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The illustration on the front cover is of Athinas street and the Municipal Market, Athens in November 1961 (photo by Dimitrios Harisiadis, Benaki Museum Photo Archives). See the paper by Aglaia Kremezi, below.

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Ethical Gastronomy: Organic Food, Markets and Marketing

Jane Levi

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In the process of my broader research into food and utopianism, I often find myself facing some rather uncomfortable self-examination. Measuring the present against a perceived understanding of the past is almost always a dangerous activity, and when dealing with the hopes, ideals and compassionate visions of utopian thinkers it seems all the easier to lose academic objectivity and start taking it all a bit too personally. Longing for my own piece of ground to grow vegetables while assessing the seventeenth-century Diggers' passionate self-sufficiency as they occupied and worked the common land, I find myself asking how it is possible to think dispassionately and unselfishly about the creeping gentrification of the UK allotment movement, itself poor compensation for loss of commons rights. Enjoying wonderful meals and new ingredient discoveries with my similarly interested friends I have to wonder whether the honorific of 'gastronome' really feels like a comfortable label once one is faced with its consumerist heart contrasted with, say, Charles Fourier's compassionate and holistic vision of harmonic 'gastrosophy'. If Keith Taylor was right (as I think he was) to say that most of what we now see as 'progress' began as someone's crazy, utopian dream, then perhaps we do need to ask ourselves some of these uncomfortable questions more often.¹

Addressing some of the possible drivers for the burgeoning market in 'ethical' foods as represented by the organic products that I frequently buy, this paper investigates the language of ethical consumerism and the utopian origins of organic produce, considering what 'organic' means in Europe today and asks how much of the original meaning is retained within our market-led system. It begins to consider what those meanings might actually be to the producers, consumers and suppliers of those foods, whether there is common ground between them, and how they have developed. To what extent is consumer demand for ethical foods driving markets to supply them, how far are the markets themselves driving consumers to make these choices and what place do policy-makers have in this equation? How much do the users of the market know about what the market really is, and how much choice do they actually have? Is it really possible to evaluate the ethical stance of a market in food, such as that for organic food, once it is established as a worthwhile market?

An ethical language of food

In part, the enquiry begins with language. The ethical gastronome is generally presented as a twenty-first century paragon of virtue, seeking out positive eating experiences

involving 'real' food – food that might, at its most basic level, be described as 'good', 'natural', 'healthy', 'clean', 'fresh', 'local' or 'authentic'. A more considered choice might be based on agricultural technique: is the produce organic, biodynamic, pasture-fed, compassionately or dry-farmed, slow-grown? Further selection could be based on trading practice, from direct supply to fairly traded to co-operative to farmers market. Where in the world did the food come from and what is its carbon footprint? Is it the dietary preference made for vegan, locally-sourced, traditional, omnivorous or free from any number of chemicals or potential allergens? Alternatively the decisive factors might come down to processing: were its ingredients traditionally crafted, stone-ground, wood-fired, cold-pressed, hand-picked? Or is it a super food: pro-biotic, live-fermented? Is the resulting product natural, unfiltered, raw, whole, pure, live, unrefined, fresh, cultured, untreated?

All of these terms seem to imply some kind of definitive meaning, and policy-makers all over the world devote considerable energy to pinning down and protecting such detail. But meaning is slippery, and marketers exploit this slipperiness. At one level, these last descriptors are straightforwardly positive attributes: apart from occasions when the terms are being cleverly inverted to appeal to our desire for safe transgression, most people would run from food described using their opposites – bad, unnatural, unhealthy, unclean, stale, fake.² Of course, real choice depends on actual information, even understanding, which would involve far more granular descriptions than the usual reassuring but too general uses of language. Different countries are subject to different labelling standards, but the desire to acquire some virtuous sheen for a product, whether appealing to the consumer's health concerns, ethical preferences or social perceptions – all of which are carefully studied by marketers – is sufficiently strong to compel producers to promote the lack of gluten in a block of butter; the missing trans-fats in a bag of sugar; the healthy, natural nature of a sweetened flapjack. Other modes of this kind of marketing focus on apparent health benefits (such as the idea that the milk helps fight osteoporosis) while neglecting less convenient factors (milk's hormone or fat levels).³ However they are labelled, there is certainly a strong market for foods that in different circumstances or with different presentation might seem the antithesis of every ethical aspiration, whether dressed in some of their language or not. In our varied marketplace it can be very difficult for the consumer to negotiate the boundaries between the wicked and the righteous.

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Development of organic agriculture

Organic agriculture emerged around the 1930s as a response to concerns about the depletion of the soil, built to a great extent on the holistic biodynamic ideas proposed by Rudolf Steiner in 1924.⁴ Lady Eve Balfour's popular book of 1943, *The Living Soil*, largely inspired by the work of agriculturalist Sir Albert Howard and nutritionist Sir Robert McCarrison, became one of the founding texts of the Soil Association, established in the UK in 1946 to promote a healthy, organic approach to farming that would increase

people's nutrition and health.⁵ Balfour presented a natural, process-oriented agricultural system based on the use of 'organic' composts or 'humus', opposed to the modern dependence on inputs of so-called 'inorganic' chemical fertilizers. In an organic system, the impact of the farmer should maintain and potentially improve the health of the soil in a 'natural' way that would heal previous damage and prevent further damage in the future, one of the most important responsibilities of the farmer being 'stewardship of the soil'.⁶ Informed by a degree of spiritualism, Balfour saw this ecological mission as atonement for the human failure to understand that self-sufficiency did not mean a focus only on the individual human self:

If our experience of the last twenty years has not taught us sufficient humility to realize that we are incapable of ordering our lives successfully in a Godless society, then one is tempted to wonder whether as a species we are worth preserving. In every activity, from the management of our soil onwards, we have regarded ourselves as self-sufficient, and in every activity that attitude of mind has led to disaster. ... Human ecology demands that we should think less of our 'rights' and more of our duties to all other living things, including each other. We must start again, with a new and better attitude towards life. Indeed, we must in some cases relearn that life exists.⁷

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The principle was that a successful quest for 'methods that encourage and enhance mechanisms that recur in nature' would, by extension, lead to improved human health and nutrition.⁸ The health of the soil translated directly into the health both of the planet and – in the body and spirit – of the individual consumer.

Balfour was deeply influenced by Dr G. T. Wrench's work, in particular *The Wheel of Health*, which not only supported the idea of natural compost fertilizers, but also emphasized the benefits of a 'whole diet'.⁹ For Balfour, too, these ideas were closely tied together. In opposition to the mainstream view that the main problem with food was obtaining sufficient quantity rather than quality, Wrench believed that 'our "faulty feeding" is the cause of disease', suggesting that the blame lay on poor personal choices by people who had lost their natural instincts, and who were now also manipulated by a growing industrialized food and agriculture system.¹⁰ For Wrench, a more traditional and natural diet was the most beneficial to health, and he, like McCarrison and the American soil scientist Franklin H. King, famously found evidence in the story of the apparently remarkable longevity and healthy lives of the isolated Hunza, a people living in a remote valley in the north of what is now Pakistan (close to the borders with Afghanistan, Tajikistan and China). Wrench sought to demonstrate that the Hunza miracle was attributable to their diet, composed of whole, naturally grown grains, vegetables, pulses, unpasteurized dairy products and sun-dried fruits.¹¹ Unlike us, the Hunza remembered that 'a food is a whole thing and should be taken as a whole', skins, peels and cooking water included, and Wrench suggested we should reacquire such

knowledge from them.¹² Balfour's work repeats the tale of the Hunza, adding further supporting evidence for the whole-food theory from Britain in the form of anecdotal reports (some apparently from doctors) of dramatically improved health in pregnant mothers and their children who had renounced white bread and (re)turned to whole grains.¹³ Natural agricultural methods and whole foods as better foods combined to produce a message focused on increased nutrition and personal health that in effect elevated 'nature and intuition over science and reason'.¹⁴

Although Balfour and others cited scientists' work in support of their proposals and were well known for their experimental field trials (begun at Haughley in 1939), the mainstream scientific community generally perceived the organic movement as anti-science, while many within the movement itself regarded science with suspicion.¹⁵ In the face of the post-war development of large-scale agri-business and expanding food-processing businesses, the organic message had many opponents, and the combination of their anti-industry and often apparently anti-science messages led them to be dismissed as peddlers of 'muck and mystery'.¹⁶ Balfour had a fundamental objection to the treatment of agriculture as an industry, writing that 'Agriculture *is* a service; it is not, never has been, and never can be an industry'.¹⁷ Protesting the false division set up between 'town' and 'country' interests, she asserted that, since the entire country depended first and foremost on the health of the land, 'Both will eventually prosper or decline in proportion as their joint heritage, the fertility of their soil, prospers or declines'.¹⁸ She therefore proposed that the Ministries of agriculture, health and food should be merged, as each was inextricably linked with the other.

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Jorian Jenks, a leading member of the British Union of Fascists and editor of the Soil Association's quarterly newspaper, *Mother Earth*, extended the anti-industry message out along the entire industrial food processing chain, suggesting that 'a fixed idea that foods must be regarded as commodities, articles of commerce which people must be allowed to sell and buy with a minimum of restraint' was to blame for poor eating habits as well as supply and quality problems.¹⁹ Industrially produced foods were said to be subject to a process of 'mutilation and adulteration'.²⁰ The shorter the food chain, or the closer people were to the land and its unadulterated produce, the better.²¹ Jenks called into question the scientific basis of nutritionists' claims that a 'healthy' diet is possible without the use of whole, natural, organic foods, calling their calculations 'not really nutritional science at all, but a combination of chemistry and arithmetic'.²² The two sides were fiercely opposed.

Adopted on a small scale in parts of the US, Australia, New Zealand, UK and elsewhere in Europe during the 1950s, pesticides and other agricultural chemicals led to emerging concerns in the 1960s and 1970s that inspired a differently politicized generation to engage with organic practices.²³ Although many health and agricultural advisors vehemently protested that organic principles were a form of charlatanry, making false health claims designed to trick the vulnerable into unnecessary spending, the movement grew and gained traction throughout the twentieth century: dispensing

with what could be described as the more mystical aspects of biodynamic methods, the movement gained supporters and solidified standards.²⁴ Its development in opposition to the mainstream drive towards agri-business meant that it emerged as a significant influence on many groups in the 1960s and '70s countercultural movements in both the UK and the US.²⁵ In particular, the ideas that bodily and spiritual health are to be derived from eating whole foods; the association of such foods with 'natural' forms of agriculture and (often) a form of New Age spiritualism; opposition to the industrialization of both agriculture and the food system and to extreme consumerism; and notions of human culpability for despoiling the earth and the resulting obligation to repair the damage became fundamentally associated with movements for social change of many kinds.

Organic food in contemporary Europe

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Organic principles as we understand them in the early twenty-first century continue to focus on the idea that there is a direct connection between the way our food is produced and the health of the planet and ourselves, and the market for organic products is now well established. Organic standards are defined in European law, based on the principles of environmental and animal-friendly farming methods: artificial fertilizers are banned and organic animals have high welfare standards (including being free range, with access to fields and defined space requirements).²⁶ Licensing and certification are required to formally approve and authenticate products as organic, and regular farm and producer inspections maintain the standards. Depending on the country, it is estimated that the European market for organic produce grew between 5% and 30% within the first few years of this century.²⁷ Now organic produce forms a meaningful component of overall agricultural production: 5.4% of the total utilized agricultural area in the EU in 2012, according to a 2014 Action Plan.

In the 1990s the market for organic food was relatively small, and most purchases took place in health food shops or other specialist outlets like farmers markets. Since 2000, the bulk of sales have shifted to supermarkets, which emphasize reducing the price of organic produce ever closer to that of conventionally farmed produce.²⁸ What was once a niche marketing idea has moved firmly into the mainstream. Policy makers' attention has accordingly shifted from sceptical examination of fundamental claims to acceptance of the marketplace, and along with that a new focus on the market for and marketing of these products: now 'Public policy pervades all elements of food marketing'.²⁹ In 2003 the European Commission funded a three-year, €1.8m study called CONDOR (Consumer Decision Making on Organic Products) to understand in detail consumer behaviour and motivations when purchasing (or not purchasing) fresh and processed organic foods in eight EU countries.³⁰ In July 2008 it launched its ongoing campaign to promote organic farming under the slogan 'Organic farming: Good for nature, good for you'.³¹

Marketing organics

Focused as it is on consumer behaviour, the EU study provides a lot of useful information for those wishing to market organic food. In its detailed interviews with 8400 people, it found that the primary stated motivation for purchasing organic food is one's own health, closely followed by concern for the environment. However, other studies place more emphasis on the individual: 'research indicates that in food choice, environmental friendliness is not a criterion considered to be highly important for most consumers.'³² Those for whom environmental concerns feature in any significant way are described as 'idealistic consumers', who make more frequent purchases but represent a small segment of the overall market.³³ This kind of consumer was focused on numerous additional positive attributes of organic foods, such as improved taste and naturalness. It was suggested that this group has 'more complicated belief structures, attitudes and values than non-organic consumers', and could be said to have a more complex relationship with moral or principled decision-making.³⁴ Whereas 'heavy' buyers of organic produce cared about both personal and social factors, personal health was the most important factor for 'incidental' buyers, who also focused more on negatives like higher price and shorter shelf-life, making decisions not to buy on this basis.³⁵ However, even for these consumers, the survey suggested that the positive moral values associated with participating in activity beneficial to the environment were attributes worth including in marketing messages.³⁶

Increasing trust in organic credentials was seen as a key step in making these products more saleable, but the most important factor was availability. In part, this need was satisfied by the survival and growth of brands developed in the 1970s and by the participation of increasingly large-scale businesses in the organic market. The trajectory of Gregory and Craig Sams, founders in 1967 of a small but fashionable vegetarian and organic restaurant in West London, a magazine (*Seed*), a natural food store and an organic food production and packaging company, provides a good illustration of this phenomenon.³⁷ Their food company became the phenomenally successful Whole Earth brand, while Craig Sams' organic chocolate and ice-cream business, Green & Black's, was purchased in 2005 by Cadbury Schweppes for an undisclosed sum.³⁸ Another, related, strategy to boost both availability and sales was to increase the number of processed foods certified as organic: 'since this [processed food] represents the majority of sales of food products in parts of Europe, represents higher "added value," and in many parts of Europe is where there is real scope for expansion of the organic market'.³⁹ In response to questions about whether processed food really represents the 'natural' image that organic food generally projects, it was suggested that these foods would actually be more positively received since 'they are both convenient and do not offend the consciences of environmentally concerned consumers'.⁴⁰ The same study found, unsurprisingly, that consumers are most interested in taste, in buying food they like.⁴¹ Put together with the primary association of health with organics – for all consumers – one begins to question the ethics of some food manufacturers' adoption of the organic

label. Although one of the EU's main justifications for introducing a Regulation (rather than a less prescriptive Directive) on organic food labelling in 2014 was that a Regulation offered more protection from the possible 'confusion and deception of consumers', a glance at the supermarket aisles shows that the word organic on processed foods is no guarantee of a health benefit to consumers or sound practices throughout the production chain.⁴² To some extent, at least, in being adopted into the mainstream and managed by policy-makers as a component of the consumer marketplace, the meaning of 'organic' been subverted to the market's ends.

Organic and biodynamic agriculture developed as a response to concerns about the degradation of the Earth and the health of the humans living on it. Viewing the Earth's soil as living matter, early proponents hoped to restore it to an earlier, purer state. In doing so, humans could be returned to their optimum level of 'natural' health. Food production methods and food supply structures were seen as fundamental means by which messages could be communicated, solutions proposed and action taken. Organic and biodynamic food products remained relatively niche commodities in the UK and the US until the late 1980s, when, Allison James argues, several developments in the wider culture conspired to give organic food or 'eating green' wider appeal.⁴³ Growing public awareness of environmental and ecological issues (such as global warming) combined with the fear engendered by various food-related health scares to make organic messages appealing to a broader population of consumers – which, in turn, made organics an attractive and potentially profitable market for large producers.⁴⁴ Organic's traditional association with individual health as well as planetary health could be turned to the marketers' advantage. In a situation like the UK's BSE crisis, when human 'culture had temporarily lost control over nature', the alignment by marketers of organic methods with what was natural and respectful of traditional ecological boundaries made its message welcome.⁴⁵

While the ready availability of organic and 'whole' products might assist many people in realizing a new pattern of ethical or ecological eating, its association with the very peak of the industrialized food system sits less comfortably with the social vision that informed many of the underlying principles of its early twentieth century origins and the late twentieth century counterculture that championed it. Today, policymakers and consumer marketers alike assert that messages about individual health – rather than planetary health – seem to be most meaningful to the majority of the potential purchasers of these foods. The new place and positioning in the consumer marketplace of organic, whole and health foods meant that it became possible for individuals to participate in this new style of apparently healthier and more ethical eating without converting wholesale to the spiritual or political extremes associated with the movements in their early stages. Only when cleansed of its troubling 'muck and mystery', hippie tarnish and transformative visions was this mode of shopping and eating ready to join the mainstream of twenty-first-century consumer society. We may have made progress, and that might be all that matters – but perhaps in the process we have lost track of the dream.

Notes

1. Keith Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1982).
2. There is a long tradition of associating indulgent, sweet and/or chocolatey foods with ideas of sinfulness. A memorable example of this in the UK is the 'Naughty, But Nice' advertising campaign for cream cakes run by the Milk Marketing Board between 1978 and the mid-1980s, and (perhaps mythically) associated with Salman Rushdie's stint as an advertising copywriter at Ogilvy & Mather. Other products like 'dirty' potato chips attempt to subvert the idea of crisps as unhealthy by acknowledging a negative in the name whilst claiming the positive benefits of a lack of processing; while 'dirty' nachos which use language as license to celebrate their lack of healthiness.
3. Gene R. Laczniak and Patrick E. Murphy, 'Fostering Ethical Marketing Decisions', *Journal of Business Ethics*, 10 (1991), pp. 259–71 (p. 265).
4. The first UK experiment comparing organic and non-organic (conventional) farming methods, the Haughley Experiment, was set up by Lady Eve Balfour in 1939, providing material for her book *The Living Soil* (1943). Lord Northbourne's book *Look to the Land* (1940) coined the term 'organic farming'.
5. Erin Gill, 'New Thoughts on the Failure of the Organic Food & Farming Movement in Postwar Britain', *Annual Conference of the British Economic History Society* (2009) (University of Warwick, 2009) <http://www.eringill.co.uk/conference_papers.html>. It is worth noting in this context that the cooperative Whole Food Society was formed in the same year: see Philip Conford, *The Development of the Organic Network: Linking People and Themes, 1945–95* (Edinburgh: Floris, 2011), pp. 223–25.
6. Julie Guthman, *Agrarian Dreams: The Paradox of Organic Farming in California* (Berkeley: U California P, 2004), p. 120.
7. Evelyn Barbara Lady Balfour, *The Living Soil. Evidence of the Importance to Human Health of Soil Vitality, with Special Reference to Post-war Planning*, rev. edn. (London: Soil Association, 2006), p. 196.
8. Guthman, p. 120.
9. Balfour, p. 135.
10. G. T. Wrench, *The Wheel of Health* (London: C. W. Daniel Company, 1941 [1938]), p. 99; Erin Gill, 'The Impact of the Early British Organic Movement's Anti-Science Bias and New Age Religious Beliefs on Relations with Agricultural Scientists and Policy Makers', *The Environmental Histories of Europe and Japan: September 2010, The Kobe Institute, Kobe, Japan* (Nagoya: Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Nagoya University, 2011), pp. 201–13.
11. Wrench, p. 93–95. The Hunza proved not to have increased resistance to disease, nor to have discovered the secret of longevity. For full destruction of the myth, see Harvey Levenstein, 'Santé-bonheur', *Manger Magique: Aliments Sorcières, Croyances Comestibles*, ed. by Claude Fischler (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 1994), pp. 156–68.
12. Wrench, p. 101.
13. Balfour, pp. 145–51; pp. 136–41.
14. Levenstein, p. 165.
15. This phrase, also used as 'muck and magic', was initially coined by Howard to discredit Steiner's theories in contrast to his own more rational approach to compost: see Gill, 'New Thoughts', p. 2. It is interesting to note that, in common with many words and phrases once used to attack disliked groups, this phrase was first turned on its inventors themselves, and has now been adopted by its intended victims (organic and biodynamic proponents) as a positive affirmation of their activities.
16. Gill, 'New Thoughts'.
17. Balfour, p. 188.
18. Balfour, p. 189.
19. Jorian Jenks, *The Stuff Man's Made Of. The Positive Approach to Health Through Nutrition* (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 188. There is insufficient room here to investigate the links between fascism or extreme right wing politics and organic and other land-based movements, but it is worth noting that

Jenks' circle was an influential group of right-wing rural revivalists, and that he was apparently encouraged to send copies of his books to former 'blood and soil' Nazi Agriculture Minister Richard Walther Darré after the war.

20. Jenks, p. 180.
21. Jenks, p. 185.
22. Jenks, p. 188.
23. See, for example, Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books in association with Hamish Hamilton, 1965).
24. See, for example, Stephen J. Barrett, 'The Politics of Health Nonsense', *The American Biology Teacher*, 36 (1974), pp. 508–11. Concerns about the ethical behaviour of food marketers continue, with increased awareness about supermarket 'slotting fees' and product dumping. See, for example, Laczniak and Murphy, pp. 259–71.
25. Philip Conford, "'Somewhere Quite Different": The Seventies Generation of Organic Activists and Their Context', *Rural History*, 19 (2008).
26. Soil Association, 'What Is Organic?' (Soil Association UK, 2014) <<http://www.soilassociation.org/whatisorganic>>..
27. European Commission, 'Organic Farming: European Commission Launches New Promotional Campaign for Organic Food and Farming' (Brussels: European Commission, 2008).
28. Timothy A. Park, 'Assessing the Returns from Organic Marketing Channels', *Journal of Agricultural and Resource Economics*, 34 (2009), pp. 483–97 (p. 483).
29. L.B. Fletcher, 'Evolving Public Policy Issues in Food Marketing', *Journal of Farm Economics*, 45 (1965), pp. 1256–66 (p. 1256).
30. The countries involved were Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the UK, giving a range from relatively high levels of existing consumption (e.g. Denmark, Sweden) to relatively low levels (Greece, Spain).
31. European Commission, 'Organic Farming'.
32. Richard Shepherd, Maria Magnusson and Per-Olow Sjöden, 'Determinants of Consumer Behavior Related to Organic Foods', *Ambio*, 34 (2005), pp. 352–59 (p. 352).
33. Shepherd et al., p. 352.
34. European Commission, 'CONDOR: Consumer Decision Making on Organic Products', (University of Surrey, 2006), p. 6 <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/psychology/files/condor_brochure-end.pdf>; Laczniak and Murphy, pp. 259–71.
35. European Commission, 'CONDOR'.
36. European Commission, 'CONDOR'.
37. Conford, *Development of the Organic Network*, pp. 230–36; Gregory Sams, 'Gregory's Story', <<http://www.gregorysams.com/wholefood-history.html>> [accessed 23 September 2014].
38. Ethical concerns raised by this sale (including Cadbury's lack of commitment to Fairtrade) were partly addressed by corporate spokespeople pointing to Cadbury's origins as a Quaker company.
39. Shepherd et al.
40. Shepherd et al., p. 353.
41. Shepherd et al., p. 354.
42. European Commission, 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Organic Production and Labelling of Organic Products [...] Repealing Council Regulation (EC) No 834/2007', ed. by DG Agriculture and Rural Affairs (Brussels: European Commission, 2014), pp. 1–73 (p. 8).
43. Allison James, 'Eating Green(s). Discourses of Organic Food', *Environmentalism: the View from Anthropology*, ed. by Kay Milton (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 205–18, 205.
44. James, p. 213.
45. James, p. 214.