



The ethics of eating

The impact of food on local and global problems

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1. FOOD IS MORE THAN JUST EATING

A scene from our childhood: our parents have just prepared food for us, and it happens to be food we don't like – maybe some boiled carrots, maybe a broccoli stew, maybe a chicken broth: pick your own nightmare! So, as always, we start protesting, we don't want this, we don't want that, maybe later, maybe after dessert, maybe without those green things... any excuse will go, as long as we avoid the dreadful dish. At some point our parents lose their patience, they point at the dish, and here they go with the most familiar line: "Eat! Why are you being so choosy? There are people starving in the world, you know!?" Now: what did they actually mean with that sentence? What's the connection? That if we do not eat more people will die? How is that possible?

Well, usually, what our parents mean is that we should feel lucky to have been born in a part of the world where we can have a meal every day. We should therefore cherish that privilege by not wasting the food we are given, because, indeed, in other parts of the world, people would be immensely grateful to afford such a meal. Otherwise, that reproach does not make much sense,

does it? Could we really imagine a direct connection between what we eat and some major problem like **world famine**?

Actually, oddly enough, there *is* a connection, and it is not a loose one.

Eating and drinking are primary needs: it is something we need every single day, and several times during the day. The need for food requires a great deal of variety in order to be properly fulfilled, and a great deal of processes that go along with that variety: preparation, production, growth, packaging, transportation, sale, consumption... Everywhere in the world, the food industry contributes to a significant chunk of a country's economy, and on average we all spend about 10% of our money in food and drinks.

So, yes, our relation with food is deeply connected with the world's problems. The food we choose to place or not to place on our table is, in many ways, an ethical action, that is, an action that may be "right" or "wrong", not only for ourselves, but also for the society we live in. The more information becomes available to everyone (through the internet and the likes), the more people are realizing this idea, and start choosing what they eat in relation to their opinions on the world's problems. For instance, people who believe that their country's economy should be defended and promoted, tend to choose more local products; people who are against the exploitation of workers in **developing countries** tend to choose so-called "**Fair Trade**" products; people who believe that animals should not be killed for our pleasure, tend to **vegetarianism** or **veganism**, and so forth.

The act of choosing what we buy in accordance to values we believe in and social problems we care for is called **critical consumerism**. You are a critical consumer if you buy your food not only because it's healthy, tasty or affordable, but also because you believe it will make the world a better place, somewhere, somehow.

The goal of this chapter is to make you aware of the various social, moral and political implications of foods and drinks, and to help you discover whether or not you would like to be a critical consumer too.

2. HOW TO INVESTIGATE ON A PRODUCT

Let us say that, yes, we want to try and be critical consumers. We want to make the world a better place by choosing more carefully what we eat, the same way as we may have made other choices in life with the same spirit: maybe we have changed our car and bought a hybrid model, maybe we bought a T-shirt in a charity sale, or maybe we chose to bring a gadget to repair instead of throwing it in the garbage and buy straight away a new one. If we have done any of these or similar actions, we are already critical consumers. So, the point here is whether we want to extend this awareness also to what we eat and drink. If yes, then we may want to first understand how to gather information about a certain food product we buy, in order to un-

derstand if it is related to some ethically-sensitive issue, and, if yes, which ones.

Let us take a food product of any type – say: a bag of chips. There are dozens of questions we may want to answer to, that have an ethical relevance. Who produced this bag of chips? Who sells it? Where does it come from? What kind of resources were employed to produce it? How did it come here? From how far? What do the chips contain, but also what is the package made of? And so on and so forth, up to questions related to the questions themselves: was there enough information available about these chips? Was it easy to find out who produced them, where they come from, etc.? All of these are important questions that, once answered, will guide our ethical assessment of the product, ultimately encouraging us to buy it or not.

The first and foremost way to start answering, at least in part, is to take the product and read whatever information is on the package. There, we usually learn at least the following three items:

1. The **ingredients**: they can tell us a great deal of information, not only how healthy the product is, but also how much chemistry and processing is involved and how many ethically “suspicious” substances are included. For instance, an ingredient like **palm oil** has become in recent times object of controversy, due to its ecological impact, and more and more people prefer to buy products that do not contain it.
2. The **producers** – particularly the place where the product was manufactured and the main office of the producing company. Sometimes, the company belongs to a bigger corporation: usually we get information about the latter, as well, but not always.
3. Some **characteristics of the product** in relation to the production process, the environment, the distribution and else: these are often embodied in graphic labels, as we exemplify in fig.1 (see chapter on packaging?).



Fig. 1. Four typical product labels bearing ethically-sensitive information. From top left, clockwise: the “Euro-leaf” means that the product is certified “biological” according to EU laws; the “leaping bunny” means that the product is certified “**cruelty-free**” by the European Coalition to End Animal Experimentation; the “Ecolabel” means that the product meets the EU standards for low environmental impact in production and distribution; and finally the Fair Trade logo informs that the product was produced and distributed while providing fair contracts and conditions to the workers involved (usually in developing countries).

There can be more information available, but definitely these three items may tell us a lot about ethically-sensitive issues, if we learn how to read them correctly. And that is not always easy. For instance: do you know what ingredient names like Lauryl pyrrolidone, Octyl stearate, Myristic acid and Ceteth-24 have in common (let alone what they mean)? They are all based on palm oil! There is something like 150 ingredient names that in fact mean that the product contains palm oil. So, definitely, if you are aiming at avoiding things like palm oil in your purchases, this is not the easiest of tasks.

The second important step is to actually collect information about the product and the producer. There is plenty we can learn by reading news on the media, browsing the web or visiting the official website of a company; plus, most importantly, associations like NGOs that are active in different causes of social concern. Any kind of information can actually tell us something worthwhile to reflect upon. Information about the history of the company may reveal that this company has been involved in lawsuits for violating labour rights or environmental regulations; information about the ownership may reveal suspicious people and connections, and so forth. Of course, you particularly may want to learn if the above-mentioned NGOs have actively campaigned against a certain product or a certain company, for instance suggesting the boycotting of them.

Third step: you can always ask. If you want to know more about a product or the company that produces it, you may write to their customer service or more specific offices. The company may or may not answer, and if they do, the answer may be more or less specific, but you will find this is a useful action in all cases. If they answer, and in detail, good: you will have the information you asked for. If they answer generically or do not answer at all, you will know a thing or two about how keen is this company to have a good relationship with the customers, and how transparent they are when it comes to ethically-sensitive information.

3. ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO FOOD

Now that we know how to investigate on a product, let us see what we need to investigate. Once again, if we think about the variety of activities that are connected to the food industry, we understand that there are many ways in which the latter can impact on society: there is a lot of money that circulates, there are workers involved, there is land being occupied, animals being exploited, resources used and often wasted, and so on. We cannot reasonably list every single problem connected to this vast universe of activities, but we can do our best to list the main ones and to identify some key-words and concepts that illustrate them.

3.1. RESPECT FOR CONSUMERS

In fact, since we mentioned transparency in the previous paragraph, we can start here. From the quantity and the quality

of information you will get from the packaging, the official website and your direct communication with the company, you will see how much the latter is willing to share and how much consideration they have of you. Transparency is indeed an ethical value. Therefore, the first issue worth to be mentioned is respect for consumers: does the company provide clear information on its products and its policies? Does it behave fairly with consumers? Do we have clear information about the company's structure, employees, business practices, waste management, type of production, packaging, the product itself, etc.? Remember that these companies rely on your money to survive and prosper. Most of all, they have our trust in regard to what they give us to eat and drink. They should deserve this trust, and treat us respectfully by making no mystery of what they do and how.

3.2 POWER AND INFLUENCE

The second ethical issue has to do with the company's power and influence and how they are used. Especially when the company is big enough, there is a chance that it may not only produce food, but also have other activities that, directly or indirectly, can raise controversy, over the quality of the product, our perception of it, and other things as well. To begin with, the company may also own a newspaper, a TV channel or another medium, and therefore be in the position to spread misleading information. If a company produces, say, alcoholic drinks and owns a TV channel at the same time, there is a possibility that this channel's programs will create a more positive image of alcohol, overlooking its risks.

Also: does the company have some political influence? Does it finance a party? Does it feature any top-manager who is also employed by the government (perhaps by the ministry of health)? In cases like these, there is a risk that the company will try to affect governmental decisions to favour its own interests rather than the citizens'.

Power and influence can also be exercised through so-called "smokescreens", that is, activities that conceal the company's true goals. Classic examples are parallel business activities that promote a product while pretending to do something else: subliminal advertisement, such as product placement in movies and TV programs; laboratory research financed by the company itself, aimed for instance at proving that an unhealthy product is not so unhealthy after all – and so forth.

When we talk power, we may also talk hard, military power of course. If you are against war and oppression, you may not be pleased to discover that the same company you buy food from is also involved in producing weapons, or manufacturing provisions for military forces. The company may also have considerable business in countries with dictatorial regimes, or anyway countries that violate human rights. Also it may be registered in a tax haven, that is, one of those countries with immoral tax conditions, that are usually possible because of suspicious/

illegal investments (most drug traffickers, for instance, hide their money in such places).

3.3 WORKFORCE

Thirdly, we may wonder about the conditions of those who work for the company. Is the working environment acceptable? Are the salaries decent? Are layoffs justified? Are safety requirements met? In a way, the best criterion to assess a company's behaviour, here, is to check that it treats its employees the way we ourselves would like to be treated as workers. Very often, cases of mistreatment of employees are in the news, or are shared on social media. In the latter case, however, pay attention to double-check the reliability of the source: the internet is great, but there is plenty of fake news spread around.

In the next paragraph, we shall mention something more about labour conditions, with specific reference to developing countries.

3.4 DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The fourth significant ethical issue concerns the way the company behaves with developing countries. Sometimes raw materials of a given product come from these countries, sometimes the production is located there (think about how many "European" products are in fact "made in Thailand", "made in China", or elsewhere). In such cases, are the materials and the workers paid fairly, or does the company exploit the usually-challenging financial conditions of those countries to pay immorally-low prices and salaries? What about the land where the product or its raw materials are produced? Was the land acquired to the detriment of local inhabitants? Were forests wiped out? Is the company relocating polluting production processes in those countries, exploiting the fact that there may be more permissive environmental regulations? Where and how do they dispose of waste?

3.5 ENVIRONMENT

Since we introduced ecological questions, the fifth important ethical issue has to be the environment. How does the product and the company impact on nature? What is the **Ecological Footprint** of the product and of its packaging? Were polluting procedures employed in the production (e.g., use of pesticides)? How polluting were they, in relation to standards and regulations? What is the company's legal history in terms of their obedience to environmental laws: were they ever fined or sued for such reasons? What about transportation? Does the product come from very far? If yes, is there a local alternative? We know we do not produce things like papayas in Europe, so we may have a lighter conscience in knowing that our papaya had to come all the way from South America or Pacific Asia, but what about a bottle of mineral water coming from a foreign country, when also our own country, if not our own city, produces it? If the product came from abroad, how did it get here? By plane, by truck, by ship...? There is a huge difference in the amount of CO₂

produced by the different means of transportation. The worst one is by far the airplane: 1 ton of transported products produces 582 grams of CO₂ every km. Much better are trucks (92 g/km), trains (23 g/km) and ships (13 g/km).

These are not marginal issues. You may be surprised to learn that almost half of a product's energy consumption goes actually in the transportation (see Fig.2)

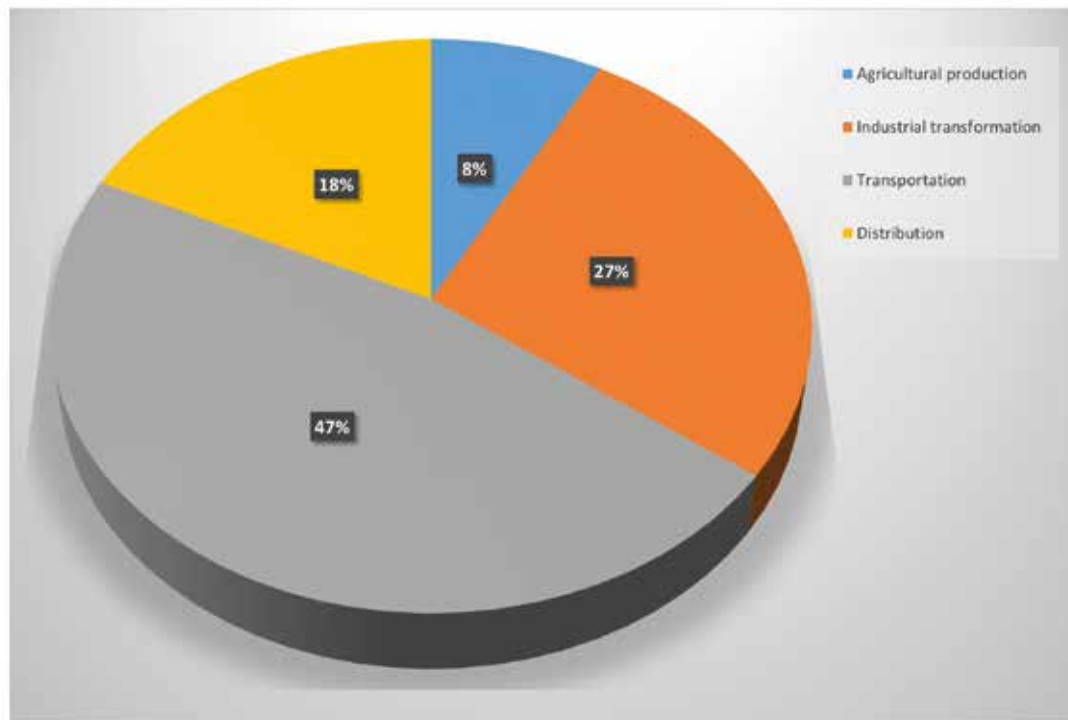


Fig. 2. Energy consumption in the four main stages of food production. As you can see, transportation ends up being, by far, the most energy-consuming process.

And, finally, packaging is one of the most important environmentally-sensitive topics: not what we eat, but what contains it. We always tend to underrate this aspect, and when we buy some posh biological products, hoping to help reducing the pollution, we tend not to notice that some of them are actually so fancily-packaged that they are probably more anti-ecological than the humbler and cheaper regular product. Just think about this: 40% of our domestic garbage comes from packaging. Again: almost half! So, in pondering the ecological pros and cons of a product, we should really take into account what and how much packaging goes with it. We should be able to discern an essentially-packaged product from an excessively-packaged one, and of course we know that some materials like paper and glass are more environmentally-sound than plastic or aluminium.

3.6 ANIMALS

The last important ethical issue to consider is the exploitation and the killing of non-human animals, in one way or an-

other. In the course of history, unfortunately, human beings have devised hundreds of ways to abuse other animals. How much of that is legitimate or necessary is up to our individual conscience and values, of course, but the following are some of the questions you may ask yourself or the company about the given product you are examining. First, does the product as such (or components within it) derive from animal killing or exploitation? Each of us has their own threshold here: a vegan of course will not tolerate just *any* employment of animals in a product, a meat-eater may be fine with meat in general, but perhaps uncomfortable with the type that comes from intensive farming, etc. Second, does the company engage in production processes that directly kill or abuse animals, such as animal testing or animal workforce? Thirdly, what about indirect abuse, such as deforestation practices that are not just damaging a given area but also the animal species inhabiting it?

4. CONCLUSIONS

There are of course many more questions that we may address, but hopefully we have mentioned enough of them to realize how dense a discussion we may initiate on the ethical impact of food in our society. Whether you find those issues relevant or not, or whether you will become a critical consumer or not, after reading this chapter, is entirely up to your own values and conscience. The key-word here is "awareness". It is important that we realize that eating and drinking is something we need, something we enjoy, but also something that is relevant to the world and to the problems within it.

FOCUS 1

The ethical reasons of veganism

Of the numerous eating habits and lifestyles, one that seems to be particularly connected with ethical issues is veganism. "Vegan" describes a person who has renounced any animal or animal-derived product. That means, in simple terms, no meat, no fish, no eggs, no dairy products, and to most vegans, no honey either. The word has recently become a label for any item or action (therefore, not just eating), whose production or implementation did not involve, at any stage, the use of animals. For this reason, we find expressions like "vegan cosmetics", "vegan shoes", "vegan lifestyle", "vegan activism", and the likes.

A marginal phenomenon until the late 20th century, veganism has become increasingly popular in the last 10-15 years, and by now the average amount of vegans, in most countries, ranges between 2% and 5%. Since we mentioned statistics, you may be interested to know that the majority of vegans in the world are female in gender (ca. 65% on average, with peaks like 74% in USA); they tend to be liberal-leftist

politically (over 50%, against a 10-15% of conservatives and a rest that declares to be neutral politically); they are about 5% more educated than meat-eaters, they are more likely to be found in urban than country areas, with prevalence in big cities; and they are on average more inclined to secular and/or atheist views on religion.



Fig. 3. A vegan meal with sweet potatoes, guacamole and fried mushrooms (Photo by Nitsan Simantov, CC BY-SA 4.0)

Still statistics tell us important information on why people become vegan. In a survey conducted in 2014, the respondents were asked to indicate one or more reasons why they had chosen this lifestyle. Predictably, the majority (69%) indicated “health” as their main motivation. Indeed, whether we may agree with this or not, veganism tends to be perceived as a healthier lifestyle, especially for adults. At the same time, the close second, settled to 68%, was the concern for animals: for a consistent amount of people, the question of animal killing is a decisive factor for their choices. Not only: 59% indicated a concern for environment, and 29% mentioned social justice and world hunger. That means that, out of the six main ethical issues we have discussed in our chapter, veganism seems to address at least three of them: animals, environment and developing countries. Let us see how.

- **Animals.** According to official sources such as the Food and Agriculture Organization, the **animal industry** is calculated to be responsible for the killing of ca. 70 billions of land animals per year and an estimation of 38 to 128

billion of farmed fish (wild fish is estimated by the trillions – in both cases the counting is less accurate than land animals). That means that, by gross approximation, we are in the vicinity of 5,000 animals killed every second. To the killing as such, vegans also add their contrariety to the conditions in which animals are kept, especially in **intensive farms**, where most of them are confined in small spaces, deprived of any possibility to express their biology, and exploited in various forms.



Fig. 4. Pigs in an intensive farm.

- **Environment.** The impact of the animal industry on the environment, in terms of pollution, deforestation and other processes, is also a major concern for vegans, as we have seen. There are actually many ecologically-sensitive issues pertaining to the effects of this industry, and we cannot list them all here. To make just four examples:
 - a. the **greenhouse gas** emission per kilogram of meat reaches peaks of 68.8 kg of CO₂, while no vegetable – with the sole exception of coffee (10.1 kg CO₂e/kg) – exceeds 3-4 kg CO₂e/kg;
 - b. the Ecological Footprint of an animal-based meal exceeds of the 500% that of an equally-nutritional and equally-balanced vegan meal. The livestock sector produces about 15% of global greenhouse gases, which is roughly equivalent to all the emissions of every car, train, ship and aircraft on the planet;
 - c. 88% of our **water footprint** is embedded in our food production, but there is a significant difference in how much water the meat industry requires, as compared to vegetable cultivation. While the water employed for vegetables' production ranges from 14 (for carrots) to 201 (for asparagi) gallon per pound, the meat industry demands a minimum of 518 gallon per pound (chicken) and a maximum of 1846 (beef);

- d. the percentage of deforestation of the Amazon rainforest due to meat production amounts to 65-70% of the total.

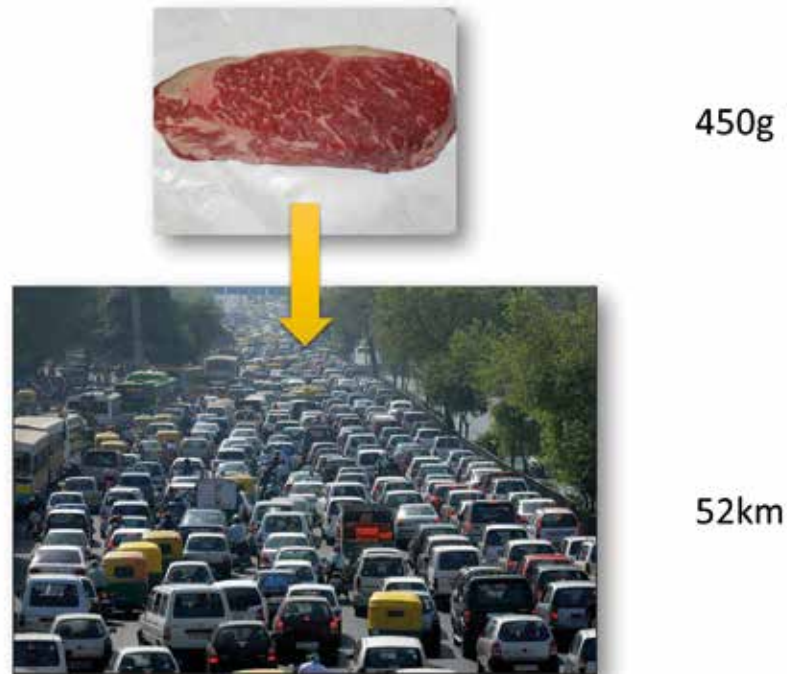


Fig. 5. A simple example of the ecological impact of the meat industry. The production of one steak (450 g) produces the same amount of pollution of a car driven for 52 km.

- **Developing countries.** The datum on deforestation is also significant in terms of how vegans perceive the animal industry as a threat for human beings as well, particularly developing countries. But even more than that, animal production occupies remarkably more land than a nutritionally-equivalent amount of vegetable products. On the same amount of land and in the same time span needed to produce 1 kg of meat, for instance, a range of 150 to 200 kg of vegetables could be harvested. One kg of animal products requires about 12 to 32 square meters to be produced. One kg of any fruit, vegetable or cereal will not exceed 2. In fact, of all the land used to produce plants, up to 80% of it is used *not* for human beings, but to feed the cattle that will be eventually slaughtered to produce meat, amounting to ca. 30% of the whole Earth's land mass. In such a condition, vegans maintain, the question is not just stealing land to local communities: it is also, and mainly, that a world going vegan would have 17 times more land, 14 times more water and 10 times more energy to feed starving people.

IS OUR NATURE TO BE VEGAN OR CARNIVORE?

A recurrent argument that vegans and meat eaters exchange in their not-always-friendly debates is whether or not human beings should be considered “naturally” inclined to eat meat. Vegans say that originally human beings were not eating meat, and that is true. Meat-eaters say that adapting to meat and hunting were decisive factors in developing the *Homo sapiens* as it is now – and that is also true!

What to do, then? Perhaps, this discussion is actually not very relevant, and should not intervene in our decision to quit or continue eating meat. We are neither naturally vegan nor naturally carnivore. What we are is the following:

1) We are – like any other animal species – an **EVOLVING** species. During our evolution we have been and eaten many things, and we changed and adapted in consequence of many factors. Our real nature, quite simply, is “evolution”, and that has changed and will keep on changing our habits.

2) Our evolution has proved that we are **POLYPHAGOUS**. It means we can eat many types of food without really dying from them. Some foods are better than others, of course, but we can eat a lot of different stuff. We cannot eat everything (that is why **omnivore** is a misleading word, and polyphagous is probably a better one), but we are very flexible. For the same reason, we are not obliged to eat any food in particular: meat is neither poisonous for us, nor is it indispensable. Animals who absolutely *cannot* eat meat are “**herbivores**”. Animals that *must* eat meat are called “**obligate carnivores**”. We are neither: we are polyphagous.