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The Taste for Ethics

An Ethic of Food Consumption

by Christian Coff

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THE TASTE FOR ETHICS

An Ethic of Food Consumption

By

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Translator

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	vii
Foreword	ix
Preface	xi
List of Tables and Figures	xvii
About the Author	xix
Part I Food and Ethics	1
Chapter 1: Eating, Society and Ethics	3
1. THE INTIMACY OF EATING AND DIGESTION	6
2. EATING IN BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH	11
3. THE SOCIAL MEANING OF THE MEAL	13
4. FOOD AND ETHICS IN HISTORY	16
5. FOOD ETHICS AND THE PRODUCTION HISTORY	21
Part II The Intellectualization of Food	31
Chapter 2: Food to Science: On the Intellectualization of Food	33
1. THE HERMENEUTIC APPROACH OF EARLY NATURAL HISTORY	36
2. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH OF LATE NATURAL HISTORY	42
3. BIOLOGY AND THE INVISIBLE CHARACTERISTICS OF LIFE	46
4. THE END OF PHENOMENOLOGY IN BIOLOGY	50
Chapter 3: The Storylessness of Food	61
1. THE HISTORY OF INDUSTRIALIZATION OF AGRICULTURE	61
2. FOOD SCIENCE AND GASTRONOMY	69
3. THE POWERLESSNESS OF THE POLITICAL CONSUMER	77

4.	THE HIDDEN PRODUCTION HISTORY OF FOOD	85
5.	DO NOT EAT WHAT YOU HAVE NOT READ	89
Part III Food Ethics and the Production History		93
Chapter 4: Tracing the Production History		95
1.	SHORT-RANGE AND LONG-RANGE ETHICS	96
2.	FOOD AS A TRACE	101
3.	THE JUDGEMENT OF TASTE AND MORALITY	107
4.	THE TRACE AS PRESENCE AND LOST TIME	115
5.	HISTORY OF EFFECT	123
6.	PRODUCTION HISTORY AND MIMESIS	130
Chapter 5: Food Ethics as the Ethics of the Trace		139
1.	THE RELIABILITY OF THE PRODUCTION HISTORY	141
2.	FOOD AND ETHICAL IDENTITY	148
3.	FOOD AS A TRACE OF NATURE	153
4.	FOOD ETHICS OF THE CONSUMERS	160
Chapter 6: Traceability and Food Ethics		167
1.	FRAGMENTATION AND TRACEABILITY	168
2.	SOCIOLOGICAL SURVEY ON ETHICAL TRACEABILITY	172
3.	CONSUMER AUTONOMY: REMEMBERING THE OTHER AND INFORMED CHOICE	181
4.	RECOGNIZING CONSUMERS RECOGNIZING PRODUCERS	189
References		203
Index		209

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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 industrialization 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 lookout for food with the healthiest production history behind it. Food ethics is related to agriculture, its production process and 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 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.

Dr. Peter Kemp
Professor of Philosophy at the Danish University of Education

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. First, the abundance of food and the astonishing variety now available to Western consumers make it possible to focus on other questions than the basics of human hunger and the supply of food. Second, the powerful technological development within the life sciences and the risks thereby 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

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*, ch. 7). I have made two changes. First, 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”. Second, because the subject here is food ethics, “institutions” has been replaced by “food production practices”.

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 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, characterized 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 that, 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 that 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, 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. First, 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. Second, 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. Third, intellectual activity is used to rationalize 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 criticize 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. 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 to bring 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: 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 – e.g. 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 organized 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 a 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