

# EDO, ERGO SUM: ANTHROPOLOGICAL, ETHICAL AND EDUCATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT EATING

*EDO, ERGO SUM: CONSIDERACIONES ANTROPOLÓGICAS, ÉTICAS  
Y EDUCACIONALES SOBRE COMER*

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## ABSTRACT

We argue that, given that the act of eating is rational and relational, it should also be an educational issue dealing with society and environment, politics and health, tastes and trends, as well as genetic and epigenetic factors. This hypothesis arises from a particular theory of the human act and an anthropological approach based on the philosophical speculations of MacIntyre and Aristotle. We argue that eating choices are “hybrids of freedom,” rationality, and unconscious and environmental elements. Finally, we suggest that people have to change their habits in order to transform the human way of acting, since every human act can change the human essence and vice versa.

**KEYWORDS:** Eating and food; education; ethics; human habits; communication; relationality (Source: DeCS).

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#### RESUMEN

Sostenemos que, siendo el acto de comer racional y relacional, también debe ser un tema educativo que tiene que ver con la sociedad y el ambiente, la política y la salud, los gustos y las tendencias, así como los factores genéticos y epigenéticos. Esta hipótesis tiene que ver con una cierta teoría del acto humano y una antropología basada en las especulaciones filosóficas de MacIntyre y Aristóteles. En este sentido, argumentamos que las opciones alimenticias son un “híbrido de libertad”, racionalidad, y elementos inconscientes y ambientales, y se relacionan con las dimensiones espirituales y biológicas de los seres humanos. Finalmente, sugerimos que debemos cambiar los hábitos humanos para transformar la forma humana de actuar, ya que cada acto humano puede cambiar la esencia humana y viceversa.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** comer y comida; educación; ética; hábitos humanos; comunicación; relacionalidad (Fuente: DeCS).

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#### RESUMO

Defendemos que, como o ato de comer é racional e relacional, também deve ser um tema educativo relacionado com a sociedade e o ambiente, com a política e a saúde, com os gostos e as tendências, e também com os fatores genéticos e epigenéticos. Essa hipótese tem relação com uma certa teoria do ato humano e uma antropologia baseada nas especulações filosóficas de MacIntyre e Aristóteles. Nesse sentido, argumentamos que as opções alimentares são um “híbrido” de liberdade, racionalidade e elementos inconscientes e ambientais, e estão relacionadas às dimensões espirituais e biológicas dos seres humanos. Finalmente, sugerimos que devemos mudar os hábitos humanos para transformar a forma humana de agir, já que cada ato humano pode alterar a essência humana e vice-versa.

**PALAVRAS CHAVE:** comer e comida; comunicação; educação; ética; hábitos humanos; relacionalidade (Fonte: DeCS, Bireme).

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## INTRODUCTION. MAN IS (NOT ONLY) WHAT HE EATS

We live because we eat, *edo ergo sum*. If we did not eat, we would not exist. The German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach was right when he said that “man is what he eats” (*Der Mensch ist was er isst*), turning an object of gastroenterology directly into an object of anthropology and, admittedly, in the reverse, turning an object of anthropology into an object of gastroenterology. There is, indeed, a strict connection between being and eating: as food goes, so goes existence; as goes existence, so goes food. This is the very essence of Feuerbach’s materialistic intuition.

But Feuerbach was wrong when he said that man is *only* what he eats. The aim of this paper is to prove that human beings are not only what they eat. In this regard, we will focus on the “human” dimension of eating by suggesting three principal arguments to support this thesis: eating is a rational act (Chapter 3); eating is a relational act (Chapter 4); eating is an educational and cultural issue (Chapter 5). In order to do so, we will show the “complexity” of this act, which deals with society and environment, politics, and health (Chapter 2). Finally, by way of a conclusion, we will suggest that people have to change their habits in order to modify the human way of acting, and of eating.

## FOOD AS A COMPLEX “CULTURAL” MATTER. EATING AS A HUMAN ACT

What we eat correlates strictly with population density, food availability and type, cultural traditions, the specific geographical area, and economic and political strategies (1, 2). What we choose to eat also depends

on individual choices that differ from what is supplied or from predominant eating habits. In this respect, we can say that food is a complex matter; i.e., it involves many different factors that must be taken into account if we want to explain it.

Indeed, food consumption in all societies responds not only to biological needs, but also to social and cultural cues, economic pressures and psychological needs. In the history of human evolution, from merely satisfying natural nutritional needs, eating has gradually become an essential aspect of social identity and organization, as it denotes exact symbolism (3).

By accepting or refusing food, we meet a cultural need. Different eating habits in different societies are determined by aspects relating to individuals, the features of the group and the environment in which people live. Under these conditions food becomes a way to communicate (4). In this regard, it is not so different from the use of language (5). Starting from this perspective, it is possible to recognize how food is a significant part of “culture.” In his book *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871, the English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (6: 1) said that civilization is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

Even the word “food” itself shows this complexity: in everyday life, there are a lot of common expressions in which we use the word “food” in its various meanings of concrete or symbolic nourishment. For example, we can mean “fuel” for bodily functions and emotional elements for psychic functions.

But food is also a matter of health. Just think of the current situation of obesity: for every malnourished person in the world, there are two who are obese or overweight (7). For example, two of every five adults (42%) in Italy are overweight ( $\geq 25$ BMI). Specifically, 31% are overweight ( $25 \leq \text{BMI} < 30$ ) and 11% are obese ( $\text{BMI} \geq 30$ ). Some 20.9% of Italian children are overweight and 9.8% of those youngsters are obese, including 2.2% of severely obese children (7,8,9). Problems with overweight and obesity prejudice health and wellness, and imply significant healthcare costs. All this is shocking and unacceptable (10), as an obese child is likely to become an obese adult, with the inevitable medical and emotional complications.

This health dimension of food brings us back to the core of the problem: since eating is a complex (or multi-dimensional) matter, we have to analyze it from a complex perspective, which means considering the different aspects of the problem, rather than focusing on just biological ones. In this paper, we will focus mainly on the cultural dimensions of eating, starting from the idea that there is a strong link between food, environment (both natural and cultural), and habits (and, thus, education). If food has something to do with life span and its quality, we have to consider this seriously, since eating can be a matter of education.

How could we better consider this matter, given its complexity? Perhaps we can start by considering that we not only need to feed ourselves, but also to eat healthy food more consciously; i.e., to develop behaviours that reflect this multi-dimensional nature.

Thus, what is good (virtuous) behaviour in the field of nutrition? We can state that virtuous behaviour, non-instinctive behaviour, which should be shown and

communicated, is always rational. As Spaemann (11: 79) highlights, “only where the will has become independent of immediate natural inclinations [...] can you live in agreement with nature [...]. And, it is this non-immediate, non-instinctive naturalness we call rational.” For something to be virtuous, it has to be rational; that is, it has to be in agreement with human nature.

Every human activity, including the act of eating, can be in agreement with nature or not; i.e., it can follow human nature. This is why Aristotle (12: 13) wrote, “And, if the work of a human being is an activity of soul in accord with reason, or not without reason, and we assert that the work of a given person is the same in kind as that of a serious person, just as it would be in the case of a cithara player and a serious cithara player, and this would be so in all cases simply when the superiority in accord with the virtue is added to the work; for it belongs to a cithara player to play the cithara, but to a serious one to do so well. But if this is so –and we posit the work of a human being as a certain life, and this is an activity of soul and actions accompanied by reason, the work of a serious man being to do these things well and nobly, and each thing is brought to completion well in accord with the virtue proper to it– if this is so, then the human good becomes an activity of soul in accord with virtue, and if there are several virtues, then in accord with the best and most complete one.”

Therefore, from the Aristotelian perspective, human beings differ from other non-human animals because their souls are rational and, thus, their actions can be rational and voluntary. According to Aristotle, every action should reflect the nature of the being that performs it. This is why an act performed by a human being should reflect his/her nature as a rational, speaking and political

animal. In Spaemann's words (11: 11), "Aristotle wrote that by nature human beings are speaking and political creatures, [...] rational animal[s]."

Based on the characterization of eating as a complex and cultural act, we have defined it as a human act. In this regard, we state that human perfection in the act of eating can be achieved if these three human characteristics (rationality, political attitude, and the capacity to speak) emerge. In view of what we have shown up to this point, we will focus on these three dimensions in order to shed some light on virtuous behaviours in the field of nutrition, starting with the rational one.

#### ***DE GUSTIBUS (NON) EST DISPUTANDUM.*** **EDUCATING FOR RATIONAL AND AWARE CHOICES**

The first enemy of rationality as a universal dimension is emotivism. Thus, the best way to deny the rationality of our choices and behaviours, even food-related choices and behaviours, is with emotivist attitudes. And, the best way to express this attitude is the aphorism in Roman tradition that is attributed to Caesar: "*de gustibus non disputandum est*". It is said that when he was governor in Cisalpine (59-55 BC) Julius Caesar was invited with other governors to lunch with Valerio Leonte. Among the different dishes comprising the meal was asparagus cooked in butter. The Romans, who were accustomed to using butter as an ointment, were disgusted that it should be offered as food, and this created a sudden tension. At this point Caesar mediated, thanked his host, and quelled the discontent with his famous utterance. The previous sentence—"there is no arguing about taste"—is used too often nowadays to justify every choice and to introduce a form of relativism, an aesthetic beyond reason. When talking about taste, we even include agreement

(or disagreement), "which there is no point in trying to settle, because it concerns no real matter of fact but is merely an expression of different, permissibly idiosyncratic tastes. Nobody's wrong" (13: 36). So, the dialogue seems to immediately come to an end. This perspective is precisely what Alasdair MacIntyre (14: 22), in his very famous book *After Virtues*, called emotivism: "What emotivism asserts is in central part that there are [sic] and can be *no* valid rational justification for any claims that objective and impersonal moral standards exist and, hence, that there are *no* such standards."

But this philosophical perspective leads to a very famous and significant consequence: "If and insofar as emotivism is true, moral language is seriously misleading and, if and insofar as emotivism is justifiably believed, presumably the use of traditional and inherited moral language ought to be abandoned" (14: 22). From this perspective, a rational discourse about taste; that is, about the way we perceive the world, cannot be undertaken at all without falling into a contradiction; i.e., without implying "an appeal to an objective and impersonal standard" (14: 22). In this regard, if we are aiming at more complete knowledge of the world—which is necessarily based on a dialogical attempt, since we continuously deal with others—we must refuse and abandon emotivism. We can talk and argue about our tastes, because we do it over and over again. This is particularly evident when talking about food: we want to know what we are eating (just think, for example, about the first time you ate foreign foods or about the widespread condemnation of food mislabeling; i.e., the practice of substituting premium commodity products, either entirely or in part). A rational discourse about food and tastes can (or should) be undertaken. What, then, is the reason that rational

argument about food is allowed? In our opinion, there are at least two reasons:

1. Senses are not irrational in human beings (as in non-human animals); rather, they are rational. “Although the power of sense is found in both human beings and brute animals [...], the sensitive powers in human beings are found in a *rational soul*, unlike in other animals [...]. For this reason, the senses are considered *rational* in a human being. [...] The sensitive aspect of the rational animal is itself rational for the reason that the sensitive aspect of the human soul works with and is subservient to the rational aspect. [...] The power of sense in human beings is *irrational* only when considered simply in itself, apart from any relation to the intellect” (15: 58-59). We should only say that, in abstract terms, human senses are irrational (as in non-human animals), while, factually, they are embodied in a reasonable being, as Saint Augustine highlights in *De Ordine II*, 11.33: “*Tenemus, quantum investigare potuimus, quaedam vestigia rationis in sensibus [...]. Alii vero sensus non in voluptate sua, sed propter aliquid aliud solent hoc nomen exigere: id autem est rationalis animantis factum propter aliquem finem.*”
2. Every taste is grounded in a judgement, which is the very essence of taste itself. The expression of taste, indeed, is a sentence –“I like this, I don’t like that”– which necessarily presupposes the presence of a well-codified language; i.e., of reason. Moreover, it presupposes a deeper comprehension of the “material aspect” of taste; i.e., the perceptive content: without this perception (which is almost a rational perception), judgement does not exist. In Descar-

tes’ words: “Everyone knows that honey is sweeter than olives, yet many would prefer to eat olives to honey” (16: 56).

### **A Focus on Education, Relationality and Unity of Life**

Given the foregoing considerations, a debate concerning taste is not only allowed, but necessary. If we consider that education is based on rationality (17), we can state that awareness of our eating habits is a prerequisite for a healthy diet. Nevertheless, this does not mean every eating choice is merely a consequence of rational choice in a well-defined moment, since choice itself can be considered as the arrival point of a particular and singular history of different choices, experiences and free acts, governed by free will. This only means, obviously, that “personal identity is just that identity presupposed by the unity of the character, which the unity of the narrative requires. Without such unity, there would not be subjects whose stories could be told” (14: 252).

In this regard, we can accept that some choices are influenced by our unconscious history at genetic and epigenetic levels, since the unity of the subject is assumed. For example, there are tastes and repugnance related to the evolutionary phases of human beings. Breast milk has extraordinary qualities, not only for its nutrients, but also because of its impact on the immediate and long-term health of the baby. Therefore, the mother’s diet influences the biological and metabolic destiny of the new-born and the adult by acting as an environmental co-factor of a genetic predisposition to obesity and other chronic diseases of multifactorial aetiology (18,19,20). The relationship with what we eat is, then, established

before birth. Foetal life is important in creating food preferences and, soon after birth, the new-born learns, through breast milk, the flavour of foods and spices from what his/her mother eats. The “flavours” of food eaten by the mother during pregnancy pass the placental filter, reach the amniotic fluid, and are “enjoyed” by the foetus. The aim of taste education is to lead the child, the teenager, and even the adult towards making aware food choices. During the growth of an individual, biological preferences intersect with psychological development, and are closely connected to the shaping of a person’s identity (21: 670; 22: 3-8). It is necessary to learn from an early age that eating is a multi-sensory experience:

- Taste: sweet, sour, salty, bitter;
- Smell (integrated with taste): smoked, spicy, fruity, and sweet;
- Sight (expectation): colour, size, shape, appearance;
- Touch: sensation on the lips and in the mouth, compact, moist, smooth;
- Hearing: the sound of the food as we chew- crisp, crunchy.

Food preferences are the result of an evolutionary process that has shaped the sense of taste over the millennia, so as to optimize the contribution of energy and reduce the ingestion of toxic substances. The ability to instinctively recognize edible food dates back to prehistoric times. It has been transmitted to us not only by oral and written tradition, but also by genetic memory (23).

In conclusion, eating choices are like all human choices, a “hybrid of freedom”, rationality, unconscious and environmental elements. As humans, being political

animals, we have to consider the weight of the relationships in eating choices, which is precisely the second aspects in our analysis.

### **FOOD AND RELATIONS: EATING AS A SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS SYMBOL**

A mother breastfeeds her baby not only with food, but also with love. This kind of nourishing strengthens the relationship between mother and child and ensures the best physical and mental development of the infant. The child also needs to feel recognized as a person and not just as a body to be filled. In fact, even in the first months of life, the request or refusal to eat can be a form of communication whereby one expresses emotions, discomfort, and doubts (24,25).

In this regard, we can say that eating deals with relations, even at the very beginning of human life; i.e., it cannot be considered an individual attitude. Since the act of eating is an intrinsically relational act, it has a convivial dimension: the idea of a meal as an occasion for celebration and an opportunity for interaction, where the convivial meal recalls suggestions of friendship, affection, and affinity to a group, has been known since ancient times (26,27). Even now, young people choose lunch/dinner time as an occasion for meeting, where the impulse to congregate is simplified by the proposed food models. Eating habits have clearly and dramatically changed, privileging “fast food habits” (28). This kind of eating favours socialization, but not health. The food usually offered at fast food venues, such as burgers, fries or fried chicken, is high fat and/or refined sugar content, with low fibre content. Often consumed in sizable portions, this type of food increases the risk of obesity, which in turn increases the risk of cancer (29). Frequent con-

sumption of fast food leads to high cholesterol levels, a major factor for heart attacks, strokes and cardiovascular diseases that promote insulin resistance, so the risk of diabetes increases as well (30). In an effort to respond to this lack of nutritional balance, fast food menus now include meals with fewer calories, such as green salads and fruit salads (31, 32).

Although the primary intent of this article is not to evaluate the ethical issue of eating disorders –it might be enough to emphasize the political dimension of the act of eating– it is worth pointing out, for a moment, the health effects of nutritional changes: how can we fight a battle against “fast food habits” that already seems lost? It is important for young people to meet and spend time together, which means going to parties, drinking a lot of soft drinks, such as colas, and eating French fries. We should not demonize this. Rather, we should teach nutritional awareness that includes the appropriate frequency of eating and the size of portions, regardless of the fashions and tastes of the moment, which are not always appropriate to the nutritional needs of individuals. By characterizing the act of eating as an intrinsically relational act, we are not saying it is a “good act,” but that it always deals with social and political attitudes. At a political level, indeed, the act of eating deals with the establishment of our civil society, since “when we eat –or more specifically, when we pay for what we eat, whether at a farmer’s market, a supermarket, or a restaurant– we are taking part in a vast global industry. [...] Food production affects every person on this planet and untold billions of animals as well. It is important, for the sake of the environment, animals, and future generations, that we see our food choices as involving serious ethical issues and learn about the implications of what we eat” (33: 18-19).

This relationality of the act of eating can even be noted in the religious dimension of food. Since its origin, the Catholic Church celebrates the sacramental act of Eucharist as one of the cautions requested by Jesus, its God, saviour and founder. According to Catholic doctrine, the Eucharist is the sacrificial act during which the priest offers bread and wine to God and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, they truly become Christ’s Body and Blood. Believers feed the spirit by the assumption of the “body” of Christ (flesh and blood) that is symbolically held in the Holy Bread (34). In this context, nutrition is spiritual and does not belong to the physical world, but to a higher culture that, in order to communicate with God, uses the familiar act of eating (35). Moreover, the idea of good and evil in the Holy Bible is closely linked to food, and in particular to eating. In *Genesis 2, 16-17*, at the very beginning of human history, “Lord God commanded man: ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die’”. Thus, in the first verses of the Bible, the possibility of salvation for man is closely related to an action that is normally considered “morally indifferent;” i.e., the act of eating. Eating is knowing, as eating means interiorizing a reality that was different from one’s own.

Finally, the act of eating can be defined as an intrinsically relational act, since it always deals with the other, both at horizontal (other living beings) and vertical levels (the absolute Other). Ultimately, if what we have said is true, the act of eating is essentially political and religious.

In this regard, “the issue of food [...] intercepts in an exemplary manner the three directions of the human relationship: 1. the relationships that humans build with the environments in which they live (and, thus, the impact

of agriculture on the ecosystem, the consequences of their technological choices, the interventions that they undertake, be they small or large in scale); 2. the relationships individual human beings interweave with other human beings (i.e., the possibility of sharing needs, of devising shared solutions and appropriate policies, etc.); and 3. the relationship that every human person builds in dialogue with himself or herself (the virtues one can develop, the values one discovers to be essential, the priority assigned to different goods, etc.)” (36: 1195).

### **FOOD, COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION**

Eating is not only knowing, since nourishing habits constitute real communication codes. This is a consequence of the idea of eating as a relational act. The social dimension (and religious, once it is acknowledged that every religious attitude has social impact) tells us something about the communicational aspect of eating habits, following Jürgen Habermas’s (37: 105) suggestion that we live in a “communication community”, since we are speaking animals. In this regard, food choices reveal a certain way of living and interpreting our relationship to the environment: every kind of food has a strong symbolic/social dimension. And, since every kind of food is a symbol –every food choice is highly relevant socially– the education to choose plays a key role.

Good educational action aims at increasing not only knowledge, but also all the skills to improve one’s quality of life. In other words, it is therapeutic education (38). As an example, a group of mothers of obese children between two and five years of age have been educated to buy less food and high-calorie drinks. The result is a decrease from 12.1% to 8.4% in obesity among children (39). Therapeutic nutritional education aims to make the person take a leading role on his/her own

care, helping him/her to make responsible choices. An aware consumer can influence the type of production, the quality and type of commercial food supply, which will also change people’s habits.

We communicate by our way of eating, and, at the same time, we need better communication to develop better eating habits. From the facts that eating is a relational act and education is grounded in relations, we can conclude that it is possible to develop a “pedagogy of food” (40). We can be more aware of our food choices by sharing our decisions and evaluations. We can develop moral sensibility, since we are capable of interpreting the symbolic dimensions of food.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Food is the basis of our wellbeing, and a healthy diet, convivial meals at the right time and in the right place, enhance the effects on the body and the mind.

It is evident that the first step toward a change in our lifestyle is reviewing children’s eating habits (41, 42). Health, nutrition, and respect for food as history and culture should be fostered to ensure food and nutritional security for this and future generations, as well as for the health of our planet. But this kind of education can only be undertaken if we are truly conscious of the essence of the act of eating. We can only teach rational, social and performative action if we believe the action of eating itself is rational, social and symbolic. Thus, the act of eating can be truly virtuous once we acknowledge that it has a strong relational and rational aspect.

Accordingly, humans are not only what they eat, but also the way they eat can radically change their way of living and interpreting themselves.

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