A look on the bright side of an environmentally-friendly life
Venhoeven, Leonore Amelie

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Chapter 1

General introduction
Increasing environmental quality is an important goal for many governments around the world. As for instance agreed upon during the Paris climate conference (COP21), it is an international aim to keep global temperature rises well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels (European Commission, December 23, 2015). At the same time, an increasing number of governments see citizens’ well-being as an important indicator of a country’s welfare. As a result, well-being research is more frequently used as a guide to develop policies that enable people to live better lives (Helliwell, Layard, & Sachs, 2012). Yet, striving towards a better environmental quality and higher human well-being are sometimes seen as separate, possibly even conflicting goals, as acting environmentally-friendly often involves some degree of effort and discomfort. As De Young puts it: “While frugality [a specific type of environmentally-friendly behavior] may be accepted as a necessary feature of the future it is usually portrayed as an onerous undertaking, one requiring personal sacrifice of the highest order. People, it is argued, are being asked to give up a modern, high-technology existence for an austere, bleak but needed substitute” (De Young, 1990-1991, p. 216). In contrast to this view, we will argue in the current dissertation that reaching environmental quality and human well-being are not necessarily at odds. In fact, we examine whether and why engaging in environmentally-friendly behavior, that is behavior that harms the environment as little as possible or even benefits the environment (Steg & Vlek, 2009), may contribute to individual well-being.

Various scholars have suggested and shown that environmentally-friendliness and well-being are intimately linked (Brown & Kasser, 2005; Helliwell et al., 2012; Kasser & Sheldon, 2002; Welsch & Kühling, 2011; Xiao & Li, 2011). For example, correlational studies revealed that consuming in an environmentally-friendly way is related to greater personal well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005), higher overall life-satisfaction (Xiao & Li, 2011), and more happiness (Kasser & Sheldon, 2002). Explanations for this link between environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being often do not focus on characteristics of the behavior itself, but rather point to factors external to the behavior. Some suggest that the things that actually make us happy, like social relationships and personal growth, happen to be sustainable at the same time (Beavan, 2009; Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; T. Jackson, 2005; Kasser, 2009). Others propose that specific personal traits such as being mindful both make people act environmentally-friendly and increase well-being (Brown & Kasser, 2005). In the current dissertation we wondered whether the relationship between environmentally-friendly behavior and well-being can indeed only be explained by factors external to this behavior. Could characteristics of environmentally-friendly behavior itself not make people feel good as well?
We first conducted a literature review that analyzed why environmentally-friendly behavior itself may contribute to or detract from well-being (Chapter 2). More specifically, we examined the (anticipated) positive emotions that this type of behavior may elicit. In our review we distinguished between hedonic well-being, as reflected in fleeting positive emotions such as experiencing pleasure, and eudaimonic well-being, as reflected in deeper positive emotions such as experiencing meaning. In the remainder of this thesis, however, we examine meaning as an explanation why environmentally-friendly behavior can elicit positive emotions in general.

We argued that pleasure and meaning may be linked to environmentally-friendly behavior in differing degrees. Pure pleasure or comfort may only be associated with specific environmentally-friendly behaviors. While cycling on a warm spring day may for instance be experienced as very comfortable, taking a cold shower in winter is most probably not. In fact, it may particularly be the latter group of environmentally-friendly behaviors that leads people to think acting environmentally-friendly threatens well-being. Viewing environmentally-friendly behavior solely as a threat to well-being, however, overlooks that it can also be perceived as meaningful behavior. As all forms of environmentally-friendly behaviors have in common that they benefit the quality of the environment and the well-being of other people, this type of behavior can be seen as moral and thereby meaningful behavior (Heberlein, 1972; Leopold, 1949; Thøgersen, 1996). While characteristics of specific environmentally-friendly behavior can bring comfort or discomfort, it may thus be environmentally-friendly behavior as such that brings meaning.

In the subsequent empirical chapters of this dissertation (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) we will examine the role of meaning more closely. Specifically, we aim to test whether acting environmentally-friendly itself may elicit positive emotions, and whether these positive emotions ensue from the meaning that is attributed to this type of behavior. Chapter 3 will explore the emotional association people have with environmentally-friendly behavior: is this association positive? In Study 3.1 we examine people’s explicit association with behavior that can benefit the environment. Using a scenario study we will test whether people expect to feel more positive and less negative emotions after acting environmentally-friendly than after acting environmentally-unfriendly. In Study 3.2 we take a step further and look at the implicit association people have with environmentally-friendly words. By using an Implicit Association Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) we will examine whether environmentally-friendly and positive words are also implicitly linked, thereby reducing the likelihood that our results are caused by socially desirable answering.

Besides testing whether environmentally-friendly behavior itself can make people feel good, we also aim to examine why this link may exist. If meaning indeed is a key
factor, more meaningful behavior should elicit more positive emotions. To test this reasoning, Study 3.1 examines whether different indicators of meaning affect the emotional association people have with environmentally-(un)friendly behavior. We will look at factors that give the behavior itself more meaning, and at factors that lead people to attach more personal meaning to the behavior. Specifically, as its benefit for the environment may make behavior moral and thereby meaningful, we expect that people have a stronger positive association with behavior that is perceived to be more environmentally-friendly (behavioral meaning). Furthermore, as they may attribute more personal meaning to environmental quality than others, we expect that people have a stronger positive association with environmentally-friendly behavior when they value the environment more strongly and feel more morally obliged to act this way (personal meaning). In Chapter 4, we further test our reasoning by explicitly measuring whether behavior that is perceived to be more environmentally-friendly is perceived to be more meaningful as well. In two scenario and one field study we will examine whether the meaning associated with this behavior can explain why people feel better about engaging in behavior they perceive to be more environmentally-friendly.

If meaning indeed plays a role in explaining why acting environmentally-friendly feels good, the next question that arises is what leads meaning to have this effect. As we theorize in Chapter 2, engagement in meaningful behavior could elicit positive emotions because this behavior signals something positive about who you are. One of the pillars on which people base their self-image, is their own actions (Bem, 1967; Bem, 1972). Acting environmentally-friendly can for instance lead people to see themselves as a more environmentally-friendly person (Cornelissen, Pandelaere, Warlop, & Dewitte, 2008; Van der Werff, Steg, & Keizer, 2014b). Following the same reasoning, doing something meaningful may boost someone's self-image: by doing something meaningful you signal to yourself you are a good person. Having a positive self-image, in turn, is an important determinant of well-being (Baumeister, 1993; Taylor & Brown, 1988). The positive effect meaningful behavior has on one's self-image (positive self-signal) may therefore explain why acting this way can feel good. If environmentally-friendly behavior is perceived to be meaningful behavior, acting in this way may thus boost one's self-image, thereby eliciting positive emotions.

As voluntary behavior is more likely to be internally attributed (Ryan & Deci, 2000a; Ryan & Deci, 2000b), making the choice to engage in certain behavior may particularly reveal something about who you are – not only to others, but also to yourself (Bodner & Prelec, 2003). This suggests that acting environmentally-friendly out of your own volition may send a stronger positive self-signal and therefore elicit stronger positive emotions than acting this way out of external pressure. Following this reasoning, we test whether people have a stronger positive association with voluntary
engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior than with non-voluntary engagement in environmentally-friendly behavior in Study 3.1. Building on this study, we further test our reasoning by explicitly measuring whether acting environmentally-friendly affects how environmentally-friendly people perceive themselves to be (Study 5.1) and elicits a general positive self-image (Study 5.2). In one scenario and one field study we test whether the self-image this behavior elicits can explain why people feel good about engaging in environmentally-friendly behavior in Chapter 5.

Figure 1
Theoretical model studied in this dissertation

Volition of behavior choice (Chapter 3 & 5)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of behavior (Chapter 3 &amp; 4)</th>
<th>Positive self-signal (Chapter 5)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Acting environmentally-friendly</td>
<td>Feeling good about engagement</td>
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Additional remarks
The empirical chapters of this dissertation study different parts of our model step by step (see Figure 1). As each chapter was written as an individual paper, there may be some overlap in the theoretical reasoning and some differences in the structure of the chapters. In Chapter 6 we discuss and integrate the main findings of the studies, and elaborate on their theoretical and practical implications. As all research reported is the result of fruitful collaborations, the personal pronoun “we” instead of “I” is being used throughout this dissertation.