

Reviews

Food and Ethics: What Shall We Eat Today? By Roger Haden.

Christian Coff, *The Taste for Ethics: An Ethic of Food Consumption* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 212 pp. Highly Recommended.

Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Search for a Perfect Meal in a Fast Food World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 450 pp. Highly Recommended.

Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Way We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Rodale, 2006), 332 pp. Recommended.

Interest in the relationship between food, eating, and ethics extends at least as far back as the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, while notable exposés on the wrongs of unscrupulous producers and marketers of food have, understandably, increased in modern times. Broadly ethical in their approach, the likes of Frederick Accum (*The Adulteration Food*, 1820), Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 1962), Ross Hume Hall (*Food for Nought: The Decline in Nutrition*, 1974), and Eric Schlosser (*Fast Food Nation*, 2001) have all sought to uncover the “dark side” of the Western diet and to prick public concern.

Today a chasm of uncertainty has opened up between the actual foods consumers eat and what consumers know about what they eat. Perhaps as the distance between consumers and producers has increased so too has our anxiety about the unknown. Nature seems further at a remove than ever before, even though problems like global warming seem to bring “nature” back home to roost. Ignorance being bliss for some (many?) means that not knowing where one's food comes from or how it is produced may not necessarily be a problem. But now that we live in world where food is grown, processed, packed, and shipped using technologies that can alter food quality and adversely affect the environment and human health, expect to hear more and more about the perils of our diet.

Add to this that the knowledge individuals have of their food no longer comes from the senses, in particular, but from packaging information, advertising, marketing, scientific discourse, nutritionists, social scientists, and various other experts, and the problem of behaving ethically becomes still more complex. What one buys as an ethical product, what passes for an ethical product, and what is an ethical product will never be determined by the blurb on the bag.

Ethical debates about food typically identify areas of concern such as the living conditions of “battery animals,” gene technologies and the introduction of GMOs, the use of pesticides, chemical fertilisers, and growth hormones, the exploitation of food industry workers in third-world countries, and the environmental cost of food (fossil fuel use and therefore “food miles”), for example. None of these issues are invoked in the “benign” space of the supermarket or by the docile “please buy me” attractiveness of packaged goods that appear on shelves as if from nowhere. In this sense the arrival of the “organic” section in the supermarket is also just a sign that such concern exists, whereas the products themselves are there primarily for the same reason as all the other goods, namely, to sell.

Living (and eating) ethically in today's world, simple put, is anything but simple. Yet in essence it means acting with an awareness of the personal, physical, social, and environmental consequences of our actions. Notwithstanding that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, many choose ignorance rather than face the fear and anxiety that comes from knowing the truth about our food system. One wonders whether the current explosion of interest in cookery and eating in the form of foodie-ism, celebrity chefdom, and the accompanying sycophancy is not in fact the paradoxical expression of this will to ignorance. A mode of denial that merely resembles “passion,” whereby in spite of overwhelming evidence that we're rapidly destroying the natural environment and our own health, the gourmet can in Nero-esque fashion avoid facing the gloomy reality through gastronomic indulgence. Moreover, the romanticising, aestheticising, and “sexing up” of cookery in

these shows are also precisely the latter's mode of denial. The ethical question never asked is where does all that "beautiful food" come from, who produces it, and at what cost (socially and environmentally)?

The issues surrounding even the theory of ethical behaviour in relation to food are complex, as Christian Coff makes clear in his admirable book, *The Taste for Ethics*. Coff's meticulous, closely argued text offers in the first place an excursus on the history and philosophy of science that has influenced attitudes to food and to food ethics, in particular. It therefore traces the philosophic ideas that have shaped those attitudes and which were subsequently applied through science and technology and reproduced by the modern food industry. With an analysis citing a host of thinkers including Aristotle, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Comte, Malthus, Darwin, Simmel, Nietzsche, Bachelard, Gadamer, Foucault, Ricouer, and many others, Coff suggests that it was a quantifying, "positivistic" Western science that was largely to blame for our current form of "intellectualisation and distancing" with regard to food. It was the emergent life sciences, in particular, Coff argues, that changed our understanding of nature and of food to the extent that food was regarded as a known quantity, as so many calories, a chemical product with predictable physiological effects. In a brief critique of Ludwig Feuerbach's (1804-1872) influential statement that, "Man is what he eats" (which is taken to reflect this quantitative approach) Coff states that although "man is what he eats" this is "not only in a substantive sense but also in a cultural sense." That is to say, food does not simply sustain physiologically but "nourishes" by virtue of its meaning, its social significance, and by the values it represents; indeed, by the ethical responses it may elicit. Food in today's context is very much about others.

Coff's account is scholarly and academic in tone and structured in a way that allows for an in-depth study of the nuanced relationship between consumers and their food, between human beings and nature, and between individuals and others. It is at times theoretically dense, involving the reader in philosophical excursions on subjects like identity, nature, sensory experience, autonomy, and trust, but in doing so it provides a complement of elements affecting ethical choice-making. The rewards of such a study are significant. Coff identifies sensual and emotional as well as intellectual forms of knowledge as being necessary for the ethical understanding of our food. Engaging with the sensual properties of food as a source of knowledge, the active pursuit of knowledge related to the production history of the food product, and considering food as an agent of self-knowledge are presented as the interlocking elements of this relationship.

After a lengthy development at "the theoretical and abstract level," Coff writes, "the theoretical reflections can be more than just an academic interest." In the final thirty pages of the book he presents the "practical implications" (and applications) of his theoretical ethics. This includes the results of a "sociological survey on ethical traceability" conducted in Denmark in 2004. This concluded that tracing the product's production history was by no means easy and that consumers (who have come to value that history) had widely differing attitudes when it came to the provision of product information. Coff also identifies globalisation as one of the forces that has made "long-range" food ethics a "difficult and diffuse concept." Act local, think global may well be the mantra for ethical food consumption. "The longrange consequences of our actions" are now necessarily a part of the ethical consumer's deliberations, Coff argues.

The book concludes with a practical "answer" to what is an exceedingly difficult problem: given that there are ways in which acting ethically can enrich one's life in a socially and environmentally beneficial way, how do we act ethically (in relation to food) and influence others to do the same? Coff claims ultimately "ethical consumption is based on the wish to contribute to the common good through consumption." Notwithstanding the difficulties implied by such a "simple" principle (the rich, for example, appear to be favoured by such a consumerist politics), Coff responds by distinguishing between political and ethical consumers; the latter "force us to reflect on the role of the individual in a democracy, both as citizen and as a consumer."

Given that Coff is Danish, and Denmark is a country well-known for its socially responsible politics, this tightly woven argument more than makes sense, but whether the book's analysis proves convincing in other cultural contexts remains to be seen.

The reviewer then continues with the other two volumes under review, making the following references to Christian Coff's book:

...At this point, enter the typical, ethical or “political consumers” (Coff’s term), relatively wealthy, well-educated, and mostly middle class. Their power as consumers is exercised in relation to which products they buy, influences the information about products supplied, and also drives prices. But Coff makes a cogent case that the positive formulation, “political consumers,” together with their actions in the marketplace as responsible agents of change, are merely a wholesale endorsement of consumerism itself. Ironically, “political consumers” merely “conserve or even increase consumption and thus... expand the market.” Thus there is in Coff’s view “an unstated alliance between consumers and producers, where the real losers are those who cannot afford to pay: those without money.” Taking this to its logical conclusion, Coff argues that, “creating an ethical profile for the company is [simply] a new strategy for selling products.”

And later still, referring to Pollan’s book:

...However, the social and philosophical aspects of (ethical) consumption that Coff explores are not broached in anything like the same manner as the Danish researcher. Only a radical re-evaluation of current patterns of production and consumption could make any noticeable difference, and, as this is not likely to happen, what is the best way forward? Proper labelling monitored by an independent group and enforced by legislature, education, and encouragement to eat plenty of unprocessed foods as a part of the diet. Surely.

But also, as Coff argues, by treating our consumer food choices as choices that enrich self-understanding. Eating is being, and through knowing our food our self-knowledge is also kindled. Ethical eating is not only about “political consumerism.” It is also learning about how to be oneself through the ethical understanding of others. Our engagement with food is arguably the pre-eminent social act through which ethical understanding can best be nurtured.

Roger Haden