

THE TASTE FOR ETHICS

An Ethic of Food Consumption

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Foreword

This book marks a new departure in ethics. In our culture ethics has first and foremost been a question of ‘the good life’ in relation to other people. Central to this ethic was friendship, inspired by Greek thought (not least Aristotle), and the *caritas* concept from the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Later moral philosophers also included man’s relation to animals, and it was agreed that the mistreatment of animals was morally reprehensible. But no early moral teaching discussed man’s relation to the origin of foodstuffs and the system that produced them; doubtless the question was of little interest since the production path was so short. The interest in good quality food is of course an ancient one, and healthy eating habits have often been underlined as a condition for the good life. But before industrialisation the production of this food was easy to follow. As a rule that is no longer the case. The field of ethics must therefore be extended to cover responsibility for the production and choice of foodstuffs, and it is this food ethic that Christian Coff sets out to trace.

In doing so he shows how the focus of ethics can be expanded from its concern for the good life on earth with and for others to cover the good life in fair food production practices, and how not least through using our integrity or life coherence we can reflect ethically, or caringly, about living organisms, ecological systems and our human identity. Ethics here is not reduced to a merely personal ethic but embraces a nature ethic, an ethic for our physical lives within the whole of nature. And as an ‘ethic of taste’ it deals with our relation to all that we eat – normally not at the moment of eating, and certainly not when we are gathered for a celebratory meal, but when we are purchasing foodstuffs or producing the raw materials ourselves. In practice this means that whoever is involved in the production of food, as a professional producer or merely as a private citizen growing vegetables or keeping chickens, and in particular as the consumer shopper, ought to be on the look-out for food with the healthiest production history behind it. Food ethics is related to agriculture, its production process, its marketing and distribution – and our choices of what to eat. As such, food ethics has very much to do with the safeguarding and promotion of good health, and in this sense it is one of the conditions for a good life.

In Christian Coff’s study ethics are extended from personal relationships to the traceability of foodstuffs, and thus to our whole relation to nature as the environment of our lives. His pioneering work presents a new way of thinking when we wish to act responsibly for a healthy and good life. It tells us how as consumers we should consider choosing our

foodstuffs, as parents for children, as a cook for institutions and so on. But it also concerns everyone involved in producing and presenting foodstuffs in a modern technological society. *The Taste for Ethics* illuminates a central aspect of the difficulty of being responsible today in the face of a complex production machinery, and in so doing it helps us to become precisely that – responsible.

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Preface

Over the last decade or so large numbers of consumers have acquired a taste for ethics. It is those consumers and their possibilities for action that are in focus in this book. And as always with a new subject, there is inevitably a search for definitions and vocabulary: what is food ethics? Is it indeed possible to have ethics for food? And why has the taste for ethics not emerged among consumers before now?

Two factors seem particularly important. Firstly, the abundance of food and the astonishing variety now available to western consumers makes it possible to focus on other questions than the basics of human hunger and the supply of food. Secondly, the powerful technological development within the life sciences and the risks hereby incurred have brought about new forms of intervention in living nature that have in turn given rise to ethical reflections on food production practices, most notably on the use of gene technology. Especially in Europe this has led to serious controversies between advocates and opponents. Among the latter are many consumers who find it difficult to understand the need for new risky technologies with unforeseen consequences at a time when there is no hunger in the western world. The advantages for consumers seem small or even totally absent. Another example is the BSE crisis, which has rendered many consumers sceptical or critical about tampering with nature. All in all, food production practices – from farming to food processing – are thus faced not only with various problems linked to the social aspects of farming and food culture but also with a growing concern for the environment and for animal welfare. And it seems unlikely that future technological development will be able to solve so many problems in the short run. By way of immediate response, an ethical reflection is essential for guidance between what is ‘too much’ and ‘too little’ in food production practices. Today, when we are in search of food ethics, we are asking for *the vision of the good life with and for others in fair food production practices*.¹

Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to speak of a food *crisis*, not in the sense of a supply crisis but of an ethical crisis. Food researchers and food industries are ready to use the new opportunities stemming from technological development, whereas critical consumers seem to want to slow, or even halt, this development. The designation *crisis* signifies the dissolution

¹ This is based on Paul Ricœur’s definition of ethics: “Aiming at the good life for and with others in just institutions.” (*Oneself as Another*, chapter 7). I have made two changes. Firstly, Ricœur borrows the phrase “aiming at” from Aristotle’s definition of ethics (aiming at the good life) in *The Nicomachean Ethics*. I prefer to use “vision of” instead of “aiming at”. Secondly, because the subject here is food ethics, “institutions” has been replaced by “food production practices”.

of a given order and indicates a formless intermediate position, a turning-point or a transformation, before a new order has been established. A crisis creates a situation dominated by instability, the outcome of which by definition is impossible to foresee. The word *crisis* comes from ancient Greek and is derived from the verb to *distinguish* or to *decide*. In Chinese the concept of crisis contains a twofold meaning and therefore consists of two signs; one for *beginning* and one for *end*. If the changes brought about by the crisis are dramatic they might result in a revolution that is irreversible and in a violent change of the existing order. Food production practices are therefore in crisis, for there is a dissolution of the existing order, characterised by numerous attempts to distinguish between good and bad food production practices and good and bad technological developments.

Food is a subject in the life sciences, agriculture, economy, the culinary art and aesthetics. It is also a subject within sociology, anthropology and psychology, but it has so far only been a very peripheral subject in philosophy – the reason perhaps being that food is a somewhat earth-bound and materialistic subject difficult to raise to higher philosophical levels than the purely utilitarian considerations of costs and benefits. Utilitarianism is an important aspect of food ethics that it would be foolish to overlook and one which, in the reflections of most people, is an integrated part of any food ethic. But this is certainly not the only way we think about and relate to food. Dealing with food ethics in a non-utilitarian way is a venture, and an even bigger venture for an agronomist like myself. *Agro* means soil and it follows that agronomists are occupied with the rules and laws of the soil. I am therefore running the risk of being considered a ‘peasant philosopher’ – the name assigned by the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas (1905-1995) to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). According to Lévinas, Heidegger had no understanding of the relationship between human beings, but only of that between man and nature (nature was called *die Erde, the earth*, by Heidegger). Grasping one’s *own* existence and the understanding of the *self* was the main task of philosophy, said Heidegger. In his view the presence of others does not complement but rather disturbs the existence of the self. Food ethics is of course a relationship between man and nature, but it should not be limited to that and therefore we do not need to follow in the footsteps of Heidegger. I hope it will become clear to readers of this book that food ethics is also a question of the relationship between human beings.

If we dwell briefly on Lévinas and follow his ideas about ‘peasant philosophy’, it is reasonable to state that agriculture is an occupation for those who have no understanding of

the relationship between human beings. Looking at the present agricultural practices and their often very poor public image I am tempted to say that Lévinas was right. Today machines have replaced manpower, so that on most farms only a single person tills the soil. In many cases farming has become an isolated occupation with limited social contact. The word ‘peasant’ is used in a condescending manner to refer to somebody stupid or foolish. How has this come about? I believe it is because those who are bright and wise enough have left agriculture behind and devoted themselves to tasks which they consider a bigger challenge to mental activity; they have left the hard, manual grind of tilling the soil to those who *cannot* think. If the idea of the ‘peasant’ in its negative sense is taken seriously, then farming and food production is an occupation for those who do not know how to think. Leaving farming and food production to those who cannot think is the same as not giving any thought to food and not paying any attention to it.

This is of course a surprising claim that ought to be amplified. For in a manner of speaking it seems that we are thinking more about food than ever before. We think about food in at least three ways. Firstly, it is seen as part of a social context. The consumption of food usually takes place under social circumstances and contributes to a person’s identity or self-understanding and social position. Secondly, food has an aesthetic dimension as ‘prepared taste’. Food is ‘prepared aesthetics’ when cooked, and ‘natural’ or ‘non-prepared aesthetics’ in its more raw or natural form. A lot of attention is paid to transforming food from its natural to its prepared form. Thirdly, intellectual activity is used to rationalise food production and food processing by scientific and economic means. So one has to ask, in what sense do we not pay any attention to food? The claim should be understood to mean that we do not think about food in its broad context but reduce it to one or more of the areas mentioned. Knowledge about food is often very specific and detailed. For instance, if we consider the huge number of very popular cookbooks available, it is evident that a large amount of detailed knowledge about cooking exists. This is in itself not a problem. It only becomes a problem when it prevents us from a wider understanding of food and food production in societal and environmental contexts – when the detailed knowledge excludes food ethics as the vision of the good life with and for others in just/fair etc food production practices.

In part II of the book I describe how and why these detailed and simultaneously reductionist views of food have become dominant in our culture. I also criticise the narrow understanding of food because in my view this often prevents us from seeing the ethical aspects of food production and consumption. In a sense the book is an attempt to

rehabilitate the concept of ‘peasants’, to focus on the positive instead of the negative understanding of the word and to investigate the link between food production practices and philosophy.² This means that I will try to bring together the often rather abstract thoughts of philosophers regarding present food production practices and vice versa, to consider food not only as substance and economics but to give these a history and an ethic.

Foodstuffs have an origin and a history before they are consumed. This history can be known or unknown to the consumer; it can be of importance or of no importance. However, if ethics is to have any meaning in relation to food, it is in the *production history* of the food being processed that it must be found. Food ethics as it is developed here is based on humanist traditions such as phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiology, which together are used in the analysis of our sensuous and reflective relationship to food. This description and analysis leads to the central aim of the book: an investigation of the possibilities for consumers of bringing their own food ethics into action. For this reason food ethics is here also developed as a narrative ethics; it is the recounting or the self-experience of the production history that forms the basis for the ethical attitude to food.

Today most people in Western Europe are living in urban areas, and their contact with nature, not to mention agriculture, is therefore rather limited. Living in cities where most things are made for specific purposes we are tempted to adopt the same kind of thinking in our reflections on nature. We see it in terms of utility and benefit. There is one way, though, in which even city dwellers are in contact with nature every day; namely through food. Food *comes* from nature; it is *made* from nature. This immediately suggests that food could function as a starting-point for a consumer ethics for the natural environment. It is my intention to see how far we can go in thinking of food ethics as a way of mediating an ethic for the environment and nature.

Food is made from nature, but in the preparation and cooking of food nature is transformed into culture. As culture, food is a part of the relations between human beings and as such it is also an intermediary in those relations. But just as much as we are likely to forget that food is made from nature, so are the consequences of food consumption for other people – for instance those involved in food production – somewhat obscure.

During the writing of this book I was also involved from 1998 to 2002 in the establishment of a consumer-supported agricultural guild called *Landbrugslauget*, housed close to Copenhagen. This is organised as a shareholder farm: 500 consumers, mainly from

Copenhagen, own the farm 'Brinkholm' together with the farmers. This makes it possible for the consumers to acquire a deeper understanding of agriculture and food production practices. The consumers get to learn about the production history in another way than they would otherwise have done. Working with this project has given me much inspiration and can in some sense be considered as part of the empirical basis of the present book.

I would like to add a few remarks on the methods I have employed or more precisely the methods that developed when working with the issue of food ethics. The book consists of an introductory Part I giving a general presentation of the specific kind of food ethics that is developed in this book. Part II where is this? consists of two chapters, the first being a critical analysis of the dominant scientific food regime of the industrialised countries. The criticism is directed towards the narrow and therefore also limited understanding of food and the consequences of the prevailing food production practices in most industrialised countries. Chapter 2 shows how the development of modern biology as a natural science has turned into an intellectualisation of the living and hence also of food. Chapter 3 deals with the more practical implications of the intellectualisation of food as they appear in everyday life. In Part III I make a more constructive and philosophical response to the criticism. Chapter 4 explores from a philosophical point of view the possibilities for consumers to relate ethically to food. This is followed by a chapter that goes into more detail with regard to how food can be used as a way of relating to the environment, to others and to society. The last chapter presents the results from an empirical study on ethical traceability and discusses the issue of recognition in relation to ethical consumption. As mentioned, the literature on food ethics is still sparse and only a few philosophers have written on the subject of food. Apart from the 'empirical' inspiration from consumer-supported agriculture and the empirical survey referred to in Chapter 6 my method has to a large extent consisted of exploring philosophical and ethical writings which I believed would be fruitful from a food-ethical perspective – even though most of these philosophical writings are not about food at all. The idea is not to provide a critique of these philosophers' shortcomings but to use their work in a pragmatic way in order to elicit a new form of food ethics.

Part I

Food and Ethics

Chapter 1

1. Eating, Society and Ethics

Are the moral implications of food known? Is there a philosophy of nourishment?

Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*.

Cultures can be described by their values and morals, and the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) surmised that there was a cultural link between food and ethics. He never analyses this link, however, and he leaves us with no more than a vague feeling that the intake of food must have some influence on human character and virtue – just as with the dietetics of the Greeks, as we shall see later on.

The question I pose is the opposite of Nietzsche's: not how does food influence our morals and values, but how do our morals and values influence our food consumption. The concept of 'the political consumer' signifies that consumers are becoming increasingly committed to selecting goods from a political point of view. Well-known examples of this are the boycott of Shell as a response to its plans to sink an oil platform in the North Sea as a method of disposal, and the boycott of French wine as a retort to atomic bomb testing by the French military. This kind of political action effectuated by consumers clearly has an ethical foundation, in these cases the protection of the environment and mankind.

The two cases received considerable attention in the media and were headline news items over a long stretch of time. Because they were dramatic, they were good media stories, but in most cases stories of production practices fail to gain any significant media exposure and thus remain hidden from consumers. This questions the actual effect of the politically-conscious consumer.

By way of example, in 2001 the Nordic Council of Ministers published a report called *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements*. This was the result of an attitudinal survey conducted among 1,300 Nordic consumers as store exit-interviews (usually as consumers were leaving supermarkets) and follow-up telephone interviews of the same people including some of the consumers' attitudes. A number of the results are very striking, see table 1 below:

Table 1. Consumer attitudes. Selected results from the Nordic Council of Ministers: *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements* (2001).

The Nordic Council of Ministers: <i>Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements</i> (TemaNord 2001:573, p. 38)	
Question	Result
Do you think it is important to demonstrate your attitude as consumers – for example, by boycotting products?	Close to 70% of Nordic consumers <i>think</i> it is important to demonstrate their attitudes as consumers – for example, by boycotting products.
Are you ready to pay more for foods produced with respect for animal welfare and the environment?	Nearly three-quarters of the consumers <i>claim</i> that they are ready to pay more for foods produced with respect for animal welfare and the environment.
Do you prefer to buy organic commodities, even if they might often be a little more expensive?	Close to half of the consumers (48%) <i>claim</i> to prefer organic commodities, even if they are often a little more expensive.

The table shows *the attitudes* of the consumers *when questioned about these issues*. This is what the consumers *think* is right *when they are asked* as part of a survey. But attitudes are one thing, reality is another. Attitudes in this area are more or less free, while real actions have their price: 48% claim to prefer organic food, but at the present time only 5 to 6 % of the total food consumption in Denmark is organic. The consumption of coffee with ‘ethical labelling’ subsumes an even lower percentage of the market.

The gap between what the surveyed consumers *think* and what they *do* is too vast to be an accident. The report from the survey makes it clear that “‘political consumption’ is far more common in attitudinal investigations than is reflected in real consumer behaviour.”³ Sociologists and anthropologists have known for more than three decades that people are *not* telling the truth about their consumption habits when asked about this in surveys.⁴ This lack of coherence between attitude and action/behaviour arouses our suspicions. Are the consumers *really* telling the truth about their attitudes? Or are they pretending to be more politically correct than they actually are?

It strikes me as highly improbable that the gap between attitudes and actual action and behaviour can be explained away as merely a matter of consumers bending the truth in order to *pretend* to be ‘politically correct’ in the interviews. Attitudinal inconsistency with behaviour is not necessarily

³ Nordic Council of Ministers: *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements*, p. 38.

⁴ For this reason, some sociologists have developed a specific method, called “garbology” – the study of people’s garbage, the assumption being that garbage does not lie. Garbage is solid empirical material.

synonymous with exaggeration or pretentiousness. I believe that in order to *understand* the gap between attitudes and action/behaviour⁵ a different approach must be taken.

Questions about consumption relate to consumers' self-awareness as well as to their social identity. For the most part, people *make up* pictures of themselves; they create their own identity by selecting elements from their own life story, often referred to as the 'narrative identity', and from other sources, including ideas of how they *would like* to be. Thus, conceptions of ourselves are not necessarily realistic. They tend to be self-constructed and are partly illusory, yet they are important in social contexts and for identity. I suggest that this 'constructed identity' should be interpreted ethically and that the gap between what consumers *claim* to do and what they *actually* do represents the gap between their vision of the good life and their real life.⁶

In this case, however, our object of concern is not merely 'the good life' in general but more specifically 'the good life' in relation to food production practices. We will be taking a close look at the consumers' vision of the good life in relation to food production practices. The survey suggests that it would not be too much to say that consumers, at least in the Nordic countries, have acquired a taste for ethics. One might safely assume that this is also the case in many other European countries.

The ethical interpretation of the gap between attitude and behaviour in attitudinal surveys of consumers suggests two things: first, that the ethical engagement of the consumers is high (and often underestimated, or rejected as a moral double standard due to the gap between attitude and behaviour), and second, that there must be some barriers which actuate this gap between attitude and behaviour and accordingly prevent consumers from putting their attitudes into practice. We are reminded of St. Paul's famous words, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ...For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing."⁷ With the reservation that eating is no evil, this seems to describe the situation of many consumers with a taste for ethics. There is the difference, however, that the consequences of the consumers' shopping is not evident, as the production history remains hidden from them. They may have an idea of what comprises 'the good life' but not of the right action that leads to this.

1.1 The Intimacy of Eating and Digestion

Most people have an intimate relation to food and eating. We are more discriminating about food than about most other things. But why is this so? The process of eating can be separated into several steps.

⁵ I do not distinguish here between action and behaviour, as is especially done within sociology. See for instance Kaj Ihmonen: "Sociology, Consumption and Routine". In Gronow, Jukka and Alan Warde (ed.): *Ordinary Consumption*, p. 10.

⁶ Sometimes *attitude* is interpreted as referring to the identity as citizens, and *behaviour* as referring to the identity as consumers.

⁷ The Bible, New International Version: The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, 7:15-19.

Setting aside for the moment cultural and religious bias as well as all preconceptions of what is edible or non-edible, eating is often preceded by the view and by the smell of the food. Our approach is often to use the visual aspect of the food to classify it as edible or inedible. This classification takes place at a relative distance. We then estimate the food by its smell. The sense of smell is of course far more intimate than that of sight, though not as intimate as that of taste. There is still some distance involved in smelling, whereas in tasting we are in close physical contact with the food in question. If we are not averse to either the sight or smell, we may then venture to go ahead and taste the food. Tasting is the final judgement on edible or inedible, the last gate the food has to pass where it still can be accepted or rejected. Swallowing is usually the point of no return.

Since the time of Aristotle the physiological sense of taste has generally been divided into four: salty, sour, bitter and sweet. From these basic elements all other tastes can be derived. This popular theory is very much consistent with other ancient Greek classification systems such as the four elements of earth, water, fire and air. But it tends towards simplification; many food researchers nowadays are convinced that a larger spectrum of tastes exists.

The gustatory sense is not isolated, but is related to the other senses. Most people who have caught a cold experience not only a temporary loss of the olfactory sense but also a reduction in the gustatory sense at the same time. It is also thanks to the olfactory sense that the first bite of, for instance, an apple tastes different from the next ones. Just as the olfactory sense quickly accustoms itself to new smells and becomes much less sensitive to them, so does the gustatory sense undergo a change based on this experience.

The gustatory sense is linked not only to the other senses but also to the mind – and, as mentioned, to cultural values. The eyes of newly-caught seals are considered a delicacy by the Inuit. The Danish author Jørgen Roos writes in his *Recollections*:

I was offered a special titbit, a freshly shot seal's eye. It is eaten by making a cut with a sharp knife and after that the contents are squeezed out in the mouth as if it were a large grape. One should remember to spit out the stone; it is the lens in the seal's eye.⁸

No doubt in most Western cultures the appealing eyes of the seal would be considered repulsive for eating purposes. Taste is further dependent on context, and not only the cultural context but also the state of mind and the actual atmosphere and situation in which the eating takes place. Moreover, there is clearly a subjective side to physiological taste. Neurobiology teaches that taste is memorised by the brain in the form of chemical signals, as specific markers or cellular and neural patterns. These memory

⁸ Roos, Jørgen: *Recollections*, p. 5.

patterns are altered by a series of parameters, some of which are social, emotional, biological, symbolic and so on. But this is not news in the world of gastronomy. The French hedonist and philosopher, Michel Onfray, writes that...

All gourmets know that part of the mysticism of the menu is due to the poetry of the words and that the title of the menu hides, disguises, covers up, reveals or lets us presume acts and artifices which have made possible the transformation of the natural product into its cultivated appearance.⁹

Digestion follows the tasting. The digestive tract is very versatile (more so than taste, I might add) and the human being can live off more kinds of food than any other creature. But we only eat a very small part of what is actually edible. Periods of hunger as in wars are well known for extending the perception of what is edible under duress.

The human digestion system starts already in the mouth. Bacteria and enzymes in the saliva initiate the decomposition of the food. Indeed, the actual cooking of food may be considered an extension of its digestion in that during the preparation the food in many cases is made more easily digestible. For instance, bread is made of cereals and like all other grasses these are not suited to human digestion. Cows can digest grass but human beings cannot. However, the fermentation of the dough, and especially the lengthy fermentation, changes the structures of the nutrients in the bread and thus renders it more digestible to human beings. Saliva can also be used outside the body to prepare and conserve some kinds of food, as is the case when lightly-chewed cabbage is stored in glasses, as is the case in some cultures. In the stomach the food is broken down with the aid of hydrochloric acid, bacteria and other microorganisms.

In the process of eating, elements of our physical surroundings are taken up and absorbed by the body. In the act of eating the outer world becomes a part of the person eating and in this sense eating involves making the outward inward. When food is swallowed it does not immediately become a part of the body, rather it is placed in a specific cavity of the body, the digestive tract. This system, which in adults is about 12 m long and has a surface of about 400 m² (about the size of a tennis court), can be considered as an *inner outside* – a channel or pipe through the human body. However, what is found in the digestive tract is not the human body itself, even though an element of it will later become part of the body. The digestive tract is full of many and various microorganisms; for instance, there are approximately 100,000 billion bacteria in the human body (compared with a mere 50,000 billion cells) dispersed over about 400 different human species. Many of the bacteria adhere to the cells in the gut and

⁹ Onfray, Michel: *La raison Gourmande. Philosophie du goût*, p. 54.

are indispensable to its function. The composition of microorganisms in the digestive tract is not stable but varies over time. The digestive tract of the unborn child is sterile, but during birth the child is inoculated with the microorganisms from the intestine and the milk of the mother. The composition of microorganisms in the digestive tract does of course have some general characteristics, but on the other hand it is just as individual as a fingerprint.

Present in the digestive tract, the content of which is not yet part of the human body, is another kind of life consisting of bacteria, fungi and other microorganisms that are essential for digestion. However, the digestion chambers are clearly not an ‘outer world’ as we understand the concepts of surroundings or environment. They are a confined ‘outer world’. The content of the digestive tract is in a borderland, and that makes it difficult to define: it is the bodily interior without being body and it is exterior without being surroundings. Eating is a transformation where what is “other” is transformed to the self. Eating confronts us with one of the most fundamental kinds of transformation, namely, encountering the *otherness* of our surroundings, which, through this activity of ‘internalising’, are transformed into oneself, into one’s own body.

Our surroundings, i.e. nature, are *in-corporated* in order to be transformed through digestion (Greek; *pepsis*) and in the end to be incarnated (Latin *carne*; meat), that is, to become flesh – or perhaps some would say ‘reincarnated’ (reborn), but now as a human being. During this in-corporation our surroundings are outer inwardness;¹⁰ in the course of the digestion the outer world is transformed and during this process it is therefore neither outer world nor body; finally, in the incarnation our surroundings are embodied as a part of us.

In all living creatures openings to the outer world which allow it to enter the body are a necessity, but at the same time this renders the organisms vulnerable to hostile intruders like pathogenic bacteria etc. Many religious rites take into account that eating might expose human beings to danger. For instance, nuns in Greek Orthodox convents routinely bless themselves before and after each meal to protect themselves from dangers associated with the opening and closing of the body during the meal.¹¹ The outer world is far from being harmless. Letting food into the body incautiously is too risky, and precautionary measures must be taken to protect oneself. One must be both selective and particular about one’s food. The passage from one condition to another – as when eating food involves turning something external to the body into part of the body, is considered dangerous, because transitional states are neither one state nor the next. According to the English Anthropologist Mary Douglas they are in between and cannot be defined, they are neither what they have been or will become.¹² Digestion is one

¹⁰ Lars-Henrik Schmidt: *Smagens analytik, (The Analytics of Taste)*, p. 83.

¹¹ Lupton, Deborah: *Food, the Body and the Self*, p. 16.

¹² Douglas, Mary: *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, p. 95-98.

such transitional state or marginal period. Some kind of order is apparent at the beginning, because what we eat is classified as food. However, shortly after in the digestive tract the food enters the marginal period and is transformed into some indefinable substance. It cannot be described by some clear concept that would make us understand what it is. It seems to be complete disorder. Disorder is substance without borderlines and pattern but with the potential to turn into new and unforeseen states and therefore cause unpredictable changes in the future. Because of the dangers of the transitional states, rituals often surround transition, as the above example from the Greek Orthodox convent shows. Transitional rites are often symbolised as death and birth and this symbolic or metaphoric language also cover eating. Food that is eaten was once living but when it is eaten it dies. However, we could also say that at the actual time of eating the food is usually already dead and when we eat, it becomes alive again – but now as our bodies. The danger is of course that when we eat we are running the risk of being eaten instead, that the food for some reason is poisonous and in the worst case kills (or eats) us. The outer world would then not be reincarnated as our bodies but as itself, and at the expense of our bodies.

The incarnation that follows the eating process led the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) to put it this way: “Der Mensch ist was er ißt” (*Man is what he eats*).¹³ Feuerbach wished to give a materialistic (and provocative!) answer to the anthropological question raised by Immanuel Kant approximately 50 years earlier: “Was ist der Mensch?” (*What is Man?*). Feuerbach had no intention of hiding his own very materialistic point of view; instead he made a virtue of it. The point of departure of his extremely materialistic philosophy was the burgeoning food science, a relatively new scientific area at that time. Comparisons of the chemical compositions of the food with the content of the human body showed many points of similarity, and this gave Feuerbach the inspiration for his radical conclusion. Positive science had answered Kant’s anthropological question. And the resemblances are striking: too little iron intake can be measured in the blood as lack of iron; one becomes fat from eating fat foodstuffs, one becomes thin from eating lean food; one becomes healthy from healthy food and happy from funtex; and if one eats carrots . . .! No, this is quite absurd, we all know that we do not become what we eat. The similarities can only be found at a molecular level and even there only in very restricted areas. Human beings are substantially different from what they eat. The digestion and decomposition of food and the synthesis of new molecules in the human body make it reasonable to talk about molecular ‘transubstantiation’, that is, transformed substance. This view is also taken by the German-American philosopher Hans Jonas (1902-1993). In his book *Das Prinzip Leben* Jonas presents, with his own terminology, a biological philosophy or philosophy of organism.¹⁴ Central to this philosophy is the

¹³ Feuerbach, Ludwig: *Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution*, p. 367.

¹⁴ The book *Das Prinzip Leben* was originally published in 1973 as *Organismus und Freiheit*, which was a rewritten and expanded version of *The Phenomenon of Life*, 1963, New York. Translations from the book are here by the present author.

ontological status of the living: what is 'being'? Traditionally, we think of the substantial and material composition of the living as essential qualities. But Jonas takes the opposite position:

Organisms are never identical from a substantial point of view, but nevertheless the self of the organisms remain a "self", precisely because they are not made of the same matter.¹⁵

If an organism turns out to be substantially identical at two different times there can only be one reason; it is no longer alive. Metabolism, the flow of substance 'through' the organism, is essential for survival and continued identity. In that sense living organisms differ from their substance and therefore also from what they eat. Describing the substantial aspect of organisms as accidental Jonas believes that *form* is a much more characteristic quality of organisms. In biological theory the concept of form is closely related to the concept of *organisation*, because it is the organisation of the matter that gives the substance its form. Form or organisation is transcendent, as it remains more or less the same and keeps its identity in spite of the metabolic replacement of substance in the organism. And Jonas goes even further when he writes:

the form is not the result of material composition but the cause of it . . . 'Selfness' (German: *Selbstheit*), as long as it lasts, is the continuous renewal carried by a flow of that which always wants to be the other. It is only with the active 'self-integration' of life that the concept of 'individuality' acquires its ontological status, in contrast to the phenomenological concept of individuality. This ontological individual, with its existence through every moment, its duration and 'selfness' in the duration, is first and foremost the function of the individual itself; it is its own interest and its own continued performance. In this self-preservation the organism relates in two ways to its own substance: matter is substantial as matter and accidental to the form. The organism merges with the material composition of the moment but is not tied to the material composition at any specific time, only to the form that it constitutes in itself, dependent on the matter as substance but independent of the 'selfness' of the matter; the functional identity of the organism does not merge with the substantial identity. In short: the relationship of the organic form to the matter can be described as an urge to freedom (*bedürftiger Freiheit*).¹⁶

The form remains, whereas the substance is replaced. Jonas makes of form the essence of life and of substance, accident. Form is described as a succession of moments marked by differences in substance.

¹⁵ Jonas, Hans: *Das Prinzip Leben*, p. 145.

¹⁶ Jonas, Hans: *Das Prinzip Leben*, p. 149-150.

Temporality becomes an important characteristic of the living in the biological philosophy of Jonas. The relationship of form to matter is not passive; rather the form is actively shaping the matter. The form is independent of the actual matter, though of course dependent on there being matter at all. Jonas describes this as “dependent independence”. This dialectical freedom of the form is not absolute but limited by the actual need of matter. It is also a “forced freedom”, as the form must necessarily replace the matter through the metabolism. Dialectical freedom is a fundamental quality of life.

Living beings, including the human being, must eat to stay alive: what is eaten is the world. The need for nourishment forces organisms to open up to the outside world and to develop senses orientated towards the outer world. The openness in the meeting with the world makes the experience of the world possible. Jonas describes the openness as the transcendence of hunger. It is the lack of food that makes organisms reach for the world, to grasp and sense the world: to-have-a-world is the transcendence of life. The unfamiliar and alien surroundings could potentially become a part of oneself and at the same time oneself could become a part of the surroundings. The reaching out for the world is the basis of *intentionality* as the fundamental quality of life. Today, if “Der Mensch ist was er ißt” is to have any meaning, it is not from a purely materialistic point of view. Matter is accidental, whereas the form or organisation regulates the metabolism and confers individuality on the organism. Eating a carrot does not turn us into a carrot; the substance of the carrot is organized into another form. It is incorporated into the human body and thus given the form of a human being. However, Feuerbach’s aphorism continues to carry a meaning and make sense to many people. Otherwise it would not have been quoted as often as is still the case. Eating is discriminatory; when we eat we are generally particular about our food. However, we choose food not only from a materialistic point of view, as is the case when considering the healthiness of the food for the body. Just as important for the discriminating regimes are cultural values and the fact that food is related to identity and self-understanding. Man is what he eats, not only in a substantial sense but also in a cultural sense.¹⁷

1.2 Eating in between Life and Death

Eating is a continued holocaust (from Greek: *burnt offering*), as Michel Onfray remarks: to exist the body needs to take in corpses, things torn up by the roots, ripped out of their natural environment, food that is fermented and putrefied and hanged meat.¹⁸ It does not sound very delicate but these are nonetheless some of the ways that we treat our food before eating it – a smoked ham, for instance. However, since the Second World War the concept of holocaust has acquired another meaning, with the

¹⁷ See for instance Baudrillard, Jean: *La société de consommation* and Bourdieu, Pierre: *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

¹⁸ Onfray, Michel: *La raison Gourmande. Philosophie du goût*, p. 111.

concentration camps reminding us of modern, industrialised meat production, not least in the frightening rationality that calculates the most effective mass slaughter that leaves no trace. And as with the holocaust, the public in general do not wish to know about the work of the slaughterhouse, even though it puts food on their table. Mass slaughter of animals exceeds what most people can bear – but of course that does not make it disappear.

This is the tragedy of eating. Eating always implies sacrificing something, eating must always have a victim, and there is always something or someone who has to die when others eat. Hunger leads to the ‘dilemma of eating’: when we eat we kill – but if we do not eat we will die ourselves. Whether we eat or not, it is going to be the death of some. Hunger leads to death either for us or for others. Not to eat is to let others eat one; it is to give life with one’s own life in the grave. The aesthetics of gastronomy serves to hide the banal necessity and the barbaric compulsion of eating. Aesthetics turns the necessity of eating into a pleasure unsubsidiaried to anything else, that is pleasure without purpose, as the purpose is not satiation but pleasure itself, which in this case is the aesthetic satisfaction gained from the meal.

Food is organic; it comes from nature. Only a small part is inorganic, like salt. Organic material is living – or at least it has been. The food we eat has had a life and is now dead or is going to die. Some food we eat alive, some we eat dead. Animals we usually eat dead and we also buy them dead and butchered. Plants are eaten both dead and alive (vegetables, fruits etc. continue their metabolism after having been separated from the soil, the rest of the plant etc.). We consider it a horrible violation of the animal to eat it alive, as it is able to feel pain. It is humane to kill the animal before eating it.

Some, though, find it offensive to eat meat at all. For them eating meat is equated with murder, as formulated for instance already in 1791 by the vegetarian John Oswald in his book *The Cry of Nature; Or, an Appeal to Mercy and to Justice, on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals*.¹⁹ Eating habits often reveal different ways of relating to and thinking about nature. The debate is not new, on the contrary. One of its oldest sources goes back to a dispute on vegetarianism in 450 BCE, when Ovid (43BCE-17CE) took issue with the earlier views of Empedocles (fl.450BCE). The consumption of meat was even seen as a killing of relatives; since everything comes from the earth and returns to earth again we will inevitably eat one other. It is unclear, however, why this reasoning only applies to meat; it seems that the same argument serves just as well for plants.

Is the consumption of meat, i.e. the incorporation of the animal into oneself, a violation of that animal? Some think not. They regard eating as a negation of death, and eating even becomes an appraisal of what is eaten. When the French philosopher Jacques Derrida was asked about the moral implications of the meal, he simply replied that the moral question has never been whether one should

¹⁹ Published in Morton, Timothy (ed.): *Radical Food. The Culture and Politics of Eating and Drinking 1790-1820*. Routledge, London, 2000, vol. I, p. 143-170.

eat or not, dead or alive, human or animal; the essential premise is that we *have* to eat and eating is thus in itself good and just. For Derrida, the killing of the animal is of no concern – since we have to eat to stay alive. Eating is thus a rejection of death, and the moral question of eating is concerned with the ‘good’ meal. Doubtless Derrida delights in the famous French hedonistic tradition of the culinary arts, which is centred on the pleasures of the table; talking about the origin of the food and the animals eaten is not only impolite and indelicate, for the true hedonist it is unthinkable. It is separated off and carefully eliminated; there are no words for it in the hedonistic food regime. Rather than consider the former well-being of the animals eaten, the hedonistic tradition concentrates on the present and the future. Eating means the death of some; that is how nature works and we can do nothing about it. But more importantly, it is the joyful continuation of life – not of course for those eaten but for those who eat. The hedonistic understanding of the good meal is more about aesthetics than ethics. This is how aesthetics usurps ethics,²⁰ and this is particularly evident within gastronomy.

The German performance artist, Daniel Spoerri, who often incorporated food in his art and happenings, thought of eating and being eaten as an expression of an almost metaphysic metabolism; the continuous reappearance of the same. Eating as the continuation of life in another form . . .

These are the poles between which eating takes place and which also cannot be separated. Death and life always go together in eating. Eating meat can be seen as a killing, or it can be considered as a necessary but beautiful metabolism where life gives life.

1.3 The Social Meaning of the Meal

In his short essay *Sociology of the Meal* from 1910 the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) reflects on the meal and how it is linked to the tension between individuality and community. Simmel starts by noting that first of all eating is both common and extremely individual:

Hence, of all the things that people have in common, the most common is that they must eat and drink. And precisely this, in a remarkable way, is the most egoistical thing, indeed the one most absolutely and immediately confined to the individual. What I think, I can communicate to others; what I see, I can let them see, what I say can be heard by hundreds of others – but what a single individual eats can under no circumstances be eaten by another. In none of the higher spheres is it the case that others have to forego absolutely that which one person should have.²¹

²⁰ See Korthals, Michiel: “Taking Consumers Seriously: Two Concepts of Consumer Sovereignty”, p. 208.

²¹ Simmel, Georg: “Sociology of the Meal”, p. 130.

Eating is individual, as the same food cannot be eaten twice; food is ultimately used and transformed during eating and digestion and cannot also be eaten by another person (unless we eat each other!).

However, during the shared meal individuality is transgressed and elevated into community and social interaction. Simmel writes that...

Communal eating and drinking, which can even transform a mortal enemy into a friend for the Arab, unleashes an immense socializing power that allows us to overlook that one is not eating and drinking “the same thing” at all, but rather totally exclusive portions, and gives rise to the primitive notion that one is thereby creating common flesh and and blood.²²

Holy Communion, Simmel emphasises, is the ritual in which the suspension of the individuality finds its most sublime form and symbolization. During Holy Communion, where the bread and wine symbolize the life of Jesus, it is not the case that one cannot eat what has just been eaten by another; everybody eats the same; everybody receives a part of the unbroken whole.

In its most simplified conception, the social meal also creates the same flesh and blood, as mentioned above. Ludwig Feuerbach would have said that if two persons eat the same they also become the same, but in a less materialistic interpretation ‘becoming the same flesh and blood’ is a metaphor from genealogy. The ties of blood refer in this case to the ties among the individuals in a community. The social meal rejects egoism and binds individuals together in a community and a common identity. The egoistic satisfaction of the fundamental need for food is ignored and instead the food is shared; one does not eat what the others are eating (or could be eating) and one certainly does not eat the others!

Thus, even though eating is basically egoistic, the common meal has the power to override this egoism, and more than anything else it possesses the ability to institute solidarity and community feeling. Of all the things that human beings have in common eating is among the most fundamental. Eating is the lowest and most egoistic common denominator and this is why we find in the meal the best-suited instrument of instituting a community; the meal does not demand specific qualifications, everybody can participate without any other conditions or competences than being hungry. The meal appeals to everybody and this renders it sublime in overruling egoism among all individuals. Simmel notes that if eating had not been low enough to include everybody, the rise to sophisticated social conventions – as in the aesthetics of the culinary art – would not have been possible. The origins of the social meal and the solidarity it gives rise to are thus not to be found in a common taste. This arises from the widespread and common hunger, not an egoistic hunger but a socialised and disciplined hunger,

²² Ibid. p. 131.

hunger transformed from a natural and bestial instinct into civilised and cultivated manners. Community is founded in the taming of hunger, which is the civilising process.

Individuality and sociality are reconciled in the meal; people eating together enter into a contract or a pact. The change in the aesthetic conventions of the dining table at the beginning of the sixteenth century was also the start of a reorientation of table manners. Simmel points to the fact, that as the meal becomes a social matter, it is organised into a more aesthetic and stylized form. A conclusion he draws from his observations of lower social classes, where the material sense of the food dominates in contrast to the higher social groups where the meal is dominated by codes of rules and behaviour regulations. The plate and the glass symbolise the order balancing the relationship between egoistic individuality and solidarity; the plate and the glass ensure that everybody gets their share of the whole and at the same time they set limits for how much can be taken (as one cannot take more than there is room for on the plate or in the glass). It is a socialised distancing to the animal in the human being and the lowest common denominator. According to Simmel, the aesthetics of the meal serve to suspend the individual desire for satisfaction, and accordingly it is important to moderate or temper the individual character of the dining table. In his view, accentuating the individual character of a course or the aesthetic arrangement of a table is indecent and bestial. Simmel dissociates himself from the individualisation of the course as he considers it akin to cannibalism.²³

Food and the meal are for these reasons especially suitable as symbols of solidarity and community feeling. Simmel praises the common, civilised meal for its ability to elevate the physiological primitiveness of eating to higher social forms and social interaction. Also Leslie Gofton touches upon this when he writes that...

food not only symbolises cultural values, but also forms a medium through which social relationships are expressed, from the intimate, face-to-face relations within the family, to the relations between regions and nations.²⁴

Food is used to express social relations in various ways. In arctic Inuit societies it is considered impolite to offer thanks for a meal. As a natural custom they always divide the food that the hunters bring home between themselves. As the Arctic explorer Peter Freuchen was thanking the Inuit for meat given to him, an old man promptly corrected him:

²³ Simmel is not very clear about his dissociation from anthropophagy, which seems only to be used to make a parallelism. In spite of the fact that Simmel views the meal as a basic means of institutionalising community he does not see it as a social pact of the meal not to eat each other.

²⁴ Gofton, Leslie: "Bread to Biotechnology; Cultural Aspects of Food Ethics.", p. 121-122.

You must not thank anyone for your meat; it is your right to receive parts of it. In this country, nobody wishes to be dependent on others. Therefore, there is nobody who gives or gets gifts, for you thereby become dependent. With gifts you make slaves, just as with whips you make dogs.²⁵

One does not need to thank anyone for the meal, as everybody has a right to a share in it, independent of who provided it. Thanking anyone for the meat is a sign of a lack of solidarity: the Inuit do not thank the hunter, instead they celebrate his skills.

In some languages we find a double meaning of the word ‘course’ – as in Danish “*ret*”, Swedish “*rätt*”, Norwegian “*rett*” and German “*Gericht*”. In these languages this same word has both a gastronomic sense, as in ‘course’ or ‘dish’, and a legal sense, as in ‘law’ or ‘justice’. The etymological root of these words is thought to be in the old German word *rextia*, which means to straighten or to make even. The development of this word into its gastronomic sense is believed to have been influenced by the Low German ‘richte’, which has the same etymological roots.

This allows us to assume a connection between the juridical and gastronomic meaning of the word: the fundamental right in some cultures may have been the right to food. This is easily understandable, since the denial of food equalled exclusion or at least the inferiority of the individual. Distribution, and especially the distribution of food, is a fundamental dimension of justice in any society. The right of all members of the community is to have their share of the available food, even if they have not earned it or deserved it. With Simmel in mind we can say that the right to food is the basic constitutive element of a community.

1.4 Food and Ethics in History

There is a long tradition of relating food and eating to ethics and morals. In most cultures we find *food regimes*, that is, foods that are surrounded by taboos, specific meanings and values, and also very precise descriptions of what to eat and how to eat. The following is a short history of the relationship between food and ethics.

In antiquity this relationship was expressed in dietetics (from Greek; *diatité*). In his book *The History of Sexuality* the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) refers to Hippocrates, who described how in the beginning the food of human beings was like that of the animals and how human beings in the course of time distanced themselves from this natural way of eating things raw by

²⁵ Freuchen, Peter: *Book of the Eskimo*. Cleveland, Ohio, 1961, p. 154.

preparing the food before eating it.²⁶ Thus, there is no doubt that Hippocrates understood food not only as natural but indeed as *cultivated nature*. Dietetics related food to bodily health; the diet was the right food essential for the cure of the patient. However, the dietetics of the Greeks was not just used as medical treatment;

‘diet’ itself – regimen – was a fundamental category through which human behaviour could be conceptualised. It characterized the way in which one managed one’s existence, and it enabled a set of rules to be affixed to conduct; it was a mode of problematization of behaviour that was indexed to a nature which had to be preserved and to which it was right to conform. Regimen was a whole art of living.²⁷

Ancient Greek regimen was not only about the right nourishment of the body, it was just as much a question about the conduct of life and human existence. For this reason dietetics was also a reflection on the good life. The right diet and the right conduct of life could not be separated. Foucault’s analysis of the dietetics of especially Hippocrates and Plato points to the twofold meaning of this food regime: the healthy body and the healthy soul. Dietetics was the art of living. Dietetics was ethical when it showed a way of living the good life: avoid extremes and eat with moderation (temperance). Dietetics was a balancing between too much and too little; it was the care for one’s own body and the self. Dietetics was a specific way of constituting oneself as a corporal and moral subject; it was a *technology of the self*.

It is almost an everyday experience that food has a physiological impact on the body and that some kinds of food can lead to tiredness, excitement, dizziness and many other states. Lack of specific nutrients, as in the case of malnutrition, also affects the body and the mental state and can lead to depression, anxiety, irritability, emotional lability, hysteria etc.²⁸ Therefore, the practice of regimen is an art of living, it is a strategy involving the body and the elements proposing to equip the individual himself for a rational mode of behaviour.”²⁹

The books of Deuteronomy and Leviticus in the Old Testament contain extensive examples of religious dietary rules which prescribe what is allowed to be eaten and what is forbidden. In Deut. 14 we read: “Do not eat any detestable thing. These are the animals you may eat; the ox, the sheep...”. And later on: “you may not eat the camel, the rabbit...”. There are many interpretations of the meaning of

²⁶ Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2, p. 99.

²⁷ Ibid p. 101.

²⁸ Benton, David: *Food for Thought*, p. 17.

²⁹ Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 2, p. 108.

these rules. In the third chapter on *The Abominations of Leviticus* in her book *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas gives a brilliant review of the most common interpretations of the meaning of the dietary rules.

Some readers have taken a modern pragmatic view, considering them as an expression of food sanitation. The text of Deuteronomy should in this interpretation be comparable to modern food security or safety rules. This is unlikely to be the case, however, as there is no indication of this at all in the Bible.

In the second interpretation it is stated that the objectives of the dietary rules were self-control and prevention of thoughtless action and injustice. The dietary rules were a means of achieving the good life. This ethical interpretation has its origin in the periods of Alexander the Great and Hellenic culture.

A third interpretation is the view that the dietary rules should function as a protection from foreign influence. In her book, though, Douglas is rather swift in rejecting this as irrelevant and she does not see such protection as a mode of conserving cultural identity. Dietary rules prescribe specific eating habits and thus also a specific conduct of life that is important not only for cultural reasons but just as much for the understanding of the individual's identity. Douglas also proposes a fourth religious interpretation:

...the dietary laws would have been like signs which at every turn inspired meditation on the oneness, purity and completeness of God. By rules of avoidance holiness was given a physical expression in every encounter with the animal kingdom and at every meal. Observance of the dietary rules would thus have been a meaningful part of the great liturgical act of recognition and worship which culminated in the sacrifice in the Temple.³⁰

What Douglas is indicating here by referring to the dietary laws as *signs* that inspire meditation actually comes close to the kind of food ethics that will be developed in the third part of this book. However, I intend to follow a different path from Douglas. First of all the context in the present book is not religious but ethical. Secondly I will not speak of signs but of traces. At the end of this chapter and in the third part of the book I will examine the philosophical consequences of regarding food as a trace of the production history. It is argued that the ethical dimension of food indeed involves looking at how the food is produced, that is, the specific food productions practices.

According to the Dutch philosopher Hub Zwart, the moral implications of the dietary rules are abandoned in the Gospels, that is, in Christianity.³¹ In the light of the interpretations presented by Douglas we can take the case even further and say that when dietary rules are abandoned in Christianity,

³⁰ Douglas, Mary: *Purity and Danger*, p. 58.

³¹ Zwart, Hub: "A Short History of Food Ethics", p. 118.

this also implies that the other interpretations mentioned above of the dietary rules would lose their meaning. Food would no longer be related to cultural identity. It is an important aspect of the Christian tradition that food loses its relation to self-understanding and could no longer be used as a sign that inspired to meditation of the holy. The gospel of Matthew can be seen as a direct refutation of the Old Testament, when Jesus says that...

What goes into a man's mouth does not make him 'unclean', but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him 'unclean'.³²

As the disciples do not understand, they ask him to explain. And he answers:

Are you still so dull?... Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man 'unclean'. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man 'unclean'; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him 'unclean'.³³

If the dietary rules formerly had a hygienic purpose, this is invalidated by Jesus in saying that unwashed hands do not defile the man, and that it is of no moral importance what one eats. The nourishment becomes insignificant; what really counts is the food for the mind: "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you."³⁴ According to Zwart there is nothing moral in the relation to food in Christianity, on the contrary Jesus encourages averting one's eyes from the earthly and material world.

I consider this interpretation too radical, however. Another interpretation would be that as food in the Old Testament is given a central position, Jesus in this context is settling up with the traditions of the Old Testament. Thus the message is: do not exaggerate the traditions of eating habits as they may turn the focus away from what really counts, which is faith.

Yet in spite of this interpretation, food in the New Testament is also used as a picture for what is important – as a sign that should remind us of God. The earthly food should lead the thoughts of the eating person towards holiness:

³² Matthew 15:10-12.

³³ Ibid 15:17-20.

³⁴ John 6:27.

And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”³⁵

This text from Luke constitutes the background for the Holy Communion. The theophagy of the Holy Communion, where the flesh of Christ is symbolised by a wafer and his blood by wine, is one of the biggest mysteries of Christianity: the presence of Christ as bread and wine. The scholastic term *transubstantiation* refers to the metamorphosis occurring to the bread and the wine during Holy Communion. It is substance that trans-substantiates, transforms into a new substance. This theophagy, which Christianity shares with many other religions and which also existed in antiquity, must be based on a killing.³⁶ The flesh of Christ is eaten in the form of bread and wine during the symbolic meal of Holy Communion; the corpus of Jesus Christ is incorporated into the body of the Christian. The external world is consumed and transformed to “inwardness” to become faith. This shows how strong a metaphor eating is for the appropriation of the world; and how nature is transformed into culture.

For the moment let us leave the gospels and take a huge jump in time to the end of the 17th century (I will return to the intervening periods later in chapter 2). Food supply on a societal level becomes an important issue in the public debate during this period. In his famous work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* from 1798, Malthus describes how food production is unable to follow the growth of the population and that this inevitably leads to starvation. According to Malthus, nothing could be done to prevent it, as this rule was a natural law.

At present, lack of food and famine are increasingly being submitted to debate in a more or less scientific manner. However, some are beginning to consider famine not as a natural law with severely local consequences but as a problem that the state could and should take care of. Famine is transformed from a natural law into a cultural and moral problem. In Bertolt Brecht’s play *The Threepenny Opera* Macheath (Mack the Knife) and Jenny from the criminal underworld sing the ballad *What keeps Mankind Alive?*:

You gentlemen who think you have a mission
To purge us of the seven deadly sins
Should first sort out the basic food position
Then start your preaching, that’s where it begins

³⁵ Luke 22:19-20.

³⁶ Böhme, Hartmut: “Transsubstantiation und symbolisches Mahl. Die Mysterien des Essens und Naturphilosophie”, p. 139-140.

...

So first make sure that those who now are starving
Get proper helpings when we do the carving.³⁷

The famous aphorism from the ballad states that “Food is the first thing, morals follow on.”³⁸

Starvation overrules the morality of the ravenous because it threatens death and destruction. To escape alive from starvation the ravenous will not hesitate to violate their own or society’s morality. Starvation leads to amoral and anti-social acts. The medieval Swiss doctor, Paracelsus (1493 – 1541), put it thus: “All that live must eat and all that is eaten must be digested; from this digestion departs philosophy.”

In western industrialised countries it is hard to imagine what starving is like; the surplus production of agriculture has reduced starvation to such an extent that the World Health Organisation has declared corpulence to be the bigger threat to mankind. More people die from being too fat than from not getting enough to eat. In the western world we can try not to eat, as we do when we go on a fast, but this is incomparable to enforced hunger. We are therefore no longer familiar with starvation, and are unable to say whether “Food is the first thing, morals follow on”. Of course, aphorisms push things to extremes. Mack the Knife and Jenny claim that to survive the poor must not merely compromise their own moral values but actually leave them entirely out of account. Only when man is not starving has he the *possibility* of acting morally; and even then satiety is no guarantee of moral and justifiable acts. What happens, though, is that satiety allows ethics to become vocal, it creates a space for a discourse on ethics, and it allows ethics to become a subject in the debate, whereas hunger excludes food ethics. And the first obligation of the satisfied is to assure that nobody is starving, to secure a reasonable and just distribution of food. Where starvation sets aside and neglects ethics, the distribution of food to all is the *course of justice*. This is to put ethics on the agenda.

So far, most ethical regulations pertaining to food production have been put on the agenda by authorities on a national or European level (often in collaboration with interest organizations). Food ethics is becoming part of the agenda, as can be seen in a survey of the many new councils dealing with this specific topic. In 1998 the *Food Ethics Council* was founded in the United Kingdom; in 1999 the *European Society for Agricultural and Food Ethics* was established; in 2000 the *Dutch Platform for Agricultural and Food Ethics* was set up, while the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has created a *Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture*. The overall picture, drawn from these more or less official sources, is that food ethics deal with moral and ethical

³⁷ Brecht, Bertolt: *The Threepenny Opera*, Second Threepenny Finale, p. 55.

³⁸ “Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral”, p. 55.

questions related to food. A common consensus also seems to exist that food ethics emanate from a general concern about the development in food production practices. This concern is directed towards the health of the consumers, food security, the autonomy of the consumers, consumer information, hunger and starvation in the third world, sustainable development in rural areas, equal participation in decision-making, the responsibility for future generations, animal welfare, protection of the natural resources and the biological diversity, ethical research and, finally, the development of an ethical codex or guidelines for food production practices. These are worthy ideals but difficult to live up to. It is not too much to say that food ethics bite off more than they can chew. The figure of 800 million starving people in the world reminds us of that.

1.5 Food Ethics and the Production History

Compounding food and ethics into the single concept of food ethics is a recent innovation. At first sight it seems to be an oxymoron, that is, a concept constructed from two contradictory terms: ethics exclude food and food excludes ethics. Some, especially within the hedonist tradition, might even see food ethics as a result of bad taste, likely to spoil the appetite and the good meal. Food ethics are probably not going to be a suitable dinner-table subject in the near future. There is no desire to spoil the consumers' appetite, even though that is very likely to come about when we consider today's food production practices. Rather, the intention of food ethics is to discuss and formulate visions of the good life in food production practices and thereby increase the pleasure of the meal.

The emergence of a new concept is not accidental; it reflects new directions in the thinking and consciousness in the society. The concept of food ethics is used to designate a wide field of new concerns about food production practices. Food ethics, as they are understood to today, certainly differ from the understanding of the relationship between food and ethics in earlier times. Food ethics are not only about health and the maintenance of personal virtues, centred on the constitution of one's own human body and self. Food ethics is today also about the care for others. Food ethics as it is developed here includes the ethics of the environment, the society and others insofar as this is related to food.

It is no exaggeration to claim that consumers have acquired a taste for ethics. So far I have mostly concentrated on food and its consumption. Before proceeding in Part Three to a deeper philosophical analysis of the consumers' taste for food ethics, I also need to say something about ethics and their relation to food.

The aim of ethics is *praxis*. According to Aristotle (384-322 BC), in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics are "striving for or aiming at the good." However, what is the good? And what is the good act? This is what ethics involve. Accordingly, within the realm of ethics, we must imagine the good in order

to determine what is worth striving for. It is the vision of the good life that succeeds. However, this vision should not only be imaginable, it should also be convertible into *action*.

Actions always take place in specific situations. We cannot imagine an action without its setting. These situations are characterised by openness, inasmuch as different people are free to react very differently to the same situation. It is possible to take different kinds of action in a given situation: good, less good and bad action. Some situations seem to be very similar, but they are never entirely identical. They always differ in some respects. Thus, the good action becomes dependent on the actual context. The point of reference for ethical reflection is twofold: it is the generalised or universal vision of the good life on the one hand, and it is the employment of this vision, for instance, in the form of guidelines for real life, on the other. It is an intermediate between the generality of the vision and the specificity of the actual situation. The general ethical reflections must be adapted to the actual situation in order to be able to function as guidelines for acting in the specific situation.³⁹

The second important lesson from understanding actions always taking place in the context of situations is that *one is not alone*. To be in a situation is precisely to be in a specific position in relation to something else, to other persons, living beings or things. The vision of the good life must necessarily include others, for life is never isolated from others but is always lived with them. Actions do not take place in isolation but always include others. Ethics come into existence in the presence of the ‘other’, or as Emmanuel Lévinas has put it:

We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics.⁴⁰

The good life cannot *only* be my own good life; it includes that of others, since my own good life is unthinkable without the other and his or her good life. My own good life includes the good life for the other. Thus, I must also be able to imagine or think the good life of the others by putting myself in their position. The relatedness of ethics inspired the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1937-2005) to state that ethics are the vision of the good life with and for others.⁴¹

However, Ricœur does not leave it at that. For we not only live in the context of face-to-face relations, we are also part of a larger society, where justice is supposed to provide equality and fairness. In society, justice is institutionalised. Thus Ricœur describes ethics as the vision of the good life with

³⁹ This illuminates the difference between ethics and norms. Ethics are reasoned or substantiated, whereas norms are more or less non-reflected guidelines for acting, formulated as “you must . . .” or “you must not . . .”, without any reference to a reason or the specific situation.

⁴⁰ Emmanuel, Lévinas: *Totality and Eternity*, p. 43

⁴¹ Ricœur, Paul: *Oneself as Another*, chapters 7, 8 and 9. Instead of ‘the vision of’ Ricœur uses the words “aiming at”, which are also used by Aristotle in his definition of ethics (aiming at or striving for the good life) in his *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

and for others in just institutions. Food production is one such institution in society and we may therefore conceive of food ethics as *the vision of the good life with and for others in fair food production practices*.

We must now ask who, within the sphere of food ethics, are those *others*? Let us imagine the consumers in the store, confronted with the presence of the food. They may with good reason ask what this has to do with ethics. For those consumers who know nothing about the practices of food production there can be no food ethics. Food is ethically irrelevant to them. In the shops food is presented as “dead life”, for which no moral claims can be made with respect to the life it once was. For this food we cannot harbour any ethics. We are likely to have a taste and an aesthetic opinion, but no ethical concern can be expressed. This is also evident when we consider that we cannot violate food in itself. Living beings can be violated, but food cannot.

Why is it then considered unethical to sell food with pathogenic microbes? It cannot be because it is a pity for the food, since the food is ‘dead’, anyway. However, it is a pity for, and maybe even a violation of, the consumers that are going to eat the food and consequently get sick. Why do some consumers consider it unethical to eat eggs from battery hens? It is not because it is a violation of the eggs to eat them, nor is it because they were laid in a battery. Rather, they consider it unethical because it is a violation of the battery hens – and perhaps the quality of the eggs is deteriorated in comparison with more ‘natural’ eggs making them less attractive to the consumers. Why, to the eyes of a cook, can the tasteless mixture of different high quality food ingredients seem to be a pity and a waste? It is not out of pity for the ingredients but because it is disdainful of the work put into the production of the food ingredients and an insult to the people who could have enjoyed a good meal.

In this light therefore, food ethics do *not* concern the end product, the ready-to-eat food.⁴² Instead, food ethics concern the production practices: *we know that food has its origin in the living world and that there must necessarily be a production history*. Even if we know nothing about the production practices when we buy the food, we still know that there must be a history and that this history can be cruel and ugly, as in a brutal slaughtering not respecting animal welfare, or it can be good and beautiful, as in the cases where the animals are treated properly and with respect for their natural behaviour. Knowledge of the production history of the food constitutes the basis for the ethical standpoint of the consumer. *The production history forms the basis of consumers’ food ethics*. Without knowledge, consumers are excluded from acting (or shopping) ethically. They cannot ask the question: could the production history be different?

The case of genetically modified food illustrates this very well. Many Europeans oppose genetically modified food and wish to avoid it. But this is not always a simple task, as genetically

⁴² Fair distribution of food is, however, one of the most pressing ethical issues.

modified plants can easily spread beyond control, for example as pollen is spread from one field to another or as the result of mixing genetically modified with non-modified plants during the processing (usually there is no visible distinction between genetically modified plants and conventional plants). The European authorities in this field, the EU Commission, have proposed a labelling procedure stating that only if the content of GMOs exceeds a specific limit does it have to be labelled. This makes it completely impossible for the consumers to avoid genetically modified food. Being 'forced' to eat, or being unable to avoid, genetically modified food, opponents can soon be expected to retire from the fray. It makes it impossible for the consumers to express their ethical engagement in food.

Food ethics stretch back towards the past, towards the origin of the food: towards the living nature that the food comes from and towards the production practices under which the food has been produced and distributed to the consumers. Food ethics is about the ethics of food production practices, all the way from breeding and farming to food processing and distribution.

The 'pastness' of food ethics might seem a problem. Food ethics, as it appears in the consumers' choice and actions, contains a systematic sluggishness, an inner inertness, as the damage must already have happened before the consumers can avoid or boycott it. In a way by then it is too late. Food ethics point towards past time and make up an 'ethics of the past', an impossible ethic from the consumers' point of view, since what is already done cannot be undone: the food has been produced – under either ethically acceptable or unacceptable conditions. When the food ethics of consumers are based on sanctions, that is, a sanction of specific products whose production history is found unacceptable rather than on the specific choice of products whose production history is known and appreciated, then there is a danger that food ethics become the 'least poor ethics'. The choice is made among the products offered on the shelves of the stores, and all that can be done is to choose the least poor production history. Food ethics based on sanctions of productions that have already taken place are not the ethics of oneself but can only be the least poor ethics among the choices offered by the stores. Not to mention that in a globalised world sanctions seem to have lost much of their effects: only in very few cases it has been possible to mobilize consumer boycotts that have been really efficient. For a sanction to be efficient there must be a linkage between involved partners, there must be something to sanction. Where there is no such relationship, sanctions become useless,

It is surely a fundamental characteristic of food ethics that they relate to production stories of lost time, but even so I consider this view of the consumers' possibilities too pessimistic. It might be a true and fundamental characteristic of the market that consumers only act when it is too late, but then one of the basic aims of food ethics should be to make it good again. Not in the sense that what is done can be changed and time rolled back, but that in the future, food production practices should be changed for the better. This points food ethics into the future as the vision of the good life with and within food

production. In his book *Food Ethics* from 1996 Ben Mepham, in an attempt to give a systematic overview of food-related ethical issues, sets up an ‘ethical matrix’:

Table 2. Ethical matrix showing three ethical principles and appropriate organisms (e.g. animals and crops), producers (e.g. farmers and employees in the food industry), consumers and biota.⁴³

	Well-being	Autonomy	Justice
Treated organism	e.g. animal welfare	e.g. behavioural freedom	Respect for <i>telos</i>
Producers (e.g. farmers)	Adequate income and working conditions	Freedom to adopt or not adopt	Fair treatment in trade and law
Consumers	Availability of safe food, acceptability	Respect for consumer choice (labelling)	Universal affordability of food
Biota	Conservation of the biota	Maintenance of biodiversity	Sustainability of biotic populations

The principles mentioned (well-being, autonomy and justice) are indeed relevant issues and represent one of the first attempts to reflect systematically on food ethics in a principled approach, also sometimes referred to as *principalism*. For the moment, though, I am going to leave them uncommented and instead concentrate on the question of the relevant actors within food ethics: the appropriate organisms, the producers, the consumers and living nature. Of these four only three – the appropriate organisms, the producers and living nature – are directly involved in the production history.

The consumers are not usually involved in the food production. This is an important distinction within food ethics. Food ethics of course should be and are concerned with the just distribution of food. However, the concern for nature, the living organisms and human beings involved in the food production is of another category. Precisely because they are the concern for those involved in the production the actions or the shopping of the consumers are of immense importance – which is much less the case when it comes to fair distribution of food. I have already mentioned that in this book I have taken the view of consumers in order to see what possibilities are available for them to enact their food ethics.

However, as can be seen from the matrix the relevant ethical issues concerning consumers are availability of safe food, free choice of food and the affordability of food. These can be seen as rights of the consumers that put an obligation on the producers and retailers in the form of safe production systems, the duty to inform the consumers and so forth. The free choice of consumers (or as I would rather say the *informed choice* and the respect for consumer autonomy) is at the core of consumer food

⁴³ Mepham, Ben: “Ethical Analysis and Food Biotechnologies: An Evaluative Framework,” in Mepham, Ben (ed.): *Food Ethics*, p. 106.

ethics because without information consumers cannot make any choice. The principle of consumer autonomy is the only above-mentioned aspect of the *ethics of consumption*, as it is sometimes referred to, that I shall deal with in this book.⁴⁴ Informed food choice points to the moral duties of the producers and retailers to give information to the consumers concerning the production history and its food-related ethical issues.

As most people do not know anything or only have very sparse information about the production history, it is relevant to ask what then happens (which is the case of the food consumption). The answer is straightforward and well-known to most people: food should be cheap!

Statistics show that every year consumers are spending less money on food.⁴⁵ They devote a smaller and smaller part of their income on food. For households seeking to maximize utility, this seems to be reasonable and justifiable: let's save money on food in order to be able to spend more on other things. The hidden assumption behind this is, of course, that food is more or less the same stuff anyway and that there is really no difference in quality. Moreover, it can indeed be difficult for modern consumer to see the difference between the foodstuffs. Let me try to follow the so-called utility maximizing consumers and their households to the outskirts, since this will indicate a number of things about the dilemmas facing modern consumers. For they are in a situation where they constantly have the feeling of being cheated. On the other hand, a lowering of prices would also lead to many other problems. If prices are lowered, the farmers and the food industry will have to produce more and will simultaneously have to lower their expenses. They for their part have already gone a long way in this direction and their realignment has affected the animals' welfare, the well-being of the farmers and the job satisfaction of employees working in the food industry, the protection of the environment and the landscape and, of course, the quality of the food. Consumers either pay too much and have the feeling of being cheated or they pay too little and feel they have obtained inferior quality. The thought of being cheated torments consumers who, for this reason, prefer to swallow their pride and buy what is cheapest although they know it is inferior. But this at least saves them from the feeling of being cheated. It's not easy to be a consumer when price is the most important thing and the cheapest commodity is the worst.

The fitting up of the shops is tasteless, since the shopkeepers simply cannot afford to satisfy the fine taste of such cheese-paring consumers. The consumers lose their good appetite when shopping. Whatever the cost, it has to be cheap; this is why the consumers are shopping at the cheapest markets,

⁴⁴ This means leaving out the other aspects of *consumer ethics* (e.g. food security and affordability), which are the *ethics for* consumers and the *rights of* consumers. See for instance Crocker, David and Toby Linden (ed.): *Ethics of Consumption*.

⁴⁵ See for instance Warde, Alan: *Consumption, Food and Taste. Culinary Antinomies and Commodity Culture*, p. 101.

well knowing they naturally become dissatisfied. But they want the cheapest and therefore they arrive in large crowds to procure as much cheap food as possible of the poorest quality.

Because of the low profit yield on the sale of cheap food, the shopkeepers cannot pay the employees a decent wage and consequently feel constrained to buy the cheapest food. Even when they can afford something else they know all too well that the profit margin on specialty items, delicacies and deluxe-quality foods is high. The quantity of products sold of this type is low; this condition makes the cost of distributing these items higher than the actual selling-prices of the products. It is not easy to be a shopkeeper when one always has to please the consumers who come in looking for the cheapest products. They have to push the prices of the wholesalers down in order to put cheap food on the shelves of the food store.

This makes it difficult in turn to be a wholesaler. The wholesalers must import food that is produced in countries that are far away. This cuts costs, because consideration and care for the environment, the employees and the animals is virtually non-existent in these countries. It is hard to discontinue contracts with the local farmers, but one has to do so when it is imperative that the food be sold at those prices. In order to make the whole enterprise rational and profitable, the wholesaler is forced to take home larger portions than can be produced locally. The wholesalers know that the transportation of food all around the world causes pollution, but that's how the market works and we cannot escape globalisation.

Nor is it easy to be a farmer when the wholesaler forces the prices down saying that he can get the goods even cheaper elsewhere, whether from the neighbour or from abroad. The farmers shake their heads at the prices in the stores when they consider what they themselves earn on the production of the food. In addition, it's hard to industrialize the small pigs and the chickens, but one must do so to stay in business. In order to make the production rational and efficient, farmers have to expand and to go into big business and specialized production. They have just got to buy up the neighbour's family farm, but it's going to be very expensive, because the neighbour knows all too well that one is forced to expand, just to stay in business.

If there was anybody along this line who could agree to boycott the consumers and stop producing cheap pigs, it might be realistic to believe in a better food quality for the future. However, most of the producers and merchants have a hard time standing together; solidarity among competitors on the market is not very widespread. Moreover, globalization renders boycott old-fashioned and ridiculous. This describes many of the dilemmas pertinent to the modern food market and food production practices. It is a vicious circle, where selfishness, bookkeeping and economic rationality are assigned a higher priority than ethics. From a consumer perspective the structures of the modern food markets keep the production history hidden. In their present state the structures of the market are

unable to deal with the production history. Every time a food product changes hands almost all information of the former owner is lost. As things are today, it is difficult to make the production history visible; the effort needed to find relevant information concerning production practices is far too Herculean a task for consumers. The complexity and the lack of transparency of today's food market make consumers distrust the producers and the retailers. As consumers of food they only experience the food in its aesthetic and civilised form and never in an ethical perspective. It is no longer obvious that food has an origin and a history. To most consumers agriculture, the food industry and the other enterprises that are involved in bringing food to the food stores and the dinner tables are pretty much a closed book that they know very little about. They are unable to review the production history and thus equally unable to see into the future of how their food consumption is going to influence nature and society. The relations between producers and consumers are non-existent, and the coherence between the elements in the whole chain from "farm to fork" is concealed from the latter.

Food is not only a subject for the selfish consumer and household; rather, it is an ethical subject with immense importance for society, nature and human beings. Food makes a difference; it is not indifferent in the sense that one kind of food is just as good as another. There is a difference in foods even though the food industry tries its best to standardise food.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Even such a very basic and relatively non-processed product as milk – at least most people do not think of milk as highly processed – is standardised for variations in breed, fat content, season, origin, feed, time of lactation, milking system and storage system, to mention but a few of the parameters that could otherwise make milk a very varied product.⁴⁶ The temporal variations in the level of proteins in the raw milk are standardised in the dairy to the same level. This enables the dairy to deliver the same homogeneous product all through the year and in all parts of the world. Milk is no longer a natural product but an industrial product; it possesses the most characteristic feature of mass-produced products: uniformity. The standardisation of food products makes us forget their origin, that food comes from living creatures and from living nature.

So why is that it is so difficult for industrialised and modern societies to deal with food ethics? From the producers' point of view the problem is that even the most ethically reasonable and justifiable food production practices will never be able to survive a financial deficit for longer periods. For this reason the ethics of the producers and the ethics of the consumers cannot be separated. The ethics of the producers cannot be maintained unless they are supported by the ethical consumption of the consumers. The ethics of the producers must therefore fit those of the consumers, otherwise there will be no customers. Some kind of conformity in the ethical standpoints of the producers and consumers is

⁴⁶ Sørensen, John (Arla Foods): "Milk – quality aspects relating to the raw material." Paper from the conference, *Kvalitet fra jord til bord (Quality from Farm to Fork)*, The Royal Veterinary and Agricultural University of Copenhagen, January, 2001.

necessary if food ethics are to exert their influence in the face of the economic rationality of the market. However, as production and consumption have been separated, the communication between producers and consumers is very limited and thus the chances of reaching agreements on food production practices are very poor.