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A SHORT HISTORY OF FOOD ETHICS

(Accepted November 6, 1999)

ABSTRACT. Moral concern with food intake is as old as morality itself. In the course of history, however, several ways of critically examining practices of food production and food intake have been developed. Whereas ancient Greek food ethics concentrated on the problem of temperance, and ancient Jewish ethics on the distinction between legitimate and illicit food products, early Christian morality simply refused to attach any moral significance to food intake. Yet, during the middle ages food became one of the principle objects of monastic programs for moral exercise (*askesis*). During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, food ethics was transformed in terms of the increasing scientific interest in food intake, while in the nineteenth century the social dimension of food ethics was discovered, with the result that more and more attention was given to the production and distribution of food products. Because of the increasing distance between the production and consumption of food products ever since, the outstanding feature of contemporary food ethics is it reliance and dependence on labeling practices.

KEY WORDS: Food ethics, history, dietetics, labeling, devitalization, consumer dependence

Something for the industrious – Anyone who now wishes to make a study of moral matters opens up for himself an immense field of work. So far, all that has given color to existence still lacks a history. Has anyone made a study of different ways of dividing up the day or of the consequences of a regular schedule for work, festivals, and rest? What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there any philosophy of nutrition? (Nietzsche, 1974, §7).

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1984a) notices that, in the ethical literature of ancient Greece, food ethics – or rather *dietetics* – constituted a section of substantial importance. Indeed, in those days, food ethics was no less prominent than, and existed side by side with, sexual ethics and medical ethics. Roman and early Christian writers likewise devoted serious attention to the moral aspects of food intake. Gradually, however, whereas sexual ethics became something of an obsession to the West, the interest in food ethics seemed to decline

Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics **12:** 113–126, 2000.
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(Foucault, 1995, p. 607). Nonetheless, Foucault emphasizes how interesting it would be to write a history of food ethics some day, and I quite agree with his latter claim, although in this article I will have to restrict myself to drawing up a scheme, a *table of contents* for such a history. As to his former claim, however, the possibility must not be ruled out that, should we really embark on such a project, the history of food ethics will prove no less interesting and relevant than that of sexual or medical ethics.

But why should we be interested in the *history* of food ethics, rather than in its present conditions or its prospects for the future? Because in order to understand the present, it is important – at least in broad outline – to be familiar with the past. Certain basic and apparently self-evident features and convictions of contemporary food ethics are actually the outcome of a long history. In the course of this history, a series of events has occurred the effects of which are still noticeable today. At the same time, however, a comparison with the food ethics of the past will make us more aware of precisely those aspects and concerns of the present ethic that can be regarded as new and typical for our age. In other words, history is to be explored in such a way that the resulting account is not *merely* historical, but rather aims at proliferating the present.

What is true for applied (or professional) ethics in general also applies to food ethics in particular – its history is both long and short. Applied ethics as we now know it was launched in the sixties, but centuries of casuistry preceded it (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988), and a similar claim can be made for food ethics as well. With the recent publication of the volume *Food Ethics* by Ben Mepham in 1996, a new branch of applied or professional ethics was introduced, but a long tradition of dietetics and other forms of moral concern with food preceded it. And although the fact of this particular branch of ethics receiving a new name ("food ethics") rightly stresses its discontinuity with the past, some legacies and points of continuity can be indicated as well.

One of the things we may learn from studying the past is that, in the course of history, some remarkable shifts occurred. Whereas pre-modern food ethics predominantly focused on issues relating to the *consumption* of food, modern food ethics typically developed an interest in issues relating to food *production*. And whereas ancient dietetics was basically a *private* morality, in recent times the importance of the *social* dimension of food ethics was recognized. Moreover, in the course of history, several basic *models* for reflection on food intake emerged. Whereas Greek dietetics typically argued in terms of *right measure* and *temperance*, Jewish morality started from a binary distinction between what was *allowed* and what was *not allowed*. Both models adhered to and were elab-

orated in terms of a definite logic of their own. Finally, in recent times, food products increasingly came to be regarded as incarnating or materializing basic ideological and societal conflicts.

The first sections of my paper will be devoted to ancient food ethics: Greek, Jewish, and Christian ethics. With the onset of modernity, scientific explanations of food production and consumption (such as iatrophysics) became increasingly important. Subsequently, in the nineteenth century the political and demographical aspects of food production and consumption were explored. In the final section, I will return to the significance of historical research for the ethical concerns of the present.

2. ANCIENT FOOD ETHICS

2.1. *Greek Dietetics*

The basic maxim of Greek morality – *Live and act in accordance with nature*, [*kata physin*] – applies to ancient Greek food ethics as well. But we must not interpret it in the sense that man is to be merely a *passive* consumer of anything nature has to offer. Rather, whereas all other animals may rely on their natural inclinations when it comes to food intake, man alone is equipped with the faculty of reason.[1] This allows him (or forces him) to participate in nature in an *active*, conscious manner. To live in accordance with nature basically means to live a life of temperance. Although we nowadays tend to associate nature with abundance and waste, rather than with temperance, in mainstream ancient Greek and Roman ethics the connection between "nature" and "temperance" was self-evident somehow – a "historical a priori," as Foucault calls it. Thus, in the sphere of food consumption, a rational and moral life was a temperate one.[2]

In fact, Hippocrates (1923/1957) already stresses that a truly human life is not a life of passive consumption. Food products yielded by nature have to be improved and refined. Many and terrible were the sufferings of men from brutish living, he tells us, when they partook of crude and uncompounded foods. They suffered severely, but in the course of time developed a nourishment that harmonized better with their constitution. What is provided by nature must be actively cultivated by man. And

[1] This difference between human beings and animals in terms of food intake is more or less confirmed by contemporary research. Normally, the body of animals produces letine to signal saturation. In the case of man, as compared to other animals, this function has diminished, probably due to exposure to extended periods of hunger and scarcity in prehistorical times (Westerterp-Platenga et al., 1999).

[2] Cf. for example Aristotle (1982, III x, VII ix).

this is a fully moral task. Indeed – dietetics entails a way of life. In order to maintain health and well being, the selection and preparation of food becomes an item of major concern, for which, however, no general recipes can be forwarded. Rather, one has to discover the most suiting and natural daily regimen in an inductive manner. By subjecting oneself to a program of systematic self-observation, self-inspection, and experiment, each and every individual may develop a moral regime, a moral life style, a pattern of feeding habits of his own, one that suits his personal physical make-up (Foucault 1984a, 1984b). Nonetheless, all these individual patterns of consumption adhere to one and the same basic moral scheme, namely the idea of temperance as the primary condition of human flourishing. Moreover, temperance allows the moral elite to distinguish itself from the masses, the mere consumers. Whereas the latter's life in ancient times was bound to oscillate between excess and deprivation, between consuming extreme quantities of food at some occasions while experiencing hunger and scarcity at others, the gentleman maintained his well-considered pattern of life under all circumstances, neither completely gratifying his desire, nor completely abstaining from doing so. Nowhere do we find it indicated that certain food products are to be regarded as illicit in and by themselves. Everything is allowed – as long as one's food practices remain within the limits of temperance.

2.2. *Food Ethics in the Hebrew Bible*

In the Hebrew Bible, a completely different moral logic is at work. It is guided, not by the idea of temperance, but by the idea of a basic distinction between what is allowed and what is not allowed. In the context of food ethics, divine legislation introduces a dichotomy between admissible and inadmissible, legitimate and illicit food. "These are the creatures you may eat," the Bible tells its readers: "Of all the larger land animals you may eat any hoofed animal which has cloven hoofs and also chews the cud; those which only have cloven hoofs or only chew the cud you must not eat" (Leviticus 11: 1–4). Or, in another version: "You must not eat any abominable thing . . . You may eat any hoofed animal that has cloven hoofs and also chews the cud; those that only chew the cud or only have cloven hoofs you must not eat" (Deuteronomium 14: 3–7). Countless efforts have been made to explain the *why* of these stringent directions, notably in terms of health, hygiene, and other "utilitarian" concerns, but none of them has completely succeeded in effacing their basically *arbitrary* nature. From the perspective of their moral logic, the most important reason for abstaining from eating *unclean* food products (such as pork) is simply the fact that the Law prohibits it. By indulging in consumptive habits that are in compli-

ance with the Law, the individual acquires a distinctive moral identity of his own, thus distinguishing himself from gentiles – much like the Greek gentleman distinguished himself from the masses. In this manner, the Hebrew Bible introduces a new and highly significant principle into the history of food ethics, namely the idea that certain food products are to be regarded as *contaminated* in view of their origin – not because they are unhealthy, tasteless, difficult to digest, or something like that, but because they are unlawful *in themselves*. Instead of the Greek logic of "more" and "less" we are faced here with a binary logic of prohibited versus permitted.

2.3. *Food Ethics in the Gospels*

Although in historical accounts, the phrase "Jewish-Christian tradition" quite often occurs, nothing like that exists in the history of food ethics. On the contrary, the moral view on food consumption that one encounters in the Gospels is as much at odds with the ancient Jewish food ethic as it is with the ancient pagan one. Indeed, what is so striking in the food ethic proclaimed by Jesus, is the basic atmosphere of carelessness it conveys. All of a sudden, food intake seems to have become completely insignificant, from a moral point of view. Food no longer seems to matter at all. Food intake is of no concern to one's moral identity. Indeed, the early Christian food ethic is an ethic of de-problematization. Be not anxious about food or drink, Jesus tells his followers. Surely, life is more than food. Indeed: "No one is defiled by what goes into his mouth; only by what comes out of it ... Do you not see that whatever goes in by the mouth passes into the stomach and so is discharged at a certain place? But what comes out of the mouth has its origins in the heart; and that is what defiles a person" (Matthew 15: 11–17). What is so striking in the teaching of Jesus, in comparison with the stringent food ethic of the Hebrew Bible, is its tolerating laxity, the abrupt revisions it contains. Moral precepts (such as concerning the gathering of corn on a Sabbath day or eating and drinking with gentiles and publicans) are annulled, violated, disregarded, one after the other. Countless efforts have been made to retain some kind of continuity between the sayings of Jesus and the moral context in which they were uttered, but the effect produced by the sudden intrusion of disregard cannot be effaced completely. Placing all his hopes on the Kingdom of Heavens, Jesus simply urges those who follow him to loose all interest in food production and consumption.

In his First Letter to the Christians of Corinth, Paul considers some of the issues raised by this early Christian food ethic quite carefully, but eventually sides with the Christian point of view – Nothing is unclean *in itself*. Even meat sacrificed to idols and subsequently sold in the market

may be eaten by Christians (1 Cor 10: 19–11; 8: 1–13). In a rather similar vein, the council of Ancyra (AD 314) required Christians who favored vegetarianism to dip vegetables occasionally into meat gravy so as to show that their dietary was based on personal preference rather than on any Christian principle (Jonsen and Toulmin, 1988: 93).

3. MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE FOOD ETHICS

Up to a certain point, the monastic food ethic elaborated during the middle ages adhered to the Christian principle of disregard, namely insofar as food *in itself* was unimportant. Food and food intake merely functioned as a means, an object for moral exercise. Thus, concern with food found a place in monastic regimes directed at the strengthening of self-discipline and the gradual submission of the *homo naturalis*. Gradually, however, monastic concern with food grew into something of an obsession, and abstention from food intake became an objective in its own right. Instead of functioning within the framework of a program for moral exercise, food ethics now aimed at the mortification of the flesh and the extinction of all desire, as well as of all worldly involvement (Van den Berg, 1961). The ancient Greek morale of temperance, directed towards the "right measure" – that is, *askesis,* in the original sense of exercise –, was replaced by "asceticism" in the sense of excessive abstention. In popular imagination, however, but also in real life, the official ideology of excessive asceticism was complemented by a counter-image: that of the excessively gluttonous monk (Bakhtin, 1968).

In Christian food ethics, the emphasis usually is on monastic practices of food intake. Submission to such practices allowed monks or nuns to distinguish themselves from the laity. But ecclesiastical regulations had a considerable impact on food practices of the masses as well, notably through prescribing times of fasting or regulations for special fasting-days, such as abstention from meat intake on Fridays. The forty-days period of fasting during Lent (that is, between carnival – *carne vale* means "Adieu, meat" – and Easter) was already established in the fourth century AD; but as it coincided with nature's own cycle of scarcity and abundance, it in fact canonized pagan practices that had already been in vogue before the dawn of Christianity.

In the sixteenth century, the monastic food ethic of mortification had already become a principal target of moral criticism. Even within Christian circles, a much more positive appreciation of food intake had emerged. Martin Luther, notably in his *Table Talk*, recommended the intake of food in large quantities as a remedy against temptation and melancholy (Zwart,

1996). Indeed, having been an ascetic monk himself, later in life he grew into the obese figure with whom he is now usually identified. His contemporary Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, also stressed the importance of a healthy and well cared for body. He appreciated a good meal and even seems to have given gastronomical advice (Van den Berg, 1961). Instead of retiring into a monastery, the Jesuits decided to re-enter the world, and this included taking part in worldly practices of food intake. But the Renaissance rehabilitation of food intake is nowhere as apparent as in the astonishing novels of Rabelais, where we meet great, healthy, vigorous giants, consuming enormous quantities of food and adhering to a food ethic that can be regarded as the very antipode of asceticism (Bakhtin, 1968). Instead of mortification, we are faced with supersaturation of the flesh. And in real life, the Renaissance elite aimed at reviving the ancient Roman culinary tradition with its ravishingly abundant and exotic dishes (Morus, 1952).

Thus, the Renaissance was quite in accordance with some of the main trends in “worldly” medieval life. Quite in opposition to monastic life, the medieval worldly elite had always distinguished itself from the rural masses by consuming large quantities of meat. As Norbert Elias (1969) pointed out, however, a *civilization* of food intake was to take place. It consisted of the gradual increase of delicacy and sensitivity, notably with regard to meat consumption. Initially, animals that had been prepared for consumption were served at a piece, clearly recognizable, and the process of skinning and dissecting them was done immediately before consumption, that is: in public. At a certain point, however, dissection and consumption came to be discretely separated from one another. In fact, this increase in distance between the preparation and consumption of meat, as well as of other food products, continues well into the present. Initially, it was reinforced by the emergence of moral scruples with regard to the butchering of animals. Subsequently, however, it became a source of estrangement and suspicion, of moral concern with regard to food production in its own right. Nowadays, countless initiatives in the realm of food ethics actually aim at reducing (at least to some extent) the ever-increasing distance between the production and the consumption of food products – a distance that is both concealing and disquieting. The food ethics of the bourgeois parlor is both forgetful of and worried by what is actually happening in the kitchen beneath (or, for that matter, in the abattoirs behind the fence). But in saying this, we have already entered the modern era.

4. THE FOOD ETHICS OF MODERNITY

4.1. *Scientific Interest in Food Intake: Iatrophysics and Macrobiotics*

The new element in the food ethics of modernity is the scientific point of view. Modern science basically consists of a combination of systematic observation and quantification. One of the new scientific practices emerging in the seventeenth century was iatrophysics. Sanctorius, its founding-father, whose aphorisms on medical statics – *De Medicina Statica Aphorismis* – were published in 1614, spent no less than thirty years of his life on a scale, carefully measuring the effects of food intake and other daily habits on body weight (Van den Berg, 1961; Recht, 1931). He faithfully registered what happened (quantitatively speaking) when he was eating, drinking, sleeping, and having intercourse, and by doing so he discovered, for example, that having breakfast leads to a gain in body weight (although one might have the subjective experience of becoming somewhat lighter because of stimulated blood circulation). His more important discovery, however, was that the most significant decrease of body weight occurs during sleep, while sexual intercourse is by far the most weight-consuming activity (although an elderly man may actually "feel" heavier after the act). If it were not for these "statics" of bodily existence, the present obsession with bodily weight would be unthinkable. Those who nowadays include regular weight measurements into the daily practices of their lives are more or less repeating Sanctorius's original initiative. Instead of on subjective experiences, modern dietetics relies on quantitative measurement, on "objective" temperance.

The fact that modern dietetics, rather than being merely a scientific or medical endeavor, has a moral import to it as well, becomes noticeable in the famous treatise on macrobiotics – *Makrobiotik* – published by Hufeland in 1796. The question how to extend one's own life is considered both from a medical and from a moral point of view. Indeed, man's physical life is explicitly regarded from a moral perspective. Hufeland's plea for diet and temperance is substantiated by a series of figures and tables and eventually results in a medical table manual – *medizinisches Tischbuch*. The ultimate objective of his scientific dietetics is the quantitative extension of life (Hufeland, 1796/1860/1958).

In his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Kant had explicitly denied that dietetics can be regarded as a form of ethics.[3] Since it basically consists in the

[3] "Es herrscht ein großer und selbst der Behandlungsart der Wissenschaft sehr nachteiliger Mißverstand in Ansehung dessen, was man für praktisch, in einer solchen Bedeutung zu halten habe, daß es darum zu einer praktische Philosophie gezogen zu werden verdiente. Man hat Staatsklugheit und Staatswirtschaft, Haushaltungsregeln,

application of scientific knowledge to matters of health, it is a technical, rather than a "practical" (i.e., "ethical") endeavor. In the *Streit der Fakultäten*, however, urged by Hufeland himself, he seems to change his mind somewhat. Dietetics is a moral endeavor insofar as it entails the systematic effort to subject one's sensuality to reason. Thus, dietetics is the willingness to regulate one's life in accordance with self-ordained rules. Kant then adds some dietetic experiences of his own, borrowed from daily self-observation. It is well-known, of course, that Kant excelled in living an extremely regular, orderly life, notably in terms of time schedules for physical exercise and food intake. Even mental work was accurately scheduled. In his *Metaphysik der Sitten,* Kant had argued that it is morally illicit to benumb one's mind by the intake of excessive amounts of food or alcohol, thus depriving oneself of the use of one's intellectual faculties. The mere *physical* effects of consumption, however, in terms of well being or health, are still regarded by him a matter of prudence (Klugheit), rather than of practical reason (that is, ethics).

4.2. *The Social Dimension*

The nineteenth century constitutes an important chapter in the history of food ethics, predominantly because the importance of the social dimension of food production and consumption is now being recognized. In Malthus's famous essay on population growth, food constitutes a major moral problem. According to Malthus (1798/1872), there is a tendency in all animated life to increase beyond the nourishment available for it. Whereas in the case of animals, the population increase is sooner or later restrained by lack of food, mankind may rely on foresight, calculation, and morality to elaborate a more rational solution. By means of temporary sacrifices, a global catastrophe and famine may be prevented. The most powerful of all desires is the desire for food, closely followed by the passion between the sexes. Both are to be subjected to regulation and self-direction.[4] Thus, food ethics provides the model for ethics as such.

imgleichen die des Umgangs, Vorschriften zum Wohlbefinden und Diätik, so wohl der Seele als des Körpers ... zur praktischen Philosophie zählen zu können geglaubt; weil sie doch ingesamt einen Inbegriff praktischer Sätze enthalten" (1957, X, p. 9). Elsewhere he claims that "nicht die Haus-, Land-, Staatswirtschaft, die Kunst des Umganges, die Vorschriften der Diätik, selbst nicht die allgemeine Glückseligkeitslehre, sogar nicht einmal die Bezähmung der Neigungen und Bändigung der Affekte zum Behuf der letzteren" can be regarded as truly pratical. All considerations of such nature are technical rather than practical (p. 80).

[4] Altough his argument is based on demographical data and mathematical reasoning, Malthus (who was actually a country minister) was basically addressing the poor with a moral plea for restraint (or urging the state to intervene in their own best-interest). His

In the absence of a policy of self-constraint, starvation on a global scale is to be expected. That is, food intake and lack of self-restraint become problematic because of their social, rather than their individual impact. Although his bleak futurology actually proved incorrect (due to technological developments induced in the nineteenth century by Thomas Cole, Robert Blackwell, and others, agricultural production was to increase on an unprecedented scale) the awareness of the social dimensions of food ethics was now clearly awakened. In fact, the relationship between population increase and agriculture has remained a major item of concern ever since.

Karl Marx (1906) likewise focuses on the social dimension of food. Moreover, in Marx's work attention is directed towards the production, rather than towards the consumption of food. The food products *as such* become the basic items of concern. They have become the incarnations of social tension and conflict – rendering them materially tangible, so to speak. The rise of capitalism effected the destruction of the self-providing, rural communities of the past and greatly increased the distance between production and consumption. Thus, the food products generated by capitalism represent a basic experience of estrangement and alienation. In his socialist novel *The Jungle* Upton Sinclair (1905/1946) exemplifies the Marxist point of view by drawing out a dreadful picture of a Chicago meat factory in which millions of live creatures are turned into food every year. At the break of dawn, a continuous stream of animals, a "river of death" arrives, still unsuspicious of their destiny. Being lined up on an enormous wheel, their throats are mechanically slit. It is "porkmaking by machinery, by applied mathematics" (p. 35). Within a few hours, all animals, so very human in their protests, are transformed into canned bacon and pork – food items that incarnate and represent an atrocious procedure that itself remains unseen (to the general public) and "buried out of sight" (p. 36). The machine-like exploitation of animals is paralleled, however, by the exploitation of the food consumers, as well as of the factory workers themselves.

5. THE PRESENT: CONSUMER DEPENDENCE AND THE IMPORTANCE OF LABELING

Several of the principles and trends that have emerged in the course of history are still relevant today, but they are functioning under new

book is part of what Foucault (1976) referred to as "biopower" – the sudden explosion of concerns, underpinned by tables and mathematical calculations, for the health, lifetime, offspring, and food intake of populations, notably the lower classes.

conditions. In this final section, I will briefly outline how three basic trends in food ethics (namely dietetics, the idea of moral contamination, and the awareness of the social dimension) are functioning today. The crucial importance of labeling practices will be regarded as the connecting element, typical for the present. A new ethical idea, namely consumer autonomy, is connected with the time-old desire to elaborate a personal moral identity.

Dietetics, or the logic of more and less – Dietetics (the art of temperance) is still part of the food ethics of the present, but has suffered a considerable change, notably due to the introduction of the scientific point of view. Rather than on subjective experience, contemporary dietetics relies on exact measurement (weight watching) as well as on labeling practices, informing food consumers about the ingredients and components of food products. A plethora of ideas about food products and their qualitative characteristics has thus been rephrased in terms of a limited number of quantitative units, notably the Calorie. In 1885, the physiologist Max Rubner discovered that one gram of carbohydrate and one gram of protein will supply about the same amount of energy, namely 4.1 Calorie (Morus, 1952). Besides Calories, the body is in need of a limited number of vitamins and proteins. Thus, a direct, mathematical relationship could be established between food intake (in terms of calories) and body weight (in terms of pounds or kilograms). In short, dietetics has been drastically quantified and objectified.

The binary logic of either/or – Side by side with dietetics there exists the binary distinction between problematic and unproblematic, contaminated and uncontaminated food products. Ancient examples still flourishing are vegetarianism and the rejection of non-kosher food products. The rejected products are regarded as contaminated, not in a literal, but rather in a moral sense. Meat products, for example, are regarded by a vegetarian consumer as contaminated, not (or not primarily) because they are unhealthy, tasteless, or hard to digest, but because they are made from animals. It is a form of *intrinsic* contamination. In fact, the ancient practice of vegetarianism has met with considerable scientific support in present times. It can easily be shown that animals such as cows or pigs consume much more calories than they eventually produce, so that a reduction of meat consumption could help to diminish the global problem of food scarcity.

Due to the increasing distance between the production and consumption of food and the massive introduction of novel food products, consumer dependence on food providers has increased considerably. The moral implication of this development is that a food ethic based on the binary

logic of contamination will more and more have to rely on labeling practices. Beside ancient (religious) forms, new forms of contamination have emerged. Significant changes in the system of food production, such as the introduction of pesticides, artificial fertilizers, preservatives, genetic modification, and other forms of biotechnology, produced a whole range of morally dubious and (at least potentially) problematic food products. The denaturalization and geneticalization of food products is complemented, however, by an ethically inspired counter-movement, namely consumer preference for *green labels*, whereas moral concern with socio-economical conditions gave rise to labels like *Fair Trade*. Faced with ready-made products, we are concerned with their economic and technological genesis and origin, as this is what determines their moral status. The problematization of biotechnology can be regarded as *moral* insofar as it expresses a moral criticism of biotechnology *as such*, rather than a mere "utilitarian" concern in terms of safety and health (which would – in Kantian terms – amount to mere prudence or "Klugheit").

The social dimension – Finally, the social dimension, discovered in the nineteenth century, is of considerable importance to contemporary food ethics. Biotechnology, for example, may be criticized mainly because of its effects on a social (or even global) scale – for example, because of the increasing dependence of farmers throughout the world (but notably in less developed countries) on a limited number of multinational economic actors (due, for instance, to the distribution of seeds of genetically modified crops and sterile varieties). Although the replacement of the crude butchering practices described by Upton Sinclair by more sophisticated and refined technologies for food production can be regarded as moral progress or humanization, the power of mankind over both animal and vegetable forms of life has increased considerably, and this may raise suspicion, notably as to its long term effects, not only for safety reasons, but also in terms of biodiversity, the extinction of species, and other global moral issues. Labeling practices are developed to inform and, if possible, reassure the public about the moral identity of the food products whose production remains to a large extent "buried out of sight." In this manner, food products come to materialize ideological and economical tensions by representing, in tangible form, whole systems of production. On the other hand, by their refusal to consume food items produced by racist or totalitarian regimes, or with the help of pesticides and other polluting substances, consumers may effect a change in the way food is actually produced (consumer power).

This consumer power, however, will never be able to change what has taken place on a more fundamental, ontological level. The food ethics of

the present, with its reliance on labeling practices, is basically a response to the fact that the *materiality* of food as such has changed.[5] Food has materialized into industrial food *products*, and we ourselves have become consumers, acting indirectly and *from a distance* on the systems of food production. The freedom of choice granted to us as consumers is no more than a compensation for our actual loss of intimacy with food production. The importance of labeling practices is the outcome of a continuous increase of consumer dependence, caused by the growing distance between production and consumption of food. This can be interpreted either in an optimistic or in a cynical manner. On the one hand, it can be argued that the margin for consumer autonomy is limited in principle and that, as a rule, supply precedes (and to a certain extent determines) demand. On the other hand it can be argued that, to a certain extent at least, consumer autonomy (or even "sovereignty") may be established, that we are given the power to make informed choices, and that food production practices has to take consumer preferences into account. Thus, consumer autonomy becomes an ethical counter-principle that compensates for actual dependence.

Consumer autonomy and moral identity – All food ethics of the past seem to have at least one thing in common: submission to a certain food ethic allowed individuals to distinguish themselves from others and to acquire a moral identity of their own. According to Foucault (1984a), ancient Greek dietetics allowed the individual to constitute himself as a moral subject. As for the present, Anthony Giddens has emphasized the importance of consumptive practices for the construction of self-identity (Giddens, 1991; cf. Beekman, 1999). Practices with regard to meat-consumption, for example, give material form to a particular self-identity. By accepting certain labels and rejecting others, the contemporary food consumer is allowed to develop a moral Self, to live a morally examined life and to take sides in the political conflicts of the present.

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[5] Morus (1952) identified this change as "devitalization." Animal products are replaced by vegetable ones, and raw materials of an organic nature are replaced by those of an inorganic nature. Thus, the very materiality of food products becomes more and more synthetic and artificial. The synthetic production of proteins will constitute the final stage.

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