

'THE FOOD INDUSTRY SHARES RESPONSIBILITY FOR HEALTH'

The food industry is partly responsible for our health problems and can be held to account for this, concludes Tjidde Tempels. He received his doctorate on 13 November for his PhD research in the Philosophy chair group on the ethics of business and public health.

Is the food industry's responsibility a new idea?

'Health used to be seen as the responsibility of the state and the individual. But these days, people are increasingly looking at the role played by the food industry. After all, many companies have contributed to the rise in obesity, for example, through the production and marketing of unhealthy products.'

Surely companies have to make a profit?

'Absolutely, but they need to find a balance between their economic responsibility and their social responsibility. In practice you see a kind of ambiguity, with companies encouraging health on the one hand and doing things that undermine health on the other. In my thesis, I investigated what moral reasons there might be for food companies to tackle food-related health problems. Companies too should base their behaviour on fundamental moral principles such as justice, "do no harm" and respect for autonomy.'

How could companies assume their responsibility?

'For example by taking the recommended daily amounts into account when developing new products, by nudging people to make healthy choices and by no longer lobbying against laws aimed at improving public health. But also by no longer targeting children in the marketing of



unhealthy products or putting a stop to the promotion of unhealthy behaviour. For instance Pringles has the slogan: "Once you pop, you can't stop". Is that really the right message? Does the manufacturer want people to carry on eating endlessly? The industry is already tackling such issues to some extent, but there is room for improvement. What is more, it is currently seen as something extra that companies do whereas they actually have a moral duty.'

And consumers and the government?

'It is a shared responsibility. Ideally you would want the industry to take steps of its own accord, with politicians only getting involved if that doesn't have sufficient effect. The government could also look at how it can help companies to make the transition to a healthy offering, for example by ensuring a level playing field. Because individual

companies can develop healthier products but those ethical pioneers are at a disadvantage if other companies exploit the gap in the market for cheaper, unhealthy products. Consumers are obviously not going to abandon unhealthy products immediately, and they need to be able to make that choice themselves. At the same time, we know from research that choosing what to eat is not always a rational process. What is more, people may have limited opportunities to make healthier choices.'

Isn't that focus on health a bit patronizing?

'Is your autonomy as a consumer restricted if the industry collectively decides no longer to offer you unhealthy products or if you are nudged in the direction of healthy products? Possibly. But if we accept that we live in a world where we are pushed and influenced by marketing anyway,

I think this is a better alternative to the manipulation guiding us towards unhealthy choices. However, I didn't look at whether this is morally desirable and how far you should go with this in my research.'

Quite apart from this, there is still a lot of disagreement on what is and isn't healthy

'That's right. In general, unhealthy products don't harm your health directly; you have to see them in the context of the diet as a whole. Food also has a social and cultural value. Let's say I bake an apple cake based on my granny's recipe one year after she passed away. That has a value because it reminds me of her. Life is about more than just health. The social and cultural roles of unhealthy food need to be explored further from an ethical perspective.' **TL**



'Companies should base their behaviour on fundamental moral principles such as "do no harm" and justice'

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PROPOSITION

Parenting is science with no controls

Keeping your work and home life separate is not easy, noticed Elysa Overdijk. She had two babies while she was doing her PhD research, and she found herself looking at parenting issues through the eyes of a scientist. Her proposition: 'Raising kids is like performing a scientific experiment without the proper controls'.

'For a new mother or father, there is a lot to get used to. You run up against a lot of things you don't really understand. Why does my baby cry? Why doesn't he fall asleep? I noticed, in myself and in colleagues who had babies, that you approach

these questions with a scientific perspective.

After all, we are scientists, even when we go home. If you encounter a parenting problem you want to understand it and solve it systematically.

'Imagine if you had an extra baby that you could include in your tests'

My little boy was a very poor sleeper, and he really only wanted to sleep in the baby carrier. I tried everything during that period.

Occasionally he would fall asleep in the pram, but then he wouldn't again: there was just no pattern to it. Imagine you had a control, I thought. An extra baby that you could include in your tests! But of course that's not how it works with children. Even if you had identical twins, it still wouldn't be scientifically ethical.

It is tough doing research when you have young children, but it has its advantages as well. When I put my daughter to bed, I sometimes lie beside her for an hour, waiting in the dark until she falls asleep. I came up with my propositions on one such evening. You use the time you have productively.' **RCJ**



PhD candidates are required to submit six to eight propositions with their thesis that address several societal issues. In this feature, they explain the thinking behind their most thought-provoking proposition. This time it's the turn of Elysa Overdijk, who got her PhD on 18 October for her study of the defences of plant cells against pathogens.