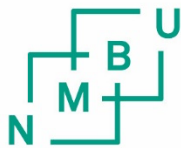

Norwegian University
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Farming as dialogue with the land – Exploring experiences and perspectives of Norwegian, biodynamic farmers.

Skjalg Bjørkevoll
Agroecology

…Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -

over and over announcing your place

in the family of things

Mary Oliver - Wild Geese

Abstract

Modern agriculture, including many alternative farming movements, tends to hold views that maintain a reductionistic and materialistic understanding of the world. This thesis explores perspectives and experiences in Norwegian, biodynamic farmers that goes beyond these worldviews. Through content analysis of two semi-structured interviews and eight informal conversations with farmers over the summer in 2023, I derived four themes that speak to how these farmers approach their work as a dialogue with the land: 1) Staying open, 2) Respecting and recognising others 3) Choosing alternative values, and 4) Being an interconnected part of the whole. I then used the four quadrants model of integral theory to find supportive and obstructive forces that help and hinder the farmers in approaching their work as a dialogue with the land. All of the farmers expressed views or shared from experiences that suggests a non-materialistic perspective. I argue how our inability to validate and support these alternative perspectives of biodynamic farmers and others might in part be an epistemological question pertaining to our tendency to disregard what does not easily fit inside our language, concepts, and current understanding of the world.

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Finally, I want to thank my wife Mackenzie, along with my parents and siblings for always supporting and loving me on this meandering life journey.

Background

What does it mean to be a part of a place? For the last year and a half, I've lived at a small organic farm in Eastern Norway. Among the people living there are the farmer and his wife who together have run the farm for more than 30 years. He grew up on this land. The intimate, tacit knowledge he embodies on everything from weather and soil quality to history and animal husbandry is astonishing. Even more astonishing, is his deep-rooted care, relation and sense of belongingness to this place. He is a part of it and the place is a part of him.

In my own short stay there, I am noticing how I too am developing a deeper sense of connection, intuition, and relation to all the things that happen there. The way the birds sing at sunrise, the unique personalities of every farm animal and the way the trees sway in the breeze at a particular spot in the forest. In turn, all of these experiences are shaping me into something I don't yet fully understand. But I do know that if I wasn't here, I wouldn't have been shaped in this particular way. Our values and sense of self is so closely connected to the place we live and yet this connection is so easily lost, forgotten and overlooked when we talk about farms and food systems.

This thesis has a strong personal motivation and is in many ways an attempt of restoring and rethinking my own spiritual relationship to land and food and life, but also to the rational and scientific world. I wonder how these seemingly contradictory forces can be integrated into a fuller whole.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION **1**

THE CRITICISM OF ALTERNATIVE FARMING MOVEMENTS 1
ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS 3

DESCRIPTION OF RESEARCH **5**

RESEARCH PARADIGM 6
RESEARCH DESIGN 6
DATA COLLECTION 7
DATA ANALYSIS 10

FINDINGS **14**

THEME 1: STAYING OPEN 14
THEME 2: RESPECTING AND RECOGNISING OTHERS 16
THEME 3: CHOOSING ALTERNATIVES VALUES 18
THEME 4: BEING AN INTERCONNECTED PART OF THE WHOLE 20
SUPPORTIVE AND OBSTRUCTIVE FORCES TO THE DIALOGUE 22

DISCUSSION **25**

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH 25
A CHALLENGE OF LANGUAGE 26
BECOMING TRUTH AGNOSTIC 27
CLOSING THOUGHTS 30

LITERATURE **31**

Introduction

To farm is to be in a relationship with the earth. However, the deep-rooted, intimate interdependence of farming is often lost on us and instead we tend to look at farming — the act of tending the land to grow food — as mostly a mechanical and machine-like process (Keller Brummer 2002, Massy 2013). This production paradigm is by Plumwood (2014) described to be rooted in reductionistic thinking and what she calls "the human/nature split". The human mind is seen as separate and something beyond "the mere things of the world" which in turn makes us look at nature as dead and mechanical (Plumwood, 2006; 2014). Furthermore, she argues, this worldview contributes to give us a false sense of autonomy, independence, and power over nature. Regardless of whether one wants to follow Plumwood's arguments or not, there is little doubt that the current state of most modern farming is problematic and has contributed to many of today's big challenges, including pollution of waterways, global warming and biodiversity loss (Jackson, 2010).

The criticism of alternative farming movements

Farming according to agroecological and regenerative principles has been suggested as a solution to many of these problems (Aare et al., 2021; Gosnell, 2021; Hathaway, 2018). However, there has also been criticism that many alternative farming movements do not fully move beyond the paradigm of industrial agriculture. Cox (2014) argues that most of the alternative movements maintain a subtle materialistic worldview which "*does not take into account the subjectivity and inherent value of non-humans beings*". Consider for instance a farmer that turns regenerative and starts to measure the carbon content of their soil or the ecological diversity of their fields. It is easy to imagine that this farmer can maintain the position that the natural processes are still machine-like. In other words, reducing the phenomena to what can be measured and explained. Similar critique has been echoed by others, who claim that modern alternative farming movements often draw inspiration from indigenous cultures, but ignores their ontological and epistemological grounds (Haverkort, 2021; Whitewashed Hope, 2020; Wright, 2022). Finally, Larsen & Johnson (2016) brings forth a similar type of criticism within the fields of geography and geohumanities.

They describe how recent attempts to bring attention and validity to indigenous views on place maintains a subtle Western perspective where a place's validity is dependent on human agency.

The criticism of subtle materialism in farming movements and geohuamanities can be seen in light of what Bland & Bell (2007) call the narrative challenge. In system thinking everything is seen as relational and interconnected with everything else so one needs to make choices of what to include in the system model. These choices are not value free but rooted in the position of whoever makes the model. Furthermore, these choices create a framework or narrative of how one understands the world. So, if we for instance decide that all the things that should be allowed into a model has to be measurable and recognisable by everyone, we will have a hard time appreciating elements that is hard to talk about or measure but nevertheless has a real impact on the world. Things like emotions, social constructs and synchronicities. Another aspect of this is that we often see the world through the lens of our worldview — in other words, we see what we expect to see. In combination, this creates a negative feedback loop where what is outside the scope of our expected worldview, not only is excluded from the models we use to explain the world, but their exclusion from these models makes it harder for us to perceive them and hence reinforces our ignorance of them. A lot of the critique on modern and alternative farming movement can be seen in this context of starting from worldviews that downplay or disregard hard-to-measure aspects such as spirituality, intuitive knowing or the interiority of the more-than-human.

This matters because how we understand and relate to the world shape our experience of it along with our actions. Swan (2010) found through in-depth research of nature activists, that the most powerful motivation for acting in accordance with ecological balance is "*having powerful, exceptional experiences with nature that evoke strong, emotional bonding*". This is congruent with a recent article by Gosnell (2021), where she describes how a change in the farmer's understanding of and connection to the microbiome in their soil made it easier for them to switch to regenerative farming. In the context of the ecological and environmental crises, the need for people to shift their worldview has also been emphasized. (Hathaway, 2018; Hedlund-de Witt, 2013). Lastly, a mindset that allows for deeper connection with nature on the farm also seem to lead to greater

well-being for the humans living there (Ives et al., 2017; Kaufman & Mock, 2014; Soga & Gaston, 2016).

Alternative Frameworks

While I have described much of the modern farming and our understanding of place as reductionistic and mechanistic, there are certainly also movements and perspectives emerging that have started to go beyond them. Some of these perspectives include:

1) ***An all-encompassing self that sees itself as everything and everything as part of itself***. For instance Larsen & Johnson's (2016) concept of the "more-than-human geographical self". Place is here seen as animated and the primary creator of everything happening within it. The place itself possesses similar qualities as the ecological self of Arne Næss (2017): an ability to see itself as part of a greater whole and as part of every plant, animal and lifeforms within the natural environment.
2) ***A re-animating of the natural world.*** Landscapes, rivers, animals and other beings are understood to have agency, intentionality and interiority. This recognition of interiority allows for communication. In the movie "Dancing with Horned Ladies" (Gerritse, 2013) one can see an example of a farmer who attempts to communicate with the cows to create a better farm for all. Another example of acknowledging interiority in nature on a broader scale is the recent phenomenon of giving rivers and other nature entities legal personhood as described by Clark et al. (2019).
3) ***The recognition of nature and mystery acting through the human farmer.*** Central here is a position of wonder and not-knowing. The world is seen as unknowable and mysterious, and the farmer is a part of that world — like a leaf on a tree. Kieft's research on intuition farming (2012) seems to agree with this perspective. As does Fukuoka, the originator of the natural farming movement, when he speaks multiple times on the world as incomprehensible and mysterious. (Fukuoka, 2009)

These types of worldviews, which hold nature as animated and mysterious and intertwined with our sense of self, stand in contrast to much of the modern literature and attitudes on farming and food production. They also have strong overlaps with many indigenous perspectives which typically have a holistic and interconnected way of relating to nature and its resources, while simultaneously acknowledging its intrinsic value (Fernández-Llamazares, 2018). Starting from perspectives like these would no doubt have implications for how we approach both working with the land and how we do research. For instance, if the land can speak, create and teach, as Larsen and Johnson (2016) suggests, it follows that part of our role as humans should be to listen, participate and learn from it.

Within the regenerative farming literature, there has been recent attempts at looking at farming through a relational lens. Seymour & Connoly (2023) make the distinction between "practicing regenerative" and "being regenerative". They argue, as I do, that most research tend to focus on the practical applications of regenerative farming and not so much on the mindset-shift that is needed (ibid). Interestingly, in interview excerpts from their study, some of the farmers demonstrate worldviews and value systems that incorporates non-materialistic dimensions. Statements such as "*loving their weeds*" and "*looking after Mother Earth*" indicates attitudes that goes beyond the rationale of the production mindset and bears similarities to some of the ontological positions presented in the previous section. This may indicate that the subtle materialistic focus within alternative agriculture discourses is partially a problem of narratives. It has been argued that the views that are presented officially in many of these movements, may not fully embrace many of the underlying personal views held by people within those same movements (Pigott, 2021; Wright, 2021). This leaves an interesting knowledge gap. How does farmers truly experience their relationship with the land and the more-than-human ecology they are a part of?

Description of Research

In the research for this thesis, my aim has been to explore experiences and perspectives that goes beyond the mechanistic and reductionistic ways of experiencing the world, through in-debt interviews, participant observations and informal conversations on three biodynamical farms in Norway. I've framed these perspectives as a farmer's dialogue with the living land and arrived at the following research questions:

> *How are some ways biodynamic farmers experience and perceive their work as a dialogue with the land?*
>
> *How can this dialogue be facilitated?*

A dialogue, according to David Bohm (2004) indicates a form of conversation where none of the participants sits with the full knowledge. Further, it asks of the participants in the dialogue to stay right on the edge of their knowledge. This allows for new insights to come true. There is often a shared feeling among the participants of what ought to happen next. Dialogue also implies that what we are dealing with is dynamic and ever-changing processes. The land includes every being that inhabits it, the farm as a whole and the surrounding land. It is hence wider than just the than the geographical and social boundaries of the farm itself.

A dialogue between the farmer and the land hence describes the process in which humans and the more-than-human elements of the land co-create and participate in the continuation and evolution of the farm and place as a whole.

Research Paradigm

Research is stronger when there's an understanding of the researcher's ontological and epistemological grounds. Epistemology is the philosophy of how we know the world and ontology is the philosophy of how the world really is. Together, they define how we understand the world and how believe we can know it.

The ontological position of this thesis is relational and process ontology. Rather than looking at the world — or anything in it — as static, the world is understood as an ever-evolving process of continuous becoming, where all things of the world are seen as relational to one another. The focus is therefore on how things interact to continuously co-create the world.

The epistemological approach of the thesis is constructivism. It takes the position that knowledge and hence the world as we know it, is a social construct that is continuously being recreated through reflection, dialogue and experiences. Knowledge is seen as constructed and ever-changing and there is therefore no absolute truth that can be known. Since how we "know" the world shapes our experience of it - and vice versa - it follows that knowledge and experience is closely tied together. Through the interviews and conversations, my focus is hence on how the farmers experience and understand their own lifeworlds: stories, memories, analogies and perspectives that can shed light on the ways they relate to the living land and their conversation with it.

Research Design

In designing the research, I decided to go with a qualitative and explorative approach with focus on interviews and informal conversations. My original thought was to do multiple case studies since the case study approach is relevant to describing "why" questions of social phenomena. (Yin, 2018). However, throughout the project I realised that case studies might not accurately describe what I was doing, especially in regard to the informal conversations which did not feel in-debt enough to be cases on their own.

As mentioned, the aim of the research was primarily to discover experiences and perspectives off the farmers that went beyond the materialistic and quantifiable. Semi-structured interviews and informal conversation seemed to be a good fit for this as it would allow room for them to share things outside of what I might have expected in advance. I wanted to supplement the interviews and conversations with participant observations, but due to the research taking place in high season I was only able to fully do this on one farm. Before doing the recorded interviews, I made it a point to build report with the participants so that they would feel more at ease. Afterwards, I allowed time for debrief where the participants could talk about their interview experience and the topics, we discussed without the recorder running. In this way the recorded interviews felt like a part of a longer conversation and the atmosphere during the interviews felt mostly easy and conversational.

For my research participants I chose to talk with biodynamic farmers. The biodynamic movement has been described as the Western farming movement that most clearly voices an interior dimension (Wright, 2022). Biodynamic farming originated from the agricultural lectures of Rudolf Steiner in 1924 (Steiner, 2013) and there are currently about 20 biodynamic farms in Norway. (Biologisk-Dynamisk Forening, n. d.) Biodynamic farmers claim to have a holistic, ecological and ethical approach to farming, advocating for biodiversity and soil fertility. They take a holistic view were they look at the farm as a living, self-sustained organism. (Biodynamic Demeter Alliance, n. d.) Furthermore, they use special preparations to prepare and fertilise the land, and often sow according to the planetary calendar. (ibid) These practices are highly contested and often met with skepsis and ridicule by the scientific community (Chalker-Scott, 2013; Kirchmann, 1994). Yet, this opening towards the spiritual and inexplainable may allow bio-dynamic farmers to see the world in a different way; one that incorporates elements like mystery, energy and attentiveness to the relationships and agency between human and the more-than-human (Pigott, 2021). This makes them an interesting subject for this thesis.

Data Collection

The fieldwork took place on three bio-dynamic farms in Norway during July and August 2023 (see Table 1). The data was collected through two recorded, semi-structured interviews and eight unrecorded informal conversations/interviews. As the thesis is explorative in nature, I aimed to

find farmers with different contexts in terms of crops, living situation, age etc., hoping that they could touch on different aspects of living in conversation and connection with the land. I found the farmers through the official biodynamic website of Norway (biodynamisk.no) and proceeded to reach out to a handful of them through an email where I explained the project, it's aims, and what their involvement would mean for them. I reached out to seven different farms before finding the three I included in my research: a vegetable farm primarily selling to restaurants in Oslo, a small farm that sells honey while developing their land, and a Camphill community with 150 inhabitants that grows food for their own use. All interviews and conversations were done in Norwegian.

The first recorded interview I did was with a young vegetable farmer, "David", who had just taken over the farm from his parents. At the time I visited, there were around ten people working there mostly in various work exchanges or through school internships. I was invited to stay and work on the farm for three days. The bulk of the work was weeding, washing vegetables and tying up tomato plants. I worked a lot alongside David which allowed me to build rapport with him and learn about him and the farm. He also gave me a small tour of the farm when I arrived. The interview was done in his house in the evening of the second day and lasted 72 minutes. My fieldwork was in the middle of the busiest season for his farm, and out of all the people I talked with he seemed the most stressed. Nevertheless, he went to great lengths to show me his farm and for the interview he carved out plenty of time to really sink into the conversation. In addition to the main farmer, I also had in-depth informal conversations with two people from Kalø — an organic agriculture school in Denmark — that were interning on the farm and several others of the interns. These conversations were without notes and happened randomly throughout my stay there, so while they aren't included directly in the data analysis, they no doubt helped form my understanding and awareness of the questions at hand.

The second recorded interview was done at the smaller farm as a double interview with "Tom" and "Amanda" — the couple living there while running the farm. They bought the farm around eight years ago and had also spend most of their lives farming. The biggest production was honey from their bees that they would sell on markets and through local shops. In addition, they grew vegetables and had recently introduced sheep to the land. Both Tom and Amanda had work

outside of the farm and were hence not dependent on it for its income, Amanda had a job with an organic food seed company. I asked them if I could stay and work for a few days, but they were too busy at the time to facilitate. Nevertheless, when I came out for the interview, they gave me a full tour of the property and we had lunch together which helped build rapport. The interview itself was done on their porch overlooking their land with both of them together. It lasted 82 minutes. Both of the recorded interviews were transcribed within 2-3 days after my visit.

The last farm I visited for the data collection was a Camphill community with around 150 people. A Camphill community is a place where people come together to create an intentional community in the anthroposophy tradition. Among the villagers are both fully functional people as well as people with development challenges that all work and live alongside each other. While not everyone in the village is farming. Agriculture and food culture is an integral part of the village. There were a lot of different productions and farm activities happening on this farm. They kept livestock, made cheeses and breads, grew vegetables, grew herbs, made compost, and gathered wild herbs from the surrounding nature. Most of what they produce was used within the village. In addition, they did a lot of arts and crafts. I visited the farm on two separate days and got a full tour of the place. I also had longer conversations with six of them: the main vegetable gardener, the herb gardener, the wild plant forager, the cheesemaker, a retired farmer, and the person responsible for setting up and running their compost and water treatment systems. I originally planned to go out there and scout the place and potentially set up an interview, but the person who showed me around (the cheese maker) had already arranged for me to talk with four of them and I ended up taking notes on the conversation as they were happening. I felt what came up in the conversations was good and I decided to use my notes as they were. I came out a second day to talk with the compost maker who wasn't available the first time around, and later had a long phone call with the retired farmer. Most of the talks were done at the place they worked. I wrote down as much as I could remember immediately after each of these conversations and also took notes during them. The length of the conversations varied: the shortest conversation took about 20 minutes, three of them were around 30-40 minutes long, while two of them lasted well over an hour. All of them except the one with the retired farmer

involved the participants showing me parts of what they were working on in addition to the conversations. This was helpful in bringing the conversations to life.

Table 1: Overview of farms and participants for the fieldwork.

Type of Farm	People on the farm	Data Collection
Vegetable farm — sells to restaurants in Oslo and through their farm shop.	Around 10-14 people, most of whom are interns or woofers.	Semi-structured interview with lead farmer "David", participant observations, informal conversations with two interns.
Small farm, honey with some vegetables, berries, and sheep.	Tom and Amanda live and run the farm on their own.	Semi-structured double interview with "Tom" and "Amanda".
Camphill village with production of vegetables, milk, meat, herbs, cheese and breads. Primarily for their own use.	Home of around 150 people, though not all of them are involved in the farming.	Informal conversations/interviews with six people: - Vegetable gardener - Herb gardener - Wild herb gatherer - Cheese maker - Compost maker - Retired Farmer

Data Analysis

For analysing the data I used a content analysis method similar to what is described by Graneheim & Lundman (2004). In this process I combined the two full length interviews as my main "unit of analysis" since full length interviews are both "large enough to be considered a

whole" while they're also easy to divide into smaller segments or so-called meaning units. (Ibid), state that full length interviews are one of the most suitable units for this type of analysis (Ibid). In addition, I used the notes from my informal conversations to supplement the longer interview units. The notes from the conversations are weaker data than what came from the recorded interviews since it's harder to go back and look at what was said in the context of a full conversation, and I also don't have full quotes. I still believe they are useable especially since this thesis is explorative in nature. In addition to the interview transcripts and informal conversation notes, I added my own observation notes from my farm visit and participant observation as a separate category.

The content analysis process is done by dividing the units of analysis into smaller "meaning units" that one can then place into mutual exclusive categories. These meaning units are then condensed and further interpreted and finally turned into codes or sub-themes. From these sub-themes we can start to search for the broader themes. While categories answers a "what" and is mutually exclusive, themes aim to answer a "how" and is described as a "thread of underlying meaning that runs through condensed meaning units, codes or categories on an interpretive level. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) In other words themes are a way to organise and present our interpretation of the underlying data.

For the content analysis I used two categories: 1) interviews and conversations, which came from the transcripts and my informal conversations notes, and 2) observations, which were my own observations from the farm visits, participant observation and also the interviews themselves. After transcribing the interviews, I read through the text three times to get a good sense of the whole. I then divided the transcripts into meaning units. The next step of the process was condensing the meaning unit into interpretive meaning units. This is the step where I moved from trying to extract exactly what was said, to interpret the underlying meaning or attitude in the context of my research question. Sometimes this would be straightforward and other times it would be more challenging. When I was unsure about how to understand a statement or story, I would go back to reading bigger segments of the interview to put it in context. Most of the notes from the informal conversations would not have an original meaning unit but would instead be inserted at this level of the data analysis. This is also the point where I translated the content

from Norwegian to English. From these interpretive meaning units, I searched for sub-themes which was then used as the basis for the four main themes that are presented in the findings section of the thesis. Table 2 shows examples from the data analysis process.

Table 2: Examples from the data analysis process.

Meaning unit (translated from Norwegian)	Interpreted meaning unit	Sub-theme/codes	Main Theme
From field notes - no full quote	Nature and elemental beings speak to her and guides her.	Living in dialogue with elemental beings, Being guided	**Respecting and recognising others** **Staying open**
A chicken needs something to wash itself in, sand, and shall be able to search for its food, peck around, because then they have something to do and don't get bored	Cares for his animals' well-being, seeks to understands and meet their needs.	Respect for animals, empathy, Animal welfare.	**Respecting and recognising others** **Choosing alternative values**

Meaning unit (translated from Norwegian)	Interpreted meaning unit	Sub-theme/codes	Main Theme
A pig farmer probably wants what is best for his pigs, but he runs it in a way that is not good for pigs or chickens, but he does everything he can so that the animals will have it as good as possible with the tools he has, but it's just not right that a chicken is in a cage so the whole premise is wrong.	Empathises with conventional farmers, beliefs everyone wants the best for their animals but get caught in the system.	Respect and empathy for conventional farmers, Animal welfare	**Respecting and recognising others**
My attitude I believe was that of course one has respect for everyone. And slowly as one goes deeper ang get to know the anthroposophy it was "of course, I know that already" I understand almost nothing of it, and still there was a recognition: the general attitude of respecting everyone and everything".	Connected initially with anthroposophy through its attitude of respecting others.	Respect for everyone and everything,	**Respecting and recognising others**

Findings

Through the data analysis I emerged at four main themes that relate to the question of how bio-dynamic farmers approach their work as a dialogue with the living land. 1) Staying open, 2) Respecting and recognising others, 3) Choosing alternative values, and 4) Being an interconnected part of the whole.

I have presented the results by describing important sub-themes under each theme and including numerous direct quotes from the participants to help bring transparency, clarity and a sense of aliveness to the process. Finally, I looked at elements that seemed to help or hinder the farmers approach their work as a dialogue with the land. All quotes have been translated from Norwegian.

Theme 1: Staying open

A major theme that emerged through the data was "staying open". Several times when I asked the farmers how one could best facilitate a dialogue with the land their answers came as one of the sub-themes presented here or just in the general guideline of staying open.

Staying open to one's senses and intuition: An openness to intuition and other alternative forms of knowledge seemed an integral part in navigating farm-life for several of the biodynamic farmers. Tom spoke about a time he had cows and how he just knew that one of the cows were ill. "I would always go into the barn in the evening before bed, just to sweep a little, and one time I looked at one of the cows and I just knew she wasn't healthy". He further expressed his frustration with the overuse of analytics and data measuring in the decision-making process of modern farms. The Steiner lectures, he explained, keeps a bigger emphasis on using the body and intuitive mind as an instrument - for instance by walking over the fields and sensing what the soil needs. Rather he advocated for using the body as an instrument by staying open to what one could sense. The herb gardener spoke along the same lines when she explained how she never listened to music while doing mundane tasks like weeding because she needed to be present to what she was doing. In this way she would pick up more information from the plants as she was working. Intuition was described as something that takes the shape of a soft whisper rather than a

well-reasoned argument. The cheese maker described it as meditative, while the wild herb gatherer mentioned how she had to be calm and "unemotional" to be able to pick up the subtle guidance of intuition in nature.

Staying open to guidance: The wild herb gatherer explained how she would let herself "be lead" by nature and elemental beings to know where to go, and how she would trust her feeling and intuition in deciding how much to pick a certain plant. This worked best when she had plenty of time, she explained. Amanda detailed how the evolution of their farm had been a sort of conversation between the land and themselves — how they could never have known where they would have ended up now when they first started. By remaining open and living their questions things would arise for them and make sense. Things that wouldn't have come about if they had rigidly followed their initial plan: "All one can do is to remain open and try one's best" she explained.

Staying open to new ways of seeing: David spoke about a practice they were encouraged to do in a bio-dynamic workshop. They would look at a place on the farm and try to see it, not as they usually see it, but with new eyes. He said this always felt worthwhile, yet in the everyday stress and busyness of the farm he rarely finds time or energy for it. Amanda talked about the importance of asking questions of the things we often take for granted: "*I think it's important to ask the question: What really happens? When one sows and watches these tiny seeds and then sees this gigantic mass of leaves on the earth today, how does that happen? I think one needs to ask these questions and wonder and then one gets to know what's there in a way you can't know by just reading…*".

Living one's questions: Several of the farmers highlighted how there were many things they did not yet know or didn't understand. For instance, the wild herb gatherer said that much of what she relied on in her craft could not be explained or proven. Still, many saw it as important to remain open and "*live the questions*" as Amanda put it. David had doubts around some of the biodynamic practices but balanced that doubt with belief in the holistic approach of the movement. However, his openness to this doubt seemed to also play a part in his journey to understand what truly mattered to him, what he believed in, and how he wanted to continue the

farm. Another aspect of living one's question was experimentation. David and Tom mentioned as a vital part of finding one's way. David described how important it was to try out his ideas that he wanted to implement to get feedback on them, yet also how it was challenging to find time and energy for it. On the same note, the compost maker described how they had developed the compost system through a process of trial and error while holding the question of how to best make use of the food waste resource.

Theme 2: Respecting and recognising others

Another recurring theme was the deep respect held for other beings and the land itself. Part of this is also in recognising them and their agency and in seeking to understand their needs and perspectives.

Respecting animals: Tom mentioned how respect for the animals was actually what sparked his interest in alternative farming. Many years ago, he met a butcher that would go out into the field and kill an animal only after saying a verse for it and then let it bleed out in the field: "*Imagine butchering an animal, but first you say a verse for it… in a normal slaughterhouse… it's just a big factory. So then it started really*". Respect for the animals continued to act as a guiding principle for him. He would, for instance, let the bees express themselves as naturally as possible by letting them keep their unproductive drone bees and letting them build their own wax screens. When I carelessly asked how much honey they produced he corrected me quickly: "*it's the bees that produce the honey*". David expressed the importance of letting his chickens display natural behaviours like sand bathing and exploring the area. His inability to provide them with what he felt was a good enough habitat and enough attention was a contributing factor in why they no longer had chickens.

Respecting elemental beings: For some of the farmers, respect for others also extended to the non-physical "elemental beings" that are a part of the biodynamic lore. Elemental beings are nature spirits that can help or hinder progress on the farm. Both Amanda and Tom talked about making places for them by setting up wind sculptures and creating habitat on the farm for them. The compost maker explained his belief that when something stopped working it could be seen

as the elemental beings acting up because the farm was moving forward in an unbalanced and disharmonious ways. This encouraged the farm to look for neglected areas or imbalances in their operation rather than just fixating on the problem. It is worth noting though that not all of the people I talked with mentioned them.

Respecting conventional farmers and consumers: David, Tom and Amanda all expressed sympathy and understanding for the way of life that conventional and organic farmers lives. All of them held beliefs that despite their farming practices, most farmers cared for their animals and wanted their animals to have a good life. Rather, they thought a lot of them was caught up in a system that pushed them in a direction with smaller and smaller margins and less wiggle room. The older farmer I talked with on the phone expressed how he respected anyone who took it on them to work with the soil and the land. David further expressed understanding for consumers who doesn't have the means or the knowledge to buy and make healthy food choices.

Respecting the land: There was also an aspect of respecting the land as a whole. The wild herb gatherer would often leave plants she found untouched if the patch was too small, or she felt it was too early in the season. Amanda spoke about the importance of also asking questions like "*what does the land want?"* as planned for the development of the land. Amanda talked about how she thought the land was happy with the changes they had put in motion during their time there. Tom talked about the importance of recognising the farm's characteristics or individuality when developing the land: "*A farm can have its own individuality that is completely different from a farm on the west coast or even one just 20 minutes from here*", and with that pointing out that every place has its own needs that one should seek to understand.

Acknowledging the inherent power imbalances: For many of the farmers respect for others also came through as a recognition of the uneven power dynamics between the humans and the other beings on the farm and with that the recognition that they need to be treated with decency. The compost maker spoke about how we as humans had a special responsibility to take care of nature and the animals and ecosystems that we made decisions for, while Tom mentioned

how the most important element of a farm was the humans working there since they would make the decisions. Both David and the retired farmer said they didn't think of themselves as owning the farms, but rather saw themselves as having the responsibility to take care of them for a time.

Theme 3: Choosing alternatives values

An important aspect of living in conversation with the land were the expression and demonstration of alternative values and priorities compared to materialistic and reductionistic worldviews. It was apparent that many of the farmers I talked with had spent a lot of time reflecting on what they deemed important and had chosen their values deliberately. This theme seems especially important when facing the challenge of making the farm financially sustainable.

Valuing healthy and tasty food: "*What is a good Tomato?*" Amanda asked rhetorically at one point in the interview. She mentioned how for a conventional farmer caught up in a production mindset it might be its transportability and ability to stay sellable for a long time, while for others, including herself, a good tomato is primarily one that tastes good and has high nutritional value. Through this she highlights the importance of values and showcases her own. David congruently mentioned the importance of growing healthy food that is" poison-free" and high in nutrition, while the retired farmer and the vegetable gardener both touched on how bio-dynamic food was healthier than the conventional grown.

Valuing beauty and the feeling of a place: How a place feels, and its beauty was a vital part of how the farmers valued the land. Farm decisions that do not make rational or economic sense, like maintaining a small number of cows or tending to non-commercial flower beds, were often found worthwhile when the feeling or beauty of a place was considered. As David put it after considering the potential financial benefit of getting rid of the cows: "*A farm without animals, what's left?*". He further expressed his desire to create a beautiful "garden of Eden". Tom expressed similar feelings regarding their bees. "*When they are away on their summer pastures, the place doesn't feel the same!*". Amanda told me a story form the day they introduced sheep to their farm touching on the non-quantifiable value they brought "…*and when they came out of the car, the place changed… it was like the place itself was lacking such an animal.*". At the Camphill farm, beauty was also in focus. The

vegetable farmer explained that by dispersing their gardens throughout the village the place got more beautiful and the villagers also saw the gardens more in their everyday. The herb gardener talked about how the gardens' different patterns and shapes created a different feeling then if they had been straight.

Valuing balance: Balance is an integral part of the biodynamic approach so there is no surprise that many of the farmers touched on this. Tom spoke about what makes Alm Østre, a big biodynamic farm, so unique compared to a conventional farm: "*They shall strive to deliver quality food and develop the farm and soils as it should be, which is in balance*". David and the cheese maker both discussed the number of animals on their farms in terms of having the right balance in manure for the land and food for the animals. Part of the balance aspect is also recognising that any external input like fertilisers is seen as a symptom of an imbalance on the farm. Tom used the medicine analogy to explain this: "*When do I need medicine? I use medicine when there's something out of balance, but the idea is to stop using it when the balance is restored*". Amanda also touched on balance and said that the environmental problem of today is the world being out of balance.

Valuing animal welfare: As mentioned, respect for animals came up often and this also came through in making sure that the animals were as healthy and happy as they could be. Tom mentioned the importance of seeking to meet the animal's needs: "One try to meet them [and their needs] as much as possible". Both David and the cheese maker also expressed importance on their animals being happy and having good lives.

Valuing being an inspiration: Tom spoke of the inspirational effect that big bio-dynamic farms like Alm Østre can have and how even their striving to become self-reliant can have a great ripple effect: "*Just the thought itself that there is a farm, Alm Østre, that doesn't buy anything from outside*…". David mentioned multiple times his desire to share what they had created on the farm with others. At one point in the interview, he started to imagine how people could come and hang out with a cow as therapy. He saw the farm and what they were doing there as more than just the products they sold, but as a sort of "*garden of Eden*" and wanted to share this other dimension with his neighbours and customers.

Theme 4: Being an interconnected part of the whole

Another commonality among the farmers was the importance of considering their role and the farm's role as an interconnected part of a bigger whole - how everything affects everything else. In fact, all three of the farmers I had in-debt interviews with as well as several of the others including the vegetable farmer and the two interns mentioned the holistic approach of bio-dynamic as one of the main reasons they agreed with the movement. The holistic attitude came both in recognising how things happening on the farm affected the outside world and vice versa, but also in feeling personally connected to the farm, the work there and the wider world.

Being part of the wider world: While self-reliance is part of the ethos for biodynamic farmers, there is still a connection with the outside world. David talked about how the farm is connected to its surroundings: "*The surrounding nature affects us. The deer that come out of the forest eat our salad, but what else? They leave muck, they bring bacteria onto our fields, they bring insects, they bring ticks and then there are all the birds that flies, and they also have some sort of effect and that's okay. And what we do has an impact on the Oslo fjord, we have an effect on our surroundings, but our surroundings affect us back*". He also saw this in terms of social impact: *"…also the local people that come and shop here. Are they interested? Can we do anything for them? What kind of effect do they have on us?*"

Being a part of the history: David saw himself as a "small piece in the place's greater story" and emphasised how all the things they did had to make sense also in a 100-year perspective. He wanted to leave the soil and the farm in a better place than when he found it. This attitude of seeing oneself as a small piece in the greater story also came up in the conversation with the retired farmer who expressed deep gratitude of having been allowed to be a part of the biodynamic movement in its early phase.

Being a part of cosmos: A lot of the more special practices like preparations and the planting by the lunar calendar was rooted in a worldview of being affected by the planetary forces. Both David and Amanda mentioned how it was accepted knowledge that the sun and the moon affects life on earth, and then questioned how we could be so certain that other planets are not making a

difference. Tom explained how each of the preparations had a relationship to one or more of the planets and by using them they increased their effect on the soil.

Being a part of the mystery: Most of the farmer said that there are things they did not understand or at least couldn't explain to others, yet their lived experience had taught them to trust these phenomena. This includes how the wild herb gatherer let herself be led by nature and intuition and how the cheesemaker would talk with elemental beings even though it felt a bit weird to him. David expressed how he couldn't rationally understand some of the biodynamic practices but stayed open to the possibility of them working. Being part of the mystery also showed itself as awe and wonder of the miracle of life itself for instance when Amanda shared her astonishment of how a little seed could become a plant. Tom expressed something similar when he wondered how we extract life force and energy from the food we eat.

***Feeling connected through one's work*:** One of the first things David shared in the interview was how he as a young boy realised his interconnection with the farm through work in the carrot field. "*I had worked for five hours, and that was long right, the little boy, and it was in that moment when I suddenly felt that what happened on the farm - it wasn't just a place I lived - it also gave me something*". This and other similar experiences he had growing up seemed very important in making him desire taking over the farm. On a similar emotional note, the retired farmer I talked with on the phone expressed a deep gratitude for having been allowed to be a part of the alternative and bio-dynamic farming movement and thereby participating in "the immense greatness of life". The feeling of interconnection of one's personal story and the story of the farm seemed to bring great meaning and joy to both of them. The herb gardener also seemed to thrive through her connection in working with the plants. During the weekdays a lot of her work consisted of guiding others, and she were not able to really sink into her own flow. Because of this, she would often work on her weekends just to be able to connect in this way.

Feeling connected through one's work was affected by technological advances. The cheesemaker mentioned how moving away from hand-milking the cows to using machines had created a greater disconnect between the animals and the humans on the farm. While he recognised how it

had made the day-to-day easier, he also felt that something had been lost. David, as mentioned, also felt frustration for the heavy use of data analytics in modern farms' decision making.

Supportive and obstructive forces to the dialogue

The second part of the research question was "*How can this dialogue be facilitated?*". Through looking at the conversations and interviews it became apparent that there were factors and behaviours that supported and obstructed the farmers' abilities to approach work as a dialogue with the land. In looking at these factors I used the four quadrants model found in integral theory, that was developed by Ken Wilber. Esbjorn-Hargens (2009) argues that in order to get a basic understanding of any phenomenon one needs to consider it from four irreducible perspectives that one finds by combining the interior/exterior and individual/collective in a four quadrant grid (see Figure 1). Using the four quadrants ensures that we are looking at a given phenomenon both from the personal, cultural, behavioural and systemic perspectives. These perspectives coincide with our everyday language of I (upper left), we (lower left), and it/its (right side). The right side of the grid represents the exterior or "objective" point of view found in natural sciences while the left-hand side represents the interior or subjective points of view. The four quadrant framework have seen use in many fields and also within an agricultural context by Gosnell (2021).

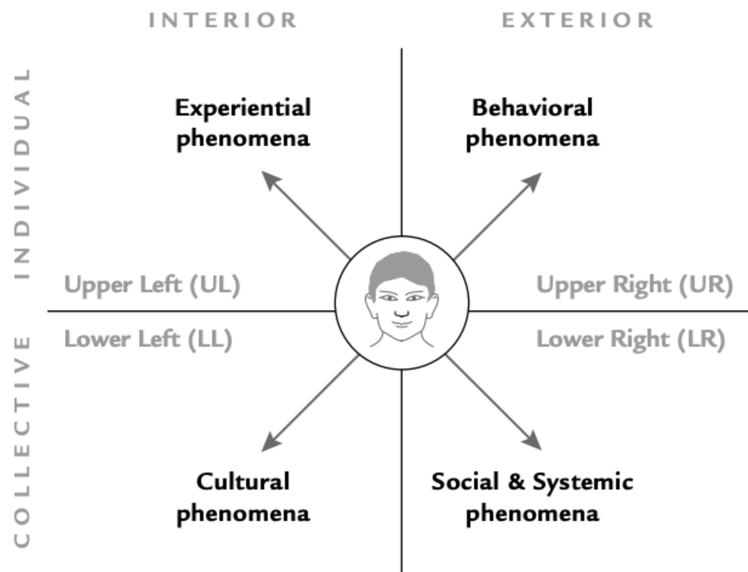

Figure 1: the four quadrants of an individual (Esbjorg-Hargens, 2009)

Experiential (UL): On the personal level, several farmers mentioned emotional turmoil and stress as something that made it difficult to access intuition and a feeling of connection. On the other hand, reflecting on their values and meaning, living their questions, and feeling awe and

wonder around what happened on the farm helped some of the farmers I talked with on an experiential level.

Behaviour (UR): One of the main tensions that emerged on the behavioural level was the use of technology versus using the body as an instrument. Over-reliance of technology, such as using data analysis programs or even listening to music while working acted as distractions and crutches that would often stand in the way of the farmers' ability to listen to their intuition, their senses, and also in connecting with the beings on the land.

Cultural (LL): Several of the farmers expressed frustration in trying to explain some of their approaches to people outside of the biodynamic community, I also saw it first hand in the interviews how sometimes the people I interviewed would try to justify their beliefs as if they needed to defend them. Both David and the herb gardener also explained how leading others sometimes would get in the way of their connection with the land, and how they felt most in tune when they could work on their own. Developing relationships and familiarity with animals, elemental beings and other more-than-human spirits like a forest patch seemed to be a powerful way to access farming as dialogue. These relationships seemed to be strengthened by the farmers putting value on protecting and building habitat and diversity on their farms.

Systemic (LR): On the systemic level the pressure to turn a profit was an obvious one. Out of all the people I spoke with, only David was fully dependent on the farm for his finances, and he also seemed to be under the most stress out of all the people I talked with. Both Amanda and Tom had also been dependent on farm economies previously in their lives and empathised with the challenges of using alternative farming approaches in a society and system that holds cost-cutting and effectiveness as the highest standard. On the other hand, wider social systems can also act in their benefit. The support the farmers felt from their local communities and customers that value what the farm is doing, and also finding support from being a part of the history of the farm and the place itself was important for continuing to farm according to their alternative values.

In Figure 2 some of these supportive and obstructive forces is presented in a force field diagram. The forces on the left are elements that help the farmers approach their work as a dialogue with the land and the elements on the right are obstructing this.

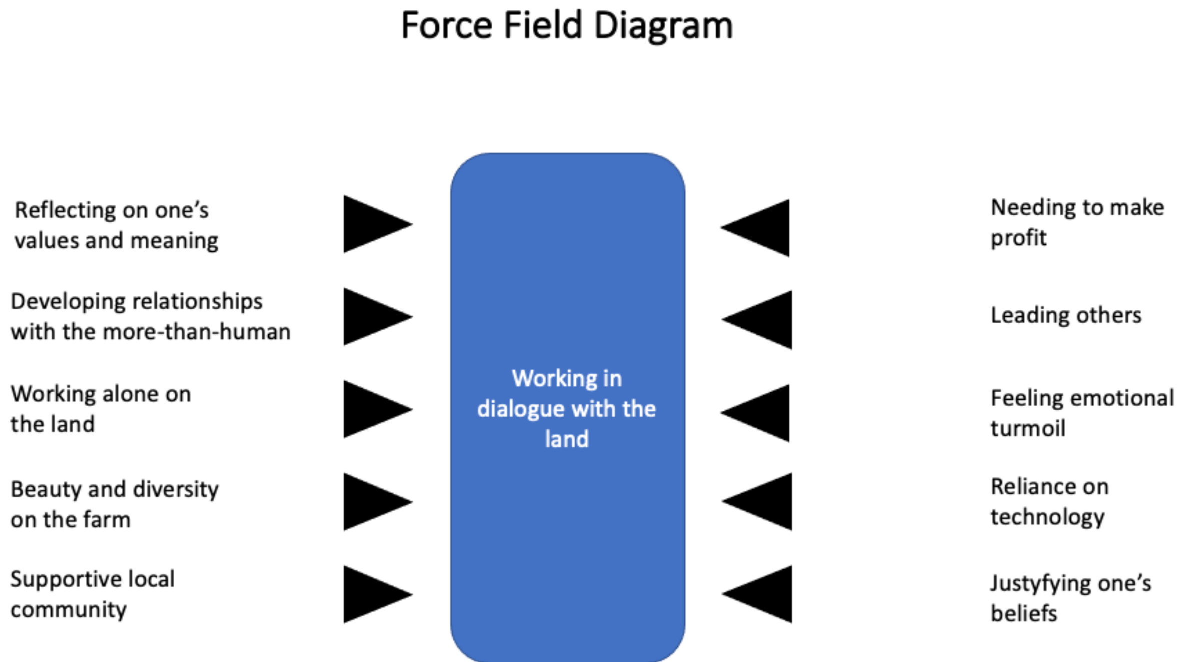

Figure 2: Force field diagram illustrating some of the supportive and obstructive forces affecting the farmers abilities to approach work as a dialogue with the land.

Discussion

“*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing there is a field. I'll meet you there* “

- Rumi

It is clear that all farmers I talked with had experiences and perspectives on farming that went beyond the materialistic and reductionistic worldview. This did not come as a surprise as I would imagine most humans emphasise with things beyond monetarily and the strictly rational.

The themes and subthemes themselves did also not come as a big surprise as all of them are somewhat related to the biodynamic teachings. However, it was surprising to see how normalised it was for several of the people to perceive and talk about unusual phenomena like elemental beings, cosmic forces and intuitive knowing. For many of the farmers these aspects were completely integrated into their everyday and wasn’t thought of as something mystical or magical. Rather, they seamlessly fitted into their understanding of their world. This wasn’t true of all the farmers, however. Some were more unconvinced of the stranger elements, yet no-one was completely dismissive of them.

Reflections on the research

In gathering and working with the data it became apparent to me how challenging it can be to work with qualitative content from a constructivist approach. My background is from the natural sciences where I’m more used to positivistic approaches that assumes an objective world. Instead, every step of the research process had me question how my decisions and approach would influence the results. Vega (2023) talks about reflexivity in qualitative research as “…a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self- consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes.”, indicating that there are no clear boundary between the researcher and the research. This has been my experience as well, and I feel that the question at hand: “how to live in dialogue with the land” is a question I have also sought to answer for myself in my own life. Some of the insights for my research has come as I’ve been reflecting on my own life and despite

no such intentions, this thesis might have an element of what can be described as heuristic self-enquiry. (Moustakas, 1990) Furthermore, content analysis and the development of themes have a strong interpretive component. This poses a question to the validity and accuracy of the research. How much of what I found in this thesis is an accurate description of the world as it is me and how much is it me interpreting what I heard and said in ways that makes sense for me? There are ways to mitigate and bring transparency into this process. For instance, by having multiple people do the content analysis or by going back to the interviewees and confirm that the themes are in agreement with them. I didn't do either of these things, partly due to this being a solo master thesis and partly due to this being my first qualitative research work. What I did do is bring transparency into the process by 1) highlighting my own motivation and position, 2) showing the process of how I developed the themes and came to the results, and 3) using some of the farmer's quotes in the findings. In addition, my observation notes helped triangulate the interviews and conversations data, although I was only able to fully participate in the work on one farm. However, I feel longer stays and participant observations would have been beneficial to get to know these farmers and their approach to life on a deeper level.

A challenge of language

Several of the answers and conversations suggest that one thing that can get in the way of farming as a dialogue with the land is our need to explain and define ourselves to other humans. This came through both in the defensiveness I perceived on some questions surrounding the more controversial aspect of the biodynamic and also through two of the farmers sharing how it was easier for them to connect with the land while they were working on their own. While explanations necessarily take the shape of language and concepts, the non-materialistic dimensions expressed by the farmers seemed to be of subtler qualities such as inner knowing, openness, and feelings — in other words experiences that can't easily be put into words.

Part of the challenge of defining our experiences and beliefs might also have to do with how we understand ourselves in relation to the world. Integral theory suggests that as we develop as humans and are able to hold more complex and nuanced worldviews, there is simultaneously a widening of our identity happening. One of these widening shifts in identity might be moving

from understanding ourselves as "part of the [human] world" to understanding ourselves as "part of all beings". (Esbjorn-Hargens, 2009) One can see how this correlates with the deep ecology concept of Naess (2017) and the more-than-human geographical self-concept of Larsen & Johnson (2016). When we understand ourselves mainly as part of a human world, language is the easiest way for us to convey knowledge and truths, it allows us spread ideas across borders and through time in an astonishing way. However, when the focus shifts and we see ourselves primarily as grounded in the ecological world — the world of all beings — looking at things primarily through human language becomes exclusive to everything that doesn't speak like us.

Another aspect of this challenge might be that we often get stuck on the question whether a phenomenon or narrative is true or not. But as we've seen through the narrative challenge of Bland & Bell (2007), every fact, system, or perspective is biased by the assumptions and position of the thinker. When it comes to the questions of truth maybe we are better off by starting to ask, "true by what assumptions?" or "true from what point of view?". The scientific method is often held as the gold standard, yet it is also grounded in its own limited view of the world. Berry, describes the scientific, reductionistic way of explaining the world as "…merely part of an explanation, which is invariably and inevitably *less than* the thing explained". (Berry, 2000, p. 85)

All in all, this creates tensions for anyone who seeks to recognise non-materialistic elements and at its core sits an epistemological question: does every truth need to be explainable, or can something exist as a reality outside of our language and concept? If so, how can we go about validating and protecting our experiences that do not fit into our words or narratives? How would we even keep these experiences alive in ourselves if we can never fully share them with others? For many of the farmers I spoke with, their dialogue with the land seemed to be a personal and subjective phenomenon and talking about it never quite seemed to capture its essence.

Becoming truth agnostic

A better approach than asking what is *true* might therefore be to ask what *effect* does believing in a certain narrative or phenomenon have on us and our environments. Is believing in this

phenomenon helpful for us? Does it create a better world around us? To answer that we first have to define what is important to us — what exactly is a "better world"? This takes us right back to our values, ethics and sense of care, moving them from the fringes of our attention to the very heart. The need to put higher emphasis on ethics, values, and even love as we approach the question of sustainable farming and development has been argued by many of the authors presented throughout this thesis. (Cox, 2014; Hathaway, 2018; Seymour & Connelly, 2023).

Take the example of elemental beings. Many people would argue that these beings do not exists, yet in the interviews and conversations I had, several of the farmers spoke about them as if they were real. This tension is often where the conversation ends: "Are they real?", "How can they be proven?". But what if we went beyond these binary questions and instead asked what the effect of believing in them would be. From my data it seems that some of the effects would be:

- Believing in elemental beings gives people a framework for talking about conscious forces in nature.
- Believing in elemental beings invites people to develop a personal connection with nature, like when the wild herb gatherer explained how the beings would lead her to the right places.
- Believing in elemental beings provides people direction for navigating challenging situations. The compost maker, for instance, said that when some things were not working, he saw it as the elemental beings acting up because of an imbalance on the farm. This, it seems, would help him consider the problem at hand as part of a bigger pattern.

These all seem to me as potential beneficial effects from believing in elemental beings. There are of course also pitfalls in believing things blindly. The point here isn't to accept every story. I simply wonder if we would benefit in moving the scrutiny from the truth of a story to the effect and implications of believing in the story. From that point of view, even if we don't believe in elemental beings or that we are affected by planetary forces, we can still find use in these

narratives as metaphors that help us act in beneficial ways. I can use a personal analogy. At some point during the research, I was having a conversation with a friend who believed in astrology. I remember us disagreeing on several points, but for some time after the conversation I let his words affect me. I stayed open to the possibility that I am an interconnected part of the solar system and that I'm moving in synchronicity with the whole universe. This brought me a lot of joy and lightness and it seemed that everything I did for a little while had really good timing. If staying open to the possibility of this belief had such an effect on me, why does it matter if it's true or not?

A more agnostic and open-minded position on truth and narratives might also encourage more research that takes its starting point in cultures' own epistemological and ontological positions. By bringing transparency and open-mindedness into how we define truth and the world, we open the door for people to participate and contribute on their own terms and by their own logic. This would help answer much of the critique of modern agriculture put forth in the first part of this thesis. In Gordon et al.'s (2023) words: "For regenerative agriculture to be transformative without being greenwashed or co-opted, institutions need to integrate diverse forms of knowledge; e.g. taking the non-quantifiable approaches of Deep Holism, First Nations and Subtle Energies seriously". To do that I believe we have to understand other cultures and worldviews from their own perspective, not merely through the lens of our own.

So where do we go from here? To further explore this from an academic and research point of view I believe there is a need for 1) More research attempting to describe the lived experiences of farmers, 2) A scrutiny of narratives in farming discourses — both mainstream and alternative ones — with a focus on their epistemological, ontological, and value assumptions, 3) Exploring alternative research and epistemology approaches that seeks to include and validate other ways of relating to the world.

For the farmers and others looking to move in this direction themselves there might be some inspiration to be found in the findings section, especially from the force field analysis. I believe it

is worthwhile to remember, however, that one's dialogue with the land is primarily a subjective experience that is to be discovered and experienced more than it is to be understood.

Closing thoughts

Through my fieldwork, I've found that most of the biodynamic farmers express views and outlooks that go beyond the materialistic paradigm. I have shown some of the ways this is experienced and discussed potentially reasons for why it is difficult to understand these things. While this thesis has looked at biodynamic farmers, the question itself is not confined to them. Much of what was said will no doubt hold true also for many organic and conventional farmers. It's not hard to imagine any farmer displaying attitudes like respect for their animal, feeling a deep personal connection through their work, or feeling wonder at the miracle of a seed. It is my belief that in order to transcend the current problems of modern agriculture there needs to be a shift in consciousness and worldview as much as a shift in practices. A reorientation of farmers and humans to the living landscapes we are a part of.

Maybe by slowly tuning in to our senses as we walk over the fields, by pausing to take in the miracle of a seed, by listening to the way the wind moves us, and by questioning the narratives we live by, we can slowly find our way into a future that works better for all beings — including us humans.

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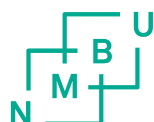

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