

**PARRHESIA AND CHARACTER:
HOW TRUTH CONTRIBUTES TO PUBLIC HEALTH**

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Abstract

Topic: The obesity epidemic and virtue ethics

Problem: The obesity epidemic is a global problem, which has placed a public health financial burden both on states and individuals. Furthermore, obesity-induced chronic diseases cause pain and suffering. From the tobacco industry, we have learnt that ignorance and doubt of the negative impacts of certain products are deliberately promoted and produced to sell those products, which has led to a public health problem. This is also true in the food industry. Junk food has invaded even the most remote and less developed areas on earth. In this scenario, morality does not seem to play a central role in business practices. We should consider how this is so and how ethics should be reinstated.

Objective: The objective of this thesis is to show the urgency of taking action to combat the global obesity epidemic by providing reasons for food companies and their shareholders, as well as the few private donors who control the global health agenda, to act morally in order to control the epidemic. To this end, this thesis will show how agnotology and parrhesia can contribute to promoting public health.

Methodology: This thesis achieved its objective through a review of relevant literature that included books, articles, newspapers, and reports.

Conclusion: Parrhesia, as a moral virtue, helps to promote public health. If food companies, their shareholders, and the few private donors who control the global health agenda will stop producing lies, confusion, and misconceptions about their unhealthy food products and will promote the truth and transparency instead, they will benefit themselves together with the better global public health.

I guess basically one wants to feel that one's life has amounted to more than just consuming products and generating garbage. I think that one likes to look back and say that one's done the best one can to make this a better place for others. You can look at it from this point of view: what greater motivation can there be than doing whatever one possibly can to reduce pain and suffering?¹

– Henry Spira

1. Singer, 294.

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Acknowledgement

The last two years have not been easy for me. I suffered from social anxiety that prevented me from continuing my study, and I had to take a break. But my break provided me with the opportunity to attend Professor Yogi Hendlin's class, "Industrial Epidemic" in the following year. This course made me think a lot about the world, the fragility of life, and myself. That experience was one of the motivations that led me to write this thesis. I'm very grateful to Professor Yogi Hendlin for being my supervisor and for his introduction to the topic of environmental philosophy, as well as his patience and kindness and support during the writing process. I'm also grateful to Professor Katharina Bauer for her willingness to be my advisor with such short notice and for providing me with valuable feedback during the thesis writing process. I'd also like to thank Naomi Paauw and Yolande Berendsen for their mental support. They helped me to build up my confidence and strength to continue doing something challenging. I'm equally thankful to Wei-Jun Shu for her companionship during my difficult time. Most importantly, I'd like to thank my parents for their support and love: they grant me total freedom and trust me unconditionally, without which I could not continue doing what I like or be truthful to myself.

Introduction

In 2008 in China, a food safety scandal broke out. It was discovered that the milk and baby formulas of many famous national brands like Sanlu, Mengniu, and Yili contained melamine. Melamine can improve the apparent protein content of foods and beverages but concentration of melamine in the urine leads to kidney stones and other renal disorders.² Numerous cases of babies developing “acute kidney failure” and several deaths were reported due to consumption of those contaminated products.³ The crisis threatened the reputation of the Chinese food industry nationally and internationally. I was so angry that I decided not to buy those brands. I found it very difficult to understand how people in those companies, who surely knew about the toxicity of melamine, still added it to their food products and sold them for babies’ consumption. Thirteen years later, in 2021, Mengniu and Yili are still selling their products in China, and they have grown even bigger and have become more famous; they sponsor television shows and cultural events, which help to relate their products with trends, coolness, fashion, youth, and health. In 2020, when I took the course “Industrial Epidemics,” I again felt angry that so many people suffer from the acts of companies that irresponsibly produce and market their unhealthy products, which cause diverse problems, not least of them global obesity epidemic. I was especially concerned about unhealthy food products because food is one the most basic needs of humans. If we would pause and look at the faces of the unsuspecting victims, who might have had no idea of why they ended up consuming so many unhealthy products and thus exposed themselves to multiple chronic diseases; if we could listen to their stories to know how their lives are, what they care about, their small joys, their concerns and worries, and their sorrows, we would realize that they are real human

2. Britannica, *Melamine*.

3. One-minute World News. *Chinese baby milk toll escalates*.

beings like you and me and not just targets of product marketing or figures in a sales analysis. I have asked myself many times what kind of person would take part in causing the obesity epidemic, and if that person cares about the results of his or her actions.

Excessive sugar consumption plays a vital role in obesity epidemic. Many people think fat, not sugar, is the main reason for obesity and overweight. This misconception dates back to a canonical study on what causes heart disease—the “Seven Countries Study.”⁴ This study, involved seven countries and spanned over 50 years, was directed by physiologist Ancel Keys, who showed a correlation between high intake of saturated fat and heart disease. However, as Alessandro Menotti, then the Seven Countries study’s lead Italian researcher, went back to the data, and found that sugar, instead of fat correlated more closely with deaths from heart disease.⁵

Further, in the 1970s, a professor of physiology and nutrition at Queen Elizabeth College in London, John Yudkin, based on research in his department and other biochemical and epidemiological research in the UK and elsewhere, showed that higher mortality rates and high sugar consumption go hand in hand.⁶ However, as consuming less sugar conflicted with the interests of food companies that made a lot of processed foods that contained excessive added sugar, Yudkin was targeted aggressively by the food industry and associated academics who benefited from the companies’ funding. Yudkin’s academic reputation was damaged—he was ridiculed, uninvited to international conferences on nutrition, and refused by research journals. Even the Queen Elizabeth College, where he was employed and where he founded the Nutrition Department, reneged on a promise to allow him to continue to use

4. See “*Seven country study*”, the official website.

5. Leslie, 2016.

6. Leslie, 2016.

its research facilities after his retirement, due to which Yudkin was forced to ask a solicitor to intervene.⁷ Yudkin already sounded an alarm to the public, but his voice was not heard by many people and even by those who were already aware of the negative impacts of sugar on public health, who might not have wanted to experience Yudkin's rejection.

Fortunately, interest in research on the impact of sugar on health continued, and scientists like Professor Robert Lustig conducted independent research and boldly revealed their findings publicly. Lustig's research explained how fructose physiologically poisons our body. Fructose (commonly known as "fruit sugar") is a type of carbohydrate found in honey, fruits, and syrups, as well as in vegetables.^{8,9} Fructose is cheap to produce, is about 1.7 times sweeter than normal sugar, and is widely used in processed food products. Lustig's research showed that ethanol (the main substance of alcohol) and fructose metabolise the same way.¹⁰ Alcohol is known to be a toxin, i.e., as having a detrimental effect on humans, which is one of the reasons why it is taxed—to regulate its consumption. However, regulators are reluctant to do the same to sugar. Furthermore, excessive alcohol consumption can cause 12 deadly health problems, whereas fructose causes 8, which are almost identical to those caused by chronic ethanol exposure (see Figure 1).

7. Leslie, 2016.

8. Britannica, *Fructose*.

9. Moderate intake of fructose from fruits and vegetables is okay because the fiber can slow down the process of metabolise fructose, which reduces the liver's stress on processing it.

10. Lustig, 2013.

Chronic ethanol exposure	Chronic fructose exposure
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hematologic disorders ● Electrolyte abnormalities ● Hypertension ● Cardiac dilatation ● Cardiomyopathy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Hypertension (uric acid)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Dyslipidemia ● Pancreatitis ● Obesity (insulin resistance) ● Malnutrition ● Hepatic dysfunction (ASH) ● Fetal alcohol syndrome ● Addiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Myocardial infarction (dyslipidemia, insulin resistance) ● Dyslipidemia (de novo lipogenesis) ● Pancreatitis (hypertriglyceridemia) ● Obesity (insulin resistance) ● Malnutrition (obesity) ● Hepatic dysfunction (NASH) ● Habituation, if not addiction

Figure 1. Phenotypes of chronic energy substrate exposure. ASH = alcoholic steatohepatitis. NASH = non-alcoholic steatohepatitis.¹¹

However, the misconception that sugar is not as toxic as alcohol has persisted for decades and is still not widely known to the public. The above facts are the reasons I choose to present the idea of agnotology and virtue ethics (parrhesia in particular). Agnotology studies the deliberate, culturally-induced ignorance or doubt. This word was devised by linguist Iain Boal, by request of a professor of philosophy of science, Robert N. Proctor, who made this term popular in explaining how tobacco industry intentionally produces and disseminates doubt about the pernicious effect of cigarettes on health to promote sales.¹² Yudkin’s story shows how the manipulation of information and seemingly authoritative voices, like Keys’ (misleading as it is) can persist for decades and impact on consumers’ choices on food products. It is the aim of this thesis to point out how ignorance is made, and how we can unmade it. As Deirdre Barrett, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School, puts it,

11. Lustig 2010, 1317.

12. Proctor, chapter 1.

it is important to recognise before we can press the override button.¹³ Even though the truth is relevant as a first step to take action, this thesis argues that agnotology alone is not enough to tackle the obesity epidemic. That is why I suggest parrhesia as an indispensable virtue in this context.

Virtues in general are highly praised in both western and eastern cultures, but at the same time, are suppressed in practice in the current global health agenda. Food companies trick us into consuming more and more junk food, which makes us suffer in the long run. Laws and regulations certainly help, but they are not enough. They will always have some flaws that companies can take advantage of. In this thesis, I attempt to show the value of virtues in general and of parrhesia in particular for food companies as well as for individuals who are shareholders of food companies and the few individuals who influence the global health agenda, to show that actions that are consistent with virtues benefit such companies and individuals as well as public health.

“Parrhesia” is ordinarily translated as “free speech” in English, but it is more of a relationship between the truth and the truth-teller, and it is closely related to morality in the later development of its usage. The word “parrhesia” first appeared in the writings of Euripides (ca. 480–406 BC), one of the greatest Ancient Greek tragedians.¹⁴ In the 1980s, Michel Foucault’s studies on “ancient sexuality, and, particularly, the idea of an aesthetics of existence led him to the ancient idea of philosophy as a way of life rather than a search for theoretical truth.”¹⁵ It is under this context that in 1983, a year before his death, Foucault delivered six lectures on the concept of parrhesia at the University of California, Berkeley.

13. Barrett, 5.

14. Foucault 2001, 11.

15. Gutting and Oksala, § 4.

Again, in 1984, just few months before his death, Foucault gave his last lectures at the Collège de France, expanding on the analysis of parrhesia, with renewed focus on Plato, Socrates, Cynicism, and Stoicism. These lectures have been recorded and edited as published books titled “Fearless Speech” and “The Courage of Truth” respectively. The word “parrhesia” is Greek for “to say everything.”¹⁶ As with many Greek words, its meaning is very rich and complex, and will be explained in greater detail in Part II Section 1. Parrhesia is discussed in this thesis in relation to the rampant manmade misinformation in the food industry and the need for transparent information that will allow consumers to choose their foods wisely and policymakers to formulate better food regulations.

This thesis has two parts. Part I defines the obesity epidemic and discusses the relevance of agnotology in the context of such epidemic. Part I has three sections, Section 1 describes the status of the obesity epidemic; Section 2 shows how food companies benefit and how individuals can shape the global health agenda; and Section 3 discusses the importance of agnotology. Part II introduces parrhesia as an antidote to the obesity epidemic. Part II has four sections. Section 1 defines parrhesia; Section 2 provides a biological basis for being virtuous; Section 3 explores how virtues benefit moral agents; and Section 4 shows what parrhesia looks like in business practices and with company shareholders as well as the few people who influence the global health agenda. This thesis will not tackle other factors that contribute to the obesity epidemic, such as a sedentary lifestyle, nor the environmental cost of producing unhealthy food products; and neither will it involve other parties that can help alleviate the obesity epidemic, such as states, non-governmental organisations, international organisations, and consumers. This thesis is rather interested in the role of food companies in the obesity epidemic: particularly how they cause it, what strategies they use,

16. Foucault 2001, 12.

why individuals matter in solving the obesity epidemic, and why parrhesia is still relevant in this context. Thus, while this thesis is about the obesity epidemic, it is ultimately about how practising virtues in food production, promotion, and consumption can help us to have a healthier and better life. With that, I hope this thesis will also remind us of how human life can flourish, as ancient wisdom has taught us.

Part I. The Obesity Epidemic and Agnotology

We have a global obesity epidemic. Obesity induces many chronic diseases that add to human suffering and economic loss. The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified two causes of obesity and overweight globally: increased intake of energy-dense foods (high fat and sugars) and increased physical inactivity.^{17,18} It might seem reasonable to blame people for not being capable of restraining themselves from excessive food intake or for not having enough exercise; this might also be the argument that food companies prefer. They would favour this reason because it says nothing about the unhealthy products that they produce. However, neurological scans have shown that sugar causes changes in the human brain similar to those produced by cocaine and alcohol.¹⁹ Food companies intentionally adding more sugar to food makes us crave more, which leads to higher sales and profits for the food companies at the cost of the global public health.

This part shows how food companies use their financial power to intervene in politics, scientific research, and marketing to be able to keep selling more and more of their food products to more and more people even if they contribute to obesity. The aim is to illustrate how ignorance, doubt, lies, misconceptions, and manipulation of information cause and exacerbate the global obesity epidemic and what are food companies' strategies and practices in this context. The practices of food companies are more effective when we are not aware of them because we do not know what we should know to have better consumption choices. For this reason, the notion of agnotology is introduced and suggested as the step that we have to

17. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

18. Sections 2 discusses more causes.

19. SugarScience. UCSF, *How Much is Too Much?*

take to deal more efficiently with the obesity epidemic. Only when we know not only the causes of the obesity epidemic but also the causes of such causes (i.e., the role of companies and who influence these companies) can we directly address the epidemic more efficiently. Section 1 defines the obesity epidemic, how severe it is, its relationship with chronic diseases. Section 2 examines the global environment of chronic disease control to illustrate how food companies benefit from the system, and the role of individuals. Section 3 zooms in on food companies and shows how they manage to promote unhealthy products and sell them massively around the world.

Section 1. The Obesity Epidemic

According to WHO, obesity and overweight are abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health.²⁰ The body mass index (BMI) is a widely used tool for measuring obesity and overweight.²¹ It is calculated by dividing a person's weight in kilograms by the square of the person's height in meters (kg/m²). WHO defines overweight as when the BMI is greater than or equal to 25, and obesity, when the BMI is greater than or equal to 30.²² Obesity and diabetes were "exceptionally rare in the 1800s" but have emerged as major health problems since the twentieth century.²³ The problem of obesity has become so serious that there is currently a global obesity epidemic. This section explains the prevalence of the global obesity epidemic, its impact, and its relationship to chronic diseases. The aim is to show how urgent it is to take action in alleviating this global public health

20. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

21. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

22. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

23. Johnson et al., 413.

problem and why the consumption of food products that contain excessive sugar should be reduced. At the same time, it shows why controlling chronic diseases is actually reducing the consumption of unhealthy food products. Part of section 2 then explains why it is difficult to prioritise controlling chronic diseases over infectious diseases.

Most of the world’s population live in countries where obesity and overweight kill more people than underweight.²⁴ In 2016, 39 percent of adults aged 18 years and above were overweight and 13 percent were obese, which amount to 1.9 billion overweight and 650 million obese adults.²⁵ Among children and adolescents aged 5–19, the prevalence of obesity and overweight has risen dramatically from only 4 percent in 1975 to over 18 percent in 2016, amounting to over 340 million children and adolescents.²⁶ In 2020, 38 million children under the age of 5 were overweight or obese. Overall, 5.3 people die every minute due to obesity or overweight.²⁷

Eating is an essential part of life and is vital for health. In addition, most people enjoy eating. We do not only want to eat healthily but also to eat delicious food; we care about the flavour, the colour, the representation, the source, and even the container of the food. That there is a category of the arts dedicated to food preparation, cooking, presentation, and serving called “culinary arts” shows how much we care about food and how delicate food and gastronomy can be. Normally, we would not associate food with epidemics, as epidemics are disease outbreaks. However, food products, as consumable products, figure in the coverage of industrial epidemics. Jahiel and Babor, who coined the term define it: “[industrial epidemics]

24. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

25. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

26. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

27. WHO, *Obesity*.

cover diseases of consumers, workers and community residents caused by industrial promotion of consumable products, job conditions and environmental pollution, respectively, and to endemic as well as epidemic conditions.”²⁸ The concept of “industrial epidemics” shifts the focus of public health from the ‘agent’ (e.g., alcohol) or the “host” (the problem drinker) to the “disease vector” (the alcohol industry and its associates).²⁹ In the case of obesity-causing food products, food companies are the disease vectors.

Being obesity and overweight are dangerous because they are not merely the accumulation of excessive energy in our body; they cause some of the most common non-communicable diseases (NCDs): cardiovascular diseases (CVDs); diabetes; musculoskeletal disorders; and some cancers (including endometrial, breast, ovarian, prostate, liver, gallbladder, kidney, and colon cancers).^{30,31} The impacts of these NCDs are wide-ranging: economic, social, and personal. For example, in the European Union (EU), CVDs alone cost health care systems almost EUR 111 billion in 2015, with cancer adding approximately EUR 97 billion, and non-healthcare costs (production losses and costs of informal care) related to CVDs and cancer further adding EUR 190 billion, for a total amount of EUR 398 billion that almost equals the nominal gross domestic product of Norway in 2019 (EUR 403 billion).^{32,33} Socially, NCDs induced by obesity and overweight reduce labour supply, reduce labour

28. Jahiel and Babor, 1335.

29. Jahiel and Babor, 1335.

30. WHO, *Obesity and Overweight*.

31. WHO, *Noncommunicable Diseases*. NCDs are also known as chronic diseases.

32. I chose EU figures here because they are easy to access and to show that if NCDs are a burden for wealthy countries, it is a heavier burden for developing countries.

33. World Bank. *GDP (Current)*.

outputs, lower tax revenues, and lower returns on human capital investments.³⁴ Personally, they increase disability and premature deaths, reduce household income, increase expenditures and losses in savings and assets, and reduce opportunities. With all these negative economic, social, and personal impacts of obesity and overweight, we should understand better their causes. Next section provides some ostensible causes, but also goes deep into the root causes.

Section 2. Food Companies and Individuals

This section follows Stuckler and Siegel’s approach of examining the “causes of the causes” of the obesity epidemic.^{35,36} The aim of this section is threefold: first, it displays how food companies benefit from the global economic environment; second, it describes how food companies benefit from the global political agenda on public health priorities; and third, it illustrates the important role of individuals in the obesity epidemic. The first and the second points also illustrate the role of food companies in causing the obesity epidemic, as they benefit from the global economic and political environment and sell their unhealthy products worldwide. This section does not address all the relevant parties that can tackle the obesity epidemic, such as WHO, national health ministers, national development agencies, and consumers, but focuses on food companies and the role of individuals, especially shareholders of big food companies and the few private donors to global public health funds, in shaping the global public health agenda.

34. European Commission. *Cost of Non-Communicable Diseases in the EU*.

35. Stuckler and Siegel, 27.

36. Stuckler and Siegel examine the “causes of causes” of chronic diseases in general. This section uses the same strategy of examining the “causes of causes” to understand the obesity epidemic.

The reason for this section’s focus on food companies is that transnational corporations that sell ultra-processed food and drinks (unhealthy commodities) are among the major drivers of NCDs globally.³⁷ To be more specifically, the consumption of ultra-processed foods and beverages is responsible for more than 18 million deaths each year, of which 9.4 million are caused by high blood pressure; 3.4 million, by a high BMI; 3.4 million, by a high fasting blood glucose, and 2 million, by high total cholesterol.³⁸ The availability, low prices, and aggressive marketing of junk foods make their consumption economically appealing.³⁹ Food companies benefit directly from the global economic and political environment; but when they do not produce and market their products responsibly, they benefit at the cost of the global public health. The focus on individuals is because of the important and active role of individuals in food companies and global health agenda at large in the obesity epidemic. Due to this special role of individuals, further space is given in Part II to the concept of virtue ethics. That is, Part II provides some insights on why and how to be virtuous and why being virtuous benefits the agent and at the same time, the health of the global public.

The global economic environment favours the expansion of big food companies. Food companies benefit immensely from “trade liberalization, export-oriented agriculture, and foreign direct investment in foods and beverage sectors especially in the context of unregulated marketing and government subsidies.”⁴⁰ However, “opening markets to trade has

37. Moodie et al., 670.

38. Moodie et al., 671.

39. Stuckler, 26.

40. Stuckler, 27.

had profound [negative] influences on people's diets and risky behaviours."⁴¹ Ironically, rapid economic growth goes hand in hand with the rapid rise of chronic diseases.⁴² The economic growth in low- and middle-income countries and trade liberalisation have eliminated tariff barriers, thereby enabling the locals to consume more unhealthy western food products. Wealthy countries have advantages over less developed countries in terms of supply chains, economies of scale, and more advanced technology, which enable large-scale production that gives big multinational companies market advantages over local companies.⁴³ The EU and the U.S. also subsidise products like oils, fat, and sugar, which makes them cheaper as raw materials and thus, very affordable as ingredients of unhealthy food products.

Gerard Hastings critically says that "Nestlé, along with any other corporation, is only interested in us [consumers] in so far as this interest benefits its shareholders."⁴⁴ That companies prioritise the economic advantage of their shareholders' over their customers'. Hastings' criticism at least transmits two ideas: first, virtues in business practices is lacking; second, economic advantage, or so-called "profit" benefits companies' shareholders. Food companies are but lifeless entities organised to sell products; they cannot "benefit from" or "be harmed by" anything. Only humans, can actually gain economic advantage from companies' profit. That is the reason why this thesis emphasises so much the role of individuals and virtues, because individuals can make conscious choice to make positive changes, and virtues helps them to make ethical actions which benefit the society as a whole (including them). Who, then, are the people who derive the greatest economic benefit through

41. Stuckler, 43.

42. Stuckler, 47.

43. Stuckler, 43.

44. Hastings, 59.

the food companies? Identifying them helps to address the problem directly and come up with more tangible solutions. They can be the owners or shareholders of the food companies, who receive the dividends from their shares; the companies' managers, who formulate the strategies for making profit from selling junk food; its employees, who produce the junk food; or their customers, who are directly affected by the products. This section identifies the shareholders as benefiting the most from the sales of the junk food in food companies and emphasises its role in obesity epidemic, for the following two reasons.

The first reason is that, according to professor Milton Friedman, the laureate of 1976 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, "the principal objective of a company is to maximize the wealth of its shareholders."⁴⁵ The reason given for this is that " 'fiduciary imperative' ensures that the focus [of the corporation] never leaves the bottom line".⁴⁶ This tremendous pressure on multinational food companies to fulfil their obligation to provide as high a share value as possible to their shareholders obviously reins in their efforts to fulfil their social responsibility, such as to promote consumer health. We can imagine that if food companies do not have an obligation to provide as high an immediate or short-term bonus as possible to their shareholders, these companies will have more incentives to sell healthy products. Therefore, it is clear that shareholders of big transnational companies play a very big role in food companies' selling unhealthy food products.

The second reason for the selection of company shareholders as the ones who benefit the most from food companies is that they are the ones who can control the global health agenda in favour of food companies. According to Stuckler and Siegel, "Global health is ruled by a few private donors who make decisions in secret. The capacity to decide what is

45. Cited in Stuckler and Siegel, 144.

46. Hastings, 45.

relevant and how it will be addressed is in the hands of very few, who are ultimately accountable to their own interests.”⁴⁷

To understand this issue better, it should be noted that despite repeated calls to action, not enough effort is made to prevent and control chronic diseases.⁴⁸ To illustrate this, “less than 3 percent of USD 22 billion in global health funds went to chronic diseases in 2007.”⁴⁹ While over half of the total global funds for the control of chronic diseases comes from private donors (for-profit and non-for-profit combined), one-third of the expenditure is unidentifiable.⁵⁰ The misalignment between the urgent need to control chronic diseases and the limited allocation of funds for it is most obvious among private donors, who give the least priority to chronic diseases.⁵¹

However, it should be clear that the mismatch between urgency and allocation of fundings is not a result of unawareness, on the contrary, it is deliberate.⁵² The United Nations deliberately excludes chronic diseases from its symbolic agenda, the Millennium Development Goals, and decides to focus on reducing poverty and improving lives, which excludes chronic diseases.⁵³ One reason is that the health status of rich and poor countries lies in infectious diseases, whereas chronic diseases are pressing issues to both rich and poor

47. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

48. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

49. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

50. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

51. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

52. Stuckler and Siegel, 157.

53. Stuckler and Siegel, 157.

countries.⁵⁴ The deliberate exclusion thus has perpetuated a situation where many private donors neglect chronic disease.⁵⁵ Perhaps, it is for the advantage of the private donors to exclude chronic diseases, as low prioritisation of chronic disease prevention means less government regulations and public awareness to promote healthy eating, and therefore, less effort of individuals to change their dietary habits which benefit the food companies and their shareholders. As only a small part of private funds is allocated to diet-related chronic diseases.⁵⁶ It seems unlikely to be a mere coincidence that on the international political agenda, priority is given to the control of infectious diseases despite the fact that chronic diseases lead to more deaths globally.

As Stuckler and Siegel pointed out, “Many of these private donors have potential conflicts of interest, as they are in close contact with, sit on the boards of, or own substantial shares in food and pharmaceutical companies.”⁵⁷ For example, the Gates Foundation is the world’s largest private financial contributor to public health, with a budget that is even bigger than that of WHO.^{58,59} However, it is said that “The fortunes of the Gates Foundation and Buffett are highly intertwined and heavily invested in food companies.”⁶⁰ and that there are “interlocking directorates of leading global health institutions, such as the Gates Foundation

54. Stuckler and Siegel, 157.

55. Stuckler and Siegel, 158.

56. Stuckler and Siegel, 142.

57. Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

58. Stuckler and Siegel, 145.

59. Stuckler and Siegel, 146. Warren Buffett and the private fortunes of Bill Gates are the main sources of financial support of the Gates Foundation.

60. Stuckler and Siegel, 148.

and Microsoft Corporation, with Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, Kellogg, and Merck.”⁶¹ “It would be surprising if these linkages did not have an influence on these private foundations’ priorities.”⁶²

However, the delay in making chronic public health a global health priority equates to more and more deaths from chronic diseases, which decrease people’s life expectancy and reduce their life quality. We have seen how individuals, especially the few private donors to the global public health fund, can do a lot to solve the global obesity problem if their attitudes and decisions will effectively influence the direction of economic policies and government regulations on public health.

Part II introduce parrhesia as an antidote to the obesity epidemic and tries to show why those private donors should act virtuously and how they benefit themselves in a way different than the economic profit. Moodie et al. have argued that public intervention and market regulations are the only effective mechanisms for preventing harms caused by the unhealthy commodity industries.⁶³ This thesis does not disagree with their view, but provides an alternative by examining how virtue ethics can have a role in promoting public health in this obesity epidemic at the level of individuals. As Stuckler and Siegel try to show, the private donors, and the sometimes hidden interests whom they serve rule the global health.⁶⁴ It is for this reason this thesis focuses on virtue ethics, because it is an ethical theory that is agent-based. It gives the moral advice of this sort: ‘Act as a virtuous person would act in your

61. Stuckler and Siegel, 167.

62. Stuckler and Siegel, 144.

63. Moodie et al., 2013.

64. Stuckler and Siegel, 166.

situation'.⁶⁵ It may sound cliché, or idealistic, but public intervention and market regulations are just external tools to enforce companies or individuals to act virtuously – like laws, this external mechanism may have flaws and weakness that lawyers can take advantage of or undermine its very authority. Instead, virtue ethics provides moral agents reasons to act virtuously. Furthermore, it seems that there is much hypocrisy in corporations' business practices, where companies do something that is different to what they say. Having knowledge about the truth but doing nothing accordingly will not help, the value of parrhesia then is relevant here because it demands the moral agent act according to what one believes to be true. It does not mean the epistemological truth is irrelevant, – we need truth to take better actions, but truth alone is not enough. It is not enough for at least two reasons: first, it is not enough because not everyone is privy to the truth that she needs to know; secondly, not everyone is rational to actually do what she believes to be true. The first point is about the agnotology, which will be explained in next section. The second point is about the parrhesia, which will be discussed in Part II.

The next section then examines the role of truth in public health, it shows how truth is unmade, how ignorance and doubt is promoted, and consequently, how unhealthy food products are sold massively to jeopardise public health. This is an analysis of epidemiology of obesity epidemic, but along the way, it demonstrates the importance of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, and of knowing how to recognize who is telling the truth.⁶⁶

65. Athanassoulis

66. These “the importance of ...” are what Foucault are interested in exploring with the notion of parrhesia.

Section 3. Agnotology

Food companies are undermining public health by marketing and selling unhealthy food products globally. The largest food companies that produce processed foods account for 75 percent of world food sales.⁶⁷ The big transnational food companies Coca-Cola and PepsiCo alone almost have more than half of the global market for soft drinks.⁶⁸ If we ignore the role of food companies in the obesity epidemic and how they manage to sell unhealthy food products and delay public health regulations, we will inevitably need more time to restore public health. Thus, it is in our interest to ask these questions: Why do we not know what we should know about the unhealthy food products? What is the reason behind our ignorance? Who hides truth from us, or obstructs this truth to the public so that we continue consuming excessively these products, and put our health into risk? This section delineates some strategies that food companies use to promote their sales of their unhealthy food products in order to illustrate questions that are raised in agnotology, namely, why we do not know what we should know and why we do not know what we do not know.

This section is mainly descriptive, but it shows reasons that food companies endorse to promote ignorance and doubt, as well as revealing the negligence to others in business practices. In Part II section 1, the relationship to others is illustrated by parrhesia and in Part II section 2, this relationship will again be emphasised under Eisler's analysis of love. This section is the background and the step we need to take before we could practise parrhesia.

“Agnotology is the study of ignorance making, the lost and forgotten . . . the knowledge that could have been but wasn't, or should be but isn't. . . .”⁶⁹ In epistemology,

67. Moodie et al., 671.

68. Moodie et al., 671.

69. Proctor, vii.

we study how knowledge is possible; but in agnotology, we study how ignorance is possible. Ignorance is generally perceived as “something in need of correction, a kind of natural absence or void where knowledge has not yet spread.”⁷⁰ However, ignorance is more than the absence of knowledge; it can be an active product.⁷¹ Ignorance can be man-made, promoted as a strategy. Therefore, agnotology has a “geography”: some people are ignorant, but some are not; ignorance can have different degrees in that some may know little, while others may be completely ignorant; and ignorance stays in one place but evaporates in other places.⁷² Moreover, ignorance is not always negative; blinded reviews in academic publications guarantee impartiality and freedom of criticism, and John Rawls’ idea of the “veil of ignorance” establishes a more just world for everyone. However, ignorance that is promoted or produced by food companies is most likely meant to promote their economic benefit, as explained in the rest of this section, and has had a negative impact on public health.

The mastery of ignorance and doubt is best known in the tobacco industry, where it has been used to successfully sell two products: cigarettes and doubt.⁷³ In the early 1950s, with the explosion of evidence that cigarettes are killing tens of thousands of people each year, the tobacco industry launched a multimillion-dollar campaign to reassure consumers

70. Proctor, 2.

71. Proctor, 9.

72. Proctor, 26.

73. Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company, 3–4. “Our consumer I have defined as the mass public, our product as doubt, our message as truth. . . . Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the mind of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy. . . . If we are successful in establishing a controversy at the public level, then there is an opportunity to put across the real facts about smoking and health.”

that the pernicious effect of cigarettes on health had not yet been “proven.”⁷⁴ The reason for this campaign is simple, if there is no clear relationship between smoking cigarettes and developing lung cancer or other respiratory diseases, people would continue buying cigarettes. The campaign was successful; 5.7 trillion cigarettes are sold annually, enough to circle the Earth 13,000 times.⁷⁵ The tobacco industry thus successfully uses doubt to ease consumers’ concern about the health risk of consuming cigarettes. This is what happens if we are deprived of the truth that we should know. The tobacco industry has “inspired” many other industries to promote their unhealthy products by cultivating doubt and ignorance. Knowledge may be power, but ignorance is also a powerful weapon against consumers’ consciousness to keep them from boycotting or consuming fewer unhealthy food products.

One reason why food companies promote doubt or ignorance of the health risks of consuming unhealthy food products is that such products are very profitable. Food companies produce various kinds of foods, but the most profitable products are highly processed “junk” foods and beverages that are abundant in calories but with low nutritional value.⁷⁶ The food industry, like other industries that have a negative impact on public health—whether in the raw material production/extraction stage or during the production stage or after the consumption stage—hides from the public the link between their products and public health problems so that they can continue profiting from the sales of their products. To promote ignorance, misinformation, confusion, and doubts about such links, they use a number of general tactics:

1. Attack legitimate science;

74. Proctor, 11.

75. Proctor, 11.

76. Nestle, chapter 1 “The Food Industry and Nutrition.”

2. Attack and intimidate the scientists;
3. Create arms-length front organisations;
4. Manufacture false debates and insist on balance;
5. Frame key issues in highly creative ways;
6. Fund industry disinformation campaigns; and
7. Influence the political agenda.⁷⁷

Marion Nestle, professor of nutrition at New York University, whose research examines scientific and socioeconomic influences on food choice, obesity, and food safety, emphasizing the role of food marketing, points out further tactics in the tobacco industry:

8. Fund research to come up with the desired results;
9. Offer gifts and consulting arrangements;
10. Promote self-regulation;
11. Promote personal responsibility as the fundamental issue; and
12. Use the courts to challenge critics and unfavourable regulations.⁷⁸

These tactics can also be found in the food industry. Proctor adds some more tactics used by the food industry:

13. Advertising;
14. Duplicitous press releases;
15. Manipulation of legislative agendas
16. Organization of “friendly research” for publication in popular magazines; and
17. Many other tactics from the dark arts of agnotology.⁷⁹

77. Moodie, 1047.

78. Nestle, chapter 2 “A Cautionary Tale: Drug Company Influence”.

79. Proctor, 17.

An article in the New York Times, “How Big Business Got Brazil Hooked on Junk Food,” gives a concrete example of how food companies use their economic, political, and social influence to promote unhealthy products in Brazil.⁸⁰ Brazil is the sixth most populous country in the world and the eighth largest economy in terms of purchasing power parity.^{81,82} It has managed to largely eradicate hunger through economic growth and government policies, but its nutrition challenge has shifted to obesity and overweight and to the diseases related to them. There are some examples in the article that are particularly relevant because they illustrate how agnotology is important to decipher the strategies that food companies implement that cause public health problems. The case of Brazil also illustrates that even a populous and economically strong country may still be unable to stand up to the power of big multinational companies, which should raise an alarm that we should consider global public health a political priority.⁸³

The article related how in the political sphere in Brazil, food companies used to donate millions to political institutions to help elect federal legislators who could act on their interests. This system was banned in 2015. However, it showed that the financial power of the food companies crossed over into the political domain, to win support in political institutions for favourable policies for food companies. When the government promulgated new rules that banned brands like PepsiCo and KFC from sponsoring sports and cultural events, food companies pretended to have good faith in negotiating the rules, but their corporate lawyers and lobbyists were quietly waging a multipronged campaign to derail the process. For

80. Jacobs and Richtel 2017.

81. World Bank, *GDP, PPP*.

82. World Bank, *Population*.

83. Global Justice Now 2018. The financial power of big companies should not be underestimated. Of the world’s top 200 economic entities, 157 are corporations.

instance, their strident denunciation of the act of “restricting advertisements as censorship” gained particular resonance, given the fact that in 1985, Brazil had just ended a two-decades-long military dictatorship. The Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency Anvisa, which is responsible for the regulation and approval of pharmaceutical drugs, the enforcement of sanitary standards, and the regulation of the food industry, was particularly targeted by the food and beverage industry as their greatest adversary. They not only filed multiple lawsuits against it, which resulted in the freezing of its regulations that intended to encourage healthy eating, but they even intended to neutralise it. For instance, a group of 156 business executives managed to persuade the then Brazilian President to appoint as the head of Anvisa Jaime César de Moura Oliveira, their long-time political ally and a former lawyer of the Brazilian subsidiary of the food giant Unilever. The food companies managed to manipulate their country’s political and legislative agendas with their financial power and ties. Those who were unaware of the subtle relationships among the food industry, the politicians, and the front groups that worked for the food companies were influenced and even grateful for what the companies did to defend freedom of marketing, freedom in choosing products, and freedom of speech.

At the social level, food companies use cultural influence or a positive public image to change people’s view of public health. For instance, Coca-Cola hosted an exhibition that relayed the idea that exercise and moderation are the keys to tackling obesity, not consuming less processed foods with excessive sugar and salt. It also employed experts to argue that exercise and stricter parenting might be more effective than regulations aimed at fighting childhood obesity. “Misinformation is a key problem in rich countries; the situation is far worse in poorer countries with less well-educated populations.”⁸⁴ Practices like these have

84. Stuckler and Siegel, 47.

helped food companies to divert consumers' attention from the significant contribution of sugar and other unhealthy food products to the obesity epidemic. Without awareness of this kind of social influence and manipulation of information, consumers would not be more careful about what food products they choose to consume.

Considering how important ignorance is in our lives with regard to health, it is necessary to uncover the strategies that food companies implement to promote sales of their unhealthy food products. A curious case with the food company Nestlé is that while it also has healthy products, in the same article “How Big Business Got Brazil Hooked on Junk Food,” it mentioned, the door-to-door vendor Mrs. da Silva said that of the 800 products that Nestlé says are available through its vendors, most of her customers are interested in only about two dozen, which are all sugar-sweetened items.⁸⁵ This case raises the following questions: If consumers are free to choose what they will consume and they choose unhealthy food products, is it not their fault if they are obese or overweight? Is the obesity epidemic caused by a lack of self-control? Probably all food companies would like to argue this way, but the rest of this section shows that these arguments are wrong; the food companies are still to blame, which emphasises the relevance of agnotology.

Nestle showed in her book *Unsavory Truth* that food companies fund nutrition researchers and practitioners as well as their professional associations to promote their product sales. Thus, their research typically promotes their interests.⁸⁶ For instance, Nestle, mentioned a research result that children and adolescents who eat candy are less overweight or obese, and the source of this news is from the National Confectioners Association.⁸⁷

85. Jacobs and Richtel 2017.

86. Nestle, chapter 6 “Research on Healthy Foods: Marketing, Not Necessarily Science”.

87. See National Confectioners Association, *PR Newswire*. Jun 28, 2011.

Chocolate manufacturer Mars has also heavily marketed the health benefits of dark chocolate.⁸⁸ However, chocolate is still a candy, and like any candy, it contains lots of sugar. Research has shown that there is no correlation between dark chocolate and a low risk of cardiovascular disease or improved neuropsychological functioning.⁸⁹ The circulated belief that dark chocolate prevents heart disease or Parkinson’s disease is only a sophisticated marketing strategy to promote sales. Another example is that of Nestlé. It had been advertising its beverage brand *Nesquik* with the slogan “Great start to the day,” but it was banned from advertising the product with this slogan because it had no authorised official claim to such benefits. On the contrary, “a 200ml drink made with three teaspoons of Nesquik hot chocolate contained more than 20 g of sugar—two-thirds of the daily recommended intake for those aged 11 or older, which classified it as ‘high’ in sugar under the government’s traffic light scheme.”⁹⁰ These cases show what kinds of misleading information we receive concerning food benefits and how we receive them. Agnotology enables us to see to whom the ignorance is targeted, who benefits from our ignorance and how misinformation, confusion, and bias are produced.

It is one thing to maintain business competitiveness by investing in research and development, but it is another to manipulate research to confuse consumers and disorient people’s consumption choices and preferences, while withholding unbiased research results from the public. In this way, food companies have successfully produced confusion and uncertainty in the minds of the public with regard to their choices of food products. When we shop, we think we are in charge of our choices, not knowing that biased research outcomes

88. See “Chocolate Is Good for You (or How Mars Tried to Sell Us This as Health Food),” *Guardian*, December 23, 2002.

89. Crews et al., 2008.

90. Gallagher, 2015.

have disoriented us as to which products are healthy and which are not, and what quantity is *actually* recommended.

Nevertheless, ploys to fund research to promote products are relatively easy to spot. If the research study is published on an academic journal, the researcher is required to reveal the sponsors and disclose any conflict of interest. If the research is tied to the food industry and its associations, extra precautions are warranted.

There are other ways in which sophisticated marketing strategies influence consumers not only to buy unhealthy food products but even to endorse such products to their families and friends.⁹¹ The use of a supernormal stimuli to promote sales is another one of these strategies. The example with supernormal stimuli also points to the importance of recognising the problem before we can take effective actions.

Not many people may have heard about supernormal stimuli. The term was coined by a Dutch biologist and ornithologist Nikolaas Tinbergen, to describe the phenomenon that exaggerated imitation can exert a stronger pull than the real thing toward animal behaviours.⁹² In other words, exaggeration of the things that appeal to us induces us more strongly to react. For instance, cuckoos lay eggs in other birds' nests. As their eggs resemble those of the host birds but are brighter and larger, the hosts would prefer sitting on the cuckoo eggs; and when the baby birds hatch, the host parent birds would feed the baby cuckoos ahead of their own baby birds because the former's beaks are wider and redder than those of the latter.⁹³ It may seem strange, funny, or even sad that animals respond mechanically to supernatural stimuli, but how different are we from them? Human beings, as part of the

91. Stuckler, 41.

92. Barrett, 3.

93. Barrett, 1.

animal kingdom, can well be influenced by this mechanism. Barrett extends the concept of supernormal stimuli to humans and outlines how supernormal stimuli are a driving force behind today's most pressing problems including obesity. The basic idea is simple. In marketing, exaggerate characters that we feel appealed of to promote sales, for instance, making candies sweeter than any fruit.⁹⁴ Even though we know that junk foods are unhealthy, we are tempted to consume them because the scarcity of sugar in nature and our food-gathering lifestyle have left their marks on us—biologically, we crave sweet and high-energy products because the sweet taste is enjoyable but scarce in nature and high-energy products can increase survival opportunities. If excessive sugar consumption did not cause health problems, we would not care if food companies add it in their products. However, as mentioned in the Introduction section, Lustig's research shows that overconsumption of sugar causes many health problems. The problem is that food companies do not restrain themselves from marketing their unhealthy products.

There are many other marketing strategies whose influence on us we may not realise, such as the use of certain package colours to attract attention; placing of unhealthy foods in the most accessible position in supermarket shelves;⁹⁵ and sponsorship of sports, music, and other cultural events to associate products with 'coolness'. Therefore, we must identify supernormal stimuli, and many other marketing strategies. As human beings, we actually possess the ability of overriding reflective instincts when they start to lead us astray.⁹⁶

However, not only the marketing and selling of unhealthy foods are controversial, but also how the raw materials are produced. Take the example of cocoa, which not only reveals

94. Barrett, 4.

95. Stuckler, 42.

96. Barrett, 177.

unethical practices but also shows how ignorance exacerbated the situation.

In spring 2019, Nestlé and a few others of the biggest and best-known chocolate brands in the world like Hershey's and Mars said they could not guarantee that any of their chocolates were produced without child labour.⁹⁷ Although they had already committed to eradicate child labour in their cocoa production by 2005, this deadline had been postponed to 2008 and then to 2010, and then again to 2020. On one hand, the third-party child labour monitoring systems (such as Fairtrade and Rainforest Alliance) were not enough and were inefficient; but on the other hand, the chocolate industry, which had an estimated USD 103 billion in sales annually, had spent only a little more than USD 150 million over 18 years (about USD 8.3 million/year and roughly 0.008 percent of their annual sales) to address the issue.⁹⁸ In contrast, in 2001, Nestlé spent over GBP 9 million (amount in USD 12.5 million) just to advertise KitKat (its wafer bar covered with chocolate).⁹⁹

Agnotology is relevant in tackling public health problems because it enables us to see how we arrived at our current situation and what the root causes of our public health problems are. Without knowing the problem and its root causes we cannot address the problem effectively. We have seen that consuming too much junk foods increases our risk of chronic diseases because junk foods contain too much sugar; that the financial powers and political ties of the food industry benefit it in shaping the political agenda and government intervention; that scientists and scientific results can be manipulated to produce results that favour the food industry; that marketing strategies hook our consciousness so subtly that we may not always be aware of them; and that ignorance of, or inattention to, the lack of fairness

97. Whoriskey and Siegel 2019.

98. Whoriskey and Siegel 2019.

99. Meek 2002.

and justice in the supply chain makes us immune to a sense of guilt in consuming products of irresponsible companies. Anyone who finds out the above information would probably rethink his or her consumption behaviour. The challenge is how more people can be made aware of the truth so that they can take more action more efficiently to control the obesity epidemic.

In response to the doubts and ignorance that food companies try to promote, Part II explains why and how virtue ethics can contribute to promoting public health. It suggests that practising parrhesia helps disseminating truth to others and be truthful to oneself. The ones who are truthful to themselves rationally doing what they believe to be true, therefore, achieve the care of oneself. Consequently, more people can have easier access to truth, and can start to choose wisely in grocery stores. Ultimately, it benefits the public health.

Part II. Parrhesia as a Character

Foucault himself emphasised that it was not the truth that concerned him or the epistemological question but the problem of the truth teller or of truth telling as an activity.¹⁰⁰ The questions that he was interested in are: What is the importance of telling the truth? Of knowing the truth? Of having people who tell the truth? Of knowing how to recognize who is telling the truth? In this sense, parrhesia, rather than being a verbal activity or a political virtue, is related more to ethics or moral virtues. This part is devoted to proposing parrhesia as an antidote to the obesity epidemic. To achieve this, besides explaining the meaning of parrhesia, Section 1 highlights the philosophical aspect of this word and explains how it fits into the context of the obesity epidemic; Section 2 provides a short illustration of the biological basis of being caring, and thus, of practising parrhesia; Section 3 presents more illustrations of how practising parrhesia benefits the moral agents; and Section 4 displays in greater detail what food companies can do to practise parrhesia and how this will improve global public health.

Section 1. Parrhesia: “Aesthetics of the Self” and Public Health

There are three forms of the word: *parrhesia*, *parrhesiazmai* (“to use parrhesia”), and *parrhesiastes* (“one who uses parrhesia”).¹⁰¹ However, the last form was not found in the Classical texts but appeared only in the Greco-Roman period.¹⁰² The more detailed meaning of parrhesia is characterized by five words: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty.¹⁰³

100. Foucault 2001, 169-173.

101. Foucault 2001, 11.

102. Foucault 2001, 11.

103. Foucault 2001, 12-20.

Frankness refers to the parrhesiastes's unreserved expression of what he thinks in the most direct and clear way.¹⁰⁴ A parrhesiastes does not hide anything but opens his heart completely to others through his discourse.¹⁰⁵ The emphasis on truth is positive; it does not mean saying anything without qualification but speaking what one thinks and believes to be true.¹⁰⁶ This truth should not be understood in the context of the modern epistemological framework, which is evidence-based. In ancient Greek culture, the truth is guaranteed by moral qualities.¹⁰⁷ The parrhesiastes possesses the moral qualities needed to know the truth and to tell the truth.¹⁰⁸ In parrhesia, there is a coincidence of belief and truth.¹⁰⁹ This does not mean that whatever the parrhesiastes believes is the truth, but his moral qualities enable him to first know the truth, and secondly, to convey the truth to others.¹¹⁰ The use of parrhesia also poses a risk or danger to the parrhesiastes in telling the truth. This is because there is an unbalanced power between the parrhesiastes and the person to whom the parrhesiastes tells the truth. This is why parrhesia is linked to courage—because a person who speaks the truth takes certain risks.¹¹¹ Truth is not always pleasant to everyone; telling tyrants the truth may provoke their anger and thus, may provoke them to punish the truth

104. Foucault 2001, 12. The masculine pronoun “he” instead of “she” is used because “the oppressed role of women in Greek societies generally deprived them of the use of parrhesia.”

105. Foucault 2001, 12.

106. Foucault 2001, 14.

107. Foucault 2001, 14-15.

108. Foucault 2001, 15.

109. Foucault 2001, 14.

110. Foucault 2001, 15.

111. Foucault 2001, 16.

teller. This reflects the critical aspect of parrhesia; that parrhesia is not just telling the truth but also criticising to improve someone or something. The criticism can be directed towards others but also to oneself.¹¹² In this sense, parrhesia is also relevant as a regulation mechanism. This reveals the last characteristic of parrhesia: duty. The parrhesiastes has the freedom to remain silent but feels that it is his duty to tell the truth. The use of parrhesia must be voluntary; if the parrhesiastes speaks the truth by compulsion, such speech is not a parrhesiastic act.¹¹³ As Franchi highlights, “The truth of the self is (also) technical, and the achievement of that truth involves the practical implementation of philosophical exercises.”¹¹⁴ This aspect is also a characteristic of all virtues, namely, it requires practice to cultivate a virtue.

Through time, the use of parrhesia has shifted from revealing the truth to others to disclosing the truth about oneself.¹¹⁵ This use of parrhesia imposes a specific relationship of the truth and truth teller himself. This is the philosophical aspect of parrhesia, or the practical aspect of parrhesia as moral rules to our daily life. Nonetheless, it does not mean that “others” are irrelevant, as it is in this relationship to others that we see the value of ethics. Practising parrhesia is caring for oneself, but also care for others. This relationship will be further illustrated in next section, with the example of love.

This new aspect of parrhesia requires the parrhesiastes to speak freely about what he thinks and to act exactly as he speaks.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the truth about oneself is not purely

112. Foucault 2001, 17.

113. Foucault 2001, 19.

114. Franchi, 515.

115. Foucault 2001, 143.

116. Foucault 2001, 101.

theoretical, as it involves practical rules of behaviour.¹¹⁷ The practices that conform to the truth make up the aesthetical aspect of our life, or as Foucault calls them, the “aesthetics of the self.”¹¹⁸ We, like craftsmen or artists, need to pause, step back from what we are working on, examine what we are doing, remind ourselves of the rules of our art, and compare those rules with what we have achieved thus far.¹¹⁹ It is through parrhesia that “the objective of a beautiful existence and the task of giving an account of oneself in the game of truth were combined.”¹²⁰

It may look obscure, but let us consider the question that Seneca asked himself in his evening self-examination: “Did I bring into play those principles of behaviour I know very well, but, as it sometimes happens, I do not always conform to or always apply?”¹²¹ Let us consider too the question that Epictetus asked himself: “Am I able to react to any kind of representation which shows itself to me in conformity with my adopted rational rules?”¹²² We then have a clear view that parrhesia helps individuals to reconcile the principles that they believe to be true with their actions in conformity to the truth. Parrhesia is a relationship between what is said and what is done. This is also the reason why parrhesia is regarded as an art of life, or the care of oneself.^{123,124} It is an art of life because there is harmony in it, and as

117. Foucault 2001, 165–166.

118. Foucault 2001, 166.

119. Foucault 2001, 166.

120. Foucault 2011, 163.

121. Foucault 2001, 165.

122. Foucault 2001, 165.

123. Foucault 2001, 23.

124. Foucault 2011, 163. In his lectures in 1984, Foucault considers the “aesthetics of existence” as the “true life”, it is “the relation between the art of existence and true discourse,

with any art, parrhesia needs practice. Foucault commented that Socrates' life is an example of a harmonious life because what he said was consistent with what he did (as seen in his brave behaviour in the battle at Delium), which represents the Dorian (courageous) harmony.¹²⁵ This also distinguishes Socrates from sophists, because the latter gave a very fine definition of courage, but they were not courageous.¹²⁶ The aesthetic perspective is also illustrated in Plato's dialogue, "Laches," where Laches says that he sees a person as musical: "he has tuned himself with the fairest harmony, not that of a lyre or other entertaining instrument, but has made a true concord of his own life between his words and his deeds. . . ."¹²⁷ This coincidence of words and deeds is what this thesis tries to argue and demonstrate as helpful in dealing with the obesity epidemic.

Part I, Section 2 showed how food companies benefit from the global economic and political environment and how a few individuals can influence the global public health agenda. Parrhesia is relevant in this context in two ways.

First, the practice of parrhesia is necessarily in public life, and is well illustrated in cynic philosophy, or to be more specific, in critical preaching. The idea of critical preaching is that the truth should not be exclusive.¹²⁸ The idea of preaching is to reach everyone in society. It means that the dissemination of truth should not be limited to a privileged few. In our time, the activity of preaching can be done by philosophers, scientists, and food companies by discussing the truth freely with the public or by at least not preventing or obstructing other individuals or organisations from discovering or telling the public the truth.

between the beautiful existence and the true life, life in the truth, life for the truth."

125. Foucault 2001, 100.

126. Foucault 2001, 100.

127. Plato, *Laches*, 188c-189a.

128. Foucault 2001, 119-120.

The truth that food companies should reveal to the public is not a kind of intellectual property but merely calls for transparency through proper product labelling and disclosure of the real benefit of their products, as well as for stopping the practices of manipulating science, sowing doubt and ignorance in the public, and most importantly, marketing their unhealthy products as healthy ones.

Second, the practice of parrhesia encourages food companies and relevant people to reveal the truth bravely. Food companies, as legal individuals who participate in social activities, can play the role of a parrhesiastes because on one hand, they have a legal duty to label their food products with their ingredients on the package in a simple and direct way, and on the other hand, they have a moral duty to not intervene in independent scientific research on nutrition. The shareholders of food companies can also be parrhesiastes, which will help them to achieve Dorian harmony. In short, the practice of parrhesia is good for public health because it gives consumers access to unbiased information on food nutrition that can help them choose their food wisely; and it is good for the parrhesiastes because they will be able to harmonise what they say with what they do.

Section 2 shows the biological basis for practising parrhesia or for being virtuous in general. The aim is to show it is biologically possible to care about others and oneself, and therefore, to practise parrhesia.

Section 2. Biological Basis for Practising Parrhesia

This section presents biological evidence of the possibility of acting virtuously based on Riane Eisler's book "Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives, and Future." Eisler is a social systems scientist, cultural historian, and attorney. This book showed how to construct a more equitable, sustainable, and less violent world based on partnership rather than domination. It also demonstrated that the widely held

belief that humans are naturally selfish, cruel, and violent is not true, but that partnership systems are biologically possible. This section uses Eisler's illustration to establish a link between human nature and acting virtuously, i.e., practising parrhesia.

Partnership and domination systems are two cultural lenses through which we classify societies. Partnership societies are characterised by democratic and egalitarian structures; gender equality; cultural rejection of abuse and violence; and beliefs about human nature that support empathic and mutually respectful relations.¹²⁹ In contrast, domination societies are characterised by rigid top-down rankings, hierarchies of domination in society and inside families; rankings of one form of humanity over the other; cultural acceptance of abuse and violence; and beliefs in rankings of domination.¹³⁰ Although there is no clear-cut boundary between a domination society and a partnership society, one is normally more dominant than the other. Even though we cannot create a society that is free of violence and cruelty, it is possible to create a society with lower levels of them and to promote creativity, caring, and consciousness.¹³¹ Examples of domination societies are secular Nazi Germany and religious Iran; and examples of partnership societies are technologically advanced Nordic countries and indigenous societies such as the "Tiruray" tribal group in the Philippines.

The promotion of the positive characteristics of partnership systems in society could influence and change the culture and strategies of big corporations. Even though there is no necessary correlation between a company's being rooted in a partnership society and its selling of its products more responsibly (i.e., with more sustainable production, healthier ingredients), we can imagine that there will be greater social pressure on profit-seeking

129. Eisler and Fry, 99-100.

130. Eisler and Fry, 99.

131. Eisler and Fry, 20.

companies in partnership societies. In the partnership context, Eisler and Fry emphasised the role of love.¹³² Love can be selfish or self-centred, but love can also “involve others [– a child, a lover, a friend] in the self.”¹³³ That is, love can “include the other into one’s sense of self.”¹³⁴ It is easy to understand that when we love someone, we care about them as much as we care about ourselves, and sometimes, we even care about them more than we care about ourselves. This “including the other” can also be related to empathy, in which one “transcends the self in feeling what the other feels.”¹³⁵ Humans are predisposed to empathetic love, and partnership societies foster positive relations based on trust, respect, and mutual benefit as well as empathetic love.¹³⁶ We can imagine that children who live in such societies would be imbued with the ideas of egalitarianism, democracy, gender equality, cultural rejection of abuse and violence, and beliefs about human nature that support empathic and mutually respectful relations. When they grow up and have their professional careers, whether in a company, the public sector, or any other sector, we could expect them to be less tolerant and supportive of the industrial epidemic that jeopardises public health or the environment than when they lived in a domination society. The partnership society then helps in fostering and cultivating virtues that are both ethical to others and also beneficial (i.e., to build up a better society) to oneself.

Even though many countries are more dominance-oriented, Eisler provides more

132. Eisler and Fry, chapter 10 *Love, Violence, and Socialization in Partnership and Domination Environments*.

133. Eisler and Fry, 225.

134. Eisler and Fry, 225.

135. Eisler and Fry, 20.

136. Eisler and Fry, 225.

biological evidence that all of us are biologically engineered to be caring. Eisler displays recent scientific studies on human biology and rectifies the misconception about Darwinism and neo-Darwinism.¹³⁷ She reminds us of what Darwinism emphasises: that in the human evolution, natural selection declined significantly and instead, learning, mutual aid, love, and the development of the moral sense became the primary shapers of who we are today.¹³⁸ Prosocial proclivities such as caring, sharing, tending, and befriending have left a deep mark on the human brain.¹³⁹ Observations of babies' behaviours suggested that babies respond more emphatically to someone else's distress than their own and seem to want to assuage the pain of others.¹⁴⁰ Our impulses toward empathy, helpfulness, and mutuality can trigger intrinsic (pleasurable) rewards on our brain; the "pleasure centres" of our brain light up when we engage in mutually beneficial behaviours, and the pleasurable reward is higher when we care for others than when we only look out for ourselves.¹⁴¹ "Our care-rewarding neurochemistry can be explained in terms of natural selection . . . [and] human impulses toward empathy, love, and caring."¹⁴² This means that caring is integral to human survival. Recognising the true human nature provides a significant inspiration for positive changes in societies. Because the belief that humans are naturally selfish, cruel, and violent is wrong, there is a biological basis for being kind and considerate to others, which means the industrial epidemic is not inevitable and a better society is possible.

137. Eisler and Fry, 27.

138. Eisler and Fry, 27.

139. Eisler and Fry, 30-31.

140. Eisler and Fry, 31.

141. Eisler and Fry, 31.

142. Eisler and Fry, 48.

Being kind, caring, and considerate not only brings intrinsic rewards but also produces economic and health gains. “Findings from neuroscience [show] that caring for people, starting in early childhood, is key to producing the ‘high-quality human capital’ essential for the post-industrial knowledge-service economy.”¹⁴³ Caring is economically effective; caring companies do better, and investing in caring policies pays extremely well for nations.¹⁴⁴ Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett’s book “The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better” described in more detail and in more dimensions why more egalitarian societies generally perform better than less egalitarian ones.¹⁴⁵ Not only do more egalitarian (partnership-oriented societies) generally perform better economically, but they also have a lower obesity rate.¹⁴⁶ The good news is that it is our nature to be caring, kind, and considerate, and therefore, to practice parrhesia, and so we only need to go back to our nature to realize all these achievements.

Section 3. Individuals and Parrhesia

The individuals discussed in this section refer to the few private donors mentioned in Part I, Section 2, who profoundly shape the global public health agenda, as well as the shareholders of food companies, who influence the ethical practice of the companies. These individuals play a big role in maintaining and spreading the obesity epidemic, which is why this section is devoted to providing more illustrations of the benefits of practising parrhesia. This section intends to show why people should live a virtuous life, i.e., practise parrhesia,

143. Eisler and Fry, 290.

144. Eisler and Fry, 291.

145. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009.

146. Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009.

and in what sense both the parrhesiastes and the public health benefit from it. This section has two parts. The first part explains what virtue ethics is; the second part argues as to how virtues benefit their possessors.

Virtue ethics is one of the most influential normative ethical theories. Its origin in the West dates back to Plato and Aristotle, and it was the dominant moral philosophy until at least Enlightenment (17th and 18th centuries).¹⁴⁷ Virtue ethics then suffered a momentary eclipse in the nineteenth century; but in the twentieth century, interest in it was revived due to increasing dissatisfaction with the then prevailing deontology and utilitarianism (a form of consequentialism), which paid little if not no attention “to a number of topics that had always figured in the virtue ethics tradition—virtues and vices, motives and moral character, . . . a deep concept of happiness, . . . and the fundamentally important questions of what sorts of persons we should be and how we should live.”¹⁴⁸ Joel Kupperman criticises a consequentialist and a deontologist as faceless ethical agents who lack psychological connection with either their past or their future.¹⁴⁹ What distinguishes virtue ethics from other ethical theories is its emphasis on agents’ virtues or moral characters. It tries to answer questions like “How should I live?,” “What is the good life?,” and “What are the proper family and social values?”¹⁵⁰

Virtue ethics is often perceived as the theory that pursues happiness (eudaimonia). Although ‘happiness’ as the translation of ‘eudaimonia’ is not quite accurate, as the definition of happiness is subjective. ‘Flourishing’ is a more adequate translation, but this ‘flourishing’

147. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.

148. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.

149. Pence, 252.

150. Athoanassoulis

excludes animals and plants, as they lack reason.¹⁵¹ There are different forms of virtue ethics, but two concepts are central: virtues and practical wisdom (phronesis). Aristotle describes a virtue as a purposive disposition that is intermediate (neither too excessive nor too little) and that is determined by the right reason.¹⁵² In modern virtue ethics, the standard neo-Aristotelian definition of virtue is “a character trait [that] a human being needs for eudaimonia, to flourish or live well.”¹⁵³ Virtues can make their possessors morally good persons: generous, courageous, honest...¹⁵⁴ However, one person can be generous or courageous but at the same time acts wrongly. For instance, courage enables one to do something monstrous, which has really bad consequences. That is why the concept of “phronesis” is relevant in virtue ethics. “Phronesis” is commonly known as moral/practical wisdom. It is part of practical wisdom to know how to secure real benefits effectively; it is the knowledge or understanding that enables us to see what is truly worthwhile, important, and advantageous in life in each particular situation and how to live well.¹⁵⁵ In addition, practical wisdom requires understanding the *reasons* for acting virtuously.¹⁵⁶ Children have dispositions to do virtuous things, but they do not know why it is considered as virtuous, or further; children may have good intentions to do virtuous things, but end up having negative results to those who they intend to benefit. This is because they lack experience and their

151. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §2.1.

152. Aristotle, 111-122.

153. Hursthouse, 20.

154. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.2.

155. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.2.

156. Foot 2002, 169.

understanding of what is beneficial and harmful is limited and often mistaken.^{157,158} An adult that possesses practical wisdom knows what is truly beneficial, and knows the reason what to act in each particular situation. Thus, a virtuous person who has practical wisdom will not make the mistake of concealing the hurtful truth from the person who really needs to know it.¹⁵⁹ In summary, there are two aspects of practical wisdom: it comes with experience of life; practical wise agent's capacity to recognise what is more relevant in each particular situation.¹⁶⁰

To situate virtues ethics in the context of the obesity epidemic, food companies have knowledge of the potential harms to people of consuming too much of their unhealthy food products, but they choose to hide such knowledge. Thus, they lack knowledge at the practical level, namely, the understanding of the reasons for acting virtuously and the ability to actually do what they believe to be beneficial (which is the philosophical aspect of parrhesia). There is evidence that external regulations help to improve public health. For example, the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (WHOFCTC) helped to alleviate tobacco's harm on public health. However, internal or external rules and regulations depend on treaties, which, like laws, are likely to have flaws that can be manipulated or misused, which will subsequently undermine their authority and efficiency. In addition, the alcohol, food, and drink industries have united against the development of an equivalent to the WHOFCTC on alcohol and unhealthy food products.¹⁶¹ The advantage of virtue ethics in promoting public

157. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.2

158. The lack of experience is one of the reasons virtue ethics emphasises the importance of practice and moral education.

159. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.2.

160. Hursthouse and Pettigrove, §1.2.

161. Moodie et al., 2013.

health is that it does not need written rules to take action. Instead, in each situation, the agent thinks about what a virtuous person would do. Therefore, the agent is not bound to existing laws or regulations but can go beyond those and can impose much stricter rules on himself or herself. In this sense, the agent does not need general rules because the agent's sense of morality enables her to do what a virtuous person would do in such a situation. This idea of virtue ethics may seem too optimistic with regard to self-control, as our family, society, or any environment where we are immersed affects how we choose.¹⁶² We cannot choose everything, but being aware of our situation is already a big step to making a positive change within our capacity. Being virtuous in every situation is not easy, that is why parrhesia and other virtues require practice. Although this section tries to show that virtues benefit their possessors, it does not mean that virtues guarantee such benefits. Following a healthy lifestyle is the way to be well physically, but this is not a guarantee that one will be healthy. Similarly, being virtuous does not guarantee that one will flourish, but it is a reliable bet.

One of the questions we demand an answer to immediately is: How about those who were not virtuous but had success in life and lived happily and healthily? The problem is that even if the metaethical justification of the objective goodness of virtues is grounded, it still might not be enough to motivate people who prefer a life lacking in virtues.¹⁶³ This is because while one may have answered the epistemological question on the nature of virtues and ethics, it is another thing to make people *actually feel motivated* and take actions

162. Personally, I recognise the challenge imposed by moral luck, that our education, habits, influences and examples shape our morality. Morality is not entirely within our control. Virtue ethics embraces the challenge of moral luck; it recognises the fragility of the good life, or life in general, and makes it a feature of morality. "It is only because the good life is so vulnerable and fragile that it is so precious." Athanassoulis, §4c.

163. The metaethical justification in this case refers to whether there is an universal moral truth, more specifically, whether virtues are objective and good, and everyone accepts its objectivity and goodness.

accordingly. Parrhesia helps in this case because it is what parrhesia demands of the agent: to do exactly what one believes to be true. Virtue ethics illustrates how virtues help us to see some reasons that we should act virtuously in terms of two types of power: rhetorical power and exhortatory power.

Rhetorical power refers to the feeling of aversion to being called a liar, thief, fraud, phoney, or any other pejorative term, especially by those whom a person cares about, such as the person's children.¹⁶⁴ Exhortatory power refers to the preference for being considered honest, fair, loyal, just, sincere, kind, and generous.¹⁶⁵ Rhetorical power and exhortatory power are external powers that virtue ethics confers on the agent. They sound more like social pressure or a marketing strategy. Part I, Section 3 gave the example of the chocolate companies' promise to deal with child slavery, which deserves praise, but which they did not fulfil. It is obvious that individuals could pretend to be virtuous to create a positive image of themselves by acting exactly the way a virtuous person would in public. In private, however, in case the public is unaware of their actions, they could choose to act selfishly. This is why agnotology and parrhesia are important. Agnotology is important to uncover hypocrites' strategy for hiding the truth or for sowing doubt or ignorance in the public's mind in order to achieve their selfish goals at the cost of the public's well-being. This is what food companies have done in public health. Parrhesia is important as an attitude of life, a way to achieve the "aesthetics of life." In addition, being virtuous does have some benefits, although unlike those of financial benefits.

Rosalind Hursthouse, a British born New Zealand philosopher, best known as a virtue ethicist, whose work is deeply grounded in the history of philosophy, and especially in

164 Audi, 286-187.

165. Audi, 287.

Aristotle's ethics, invites us to think about the fact how we raise our children and why we reflect on our own life. Both cases actually reflect what we do and what we believe, namely, that we consider virtues are valuable and worth pursuing. This is why we inculcate virtues in our children and are concerned with their "moral education."¹⁶⁶ And when we reflect on our own life, we appraise if we are living a virtuous life, and we even regret not being virtuous enough ("If only I could be less selfish and self-centred, more thankful for what I have, more concerned with the good of others and the good in them, how much happier I would be").¹⁶⁷ This is why we need phronesis — "The notion [that] practical rationality is correlative to that of the goodness of action, so far as that consists in the proper following of reasons."¹⁶⁸ If we believe that a virtuous life is preferable to and more respectable than a non-virtuous life, we need practical rationality to be able to understand how to live well and tries to act virtuously in every instance. There may be people who simply do not care about other people's well-being and who think being virtuous is not preferable to other ways of life, but I think most people know of hearts that being virtuous is the right way to live.

In the case of food companies or the individuals whose decisions shape the companies' practice and the global health agenda, we can ask similar questions that Philippa Foot, an English philosopher, one of the founders of the contemporary virtue ethics, planned to ask anyone who practices injustice whenever the unjust act would bring him advantage: "Do you admit that you do not recognise the rights of other people, or do you pretend?" "Are you prepared to treat others ruthlessly, but pretend that nothing is further from your mind?" "Do you only need other men as you need household objects, and if men could be

166. Hursthouse,175.

167. Hursthouse,177.

168. Foot 2002, 173.

manipulated like household objects, or beaten into a reliable submission like donkeys?.”¹⁶⁹

Foot did not provide answers to these questions on behalf of the unjust men. Nevertheless, she seems to suggest that it is through this kind of relationship with others that unjust men could recognise the unacceptability of injustice—that injustice not only brings misfortune to others but even dehumanises others who belong to the same category as the unjust humans themselves. This is difficult for unjust men not to recognise this fact and not to be affected by the damage they will cause were they to practice an unjust act. Foot did not explain what profit justice brings to us, but she seems to suggest that being just can preserve human dignity and honour, or at least does not dehumanise others and ourselves.

In sum, what the two modern virtue ethicists, Hursthouse and Foot, try to show is that if we really believe that a virtuous life is the good life, it would be reasonable for us to act accordingly. For this, we need phronesis, as it is also what parrhesia requires, to do what we believe to be true. If we could expand our vision to all of humanity, we could consider others—as our own children or family or friends and we could be happy just to know that they are alive and breathing, eating, laughing, and feeling. We may appreciate and rethink the questions that virtue ethics tries to answer: “How should I live?”, “What is the good life?” and “What are the proper family and social values?”

Section 4. Phronesis and Public Health: What Food Companies and Their Shareholders Should and Should Not Do

What is the importance of telling the truth? Of knowing the truth? Of having people

169. Foot 1958, 103. “Does he admit that he does not recognise the rights of other people, or does he pretend?” “Is he prepared to treat others ruthlessly, but pretends that nothing is further from his mind?” “Does a man only need other men as he needs household objects, and if men could be manipulated like household objects, or beaten into a reliable submission like donkeys?”

who tell the truth? Of knowing how to recognize who tells the truth? These are the questions underlined in Part II, Section 1 to show Foucault's interest in parrhesia. This section provides some ideas of how parrhesia works in food companies and with shareholders. It relates the above-mentioned four questions by applying the five characteristics of parrhesia: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. This section starts with duty, which refers not only to revealing the truth to others but also disclosing the truth about oneself. It is the step that shareholders have to take to enable their companies to take more steps to act in a socially responsible manner.

Duty

Part I, Section 2 shows how the few private donors can influence the global health agenda and how their attitude does not help with addressing the obesity epidemic, and may even exacerbate it. Surely money can buy a lot in the case of food companies: political allies, good lawyers, influential publicity, front groups, lobbyists, and even scientists—all in order to promote and sell their food products, no matter if they are healthy or not; and if not, they can make people believe they are or simply hide the truth. The study of agnotology is a good start to making us realise what the problem is, what its causes are, and what we can do accordingly. Given the fact that there have been efforts to demand greater transparency and truth, shareholders of food companies should take profits not as the only thing that matters. “Larry Fink, chief executive of BlackRock, the world's largest investment fund, has put companies on notice that it expects them to serve a social purpose, not just generate dividends for shareholders.”¹⁷⁰ This example of parrhesiastic practice from shareholders transmits a positive message; it shows that some shareholders have become more willing to take the long view and

170. Ewing, 2019.

be more socially responsible. A more concrete example can illustrate what parrhesiastic practice looks like in food companies: the confectionery company Mars has added genetically modified organisms (GMO) labelling to its products.¹⁷¹ This practice makes more transparent to consumers what ingredients Mars products contain. Although the possibility that GMO poses a health risk to humans is still being debated, consumers have the right to know if the products they buy contain GMO or not. This practice prevents consumers who do not like products with GMO from buying them. However, this labelling practice is an obligation under the Vermont law that requires labels on food products that contain genetically-engineered ingredients. This means that this labelling practice of Mars is not voluntary, and therefore, is not a practice of parrhesia. Still, it illustrates what food companies can do to practise parrhesia. Transparency in labelling and in providing correct relevant information on food nutrition affects the sales of food products. However, had Mars decided to add GMO labelling to its concerned products voluntarily, it would have received greater praise publicly and would have benefited from the enhancement of its public image, company reputation, and customer loyalty. It is obvious that food companies recognise and value ethical practice and even put them under the spotlight. The world's biggest food company, Nestlé, in its 2017 annual report, writes:

The successful global relaunch of KitKat's improved recipe with extra milk & cocoa, combined with strong added value innovations across markets, contributed to its accelerated growth. KitKat is our first global brand made with 100% sustainable cocoa, supplied through the Nestlé Cocoa Plan.¹⁷²

The Nestlé Cocoa Plan aims to promote better farming by making cocoa farming more profitable for farmers; promote better lives by eliminating child labour from the supply chain; and promote better cocoa by improving the transparency of the supply chain and the

171. Kim, 2016.

172. Nestle Annual Report 2017, 24.

quality of cocoa.¹⁷³ It transmits the idea that Nestlé recognises the importance of social responsibility, human rights, sustainability, and the quality of its products. However, merely recognising or targeting these as goals and putting them down on paper are not enough. Words alone do not have much positive effect on public health until they are acted upon. Parrhesia requires the parrhesiastes to perform its duty toward both the public and themselves, and demands action from the parrhesiastes as according to what they believe to be true. If food companies make promises or statements on how they will improve their products such as by making them generally more nutritious or healthy, parrhesia requires that they follow through with real actions—actions that are characterised by the other aspects of parrhesia.

Frankness and Truth

Frankness about the truth requires directness and clarity. Mislabelling, non-labelling, and using obscure names on the label all still prevent consumers from recognising the ingredients that may harm their health. Part I, Section 3 showed that ignorance, confusion, and doubt are powerful tools for manipulating consumers by tricking them to consume more unhealthy products. Instead, parrhesia requires that the truth be told succinctly and accurately. The Corn Refiners Association (hereinafter, “Association”) started a petition to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to authorize ‘corn sugar’ as an alternate common or usual name for high-fructose corn syrup (HFCS).¹⁷⁴ The reason behind this petition is that the use of HFCS has caused health concerns and has affected the sales of products that contain this substance. The potential harm of fructose has been addressed in the Introduction. The

173. Nestlé Cocoa Plan, *Read More*.

174. Food and Drug Administration, 2012.

Association recognised that there was growing attention to this concern but argued that HFCS and sugar are equivalent, according to every parameter that is relevant to consumers; for example, they have equivalent ratios of fructose and glucose, which are metabolised similarly in the body.¹⁷⁵ The metabolism of fructose has been mentioned already as having been shown in the research of Lustig to be the same as the metabolism of ethanol, which is pernicious to human health. It is good that the FDA declined the Association's petition, stating that the change in name will disorient consumers' consumption choice. This is a perfect example of how companies should label their ingredients with simpler and more accurate words to enable consumers to understand what they consume, instead of using unsuitable names to confuse them. An example of what shareholders can do in these situations can be seen in the case of the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, the Government Pension Fund of Norway. It established an ethical council with ethical guidelines on what the Fund should and should not invest. The establishment of an ethical committee or a similar group transmits the idea from the shareholders to the company that profit is not the only thing that matters. Virtue ethics does not require companies to be altruistic. Rather, it balances "prudential self-interest, the weighing of advantages, the adoption of means to the securing of ends, but also such 'other-regarding' matters as care for offspring, fidelity to contracts, and mutual aid."¹⁷⁶ In other words, food companies do not need to abandon their aim of pursuing profit, as a company exists to provide a product or service and to make profit thereby. Food companies can find a balance between profit that is not derived from unethical practices and minimising harm to public health, to show that they care about their consumers and therefore, can also improve their public image.

175. Food and Drug Administration, 2012.

176. Foot 2002, 173.

Danger and Criticism

In the U.S. in 1977, there was a boycott against Nestlé for its aggressive marketing of its baby formula. This boycott showed that although food companies may have superior power over each consumer, they are dependent on the sum of individual consumers to buy their products and are thus inferior to them in this sense. In the context of today's food companies, when the truth about their unhealthy ingredients is revealed, they risk losing their market, so they should proactively improve the formula of their products to make them healthier. In other words, food companies are better off self-regulating their food quality. This is where criticism helps by answering the question "What have I done and what do I have to do?" This criticism will help food companies evaluate what they have done, what the ethical principles they believe, and what they should do accordingly.

For another example, in Part I, Section 3, the child labour used in cocoa production was mentioned. The follow-up to that story is that a human rights body, International Rights Advocates, finally filed a lawsuit against Nestlé, Mars, and other chocolate manufacturers for aiding and abetting slavery practice in Ivory Coast, the world largest cocoa exporter.¹⁷⁷ The chocolate companies postponed several times their tackling of the problem of child labour, and Nestlé invested little in solving the problem compared to its massive investment in marketing. The companies' publicly announced promises to tackle the problem were used against them as evidence that they worsened the child labour situation in Ivory Coast and Ghana.¹⁷⁸ Recognising child labour and making ethical promises publicly are practices of parrhesia. Parrhesia encourages companies to conduct their business more ethically. The danger comes when they break their promise and make relatively little effort to solve the

177. Just Food, 2021.

178. Just Food, 2021.

problem. If companies fulfil their promises, praise, instead of lawsuits, will come to them. Assuming that companies practise child slavery due to its low cost, shareholders' call for social responsibility will allow companies to focus less on profit and have more room for alleviating child labour. Solomon argues that corporations should not only be accountable to their shareholders, should not exist solely– “to make money,” but should “serve the society’s demand and the public good, and be rewarded for doing so.”¹⁷⁹ If the shareholders of food companies could implement self-criticism and accept and transmit the idea that Solomon argues for, the status of global public health would be very different.

In summary, it would be too much to provide a full list of what companies can do to practice parrhesia, but it will suffice to provide the following directions:

1. Stop promoting unhealthy products as healthy or associating them with a positive image.
2. Do not distort, manipulate, and influence research results on food.
3. Add support for public health to your measures of success and make it one of your priorities instead of merely profitability; and transmit this new standard to society.
4. Respect independent public health bodies when they speak the unfettered truth, and follow their recommendations and guidelines.
5. Do not participate in national or international policy making on NCDs.¹⁸⁰
6. Label your products with their ingredients and with the potential health risk of consuming them.

179. Solomon, 1026.

180. Moodie et al., 670.

Conclusion

In a philosophy course on “Distributive Justice” five years ago, I thought of this question: ‘How can we persuade the rich to give away their money?’. I did not come up with an answer, but this question has always troubled me, and this thesis can be seen as an attempt to answer this question by arguing that virtues benefit the moral agent. This thesis started with the obesity epidemic and ended with virtue ethics. It answered something practical, but it was more about ourselves, about individuals, about how to live our lives, and about why we choose the kind of life that we live.

The obesity epidemic is real and affects the global population. Due to its severity and scope, we need to pay attention to it to be able to deal with it seriously. The obesity epidemic has many direct causes and root causes. This thesis used “agnotology” to study how ignorance, confusion, and misinformation jeopardise public health and how the truth can help us fight this problem. It also enables us to see the logic behind the difficulty of controlling the chronic disease globally: 1) food companies massively produce, aggressively market, and sell their unhealthy products globally; 2) consuming excessive unhealthy food products induces chronic diseases and leads to obesity epidemic; 3) prioritising chronic diseases effect food companies’ profit; 4) the global health agenda is heavily shaped by few private donors; 5) these private donors have vested interests in food industry; 6) controlling chronic diseases equals reducing these private donors’ wealth; 7) little funds are allocated in tackling chronic disease; 8) food companies can continue selling their unhealthy food products globally. “A challenge for global health is to identify these interests [of the few private donors] and bring them to the light of day, holding them to standards of transparency and public accountability.”¹⁸¹ Agnotology certainly helps us in this context, but agnotology alone is

181 Stuckler and Siegel, 136.

insufficient.

In addition, the notion of “parrhesia” illustrated that the epistemological truth is less relevant than the practical dimension, namely, the importance we decide to tell the truth and how we tell the truth. Food companies and their shareholders, as well as the few people who have the power to shape the global health agenda, most likely know the health consequences of consuming too much unhealthy food products, as well as know how to use ignorance and doubt to promote the sales of their unhealthy food products. It is not obvious to us, them, or anyone else why they would choose to act virtuously when they could benefit immensely from selling their products by fooling consumers who are unaware of the truth.

Perhaps Foucault also has thought something similar about the above-mentioned question. His interest in the aesthetic perspective of self has led his investigation to the concept of “parrhesia”, about the harmony of the words and the deeds, or to act according to what one believes to be true. The shift of parrhesia from telling others the truth to recognising the truth about oneself helps moral agents to examine their lives, or in Hursthouse’s case of reflecting on one’s life, helps moral agents appraise if they are living a virtuous life and regret not being virtuous enough. Foucault sees harmony of speech and life as “care of the self.” Parrhesia not only helps to end the plots, manipulations, doubts, and ignorance that cause public health problems, but also helps moral agents to harmonise what they do with what they say. A virtuous individual will not distort the pernicious effects of unhealthy food products on public health nor intentionally hide them. The obesity epidemic will not disappear overnight, but virtue ethics in general, in combination of the idea of good human nature and partnership system, provide us hope that we can actually make positive change. The last section of this thesis then provided some directions on how food companies can practise parrhesia, and therefore, improve public health; but we should also be aware that without the support of shareholders, companies will find it difficult to make ethical decisions that may influence

their short-term or even long-term profit. In addition, without the support of the few influential private donors in global health funds, control of chronic diseases would remain behind control of infectious diseases. This is why virtue ethics is emphasised in this thesis—to illustrate its importance and its benefits.

I had never heard about John Yudkin before I studied philosophy at Erasmus University Rotterdam, and when I did, he had already passed away, probably in solitude, but still wanting to make more people aware of the pernicious effect of consuming sugar. Fortunately, his desire to disseminate the truth had survived; there are scientists who have taken up his science and virtue, who challenge the public's conventional ideas, and who promote public health. There is a small voice that not everyone is privileged to hear, but at least, it has spread through history, and I am certain that more people will finally find out the benefit of telling the truth and act accordingly. Philosophy has taught me the importance of telling truth to both individuals and society, the truth about oneself, the importance of knowing the truth, and knowing how to recognise the truth, and most importantly, of having people who tell the truth. The individuals who are most powerful and who are responsible for public health problems perhaps have the greatest opportunity to solve those problems by telling the truth, to give an untold number of people worldwide a healthier and happier life.

Abbreviations

BMI

CVD

FDA

KFC

NCD

WHO

WHOFCTC

Body mass index

Cardiovascular disease

Food and Drug Administration

Kentucky Fried Chicken

Non-communicable disease

World Health Organization

WHO Framework Convention on

Tobacco Control

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