

Nutrition and ethics: A catalyst for social transformation and personal identity

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Abstract. This study delves into the multifaceted relationship between humans and food considering its profound ethical, cultural, and bioethical implications. It challenges the reductionist view of food as just a material object for satisfying basic needs, advocating for a recognition of its symbolic and value-laden significance that transcends mere survival. Food is depicted as a pivotal element in human history, culture, and social organization, acting as a bridge that fosters dialogue, understanding, and connection across generations and cultures. The discussion extends to the ethical dimensions of dietary practices, seeing them as expressions of identity, tradition, and cultural heritage that contribute to shaping societal norms, values, and relationships.

Key words: nutrition, ethics, social transformation, personal identity, food practices, cultural identity, subjectivation process

In the context of ethical and bioethical reflections related to food and dietary practices, it is essential to consider the role they play not only in individual nutrition but also in the broader social and environmental context. The complexity of ethical issues arising from the relationship between humanity and food manifests in various dimensions. When referring to food, it is often categorized as a material object meant to satisfy a primary need of humans and all living beings. Eating is extremely necessary to ensure the survival of every living being. Considering the way humans consume food, it is legitimate to question: is it correct to identify and reduce food to its merely objectual dimension? The answer can only be negative; food cannot be narrowly confined to its utilitarian function, aimed at merely satisfying a primary need of humans (1). Food takes on a symbolic and valuational significance that makes it something more (2).

It may seem strange that food could have represented such an important ingredient in human affairs (3), but it would be even more bizarre if it were not so because everything that humans have done throughout history has been literally fueled by food. Indeed, eating is a total anthropological act. Food and

dietary practices have always regulated the relationship of humans with the world around them and their inner dimension. The cultural and symbolic role of food opens up further spaces for ethical reflection. Dietary practices, understood as expressions of identity, tradition, and cultural heritage, invite us to consider food beyond its material dimension (4), as a vehicle for values, relationships, and collective memory. In this sense, food becomes a bridge between generations and cultures, a means to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, and respect for diversity.

Intrapsychic and personal dynamics intertwine in the relationship that humans have established with the object of their nourishment. Food can be defined as a descriptor of human lifestyle and a means of expression of sociality (5,6) through which the encounter and exchange between peoples and generations are generated. Food becomes the mirror of the history and traditions of a territory because it can express identity, symbols, and values that go beyond nutritional aspects. Therefore, it is characterized by multidimensional factors that influence the organization and transformation of society in terms of identity, consumption, and geopolitics (7).

Food and nutrition, therefore, constitute complex themes of investigation, as they pertain in an integrated manner to different dimensions of the lives of individuals and societies (8). Only by adopting a holistic perspective is it possible to investigate the various dimensions related to nutrition, which can also be read in their ethical and symbolic aspect (9,10). Thus, it becomes possible to talk about food and nourishment not only referring to a material dimension of experience, which translates into the mere consumption of food for survival, but eating, choosing, and preparing food, consuming a particular food are acts that conceal latent dimensions, which question the affective, emotional, cognitive matrices of subjects, contributing to guide their choices and lifestyles.

Nourishment calls into question symbolic processes; therefore, it is important to analyze how these processes manifest on different levels. On a macro level, the analysis of food consumption can be substantiated in the analysis of the culture and society in which consumption occurs (11). The practice of sharing food speaks to us, questioning us about how a social group communicates and manages its internal exchanges and with the outside world (12). The dietary practices adopted by a community, also understood as a body of symbols shared by a social group through their interactions and determining the boundaries within which its members shape their identity (13), reveal essential elements of its history, from how it was constituted to the relationships that regulate intergenerational exchanges among its members. Observing how a people nourish themselves allows revealing the values they have made their own and what were the historical and geopolitical processes that led them to certain choices in the field of food. Dietary practices can thus be defined as true food cultures (14), in which food constitutes a fundamental cultural index because it asserts itself as a tool for identity construction. Food becomes the first tool for coming into contact with different cultures, because eating the food of others is easier than decoding their language.

Today, more than ever, in a globalized world where different cultures converge and coexist (15), food can become a tool to start savoring the culture of other peoples and to let others taste one's own, in a perspective of reciprocity (16). Food is what helps a

people preserve their identity, remain rooted in their traditions more than anything else, but it is also what most fosters communication; it can hold together the feeling of belonging but also create the availability to open up to the other (17); it is nostalgia but also the desire for new contacts; it is confirmation of diversity but also the desire for sharing.

The consumption of food and the dietary cultures of a community also suggest the relationship it entertains with constructs of time and space (18). Taking Western culture as an example, there is a clear link between food and temporality, reflecting the historical and social phenomena (19) it is subject to: with the emergence of postmodern culture, which witnessed the disintegration of the community dimension (20) and the consequent affirmation of societies characterized by deeply egocentric, discontinuous, and anonymous relationships, the fast logic, marked by the praise of speed, has also imposed itself in the consumption of food: a classic example is the widespread diffusion of fast food, emblem of mass culture, the globalization of the Western world, and its prevailing frenzy (21,22).

In recent decades, however, the COVID-19 pandemic has also contributed to experiencing a different kind of time, (23), leading people to rediscover the taste for a higher quality of life, marked by a broader temporality characterized by slowness and anticipation. This shift is reflected in the food culture, where there's been an increased appreciation for taste. The dominance of fast food, a symbol of contemporary society's frenzy, is gradually being countered by the rediscovery of slow food culture (24). Slow food advocates for its own history and cultural identity; it demands careful preparation time, blending tradition and innovation, where the creativity of the cook is the creativity of an individual, not a machine's output. Those who consume this food savor it; they take their time (25). This is the slow time of tasting that becomes a metaphor for an existence that does not submit to market rules: an existence that withdraws from devouring haste.

Not surprisingly, during the lockdown period, instituted due to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was an acceleration of this trend (26). The confinement period has had, and still has, significant social repercussions not only from a socio-economic standpoint but also

under the psychological-behavioral aspect, which is also manifested in consumption and the remodulation of lifestyles. The lockdown led to the rediscovery of conviviality.

Consumers responded to the crisis by rediscovering their passion for cooking. The forced interruption of social interactions and daily routines led us to experience life in a different space and time, confronting the uncertainty and stagnation of a period in suspension (27). We found ourselves re-inhabiting our domestic spaces in ways we had never before considered. This led to the establishment of a new ritual to define our renewed daily lives, where the role of food became fundamental.

The new routine, characterized by the dilation of time, allowed to rediscover culinary traditions lost during the fast era, to reconnect to a deeper dimension of self-care and care for the other through the production and transformation of food. The noise generated by the emergency, in which we were all immersed, led many to rethink their subjectivity and reflect on their emotional and affective dimension (29); food played a significant role in this process of individual redefinition. The deconstruction of the fast society, characterized by individualism, standardization, and frenzy (28), was also conducted through the rediscovery of the kitchen space, through which it was possible to reset the taste for a slow culture, where the preparation and consumption of food were central. The pleasure of rediscovering conviviality and the lost family culture allowed to ensure a routine that broke the monotony of days all the same; consuming the same food, respecting procedures and recipes that are part of a family tradition, made it possible for individuals to create a sort of invisible connection with distant affections, vivifying their presence, through food. This reflection demonstrates how dietary practices are closely interconnected with the social and historical context in which they are immersed.

Food, therefore, over the centuries has done much more than nourish: it has been a catalyst for social transformation and organization and economic expansion. Analyzing the theme of food and dietary practices at a micro-level, pertaining to the intimate and individual sphere of the subject, nutrition brings out archaic emotional processes, which have a significant impact on the biographical sphere of subjects, also in

relation to the internalization of the models to which they have been exposed during their history. The food that an individual consumes and the way it is consumed are two significant aspects because they narrate, speak, and provide elements related to the history and identity of an individual (29). Using food as an identity analyzer makes it possible to reconstruct the process of subjectivation of an individual (30, 31). Indeed, it becomes a catalyst for thoughts, emotions, and relationships, acting to convey different meanings through the various uses with which humans employ it in their reciprocal interactions and in the more individual dimension.

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