

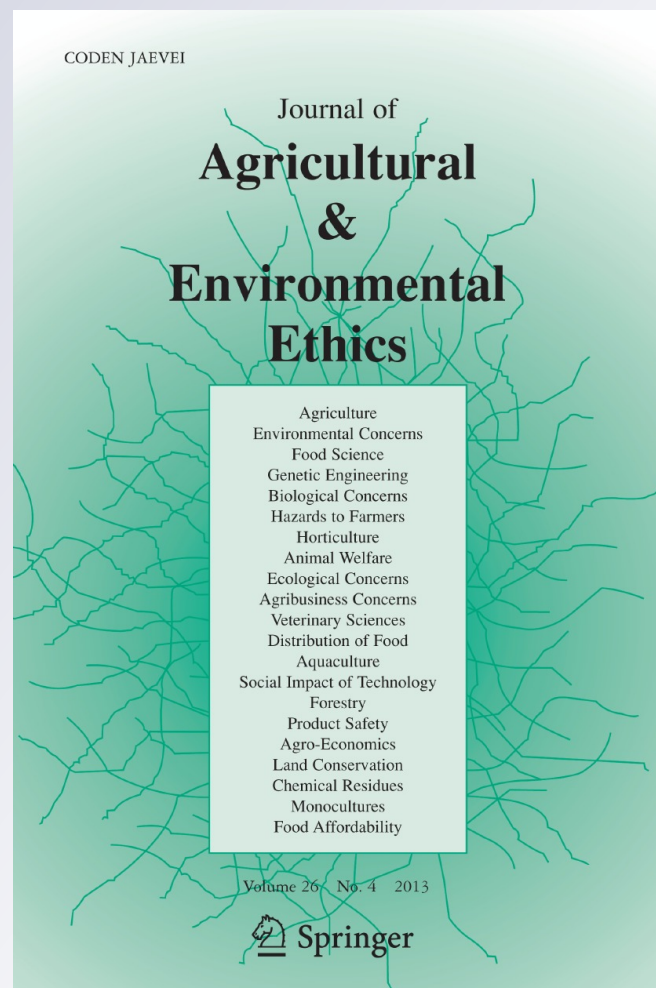
A Semiotic Approach to Food and Ethics in Everyday Life

Christian Coff

Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics

ISSN 1187-7863
Volume 26
Number 4

J Agric Environ Ethics (2013) 26:813-825
DOI 10.1007/s10806-012-9409-8



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science+Business Media B.V.. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your article, please use the accepted manuscript version for posting on your own website. You may further deposit the accepted manuscript version in any repository, provided it is only made publicly available 12 months after official publication or later and provided acknowledgement is given to the original source of publication and a link is inserted to the published article on Springer's website. The link must be accompanied by the following text: "The final publication is available at link.springer.com".

A Semiotic Approach to Food and Ethics in Everyday Life

Christian Coff

Accepted: 22 June 2012 / Published online: 5 July 2012
© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2012

Abstract The aim of this paper is to explore how food can be analyzed in terms of signs and codes of everyday life, and especially how food can be used to express ethical concerns. The paper investigates the potential of a semiotic conceptual analysis: How can the semiotic approach be used to analyze expressions of ethics and food ethics in everyday life? The intention is to explore from a theoretical point of view and with constructed cases, how semiotics can be used to analyze the role of food as an expression of ethics in everyday life among families, friends, and colleagues: How do foodstuffs function as signs of ethics in everyday life? How is food used to send signals about care and concern? How are the signs of food ethics perceived? It is concluded that analyzing ethical considerations with respect to food with the help of the semiotic model can show us perspectives that otherwise would be difficult to see and thus we can address everyday food ethical issues that otherwise might not be noted. The semiotic approach to food ethics in everyday life is a conceptual framework that can be used to draw attention to certain domains and fields of food ethical behavior that otherwise would tend to remain implicit and unspoken.

Keywords Food ethics · Ethical concerns · Signs · Semiotics · Everyday life

Introduction

On comprend enfin que les espèces naturelles ne sont pas choisies parce que ‘bonnes à manger’ mais parce que ‘bonnes à penser’¹

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) *Le totémisme aujourd’hui*, p. 132. In English Lévi-Strauss is often quoted for the phrase “*Food is not only good to eat but also good to think.*” Although this quote is popular, I have not been able to find it in his works.

C. Coff (✉)
Centre for Ethics and Law, Copenhagen, Denmark
e-mail: coff@c.dk

For French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1908–2009), the symbolic meanings of food meant that, in an anthropological context, food was a compelling point of entry for studies of how societies are structured. His argument was that by studying food cultures it was possible to learn more about societies and their culture than just by interviewing the members of these societies themselves. I wish here to continue in this line of thinking, however, the approach here is semiotic rather than the structuralism applied by Lévi-Strauss. The aim is to conduct a conceptual analysis showing the possible contributions and limits of the semiotic approach to our understanding of food and ethics in everyday life.

Apart from the methodological approach of Lévi-Strauss, his statement also reminds us that, from the perspective of everyday life, taste is not only about physiological attributes of the sense receptors on the tongue; taste is also constructed by, and dependent on, our thinking about food. If we appreciate a specific kind of food, this is not due to physiological taste alone; rather it is also because it is good to think about that kind of food.

On the other hand, if we do not like a specific kind of food, it might well be because we do not like the thought of it. An example of this concerns the meat of an animal's heart. Although this meat tends to have a rather neutral taste, many people dislike it, and link their dislike to the idea of eating the heart of a living being, something, which they find repulsive. On the other hand, we may not like the food due to the production practices involved in producing the food. Many people tend to reject foie gras due to what they consider as mistreatment of the geese involved in that production. The wider, cultural reasons for food dislikes may have religious, cultural, ethical, or political dimensions, or may derive from scientific knowledge, to name but a few of the possible influences involved in this matter. Food studies within disciplines such as ethnology, anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, suggest that people think about food in many different ways. Food is part of culture, tradition, memory, pleasure, prestige, politics, exclusion and inclusion, place, safety, biotechnology, identity, care, medicine, gastronomy, trade, distinction, table manners, agriculture, public relations, nature, sex, shopping, innovation, logistics, science, cooking, globalization, gifts, health—the list could be extended almost indefinitely! Food is central to life and, therefore, intrinsic to so many of its aspects.

This paper explores how food ethics can be analyzed in terms of signs and codes of everyday life. By the term *everyday life*, I want to refer to interactions between ordinary people in their daily lives. This means that when analyzing *food ethics in everyday life*, I refer to cases where food is included as part of the interaction, like when people prepare and give food to others and when people receive food from others. In these kinds of actions some form of care and concern is involved. I thus delimit the study from professionals such as food processors, food researchers, food retailers etc., who deal with food as part of their professional lives, even though these people surely also have food ethical concerns.

First, a brief description of food ethics² serves to define the areas involved in food ethics and is useful when making the connection to semiotics. The idea is that

² The ethics of eating and food has been debated at least since Antiquity, see for instance Lemke (2007) or Foucault (1984) on this. The term *food ethics*, however, is much more recent.

seeing ethics as something that concerns relations between people makes it possible to see food as a sign of ethical concern used in communication and interactions between people. From this opening the paper moves on to deal with how food can function in everyday life as a sign of ethics—while building on the understanding that food ethics is concerned with relational aspects of human existence. People judge foods in terms of quality and values, and the assumption here is that food choices do demonstrate care for oneself, care for others, recognition of others, ignorance of others, or even disdain.

On a theoretical level, the paper investigates how semiotics as a conceptual framework can be used to analyze the role of food ethics in human relations in everyday life. In this process the following questions are relevant: How do foodstuffs function as signs of ethics in everyday life? How are foods used in order to send signals about ethics? How are signs of food ethics perceived?

From Ethics to Food Ethics

The ethical theory that I present here sees ethics as concerned with relations. Ethics come into existence in the presence of the “other,” or as Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–1995) puts it: “We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics” (Lévinas 1979: 43). Thus the good life cannot *only* be my good life; it also includes that of others, since my good life is unthinkable without that of the “other”—that is, his or her good life. Thus, I must also be able to imagine or “think” about the good life of others, by putting myself in their position.

In short, ethics is about reasoning and judging, about rights and wrongs in relations. Ethics only become an issue that needs attention if there is a chance of causing offence or harm to others. On this basis, food ethics can be seen as being concerned with avoiding harm and offence to others in the course of our dealings with food, consumption, and eating. C. Coff, M. Korthals and D. Barling have identified four major structural areas within the field of food ethics, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1 Areas of food ethics (Coff et al. 2008: 9)

1. *Food security* deals with the just and fair supply of food to human beings. With more than 800 million starving or undernourished people in the world, this is probably the most pressing ethical question.
2. *Food safety* deals with the safety of the food: food should not endanger the health of consumers due to the presence of pathogens or pollution in the food. There are ongoing discussions about what is safe enough in relation to food, and whose definition of safety should be followed
3. New developments in *nutritional research* and technology, such as personalised nutrition, functional foods, and health foods, challenge existing norms and values about food. This also includes food-related diseases such as obesity, cardio-vascular diseases and cancer, and their association with food culture, because they raise issues of responsibility and respect for “non-healthy” life-styles and food-production methods
4. *Ethical questions raised by specific production practices and conditions in the food chain*. This concerns animal welfare, the environment, sustainability, working conditions, the use of new (bio and nano) technology, research ethics, and so forth. These ethics relate to the production-history of food, that is, how, and under what conditions, it was produced

Each of the four areas intrinsic to food ethics dealt with above can play a role in everyday life. Food security, for instance, may be an important concern for parents of young children, especially in poorer countries. On a more mundane level, concerns about food security can come into play even when considering whether there will be enough food for everybody at dinner.

Food safety is, indeed, a matter of everyday concern for many people and globally much food legislation is enacted and implemented for the purposes of increasing food safety. This is the case of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), which was created in 2002 in order to conduct risk assessment regarding food and feed safety and ensure high levels of consumer protection. The instances of contaminated milk powder in China in 2009 and of animal feed in Germany in 2011, are examples of how food safety can be jeopardized on a substantial scale. At a household level, concerns about food safety tend to relate to kitchen hygiene.

Nutritional research and the development of functional foods, raise many food ethical issues in everyday life. If for example, personalized diets based on functional foods become more widespread, the way in which we think about the meal and the commensality of the meal will definitely change and thus alter social relations with respect to food.

Lastly, the production history of food plays a growing role in many societies as is evident from the increasing demands by consumers for food-production methods that are not only sustainable, but also friendly from both climatic and welfare points of view.

Food ethics is a field applicable to many different situations and can range from the work of professionals with profound insight into food systems and production practices, to commodity users who may be less informed about issues relating to food production practices.

In considering the everyday-life aspects of food ethics it is necessary to focus on the situations in which food ethics play a role: food ethics apply to relational situations in which people interact with food as a “medium” and in which there is an element of concern for the other(s) involved. Some of these relational situations include:

- Shopping for food
- Cooking
- The common meal (with family, friends, community, network, business, in religious ceremonies, etc.)
- Eating out

If these are situations in which food ethics can and often do play a role, then it is necessary to ask: *how* do food ethics play a role in these contexts, and for *whom* do they play a role? One approach to the study of these issues has been to investigate the areas of political and ethical food consumption. Such studies ask who the ethical consumers are, and what their motives, means, and actions might be in this regard. While these studies form part of a reflexive and an everyday-consumption situation, they do not, however, necessarily capture the *everyday* context and experience of people *interacting* with other people while shopping, cooking for each other and eating together. This is the aim of the next section: To use the semiotic approach to analyze food as a sign and code of care and concern in everyday life.

Food as a Sign of Relationship

Food has a vital metabolic function for all human beings. We may regard this indispensable position of food as being a major reason for the many meanings and uses of food, which we encounter in different cultures. Dietary rules are an example of how human beings attach meaning to food. Dietary rules prescribe specific eating habits and, thus, also specific forms of behavior that are of importance, not only for cultural reasons, but also for an understanding of an individual's identity. The British anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1921–2007), wrote as follows about religious dietary rules (Douglas 1966: 58): "... 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."

Douglas here regards dietary laws as *signs* that inspire meditation. As food is usually consumed every day, it is essentially omnipresent and it is thus a very powerful sign that can remind us, on a daily basis, of our religion, cultural belonging, or personal identity. Food is an "item" that, as a sign, can direct our thoughts in specific directions depending on our relationship to food.

What is indicated above is that food, through being a sign, functions in terms of relations. As a sign, food represents something for someone. To give another illustration of this we can look at the writings of the German sociologist, George Simmel (1858–1918). According to Simmel, individuality is transgressed and elevated into community and social interaction during a shared meal (Simmel 1997 (1910)). The social meal rejects egoism since the sharing of food binds individuals together in a community and in a form of common identity. In this way, the egoistical satisfying of hunger, the fundamental need for food, is ignored and food is shared instead. Thus, the common meal possesses the ability to establish solidarity and community feeling. In the common meal, we see how food becomes a sign of a positive relationship to other human beings, and a sign of friendship.

The English researcher, Leslie Goften, touches on food as a form of relationship when he writes that (Goften 1996) "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."

Food is a medium through which relations—from close to global relations—between human beings are expressed. We use food to express ourselves, to understand others, to convey our feelings, opinions, preferences, sense of belonging, ethical and political stands, and cultures. Food is also used as a means of communication; however, this form of communication is not necessarily verbalized as, in many cases, it is more likely to take place by means of non-verbalized signs and actions.

At this point we should remember that food is not restricted to social context but that it can also be understood in terms of a relationship to nature. Food originates ultimately from nature as it is based on living organisms (minerals being excluded,

of course). What we eat is derived from selected parts of our surroundings—it may involve wild and/or domesticated animals or plants. For example, our eating habits mould landscapes through the environmental impacts of farming, and they also shape the working conditions in, and architectures of, the food sector in terms of industries and commerce. So, whether we like it or not, the way we eat establishes a relationship with nature, as well as with our immediate society, and with other people.

Since food functions in context, it is also part of the relational aspect between two or more parties. As a component of relations, food also becomes part of ethics and of food ethics. The remainder of this paper will investigate how the semiotic approach of the American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), can be used as a framework for conducting research on everyday-life interactions and relationships involving food ethics.

Signs of Food Ethics in Everyday Life

As I have already suggested, food and foodstuffs are signs that we use for communication. We make use of foods and foodstuffs to send signals and messages to others and some of these messages contain codes of an ethical character. For example, giving (good) food to somebody is widely interpreted as a sign of care for that person. The denial of food to somebody could be regarded, on the other hand, as a sign of ignorance and a lack of recognition of that person, or even as a deliberate attempt to harm him/her. Food can be likened to a language: we use it to communicate about ourselves, our concerns and attitudes, our intentions, and so forth. A dinner can communicate a variety of meanings, such as “we are in a hurry,” “I am tired,” “I love you,” “I am tired of you,” “animal welfare is important to me,” “biotechnology is not dangerous,” and so on. A meal may also serve as a finale to a business negotiation underlining the communal aspect of the project.

Health is another issue about which food communicates. As Anne-Lise Middelthon has demonstrated, the classification of food as either healthy or unhealthy is an ongoing concern of many societies today. In fact, she argues, that health considerations are fundamental to our attitudes to food today as feeding and eating are considered to foster either salvation or damnation (Middelthon 2009).

In order to explore the meanings of food as a sign from the semiotic perspective, we can look to the triadic model of Peirce. Amidst many definitions of signs in Peirce’s work, one of his more elaborate definitions is that a *sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity* (Peirce 1958, § 228).

Thus, we have three components in this understanding of sign: something—sign—somebody. Furthermore, “to stand for” entails that information about some other thing be conveyed through the sign to somebody. The thing that the sign *represents* is called the *object* of the sign, or the *signified*,³ and the “somebody” is

³ In Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857–1913) semiology, the object is named the *signified*.

called the *interpretant*. Semiosis is the process in which the sign has a cognitive effect on its interpreter (Nörth 1990):

Signified—Sign—Interpretant.

According to Peirce, signs are not objects or material things as they only exist in the mind of the interpreter. A weathervane is only a sign of wind direction for someone who knows how weathervanes function. However, a weathervane is, of course, a material object, but the sign is not the same as the weathervane itself. The model in Fig. 1 illustrates the idea of applying the triadic model to the role of food in intersubjective relations. On the left is Peirce's general model for triadic relations and on the right is the model as it can be applied to food.

Following Peirce we can say that the *food sign* is not the food itself. The food sign only exist in the mind of the interpreter as the food functions as a sign to the *interpretant* for something else. This something else, called the *signified*, is what the food sign represents for the *interpretant*—in this case, the eater of food. The kind of object or signification to which the food refers depends on the *interpretant*. For a Westerner, then, a carrot may be a sign of health and may also be considered as a part of a healthy diet, whereas, for some African peasants, a carrot may signify low prestige food only eaten at times of severe food shortages. The same kind of food thus carries different meanings and values for different *interpretants*. Serving carrots to someone may be perceived as a sign of care in one culture and as a sign of disdain in another culture.

Thus the interpretation of food signs depends on the situation or context in which food appears. Foodstuffs are interpreted and understood differently depending on whether the food is, for example, part of a meal, or constitutes a dish, or is presented in a food market or supermarket. A steak may be a sign of care when served for dinner, whereas the very same person may see the same steak as a sign of animal cruelty when confronted with it in a supermarket. In the first situation the steak is seen as a sign of caring shown by the person serving the food: the person serving the steak wishes to give you a tasty and nutritious meal. In the second situation the steak could be considered “unethical” due to the poor animal welfare of the animals in question.

The above model is a simple way of describing the relationship between food and a person in a triadic model and we see how the interpretation and understanding of food as a sign can depend on the circumstances. However, since in everyday life,

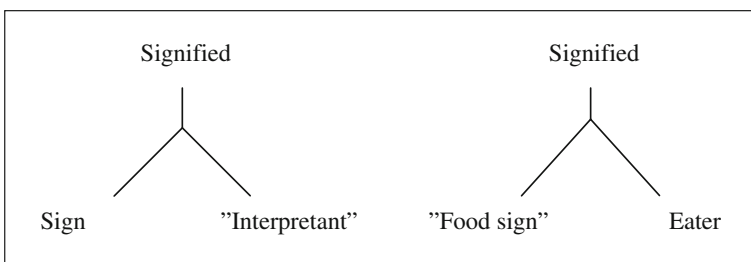


Fig. 1 The general triadic model (*left*) and the same model applied to the eating of food (*right*)

food and foodstuffs are constantly exchanged between people, and food is, as mentioned, an essential part of human relationships, the triadic model must be extended. Middelthun describes the relationship between feeder and eater when she states that the interaction between feeder and eater is not to be understood as a traditional dyadic model (feeder and eater) but that it should also include the food itself in an triadic model, which would then look like this:⁴

Supplier of food—Food itself—Receiver of food.

In this triadic model, the supplier(s) of food might be producers, retailers, catering outlets, parents, families, friends, or those in social roles, such as a host. The receiver(s) of food might be friends, families, colleagues, customers or patients of the supplier. This model can also be thought of as depicting a way of relating to oneself, as an *I* incorporating food into a *me*, as Middelthun puts it, in which the supplier and receiver are the same person, but stand for different sides or identities of that person (Middelthun 2009: 218).

The middle of Middelthun's equation, the food itself, is indeed, and as Middelthun argues, "not a passive party to the meaning-making processes of eating and feeding, but a dynamic partner in this complex exchange" (Middelthun 2009: 219). Foodstuffs are carriers of meaning and of value. However, following the theory and thinking of Peirce we can say that it is incorrect to speak of the food itself because the *food as a sign* is not the food itself, as I already mentioned above. Whatever the meaning or value we ascribe to a specific food, it is something constructed by us, human beings. We give the food its meaning, and the meaning given can vary from person to person, from culture to culture and from situation to situation. For some people, food is only a form of nourishment, for others it represents the highest of pleasure. It can be both political and ethical in nature, and it can be associated with remembrance, and it can also provoke personal stories.

Another example that supports this constructionist and food-as-a-sign approach is the long historical tradition, in both the Eastern countries of the world and in the so-called West, of thinking about food in terms of medicine and health. One such period linking food to health is described by Michel Foucault (1926–1984). In Antiquity the dietary rules were considered a technique of care for the self and for health (Foucault, 1984). Similar ideas linking food to health can also be found in the medieval period especially in monastic settings (Woolgar 2006). Until recently, these health perspectives of food have in our time been largely overshadowed by the scientific concept of food in agricultural science and in food science, in which the focus is on food security, food safety and nourishment (Coff 2006). However, today we are witnessing a revival of an understanding of food in terms of health and, for some people, food has acquired a functionality which is to be likened to that of medicine. This implies that there have been periods where food was seen as a sign relating to health and other periods where food was not primarily related to health. Another example of such a temporal shift in the perception of the value of food and its potential usefulness is the ethical view of food. The ethical aspects that many

⁴ Middelthun uses the terms "feeder," the "food," and "the one being fed." For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to use the more neutral words "supplier of food" and "receiver of food."

Westerners ascribe to food today, like animal welfare, were much less important after the second world war when food security was a much more pressing issue. This underlines the fact, that people ascribe different meanings and values to food over time and in different contexts.

This modest constructionist and ‘postmodern’ point of view concerning food that I am adopting here is in tune with the semiotic perspective. Foodstuffs become signs of meaning and value only when human beings ascribe meaning and value to them. Moreover, if by “postmodern” we mean the loss of a common belief in progress and the loss of universal values or relativization of values, then this point of view corresponds well with the present situation where many diverging and contradictory ideas about food coexist.

For the purpose of analysing food ethics in everyday life, I have already based on Middeltho'n's work made the distinction between the supplier and the receiver of food. It may well be that a supplier of a food does not ascribe the same value to it as the receiver does (see Fig. 2 for a model of this difference). In Fig. 2, the food functions as one sign, which is interpreted differently by the supplier and receiver of food, thus generating *signified* 1 and 2.

As I have argued above, food can be both communication and code, and can be likened to language. It is common knowledge that words, even between speakers of the same language, can have different meanings for different people, in different contexts, but less attention is paid to the fact that the same food can have different meanings and values for different people. As different individuals interact around food—for example, in the course of a common meal, in the selection of a restaurant, or when shopping for ingredients, contradictory meanings and values might be attributed by those individuals to the same foodstuffs. Such situations can lead to conflicts between people as well as to one person's own conflict with him/her-self. Food safety, nutritional values, ethics, and pleasure, may all be sources giving rise to different interpretation or perceptions, resulting in contradictions. To give but one example of this: Asian King Prawns are tasty and delicious, and they can be seen as a sign of affection and care when served for dinner. If, however, the receiver associates these prawns with environmental degradation and the exploitation of poor workers, then he/she may regard the food in a somewhat negative fashion. The supplier of food, the one who wants to make a delicious dinner, wishes to send a sign of care, but due to the different values associated with the very same foodstuff, the communication of that particular signification may fail. Or the supplier may be

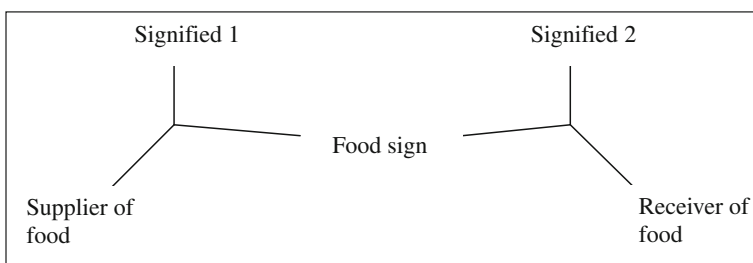


Fig. 2 Double triadic model of a food

ignorant about the receiver's preferences and values. In this case, it can be noted that the interpretations derive from two different levels of time and space: the supplier of food is referring to the "here and now" situation of the dinner, whereas the receiver is referring to past events in a distant place, namely the production history of the food.⁵

Food as a Sign of Ethical Concern

The obscure nature of food codes reminds us that, in many respects, food offers only something like a trace of meaning. "The special character of the trace," writes the French philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, "is that it means something without revealing what it means" (Lévinas 1963). The trace does not show what it refers to but leaves its meaning hidden, and, as such, the trace remains a mystery. According to Lévinas, the trace is distinguished from the sign in that it does not contain any intentionality; the trace does not intentionally *show* anything, it is signification without immediate reference to a meaning.

Foodstuffs are both sign and trace: they can function as a sign with a specific and well-defined meaning for somebody, but due to the vast number of values and meanings assigned to foodstuffs by different people, food also tends to acquire an enigmatic character in everyday life. Food is a sign, but we might ask, "a sign of what?" Following Peirce we can say that, in the case of food as trace, its interpretation is unclear: traces are latent signs because they *can* be interpreted, but they do not *have* to be interpreted in the same way by different people. As a trace, the food itself does not reveal values and meanings; it is only the *interpretant* who can do that.

From the point of view of the semiotic approach, another reflexive layer should be added to the above model. This further layer appears when either a supplier or receiver of food performs an interpretation that originated with someone else, or with another group of people. Alternatively, this reflexivity can also be viewed at a personal level, when a person tries to analyze and interpret his/her own interpretations of food. Peirce has argued that one interpretation of a sign gives rise to a new, that is a second interpretation of the former interpretation, which then becomes a sign, and that there is an endless series of signs when a sign is understood (Peirce 1902: 599). When analyzing food ethics in everyday life, this reflexive element has to be taken into account, and in Fig. 3 below, a model of the serial nature of interpretation and renewal of signification is provided:

In Fig. 3, *signified* 1 designates the interpretation by the food supplier of the food in question, and *signified* 2, designates the interpretation of the food receiver of the food in question. The interpretation of the receiver becomes a new sign, in this example for the supplier of food, which creates *signified* 3, which is the supplier's interpretation of the receiver's interpretation. This is a common and reflexive way of expressing care through food: "I give you food which I know you will appreciate." The series of signs continues, and the receiver of food interprets the supplier's

⁵ See Coff (2006), for a detailed description of the concept of production history in food ethics.

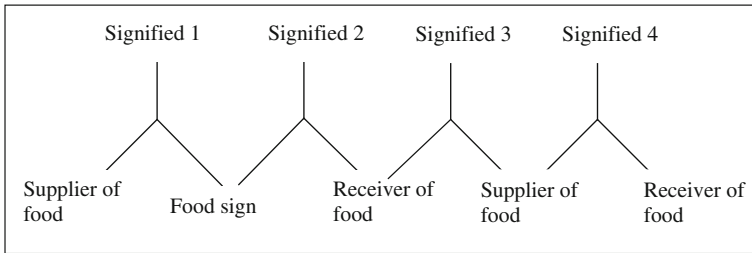


Fig. 3 Semiotic model of food illustrating the reflexive character of interpretation

interpretation of the receiver's interpretation, which is *signified 4*. For example, when a mother serves food for her child she is likely to observe the child's reactions to the food and this is how the *signified 3* comes about. This observation and the following reaction may contain ethical components as the mother will respond to the child's interpretation. The child may like or dislike the food for many other reasons than taste and the mother will try to interpret why the child likes or dislikes the food. The child may for instance show signs of dislike due to an altercation with a friend and now wishes the attention of the mother. In such cases, the food serves as a medium for communication about non-food ethical issues and the dialogue has left the domain of food ethics, see table 1. If we however continue the interest in the dialogue, the mother may react on this by getting annoyed or upset and she may try to make the child eat it anyway. Alternatively, she may serve something else for the child or she may ask the child why she/he does not like the food. There are many possible interpretations that the mother can make and react to, thus she will in most cases have to choose an interpretation and react accordingly. On the other hand the child will observe and probably react on the mother's observations and reactions to his/her dislike or liking of the food (which creates a *signified 4*). When the mother observes and reacts to the child's reactions to her reactions she creates the *signified 5*. Such forms of attention to food and use of food as mediums for expressing ethical concerns can be found in many everyday situations.

Conclusion

I have given several examples on the use of the semiotic approach along with the description of the semiotic approach to food ethics. In conclusion, I will try once more to relate the semiotic approach to the world of food ethics and evaluate the benefit of a semiotic approach to food ethics in everyday life.

I believe it is common for most people that concerns about others can be expressed in the production or preparation of food. Bringing home food can be a food security concern of the supplier for the family if there is little to eat (cf Table 1). Preparing the food safely by taking care of kitchen hygiene is also a concern for the health of those who are going to eat it. Caring for special dietary requirements of the other is another food ethical concern. Finally, caring for production practices has become a common feature of many consumers, especially in affluent societies.

We may ask how such ethical concerns are perceived? Does the receiver of food understand the care and concern of the food supplier? As long as we speak of an unspecific receiver of food the question can not be answered. Only in concrete cases can we know how the ethical concerns of the suppliers of food are interpreted by receivers. Some of the ethical concerns of the supplier might be understood and others not. A child might implicitly understand that the food provided is a sign of care and an ethical action of the mother. Yet many, and especially small children of course, may not be able to understand specific concerns of the supplier, like caring for a healthy regimen or concerns for organic food or fair trade. Not understanding the care embedded in the food supply may also be a sign that the receiver has another interpretation of the food than the supplier.

People's relation to food and the expression of their relationships to others, through food, can oscillate between ignorance of the social meanings of food, the "food as fuel" approach, and the deliberate use of food to express meanings, values and care. In everyday life food is closely embedded in traditions, routines, habits, and social norms, which are largely taken for granted and which are therefore less obvious for the purposes of analysis. As a conceptual framework, the triadic model owes its analytical power to its ability not in disclosing the "hidden meanings and values ascribed to food by actors interacting with each other, as this can be shown by other interpretative approaches like hermeneutics, but in pointing to how new forms of values and meanings constantly and endlessly are created and developed during communications around food."

One way of uncovering how values and meanings with respect to food are created in communications concerning food could be by addressing food ethical concerns in dialogues or in interviews about everyday interactions around food based on a semiotic approach. Such empirical work has not been carried out as part of this paper and it remains to be shown if such a food semiotic approach can be justified in practice.

The triadic semiotic model can through seeing food as a sign be used as a conceptual model for gaining an understanding of how meaning and value are ascribed to and around food, and for how these understandings come into play as a part of everyday interpersonal relations. The process of understanding food as signs of meanings and values in interpersonal relationships is not simple, due to the variety of interpretations, the multiple reflexive layers, and the many areas of life, in which food is involved.

The multiple reflexive layers in the triadic semiotic approach, that is the creation of still new "*signified*" in dialogues around food, can be used for analyzing how food ethics is enacted in everyday life between people. Compared to other analytical tools and understandings, like phenomenology, hermeneutics, or discourse analysis, it is the analytical strength of the semiotic approach that it sees food as a sign of something else involving the suppliers and receivers of food. The semiotic approach is able to focus our attention on how food ethical actions are enacted and interpreted in an on-going process in the creation of new meanings.

The semiotic approach can focus on ethical aspects of food as well as other aspects of food. By targeting the ethical aspects, food is seen as a both a sign of care and concern and as a medium for communication about ethics. I believe that

analyzing ethical considerations around food with the help of the semiotic model can show perspectives that otherwise could be difficult, but maybe not impossible, to see and address. The semiotic approach to food ethics in everyday life is a conceptual framework that can be used to draw the attention to certain domains and fields of food ethical behavior that otherwise would tend to remain implicit and unspoken.

Acknowledgements This paper is an edited version of “Signs and Traces of Food Ethics in Everyday Life,” in Lysaght, P. (ed) (2012), *Time for Food: Everyday Food and Changing Meal Habits in a Global Perspective* (p. 45–56). Åbo Akademi University Press, Finland. I am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their critique and useful comments and proposals.

References

- Coff, C. (2006). *The taste for ethics. An ethic of food consumption*. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Coff, C., Korthals, M., & Barling, D. (2008). Ethical traceability and informed food choice. In C. Coff, M. Korthals, D. Barling, & T. Nielsen (Eds.), *Ethical traceability and communicating food* (pp. 1–18). Dordrecht: Springer.
- Douglas, M. (1966). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1984). *Histoire de la sexualité*. Paris, Gallimard: L'usage des plaisirs.
- Goften, L. (1996). Bread to biotechnology: Cultural aspects of food ethics. In B. Mephem (Ed.), *Food ethics* (pp. 120–137). London: Routledge.
- Lemke, H. (2007). *Ethik des Essens. Eine Einführung in die Gastrosophie*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag.
- Lévinas, E. (1963). *La trace de l'autre*. Published in Lévinas, E. *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*. Paris, Vrin. First published in 1949.
- Lévinas, E. (1979). *Totality and infinity*. Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic Publishers. First published in French in 1961.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1962). *Le totémisme aujourd'hui*. Paris: Puf.
- Middelthon, A.-L. (2009). The duty to feed and eat right. *Revista della Società italiana di antropologia medica*, 27–28, 209–225.
- Nörth, W. (1990). *Handbook of semiotics*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Peirce, C. S. (1902). *Manuscripts*. Boston: Mas.
- Peirce, C. S. (1958). *Collected papers* (Vol. 2). Boston: Mas.
- Simmel, G. (1997). Sociology of the meal. In D. Frisby, & M. Featherstone (Ed.), *Simmel on culture. Selected writings*. Sage: London, pp. 130–135, First published in 1910.
- Woolgar, C. (2006). Group diets in late medieval England. In C. M. Woolgar, D. Serjeantson, & T. Waldron (Eds.), *Food in medieval England: Diet and nutrition* (pp. 191–200). Oxford: Oxford University Press.