

Consumers' Taste for Food Ethics

By Christian Coff*, September 2003.

Abstract

The paper consists of three parts. Part one makes an ethical interpretation of the gap between consumers attitude and behaviour often found in attitudinal surveys: the attitude mirrors the selfunderstanding of the consumers and their vision of the good life. The behaviour reflects some of the barriers preventing consumers of putting their attitudes into practice. Often attitudinal surveys show that consumers have strong ethical visions and engagement.

Part two describes two barriers that prevent consumers from living out their vision of the good life in relation to food production practices: the economic rationality and the emancipation of consumption from time and space.

The last part presents the food ethics of the consumers as the vision of the good life with and for others in just food production practices. It is argued that the production story forms the basis of the consumers' food ethical standing. The possibilities of taking the ethical attitudes of consumers seriously are discussed in the light of the concept of consumer autonomy (consumers' informed food choice). It is concluded that present information on food is inadequate for the consumer with a taste for ethics and does not come up to the ideal of consumer autonomy. In a plea for complete product information it is proposed that information labels and food declarations should reflect the consumers' interests and that more effort should be put into communicating information and symbols in a way that triggers the perception system (the senses) of the consumers.

Ambivalence of the Consumers

The concept of "the political consumer" suggests that consumers increasingly are committed to selecting goods from a political point of view. Well-known examples of this are the boycotting of Shell due to their plans of sinking an oil platform in the Nordic Sea as way of disposal and the boycotting of French wine due to the tests of atomic bombs by the French military. These kinds of political actions by the consumers clearly have an ethical foundation, in these cases the protection of the environment and human beings.

The two mentioned cases received much attention by the medias and reached the headlines for long periods. Because they were dramatic they were good media stories. But in most cases stories of production practices are not that dramatic and they are not exposed by the medias. Rather, most production stories remain hidden to the consumers. This questions the effect of the political consumer.

I would like to illustrate this with an example. In 2001 the Nordic Council of Ministers published the report *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements*. It is the result of an attitudinal survey conducted among 1,300 Nordic consumers as exit-interviews, that is interviews of consumers leaving the store (usually supermarkets) and subsequent telephone interviews of the same consumers. The report describes some of the attitudes of the consumers. Some of the results are very striking, see table 1 below:

Table 1. 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 on 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 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 food even though they are often little more costly?	Close on half of consumers (48%) <i>claim</i> to prefer organic food, even though they are often little more costly.

The table shows *the attitudes* of the consumers *when asked for it*. This is what the consumers *think* is right when asked for it in a survey. But attitudes are one thing, reality another. Attitudes in this area are more or less free, while real actions have

their costs: 48% claim to prefer organic food, but at present only 5,6% of total food consumption in Denmark is organic.¹ The consumption of products with ethical labelling is even lower.

The gap between what the consumers in the survey think and what they do is too huge to be accidental. The report from the survey makes it clear that ” ”political consumption” is far more common in attitudinal investigations than it is reflected in real consumer behaviour.”² Sociologists and anthropologists have known for more than three decades that people are not telling the truth about their consumption habits when asked about it in surveys.³ Also in the survey by the Nordic Council of Ministers it seems at first sight that the consumers are lying: the lack of coherence between attitude and actual actions makes us suspicious. Are the consumers really telling the truth about their attitudes? Do they pretend to be more politically correct than they actually are?

It seems very unlikely to me though, that the gap between attitude and real behaviour can be explained only as consumers lying to the people who have conducted the survey in order to *pretend* to be politically correct. I do not believe that their attitude is completely fake, that it is just a shallow and deceptive outer appearance with nothing inside. A different approach has to be taken to understand the gap between attitude and behaviour.

Attitudinal disaccordance with behaviour is not necessarily the same as lying or being pretentious. Questions about consumption relate to consumers’ self-understanding as well as to their social identity. Mostly, people do make up pictures of themselves, they ”create” their own identity by selecting elements from their own life story, usually called the narrative identity, and from other sources like for instance conceptions about how they would like to be. Thus, concepts of selves are not necessarily realistic, rather, they tend to be constructed. People create ”illusions” about themselves that are important in social contexts and for the identity of the consumer.

¹ According to the main organisation of organic food production in Denmark, *Organic Denmark (Økologisk Landsforening)*.

² Nordic Council of Ministers: *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers’ Proposals for Improvements*, p. 38.

³ For this reason some sociologists have developed a specific method, called ”garbology” – the study of peoples garbage. The assumption being, that garbage does not lie. Garbage is solid empirical material.

However, these illusions are not just to be interpreted as delusions or pious frauds of oneself. For the purpose of this paper it is interesting to consider "the constructed identity" of the consumers that we often find in this kind of surveys, as the consumers' *visions* of how it ought to be. I suggest in other words that the constructed identity can be interpreted ethically and that the gap between what consumers *claim* to do and what they actually do represent the gap between their vision of the good life and the real life.⁴

It is though in this case not just the good life in general, but the good life in relation to food production practices. It is the consumers' vision of the good life in relation to food production practices. It is not too much to say that consumers, at least in the Nordic countries as the survey suggests, have acquired a taste for ethics and probably it is likewise in many other European countries.

Obstructions of Consumers' Good Will

The ethical interpretation of the gap between attitude and behaviour in attitudinal surveys of consumers suggest two things: First, that the ethical engagement of the consumers is high (and often underestimated or teared to pieces as double standard of moral) and second, that there must be some barriers, which cause this gap between attitude and behaviour and thus prevent consumers of putting their attitudes into practice. There seems to be practical circumstances that prevent consumers from living out their vision of the good life in relation to food production practices. In the Gospels of the New Testament Paul says: "For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 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."⁵ This seems to be the situation of many consumers with a taste for ethics, although they do not feel as guilty as Paul probably did. There might be many reasons to the gap between attitude and behaviour, I shall describe two of them here.

⁴ Sometimes the *attitude* is interpreted as referring to the identity as citizens and *behaviour* as referring to the identity of consumers.

⁵ The Bible: Paul, Rom 7:17-20.

1. *Economic Rationality*

The use of economic rationality has enormous consequences for the food market in the present period of globalisation. Some of the consequences are described in the following:

Statistics shows that every year the consumers spent less money on food. They devote a still smaller part of their income on food. For households seeking to maximize utility this seems reasonable and justifiable: save money on food to be able to spend more money on other things. The hidden assumption behind this is of course that food is more or less the same and that there is no difference in quality. In addition, it certainly can be difficult for the modern consumer to see the difference between the foodstuffs. Let me try to follow the so-called utility maximising consumer and her or his household to the outskirts as it shows quite a few things about the dilemmas of the modern consumer. The consumers are in a situation where they constantly have a feeling of being cheated. On the other hand would a lowering of prices also lead to many other problems. If the prices are lowered the farmers and the food industry have to produce more and at the same time lower the expenses. The farmers and the food industry have already gone far in that direction. It hits on the animal welfare, the well being of the farmers and the job satisfaction of the employees in the food industry, the protection of the environment and the landscape, food quality etc. As a consumer one either pays too much and have a feeling of being cheated or one pays too little and have a feeling of getting very poor quality. The thought of being cheated torments the consumer, who, for this reason prefers to swallow his or her pride; buy the cheapest although it is the worst. This avoids one from being cheated. It is not easy to be a consumer when the price is the most important and the cheapest the worst.

The fitting up of the shops is tasteless, as the shopkeepers cannot afford the good taste with such cheese-paring consumers. The consumers lose their good appetite from shopping. Nevertheless, it has to be cheap and that is why the consumers come to the cheapest shops. It is so cheap and tasteless that one can only become dissatisfied. The dissatisfied crowd pour into the cheap

shops. The consumers insist on getting the cheapest and the worst not to feel cheated. They are dissatisfied because the cheapest also is the worst. They are coming in big crowds to miserable shops with their dissatisfaction and sulky and sore faces to get as much cheap food of the worst quality. Then it is not easy to be a shopkeeper.

Because of the low profit on cheap food the shopkeepers cannot pay the employees a decent wage and they feel forced to buy the cheapest food. In addition, the shopkeepers buy the cheapest food, not because they cannot afford it, but because they know all too well that the profit on specialities, delicacies and quality food are high. The amounts sold of these products are low and this makes the expenses to the distribution higher than the price of the product itself. It is not easy to be a shopkeeper when one always has to please the consumers coming for the cheapest products. One has to push the prices of the wholesalers down in order to get cheap food in the food store.

This makes it difficult to be a wholesaler. The wholesalers must import food produced in countries far away: it is cheaper because the consideration and care for the environment, the employees and the animals is almost non-existent in these countries. It is hard to denounce contracts with the local farmers but one has to do so with those prices. In order to make the whole business 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 is how the market works and one cannot escape globalisation.

Truly, it is neither easy to be a farmer when the wholesalers forces prices down saying that he can get it even cheaper elsewhere, from the neighbour or from abroad. The farmers shake their heads at the prices in the stores considering what he himself gets for the food. In addition, it is hard to industrialize the small pigs and the chickens but one has to do so to stay in business. In order to make the production rational and efficient one has to expand and to go into big business and specialized production. One has to buy the family farm of the neighbour but it is very expensive for the neighbour knows much too well that one is forced to expand to stay in business.

If just somebody along this line could agree on boycotting the consumers, stop producing cheap pigs, then it would be realistic to believe in a better food quality in the future. However, most of them have a hard time standing together, solidarity is not very wide spread between competitors on the market. Moreover, globalisation renders boycott old-fashioned and ridiculous.⁶

This describes many of the dilemmas of the modern food market and food production practices. It is a vicious circle where the selfishness, bookkeeping and the economic rationality are given a higher priority than ethics. Under the present circumstances the effort needed to find the relevant information concerning the productions practices is far too huge to be a reasonable task of the consumers. The complexity and lack of transparency of food market make the consumers distrust the producers and retailers.

2. Emancipation or Isolation of Modern Consumption?

The second thing causing the gap between attitude and behaviour is inherent to modern consumption. There is something abstract about modern kitchens. As still less emphasis is paid to the substantial aspects of food, that is its vital role as nourishment, cooking seems more and more metaphysical. Food has become more form and taste (aesthetical as well as sociological) and less nourishment.

The kitchen and the practices of cooking have been emancipated from temporality and space. Cooking has lost its relation to season and space. The seasons have no influence on the supply of foods and there are no geographical limits as to the transportation of food. Time and space are suspended in the kitchen. In the modern kitchen all the seasons are to be found simultaneously and one can move freely from one season to the other or mixing them as one likes. Fresh apples and strawberries, that have a taste of summer, lightness, deliciousness and green landscapes can be enjoyed independent of the season, even in the coldest winter. For the modern kitchen the season of harvest continues all through the year and there is never any shortage. There are no seasons where people suffer privations. There is always a place on the Earth where new potatoes can be harvested and transported to our kitchens.

⁶ First published as "Det er ikke nemt for nogen, når alt skal være så billigt" ("It is not Easy for Anyone when it has to be that Cheap". Edited article from the Danish magazine *SALT*, no. 4, 2001, p. 36.

The supermarket is the window of the kitchen towards the world. The supermarket is a miniature representation of the world, although focus is not on geography but on the culinary. Represented on this culinary globe are all the climatic zones – tropical, sub-tropical, temperate and polar – with all the edible plants and animals living on the world's seven continents: Africa, North America, South America, Asia, Australia, Europe and the South Pole. Because of the lack of seasonal variation supermarkets have introduced their own seasons; January sale, summer sale etc. These are the new artificial seasons, which have more to say about cooking than the climatic seasons.

The emancipation of the kitchen from time and space implies a paradox. On the one hand is the rupture with the local space and temporality a release from the tyranny and the limits set by space and time. It is disengagement. However, the emancipation is simultaneously a rupture with a more local and corporeal relation to food. At present, globalisation tends to reduce local production diversity to a minimum because of the benefits of large-scale production. However, consumers typically know local food much better than “globalised” food. The story and direct impact of local food production practices are typically part of the consumer's everyday life: agriculture forms the landscape and food industries and food stores structures many areas of the cities. There is a temporal, historical and spatial knowledge connected to the seasonal and local food productions practices.

Let me illustrate this with an example. Even a very basic and relatively non-processed product as milk – or at least most people do not think of milk as highly processed – is standardized for variations in breed, fat content, season, origin, feed, time of lactation, milking system and storage system just to mention a few of the parameters that make milk a very varied product.⁷ The temporal variations in the level of proteins in the raw milk are in the dairy works standardized to the same level and this makes the dairy works able 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 the mass produced products; uniformity. The standardization of the food products makes us forget their origin; that food is coming from living creatures and from the living nature.

⁷ 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.

In conclusion, the emancipation of the kitchen in time and space is both disengagement and isolation. In the same movement, where the kitchen is emancipated from the tyranny of space and season, where there is a rupture from the temporal and spatial isolation, another isolation is created. That is the isolation from the local context, the local time and space. Even though this emancipation of the kitchen and cooking is an opening towards the world, it is also the modern bluntedness of the kitchen and the consumers. In the blunted kitchen all edible things from all over the world are available, but as open it seems its horizon is although very limited. As we know almost nothing about the foodstuffs all that is left is the physiological taste of it: the pure aesthetic experience.

As consumers of food we focus on food in its aesthetic form and shut out its ethical perspectives. It is no longer obvious that food has an origin and a story. 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 fairly closed land that they know very little about. The consumers are unable to look back on the production story and thus also unable to see how their food consumption influences on nature and society. The relations are lost, the coherence between the different parts in the chain from "farm to fork", which makes up the system of food production, is concealed for the consumers.

Food Ethics from the Consumers' Perspective

Having considered some of the barriers that cause the gap between attitude and behaviour of the consumers I want to return to the issue of food ethics and the ethical engagement of the consumers.

So far most ethical regulations in the food production has been carried out by authorities at a national or European level (often in collaboration with interest organisations). Food ethics is becoming part of the agenda as can be seen by the many new councils dealing with this specific subject. In 1998 a *Food Ethics Council*⁸ was founded in the United Kingdom, in 1999 the *European Society for Agricultural and Food Ethics*⁹ was established, in 2000 the *Dutch Platform for Agricultural and Food Ethics* was established and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of United

⁸ See www.users.globalnet.co.uk/~foodeth/aboutus.htm

⁹ www.eursafe.org

Nations has established a *Panel of Eminent Experts on Ethics in Food and Agriculture*.¹⁰ The overall picture of food ethics drawn from these more or less official sources is that food ethics deals with the moral and ethical questions in relation to food. There seems also to exist a common agreement upon, that food ethics emanates from the general concern about the development within food production practices. This concern is directed towards the health of the consumers, food security, the autonomy of the consumers, consumer information, the starvation in the 3. world, a sustainable development in rural areas, equal participation in decisions, the responsibility for future generations, animal welfare, protection of the natural resources and the biological diversity, ethical research and finally the development of a ethical codex or guidelines for food production practices.

The question to be discussed here is *who* should be held responsible for dealing with these important issues? In the light of the above described ethical interpretation of the gap between attitude and behaviour of the consumers, it seems to me to be the right time to supplement the regulation of these issues, which is normally done by the authorities, by another agent on the food market; consumers.¹¹ Exactly, as mentioned by the survey by the *Nordic Council of Ministers*, because the consumers have a will to act, that is *shop*, on the basis of ethical considerations. But how are we to understand and conceptualize the food ethics of the consumers? I shall briefly try to give an outline of this starting with the ethical part.

The aim of ethics is praxis and following the Greek philosopher and scientist Aristotle (384-322 bc.) and his *Nicomachean Ethics*, ethics is “striving for or aiming at the good.” However, what is the good and what is the good act? This is what ethics is about. Ethics is about answering these questions. Accordingly, within ethics one has to visualize or 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 something imagined, it should also be converted to practice and *action*.

Acts always takes place in specific situations. We cannot imagine an act without it taking place in a setting or situation. Situations are characterized by

¹⁰ http://www.fao.org/ethics/exp_en.htm

¹¹ As Zygmunt Baumann recently has pointed to, there is a flip side to the coin of voting with money: the poor are excluded. In societies where nobody suffers from hunger this seems less of a problem. For instance are students in Denmark among the most fidele buyers of organic food.

openness, as to the same situation people react very differently. It is possible to make different actions in a situation; good ones, less good ones and evil ones. Some situations seem very much the same but they are never completely alike, they always differ in some respect. Thus, the good act becomes dependent of the actual context. The point of reference of the ethical reflection is twofold; it is generalised or universal vision of the good life on the one hand, and the use of this vision, for instance as guidelines, in real life on the other hand. 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 to be able function as guidance for acting in the specific situation.¹²

The second important thing to understand from the fact that acts take place in 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 other beings but always in relation to other beings. Acts are not taking place in isolated places but always include others. Ethics come into existence in the presence of the other or as the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas has put it: "We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics."¹³ The good life cannot only be my own good life, it includes others, as 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 be able also to imagine or think the good life of the others by putting myself in their position. The relatedness of ethics made the French philosopher Paul Ricœur state that ethics is the vision of the good life with and for others.¹⁴

However, Ricœur does not leave it at that. For we do not only live in close relations face-to-face but we are also taking part in a larger society, where justice shall provide equality and fairness. In society justice is institutionalised. Thus Ricœur

¹² This shows the difference between ethics and norms. Ethics is reasoned or substantiated whereas norms are more or less non-reflected guidelines for acting as "you must . . ." or "you must not . . ." without reference to a reason or the specific situation.

¹³ Emmanuel, Lévinas: *Totality and Eternity*, p. 43

¹⁴ Ricœur, Paul: *Oneself as Another*, chapter 7, 8 and 9. Instead of "vision of" Ricœur uses the words "aiming at", which is the also used by Aristotle in his definition of ethics (aiming at or striving for the good life) in his *The Nicomachean Ethics*.

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

Now, we must ask who, within food ethics, are those others? Imagine the consumers in the store, confronted with the food. They may with good reason ask what this has to do with ethics. Food is presented as "dead life", for which no moral claims can be made in respect of the life it once was. For this food we cannot have any ethics. We are likely to have a taste and an aesthetic opinion, but no ethical concern can be expressed. This is also evident considering 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 it and thus become 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 or because they were laid in a battery, rather, it is because it is a violation of the battery hens – and maybe the quality of the eggs is deteriorated compared to more "natural" eggs, and this might be a disadvantage for the consumers.

Therefore, food ethics in this view does not concern the end product, the ready-to-eat food.¹⁵ Instead food ethics concerns the food production practices; *we know that food has its origin in the living world and that there necessarily must be a production story*. Even if we do not know anything about the production practices when we buy the food – we still know that there must be a story and that this story can be cruel and ugly as in a brutal slaughtering or it can be good and beautiful. Knowledge about the production story of the food is the basis for the ethical standing of the consumer. *The production story forms the basis of the consumers' food ethics*. Without knowledge the consumers are excluded from acting (or shopping) ethically. They cannot ask the question; could the production story be different?

¹⁵ Though, the fair distribution of the food is of course one of the most pressing food ethical issues. I do though rather see it as question concerning the relation between human beings and less as a specific issue relating to food in itself.

Autonomy and Meaning

It has been stated that "ethical consumption is diffuse for the consumers and is not an evident preference in the consumers' everyday choice of consumer goods . . ." ¹⁶ I think that most of us would agree on this; we can think about the ethical implications of consuming goods, but it is seldom that we have the knowledge or access to information about the production practices to actually estimate the ethical implications. If the consumers find ethical consumption diffuse it is probably not due to lack of ability of the consumers to judge what is the good life with and for others in just food production practices, but due to the lack of access to information. My personal experience with running a consumer supported farm tells me that very often, but not always of course, people have intuitive understandings, but none the less very clear understandings, of what is good and evil when presented with different food production practices.

One important ethical principle relating to information is autonomy. ¹⁷ Although autonomy is not always a very clear concept I think the concept of consumer autonomy deserves to be developed further. Autonomy is usually understood in terms of liberty, independence, freedom from obligation etc. It is often practised as informed consent. ¹⁸

There is a tendency to think that the autonomy of the consumers is already respected, as the consumers do have free choices and can do their decision-making without outer constraint. However, the demand for knowledge is by no means being met under present market conditions, although the effort made to increase information by labelling and declarations is huge. The concept of consumer autonomy should in my opinion refer to the obligation of the producers to give complete product information on the whole production story.

It is not my intention to take an extreme liberal stand and to argue that as soon as there is complete product information we can leave everything to the market. My intention is rather to point to the fact that the potential of the consumers to participate in the ethical judgement of food production practices has largely been overlooked and disregarded in modern food production practices.

¹⁶ Nordic Council of Ministers: *Forbrugernes fornemmelse for etik*, p. 9.

¹⁷ See also Korthals, Michiel: "Taking Consumers Seriously: Two Concepts of Consumer Sovereignty" for a discussion of consumer autonomy or sovereignty.

¹⁸ O'Neill, Onora: *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*, p. 21.

If we take the attitude and the concerns expressed by the consumers seriously and provide the consumers with full information, we will soon be faced with the paradox that “consumers hardly ever read information on the goods they choose” but none the less they would like to know more and opt for complete product information.¹⁹ So how is the information going to be communicated to the consumers when they want the information but do not want to spent time reading it?

Even if this seems to be a paradox I believe that there are explanations to this seemingly irrational attitude. Also in the report from the Nordic Council of Ministers it is found that ”there is a strong indication that the labelling’s graphic and linguistic method of information communication does not meet consumers’ demands . . . 59% have difficulties in navigating the jungle of symbols and logos around food.”²⁰ This might indicate at least three things:

1. Existant information from labels and food declarations does not interest the consumers (it is the wrong information that is given),
2. The written and verbalized information and the symbols used do not trigger the perception systems (the senses) of the consumers,
3. The consumers are not in a position to make sense of the information given.

These statements can be considered as a critique of the present standards for giving information on food. Trying to think positively, we can rearticulate the critique into the following claims:

1. Information from labels and food declarations should reflect the consumers’ interests,
2. Information and symbols should be communicated in a way that triggers the perception system (the senses) of the consumers,
3. The consumers should be in position to make sense of the information given.

In conclusion, I would like to point to some of the aspects that I find important if the autonomy of the consumer is to be taken more seriously than at present. Transparency

¹⁹ Nordic Council of Ministers: *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers’ Proposals for Improvements*, p. 11.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 27-28.

and traceability are increasingly recognised as important principles for the future development within food production. Even though these principles are used for the purpose of food safety, they could also turn out to be useful for the consumers with a taste for ethics: *ethical transparency* and *ethical traceability* should be considered as central tools in communicating the production story to the consumers.

Another principle I would like to mention is that of *comparison*; the ability of consumers to compare different products is central for the consumers informed choice. Also the comparison helps the consumers in the ethical judgement as it gives some very clear indications of possible other production stories. Unfortunately, at present it is impossible to compare goods as the information given on labels varies a lot. Complete product information is one way of making comparison possible.

However, all this is not of much use for the consumers if the information does not catch the attention of the consumer. The verbalized and very intellectual form of information does not seem to appeal to many people – food is after all a very sensuous matter. Other ways (than food declarations and symbols) of communicating information about food should be investigated. If this could be a way of increasing the ethical engagement of the consumers it surely is worth while developing for those producers who wish to develop food production practices based on food ethical points of view (in contrast to the economic rationality) and maybe also for policy makers.

These are some of the principles that in the future could become essential for the consumers who have a taste for ethics. They would like to know how the food is produced. The production story of the food is important as to give something a (hi)story is to ascribe a meaning to it.

* Agricultural scientist and ph.d. (philosophy), Centre for Ethics and Law, Valkendorfsgrde 30, 3.rd floor, 1151 Copenhagen, Denmark, Tel.: +45 33 69 16 16, Email: coff@ethiclaw.dk

References

Aristoteles: *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton University Press, West Sussex, 1984.

Coff, Christian: *A Taste for Ethics. In Search of Food Ethics*. Doctoral thesis at the Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, 2002.

Korthals, Michiel: "Taking Consumers Seriously: Two Concepts of Consumer Sovereignty." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, **14**: 201-215, 2001.

Lévinas, Emmanuel: *Totality and Infinity*. (1961). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, The Hague, 1979.

Nordic Council of Ministers: *Forbrugernes fornemmelse for etik*. Copenhagen, 2001, TemaNord 2001:583.

Nordic Council of Ministers: *Food Labelling: Nordic Consumers' Proposals for Improvements*. Copenhagen, 2001, TemaNord 2001:573.

Ohnuki-Tierney, Emiko: "We eat Each Other's Food to Nourish our Body: The Global and the Local as Mutually Constituent Forces." I Grew, Raymond (ed.): *Food in Global History*. Westview Press, Colorado, 1999, p. 240-272.

O'Neill, Onora: *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002.

Ricœur, Paul: *Oneself as Another*. (1987). The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992.

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.