer encourage individuals to become self-focused, 'all-consuming selves' (Costea and Introna 2004, p. 5), which are also all consumed *by self*. Brueggemann relates this to a modern '"therapeutic culture"…in which the subject is endlessly fascinated with self without any reference points outside the self. The outcome of this programmatic development course has been a self-indulgent society in which the disciplines of neighbourliness, that is, attention to the other, have disappeared. In place of neighbourhood has come mall' (1999, p. 22).

The emphasis on autonomy, central to the image of the sovereign consumer, requires further consideration in this context. In his paper on Foucault's complex relationship with autonomy and agency, Bevir (1999, p. 69) critiques the liberal view of freedom, 'often defined by rights, where the individual should not be subject to any social constraint', and based upon a faith in an autonomous individual who can stand outside society. This is exactly the sort of individual conception of autonomy which is embedded in the discourses of consumption. As discussed, the particular 'autonomy' and choice enshrined in the values of consumption is a highly individualized, self-centred one. Gorz (1967, p. 68) suggests that within this 'freedom' to consume 'the individual is encouraged…to reconstitute himself [*sic*.] as a *private* microcosm which he can enjoy and over which he can reign as solitary sovereign'. This has been described as the 'privatization of freedom' by Lodziak (2002, p. 74), since it is a 'freedom' which only considers what the individual gains, entirely ignoring and even negating any freedoms which relate to the idea of a 'common good' or which take into account differential access to material resources, the social structures of opportunity or asymmetries of power.

In emphasising individualism, unitarism and greater employee incorporation, as well as consumption, HRM can be seen to be reinforcing this ethos of 'privatized freedom'. HRM practices encourage a certain circularity to the inward-turned self. The 'consuming self' can be characterised by the primary relation of the 'I'—the focus is on the gratification of self, the active and self-actualising aspect of the individual *subject* of HRM. The 'consumed self' is focused on 'me'—what is happening to me, how will changing workplace relations affect me? This is the passive, commoditised *object* of HRM. Both together form an enclosed and self-referential mode of being: 'I-me'.

Ethical Subjectivity and the Face of the Other

Despite the ethos of consumption and HRM, there is an inherent contradiction in the production of the consuming/consumed employee, a gap within which the possibility for ethical relations might be conceived. The following section takes its inspiration from Foucault and Levinas to consider the formation of 'ethical subjectivity' that might be founded on an idea of agency produced within a social context rather than the sovereign autonomy of the consumer. From this comes the possibility of 'ethical disturbance' in the face of the Other, which puts the self in question and can ultimately lead to concern for justice for 'all the other Others'.

This contradiction is within the idea of a totally self-produced self promoted by the values of consumptions and the practices of HRM. Although viewing itself as autonomous, it is itself produced through social interaction and negotiation. I want to reiterate that I am not suggesting that individual self-identity is determined. To some extent I concur with Lodziak's (2002) critique that there has been a

tendency within academic studies to over-generalise the significance of consumption in producing individual identity, often reducing the complexities of identity to image and style. In elucidating the multiple and dynamic processes of self-formation, the concept of 'ethical subjectivity' is helpful:

> From Foucault we can surmise that ethical subjectivity requires one not to be entirely subjectified by discourse but to exercise a form of freedom in relation to one's own subjectivity and conduct (Foucault 1984) (McMurray et al. 2011, p. 544).

Thus, the employee is not determined by organizational discourses and practices. Indeed, an ethical response cannot be developed without the possibilities for 'choice' in social interactions and without some form of 'freedom' to act 'otherwise', but this is different from the sort of unfettered choice promoted within the discourses of consumption. In his reading of Foucault's work, Bevir (1999, p. 67) distinguishes between the form of sovereign autonomy (such as that associated with consumption) and a conception of social agency:

> agents, in contrast, exist only in specific social contexts, but these contexts never determine how they try to construct themselves. Although agents necessarily exist within regimes of power/knowledge, these regimes do not determine the experiences they can have, the ways they can exercise their reason, the beliefs they can adopt, or the actions they can attempt to perform. Agents are creative beings; it is just that their creativity occurs in a given social context that influences it.

It is in this space of indeterminacy, between autonomy and agency that the possibility for an ethical subjectivity arises. Although Bevir argues that Foucault sees individuals in modern society as 'typically using their agency only to regulate themselves in accord with social norms' (1999, p. 74), ethical possibilities come from the ways in which individuals can question these norms. With regard to the values of consumption and their incorporation into HRM, this may involve the questioning of the nature of the choices and autonomy presented, or the centrality of self-fulfilment and self-actualisation. For, as Bevir (1999, p. 76) comments: 'Agency and freedom really appear only when we question moral rules by interpreting them creatively in an ethics, although equally we can develop an ethics only because we possess a capacity for agency and freedom'. In taking this ethical questioning further it is useful to contrast the relationship between the self-absorbed atomistic self, encouraged through consumption and HRM, and the possibilities for thinking of an ethics based on a concern for what is 'Other' than self, drawing inspiration from the work of Levinas and Brueggemann.

Brueggemann's discussion about 'othering' is a useful starting point: 'the risky, demanding dynamic process of relating to one who is not us' (1999, p. 1). Brueggemann argues that this relationship with the Other is 'the irreducible core of what it means to be human' (1999, p. 1). For Levinas too, the subjectivity of the individual can only be found in the relationship with the Other, and further than that in the impossibility of being indifferent to the Other. As he says, it is the Other that calls me into being. Thus, rather than the emphasis on the autonomy of self-creation, Levinas starts from the standpoint of a subjectivity which is only made possible because of the relationship with the Other (McMurray et al. 2011, p. 544). Yet that Other does not reflect the self, is neither able to be assimilated by the self nor can the self fully know the Other. The Other is a radical alterity.

This primary relationship with the Other is ethical, based on infinite responsibility for the Other. Levinas argues that 'ethics is before ontology. Behind the arrival of the human there is already the vigilance for the Other. The transcendental I in its nakedness comes from the awakening by and for the Other' (1999, p. 98). Hence, the 'proximity of the Other', does not affirm the self as self-sufficient but is 'the origin of all putting into question of self' (1999, p. 99), such that 'all there is to the self is the "here I am" of responsibility to and for the Other' (Roberts 2001, p. 113). It is this primary ethical relation which so challenges and calls into question the self-absorbed autonomy which underlies the freedom and choices embedded in consumption. As Critchley (2007, p. 56) explains: 'Ethical experience is heteronomous, my autonomy is called into question by the fact of the other's demand, by the appeal that comes from their face and lays me under an obligation that is not of my choosing'.

For Levinas, this ethical relation with the Other is not reciprocal (1999, p. 100ff). Indeed, it is radically asymmetrical because it is based on the obligations and responsibility of the self for the Other, without consideration of these being returned. For Levinas social relations based upon reciprocity are problematic because 'the moment one is generous in hopes of reciprocity, that relation no longer involves generosity but the commercial relation, the exchange of good behaviour' (1999, p. 101). The relations of self and other which are foregrounded within HRM and consumption practices are exactly based upon this exchange reciprocity. Thus, we can see that Levinas' conception of the relationship with the Other is radical, not to be easily achieved through a set of recommendations for action: indeed, Levinas is explicitly against this sort of prescriptive ethics.

The Possibilities of Ethical Disturbance

Levinas' work about the primary ethical relation with the Other helps us understand the disquiet with which Arthur, the earthman, relates to the 'dish of the day'. In the face of this Other being, which cannot be reduced to silent meat, Arthur faces his responsibility for the potential consumption of the Other: 'To address someone expresses the ethical disturbance produced in me, in the tranquillity of the perseverance of my being, in my egotism as a necessary state' (Levinas 1999, p. 97). Levinas argues that the face of the Other speaks both of its mortality which gives me the possibility of destroying it and at the same time gives me the order not to destroy it: 'The face is that possibility of murder, that powerlessness of being and that authority that commands me: "Thou shalt not kill"' (1999, p. 104). Arthur struggles with this ethical disturbance when he says about not wanting to eat an animal that is inviting him to: 'That's not the point. Well, maybe it is the point'. In Levinasian terms, it might be read that the face of the Other is calling him into his responsibilities and obligations towards that Other. It is calling him away from a preoccupation with consumption and interrupts a focus on self. On the other hand, another character, Zaphod, is faced with the same ethical relationship and chooses to consume steaks from the 'dish of the day'.

As we have seen, it is through the lived embodiment of the employee that the atomised sovereign individual is performed on a day to day basis. Although this self-absorbed performance may be a constraint on the formation of the grounds of ethics, it may also be seen as a possibility—the possibility for re-thinking or perhaps more appropriately for re-enacting an ethical being who is able to break out of the reflection of self on self, and turn to the Other. Levinas critiques self-absorbed identity as being one of 'an anaesthetizing of sensibility' (Roberts 2001, p. 112), which evokes again the centrality of embodiment in the development and negotiation of identity, and looks to the sensibility of touch, taste and hearing in seeking the grounds of ethics. But this embodiment can still affirm or deny the Other, something that Bauman (1995, pp. 122–125) reflects when he argues that in modern society humans have moved from *touching* the Other to *tasting* them. The Other is no longer known through a shared form of communication, but is to be consumed. This may disrupt the boundaries of the Other, but confirms the (self) entity that consumes anything different from itself. One challenge for performing an organizational ethos that rejects the values of consumption and the self-absorbed illusion of autonomy is perhaps through an embodied openness to Otherness. For example, there may be possibilities for ethical disturbance even in relation to consumption practices, where greater face to face interaction between employee and customer might provoke the consumer to question the consequences of their consumption not just on 'distant' environmental effects, but on the employees with whom they interact, and also for the employee to question the ethics of products, services and brands in which their labour has become a mediating element.

Of course, starting to think about the Other in this way has its own dangers. When Levinas talks about the foundational ethical relationship of responsibility with the Other, he means something prior to what we usually think of when we talk of ethical decisions. Talking about the importance of the Other might become just another form of organizational rhetoric to justify conventional ends or to be presented as another consumption 'choice'.

However, Levinas does not end with this dyadic relation of self and Other. For it is not solely one central Other who demands our responsibility, but there are all the 'other Others'—what Levinas describes as the 'third person', with whom, he argues, justice begins (Levinas 1998, p. 150). As McMurray et al. (2011, p. 545) comment: 'With all the others present, any practical enactment of ethics becomes even more complex because of the presence of competing demands from those different others'. Nevertheless, this points us to a radical starting place for organizational justice which is inspired by ethical responsibility for the Other(s), rather than the sovereign autonomy and choices of the self-referential consuming subject (see Byers and Rhodes 2007 for discussion of the possibilities and difficulties for a Levinasian organisational justice).

Conclusions: HRM, Consumption and Ethics

It is a complex question to ask what this might mean for the ethics of HRM. It is often argued that HRM has limited opportunities for ethical action, since it is inherently part of managing the economic exchange which is the basis of all employment relations. Watson (2007) has argued that this means that it is untenable for HR practitioners to bring what he sees as essentially private ethics into what are business decisions. Watson, drawing on Weber's theory of bureaucracy, makes a clear separation between the private ethics of the individual and the public business rationale of the organization (2007, p. 229). When Watson does allow for the limited opportunities of HR practitioners for ethical action, he frames it in an essentially pluralistic view of the firm. This sees management, including HRM, as mediating the 'conflicts, tensions, contradictions and unintended consequences' (2007, p. 228) of capitalism. He sees the contradiction in HR practice itself as being between controlling employees or 'the principles of *freedom*, *choice* and *autonomy*' (ibid.: original emphasis). I hope in this article I have shown first, that this sort of artificial

separation between the private moral individual and the public organization is problematic, because it fails to recognise that the very discourses and techniques of management, including HRM, are involved in constructing the conditions of possibility for ethical subjectivity. Following from this, I also hope to have demonstrated that simply linking the valorisation of choice and autonomy with ethicality and 'good' employment practice is fraught with difficulties. Where these form part of an ethos of consumption this emphasis on choice and freedom provokes a self-absorbed, self-reflecting subject, and a consequent failure of openness to the demands of the Other. Within the practices and values of HRM the apparent choices of consumption are simultaneously turned back on themselves to the commodification of the employee, in the process becoming intensified such that the employee has to perform his or her self-commodification.

However, HRM has tended to hold itself aloof from interest in business ethics. It 'continues to assert its significance for corporate profitability and prefers to distance itself from its traditional welfare image' (Pinnington et al. 2007, p. 1; Winstanley and Woodall 2000, p. 6). It is useful to briefly consider how this distancing comes about, since resonances can be seen with the valuing of consumption and the inward turning self-absorbed self that have been discussed above. First, the professionalising project of HRM, which emphasises its central role in linking employee management to business performance, can be seen as effectively a self-reflecting means of propping up the power of HR in organizations. Second, HRM as a distinctive mode of employment relations compels an alignment between organization and employee that can silence 'Other' voices and alternative perspectives. Third, as studies such as Collinson's (1991, p. 73) on recruitment and selection have shown, the self-interested career prospects of HR practitioners can directly lead to decision-making which excludes the Other. It can also be seen in the inwardly focused agenda of the professional body for HR in the UK, the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD), with its two-fold objectives of setting the benchmark for excellence in the HR function and providing a detailed map for career progression (http://www.cipd.co.uk/cipd-hr-profession/hr-profession-map/).

From the perspective taken in this article, there are no easy answers or codes of practice which could be put in place to 'solve' the ethical dilemmas of HRM. However, I have tried to surface the underlying 'ethos' produced by some contemporary trends in HR practice which affect the conditions of possibility for ethical action. In doing this, I hope to produce the possibility for ethical disturbance within HRM and for reflective practices which are less self-absorbed and more oriented towards responsibility and justice for Others.

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