

The Cannibals That We Are: For a Bioethics of Food

FABRIZIO TUROLODO

Abstract: Is it possible to trace the contours of a bioethical reflection on nutrition? The present study tries to do so, relying on the metaphorical and symbolic value that food often takes. Indeed, eating does not mean just getting sufficient nutrition, because through the offer and exchange of food, people recognize and welcome each other. In this sense we are all, in some way, cannibals, because in eating, we eat the other, even if the introjection of the other is only symbolic and not literal, as in the case of actual cannibals. Eating habits are also very rooted in various cultures and sometimes resist migratory flows to a greater extent than language and religion do. Consequently, the disgust for, or the refusal of, other people's food may be an indicator of a more general rejection of the diversity of other people. The conclusion reached by this study is that eating is taking care of the self and of the other and, therefore, as Jacques Derrida observes, it is necessary to "eat well" and also "eat the good."

Keywords: cannibalism; bioethics of food; nutrition; eating habits; Jacques Derrida; Ethics of Food

Hunger between Need and Desire

Is hunger a need or a desire? Need is determined in relation to its object, while desire tends toward an idea of totality, as its own etymology suggests.¹ In some ways, hunger, like thirst, is a need, because certain objects, like a piece of bread or a glass of water, can be enough to satisfy it. Yet hunger in humans, despite being rooted in the world of instinct, always goes further. Indeed, humans do not limit themselves to nourishing themselves, but they dine. The dining differs from simple nourishment because it presupposes a social ritual and a symbolic code, which is absent in simple nutrition.

Indeed, humans, through the rituality of mealtimes, not only nourish themselves, but also recognize each other. In all civilizations, the fundamental stages of life are marked by gastronomic rituals of various kinds. Births and weddings are celebrated with banquets; in some civilizations, even death is accompanied by funeral feasts. In the same way solemnities, receptions, conferences often lead to gala dinners. Therefore, the desire to dine is not only the finite need to quell one's hunger, but it is also the (transcendental) desire to be recognized by another person's (transcendental) conscience, in order to establish some form of alliance with it, to be comforted by it, or to receive important confirmation. The powerful metaphor of the offering of food as an offering of one's self is strongly present in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition: in Christianity in the sacrament of the Eucharist, where God offers himself to man through bread; or in Judaism, where the word '*nefesh*' is used to indicate both the throat, the breath and the living soul, in such a way as to create the happy ambiguity of psalm 42 (41), which says "My *nefesh* (throat / soul) is thirsty for God, for the living God." In Judaism the recomposition of a relationship and the overcoming of a previous enmity is often sealed by a meal. In the ritual of the temple of Zion, for example, there was the 'sacrifice of peace' (or communion), which included a meal with the meats of the sacrificed victim. In turn, Jesus, in the parable of the Prodigal Son, while describing the return home of the son and the

Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics (2020), 29, 268–275.

© Cambridge University Press 2020. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

recomposition of the relationship with his father, tells of the killing of a fatted calf as part of a lavish lunch. St. Thomas Aquinas, in the *Quaestio disputata de Malo* XIV (Article 1), clearly identifies all the nutritional and, at the same time, symbolic purposes of food: "Man must take food according to what is appropriate for the sustenance of the body, for the well-being of life and for the familiarity with those with whom one lives."

The metaphorization of food, according to some psychoanalysts, also plays an essential role in the development of serious diseases such as anorexia. The function of the mother, from birth, is to nourish, through breastfeeding. Even after weaning, mothers tend to express their love and their maternal function by preparing food. Consequently, the refusal of food can assume the metaphorical and symbolic value of a rejection of the mother or of the parental couple.

Bernard Brusset argues, for example, that food can represent the good object that brings with it the positive characteristics of the mother, or it can be loaded with negative maternal attributes and, therefore, it can be rejected.² Harold Boris, in contrast, advocates that patients consider food to be a good object and recognize its maternal qualities as positive, but they are not able to receive them, because this would further increase their envy linked to the fact that they do not possess them.³ Indeed, even for the common observer, it is easy to see that inevitably, parents, and mothers in particular, attach meaning to food that goes far beyond its simple nutritional properties. This is particularly evident during early childhood, during the breastfeeding phase, when food is a fundamental means of communication between mother and child. The mother, by offering the baby the milk that he needs, makes her love for the child visible and concrete. Subsequently, this sort of symbolic overdetermination of food continues, perhaps for an entire lifetime.

The psychoanalytic interpretation of anorexic symptomatology also places great importance on the role of symbiotic relationships between mother and daughter. If the mother takes care of her daughter according to her needs, then the child's body ends up being perceived as an extension of her mother's body, as if it belongs to the parents. Therefore, the need arises, according to authors like Hilde Bruch,⁴ to subject her body to the strict discipline of giving up food, so as to then regain her body. Moreover, according to perspectives such as that espoused by James Masterson, the refusal of food could indicate a refusal of oneself, or a rejection of that false self that was built to please the wishes of the parents.⁵

The Distaste for Other's Food and the Distaste for Others

Societies strongly identify with their own cuisine, so much so that cuisine tends to be more resistant in the face of migration than either language or religion.⁶ Eating represents one of those habits that is strongest and most rooted in the many cultures, and the last habit to be abandoned and replaced. People identify with food as a cultural system and as a distinguishing factor of otherness. We also differ from the other in terms of what we eat and, often, the other people's food is looked upon with suspicion. On this theme, an episode narrated by Charles Darwin in his treatise on the expression of emotions seems relevant. Indeed, Darwin recounts that "in Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear dirty."⁷

This kind of disgust, which we might experience concerning other people's food, sometimes constitutes a particular aspect of a more general disgust, which concerns the otherness of the other. Just as curiosity about other people's food may be a particular aspect of a more general curiosity toward the other. Taste and disgust have their own biological origin, but they often contribute to the consolidation of moral values and preferences. Indeed, we are not only disgusted by repulsive food, but we are also metaphorically disgusted by morally reprehensible behavior and by what we consider to be bad. Just as observing evil triumph over good "leaves a bad taste in our mouths." The feeling of disgust, however, is morally ambiguous, because it sometimes also contributes to strengthening moral prejudices and bad values. Indeed, Arleen Salles and Immaculada De Melo-Martin observe that "Disgust has been used historically as a tactic to exclude and discriminate against particular groups and persons. Jews, women, and homosexuals have been the target of this rhetorical use of disgust; painted as paradigms of the basely animal, they have been subordinated and separated from those they would purportedly contaminate."⁸

The theme of disgust and repugnance, and its ethical and cognitive value, has enjoyed much attention in the bioethical, philosophical and psychological literature.⁹ One of the best-known and most-debated articles on this subject is *The Wisdom of Repugnance*¹⁰ by Leon Kass. In this article, Kass tried to argue in favor of the moral, and not just the emotional, value of repulsion. According to Kass, acts such as cannibalism or incest are forms of 'abomination,' which cause a sense of repugnance that is difficult to articulate through logical-rational propositions, but which nevertheless possess an intrinsic moral value. According to Kass, rational arguments can certainly be found in support of repugnance, and yet, even in the absence of such arguments, repugnance continues to preserve its own moral value.

The objection that is usually made to Kass's argument is that moral taboos are not universal, and that they sometimes change over time or across different cultures. For example, on the basis of the studies of Claude Levi-Strauss¹¹ and Mary Douglas,¹² Philip Karpowicz, Cynthia Cohen and Derek van der Kooy recognize the fundamental importance of repugnance-based taboos in preserving fundamental social values, yet deny they that these taboos are universally recognized, with cannibalism being a prime example.¹³

Cannibalism and the Symbolic Meaning of Meat

Cannibalism is the most interesting taboo concerning food that Kass lists, at least for the purposes of our reflection. Indeed, the analysis of the practices of cannibalism shows that repugnance to the consumption of human flesh does not depend so much on the intrinsic characteristics of human flesh in itself, but rather on the context in which human flesh is eaten and the sense that eating human flesh takes on in various cultures. It may be useful, for the purposes of our analysis, to take up the distinction Jeffrey Stout makes between being repellent and being repugnant or abominable.¹⁴ According to Stout, phenomena with strongly anomalous characteristics are repellent, where elements are mixed that we usually keep strictly separated. Repugnance, however, has an added meaning, because, in addition to mixing things that are usually kept separate, it does so in a way that disturbs the social or cosmic order, as defined and recognized in a given culture. Cannibalism is repugnant to many cultures because it violates the social and cosmic order of those

cultures. However, when the social and cosmic order offers a context of meaning that justifies cannibalism, human flesh is no longer seen as repugnant.

From this point of view, the description that the anthropologist Beth Conklin makes of funeral cannibalism rituals practiced by the indigenous Wari of the Brazilian Amazon forest is of great interest. Eating the corpses of the dead is not repugnant to the Wari, because it takes on the meaning of an act of respect and care for the body of the deceased, given that, according to them, it is better to rest in peace in the warm body of a friend, rather than in the cold earth. Eating a body a few days after death may be disgusting, when it is smelling because of the rotting process, but for a Wari it will never be repugnant or abominable, in the sense intended by Jeffrey Stout.¹⁵

Cannibals who feed on a human body for reasons other than simple survival, often do so because they attribute symbolic value to those parts they feed on. What the cannibal feeds on, in other words, is not mere meat. The ethnographer James Frazer, referring to an African tribe devoted to cannibalism, explains that each organ is associated with a virtue and that nourishment of that particular organ also means, for the members of this tribe, taking possession of the relative virtue present in the organ.¹⁶

This powerful symbolic dimension of the consumption of human flesh is also underlined by Beth Conklin in her studies on the Wari. Indeed, Conklin explains that the rituals that accompany eating the flesh of enemies aim to express contempt and superiority and are different from those that characterize the consumption of animal meat. In the same way, the rituals that accompany the consumption of the flesh of one's own deceased are profoundly different from both previous cases and express the deep mutual dependence there is between the different members of the community.¹⁷

Cannibalism and the Symbolic Introjection of the Other: From Sigmund Freud to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (via Hannibal Lecter)

Psychoanalysis identifies cannibalistic impulses in the so-called oral phase of libidinal development, in which there appears to be a desire to incorporate the beloved object that has sadist traits. Weaning, the withdrawal of the mother's breast, usually produces very deep separation anxiety, pushing the unconscious mind to devour the mother. The frustration due to a denied childhood need for satisfaction can reappear with a vengeance in adulthood; for example, the pressure of a stressful situation could lead to regression.

The desire to incorporate the beloved object is therefore common to all, only that the cannibal implements introjection in a literal, and not merely a symbolic, way. Behind the cannibal there is, in fact, a being full of desire, similar to the one that dwells in each of us, as Hannibal Lecter also explains to Clarice Starling in the following dialogue of *The Silence of the Lambs*:

Hannibal Lecter: First principles, Clarice. Simplicity. Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing ask: what it is in itself? What is its nature? What does he do, this man you seek?

Clarice Starling: He kills women...

Hannibal Lecter: No, that is incidental. What is the first and principal thing he does? What needs does he serve by killing?

Clarice Starling: Anger, um, social acceptance, and, huh, sexual frustrations, sir...

Hannibal Lecter: No! He covets. That is his nature. And how do we begin to covet, Clarice? Do we seek out the things to covet? Make an effort to answer now.

Clarice Starling: No. We just...

Hannibal Lecter: No. We begin by coveting what we see every day. Don't you feel eyes moving over your body, Clarice? And don't your eyes seek out the things you want?

Desire is transcendental, as is the case for thought, because everything can be desired or thought. This is why Aristotle, in *On the soul (Peri Psyches)*,¹⁸ wrote that "the soul is in a way all existing things." Just as a mirror is not all things, it can mirror everything; in the same way the soul is not all things, though it may think of or desire all things. In this sense, the soul is only all things *in a certain sense*. With this statement, Aristotle wanted to underline that the soul is, from a formal (and not a substantial) point of view, infinite. This element of transcendentalism and infinity, which Aristotle attributes to the soul, has been transferred, in contemporary times, to conscience and its intentional character. For example, consciousness, observes Jean Paul Sartre, is also the awareness that there is something else besides itself, that there is being. From the awareness of this difference comes the desire: to be ready in the face of something that can be acquired and that is always different. And yet, everything that we can acquire, being finite and limited, cannot saturate desire and cannot stop its absurd and desperate rush, because desire is an opening on infinity, an aspiration toward the infinite.¹⁹

The illusion of being able to fill this infinite void sometimes leads us to an infinite consumption of finite realities. However, this consumption, which can take on a spasmodic and compulsive character, always leaves us dissatisfied. We delude ourselves that quantity can replace quality, that bare bulk can substitute the spirit, that food, drugs, sex, human flesh, or any other finite reality can become the surrogate of the infinite, and thus, we eat ourselves to death.

Turning to the bulimic person, who swallows food to bursting point, in the futile attempt to fill this infinite emptiness that we all have, or the alcoholic who downs one glass after the other, some platonic images come to mind, such as that of "a jar full of holes,"²⁰ or that of the plover, a bird that eats and defecates at the same time.²¹ The act of injecting drugs, in Italian, is referring to as 'piercing a hole' (*bucarsi*) and in French, being an alcoholic is described as 'drinking like a hole' (*boire comme un trou*).²² These are images that all refer to the infinity of desire and its inevitable insatiability.

The contradictory attempt to saturate our desire for infinity through a tendentially endless pursuit of finite objects, brings to mind the criticism that Hegel makes to the Johann Gottlieb Fichte's 'bad infinity.'²³ The Fichtean infinity, in which the ego poses itself, and unconsciously imposes a limit on itself (the non-ego), which it then tries to overcome dynamically, can be represented as a straight line that proceeds without limits. It is therefore configured as an unsolved process, which never fully achieves its purpose, in which being and having to be remain perennially split into a never-ending chase. This, according to Hegel, is a bad, or a false, infinity. In reality, Fichte, observes Hegel, fails to restore the division of the ego and non-ego,

of the subject and the object, the infinite and the finite, thus not overcoming the structural opposition. Similarly, the alcoholic, the drug addict, the bulimic or even the cannibal, who find a false substitute of the other in alcohol, in drugs, in food, and in human flesh, only re-propose the Fichtean inequality between the infinite subject and the finished content. The seemingly endless process of consuming food, alcohol or drugs will never be able to achieve its true purpose, which is to saturate an infinite desire. It is, therefore, destined to remain an unresolved process, in which being will never fully match up to what should be. Only a relationship of mutual recognition with another person can truly saturate this infinite desire, because there is true infinity in the other person, the infinity offered by the person's transcendental consciousness. No surrogate can do the same.

However, a relationship with another consciousness must be a relationship of true recognition, in order to truly saturate infinite desire. If, on the other hand, the other is exploited, treated like an object, subordinated, eaten, then he is reduced to something finite, to a thing, and again, he is no longer able to saturate infinite desire. Indeed, an enslaved person is not ever the opposite pole of a dialectic of recognition. On this point, Hegel wrote some of the most beautiful pages of his *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*, dedicated to the dialectic between servant and master.²⁴ The enslaved person, Hegel observes in those pages, fears death and, in defeat, in order to save his own physical life, accepts the condition of slavery and thus becomes dependent on the master. However, the master cannot fully realize himself, in terms of his self-consciousness, in such a relationship, because the enslaved person, reduced to a thing, cannot represent the dialectical pole with which the master can adequately relate. Being merely a master is in fact much less than being a grateful and recognized conscience.

We Must Eat Well: Jacques Derrida

Jacques Derrida, in an interesting dialogue with Jean-Luc Nancy on the subject of food, maintains that mutual recognition, which we mentioned above, constitutes the "Good" of every moral. "As for the 'Good' of every moral," observes Derrida, "it has to do with the best, the most respectful, the most grateful and the most suitable way to relate to the other, and to relate the other back to himself."²⁵

If so, then, the problem for Derrida is not so much related to 'what' we should or should not eat, but to 'how.' For Derrida, the problem is that of eating that goes beyond the logic of appropriation and of one's own satiety, to move in the direction of the other. Eating calls into question the relationship with the otherness of food, with the alterity of one's own body and of one's own conscience, as well as with structuring the relationship in relation to the otherness of the other living, with which so much more than just hunger is shared. If the mouth (the same one that says "I") only feeds itself, then it eats badly. Eating then, while nourishing us, offers itself to us, and in this act teaches us to give. "Learn-to-give-feed-others, because you should never eat alone: this is the rule of 'having to eat well'. It is a law of infinite hospitality. And all our differences, fractures, wars (and we can include religious wars) have this idea of 'eat well' at stake. Today, more than ever."²⁶

This is not the rule of 'you have to' but of 'you need to,' a need that must be oriented by what is good: we must also know how to desire, how to educate our need in a good way. Only in this way can the other be respected: the other who is symbolically eaten without being annihilated, the other with whom one eats and the

other one feeds. So, eating teaches us to 'address the other' with responsibility, to experience them in identification, understanding, assimilation and internalization. Eating is care of the self, and it is also the care of the other.

Notes

1. In the term *desire* there is a reference to the starry sky, since this term derives from the composition of the privative particle 'de' with the Latin term *sidus, sideris* (plural *sidera*), which means star. Therefore 'desidera,' from which 'desire' derives, literally means "condition in which the stars are absent." Probably the term was coined in the environments of the ancient haruspices who, in order to perform their divine functions, needed to be able to observe and interpret the stars, that is to say "stay with the stars," from which the verb 'consider' derives (*cum sidera*), or reflect (on the future, in their case). Thus, when the stars were not there, because the sky was covered, the desire was lit in the haruspices to see the sky and the stars that metaphorically represented the infinite.
2. Brusset B. *L'assiette et le miroir: the mental anorexie de l'enfant et de l'adolescent*. Toulouse: Privat; 1991.
3. Boris HN. The problem of anorexia nervosa. *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 1984;65: 315–22.
4. Bruch H. *The Golden Cage. The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 2001.
5. Masterson JF. Primary anorexia nervosa in the borderline adolescent: An object relations view. In Hortocollis P, ed. *Borderline Personality Disorders*. New York, NY: International Universities Press; 1977.
6. See Calvo M. Migration et alimentation *Informations sur les Sciences sociales* 1982;21(3):383–446; Stano S. Boutaud JJ L' alimentation entre identité et altérité: Le Soi et l'Autre sous différents regimes. *Lexia* 2015;19:99–115.
7. Darwin C. *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. London: John Murray; 1872, at 257.
8. Salles A., de Melo-Martin I. Disgust in bioethics. *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 2012;21 (2):273.
9. See Rozin P., Fallon AE. A perspective on disgust. *Psychological Review* 1987;94:23–41; Kekes J. Disgust and moral taboos. *Philosophy* 1992;67(262):431–46; Miller WI. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1997; Kahan D. The progressive appropriation of disgust. In: Bandes S, ed. *The Passions of Law*. New York and London: New York University Press; 1999:63–79; Rozin P, Haidt J, McCauley CR. Disgust. In: Lewis M, Haviland J, eds. *Handbook of Emotions*. 3rd ed. New York, NY: Guilford; 2008:757–76; Nussbaum M. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press; 2004; Deigh J. The politics of disgust and shame. *Journal of Ethics* 2006;10:383–418; Nussbaum M. *From Disgust to Humanity: Sexual Orientation and Constitutional Law*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press; 2010; See note 8, Salles, de Melo-Martin 2012: 267–80.
10. Kass L. The wisdom of repugnance. *The New Republic*; June 2, 1997:17–26.
11. Levi-Strauss C. *Myth and Meaning*. London: Routledge and Keagan Paul; 1978.
12. Douglas M. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul; 1966.
13. "Are the moral taboos that Kass lists universally accepted? It seems not. A paradigm moral taboo that he maintains is universal, that against cannibalism, is not found in all cultures. Indeed, cannibalism still exists today in some societies as a socially sanctioned practice." Karpowicz P., Cohen CB, van Der Kooy D. Developing Human-Nonhuman Chimeras in Human Stem Cell Research: Ethical Issues and Boundaries. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 2005;15(2):112.
14. Stout J. *Ethics after Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents*. Boston: Beacon Press; 1988: 145–62.
15. See Conklin BA. *Consuming Grief: Compassionate Cannibalism in an Amazonian Society*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press; 2001, at 82.
16. Whenever an enemy who has behaved with conspicuous bravery is killed, his liver, which is considered the seat of valor"; his ears, which are supposed to be the seat of intelligence; the skin of his forehead, which is regarded as the seat of perseverance; his testicles, which are held to be the seat of strength; and other members, which are viewed as the seat of other virtues, are cut from his body, baked to cinders and ... mixed with other ingredients into a kind of paste." Frazer J. *The Golden Bough*. London: Wordsworth; 1993, at 497.
17. See Conklin BA. "Thus Are Our Bodies, Thus Was Our Custom": Mortuary cannibalism in an Amazonian society. *American Ethnologist* 1995;22(1):75–101.

The Cannibals That We Are: For a Bioethics of Food

18. Aristotle. *On the soul*. 431b, 21.
19. Sartre JP. *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* Paris: Gallimard; 1943:447–83.
20. Plato. *Gorgia*, 493 ac.
21. Plato. *Ivi*, 493e - 494b.
22. See Sissa G. *Le plaisir et le mal. Philosophie de la drogue*. Paris: Odile Jacob; 1997.
23. See Hegel GWF. *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*. New York, NY: State University of New York Press; 1988.
24. Hegel GWF. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2018.
25. Derrida J. *Points de suspension. Entretiens*. Paris: Galilée; 1992, at 296.
26. See note 25, Derrida 1992, at 297.