

Research Article

Food Choice as an Ethical Practice: Top-Down and Bottom-Up Approaches to a Possible Synthesis

Teresa Caporale ^{1*}

¹ Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II; teresa.caporale@unina.it

* Correspondence: teresa.caporale@unina.it

Abstract: Food, reflecting individual and collective ethical choices, is the focus of this essay, which explores the profound interrelationship between food practices and the moral principles that govern them. Beginning with Feuerbach's maxim 'Man is what he eats,' the essay explores the complex relationship between diet, ethics, and philosophy, showing how every food decision is inextricably linked to ethical, social, and environmental considerations. It explores the transformation of the concept of 'food' from a mere dietary choice to an expression of a conscious lifestyle. It shows how everyone's food choices reflect and influence our interaction with the world. Through historical and contemporary analysis, the multiple dimensions of diet are explored: from responsibility towards undernourished people to environmental sustainability, from the debate on omnivorism to the promotion of ethical diets such as vegetarianism and veganism. The exposition is then articulated through two dominant ethical currents: the top-down approach, based on universal principles, and the bottom-up approach, which emphasizes the importance of virtues and values in the specific context of food. The essay not only brings these perspectives into dialogue but also invites critical reflection on the role of food in defining human identity and morality, underlining the urgency of a global ethical commitment that reconciles personal needs with collective and environmental ones.

Keywords: Food Ethics, Top-down approach, Bottom-up approach, Feuerbach

Citation: Caporale, Teresa, 2024.
Food Choice as an Ethical Practice:
Top-Down and Bottom-Up
Approaches to a Possible Synthesis .
*Journal of Ethics and Emerging
Technologies* 34: 1.
<https://doi.org/10.55613/jeet.v34i1.137>

Received: 15/02/2024

Accepted: 17/04/2024

Published: 29/04/2024

Publisher's Note: IEET stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In today's society, food is an area of considerable ethical concern, challenging individuals and communities to reflect on their values, responsibilities, and the impact of their actions.

This paper explores food as more than a biological need or a source of pleasure and examines it as an ethically charged domain. Every decision about food is intertwined with considerations of justice, sustainability, and respect for all forms of life. Drawing on philosophical insights, the paper navigates the course set by philosophers such as Feuerbach, who saw the act of eating as reflecting and influencing human nature, into broader discussions of our interactions with the natural and social realms.

The exploration begins with the realization that personal food choices are deeply intertwined with global phenomena, affecting the economy, the environment, and the fabric of society. The ethical dimension of food is thus revealed through a dialogue between *top-down* and *bottom-up* approaches that, although different in methodology, converge in highlighting the importance of harmonizing food practices with principles of justice and equity. At the same time, the top-down approach examines food under universal ethical principles - proposing normative standards to guide individual and collective choices - the bottom-up approach emphasizes the importance of experience, context, and collective deliberation in shaping ethically sustainable food practices.

Through an analysis that interweaves ethical theory with concrete cases, the paper aims to offer a holistic understanding of food as an ethical practice, questioning readers

about their daily choices and their impact beyond the personal sphere. The need for a balance between meeting individual needs and global responsibilities is explored, focusing on resource distribution, nonhuman animal welfare, and environmental preservation. The goal is to stimulate critical reflection, leading to a thoughtful and dynamic food ethic that can adapt to the challenges of a rapidly changing world and contribute to more harmonious and sustainable coexistence.

2. The Omnivore's Dilemma

Feuerbach argued in the 19th century that hardship and hunger deprive the body of nourishment and deprive the mind and soul of any ethical and moral foundation. He thus established a very close link between the act of eating and the entire field of human subjectivity, right down to its projection into the social dimension. Claiming the necessity and dignity of the human need for food is one of the *leitmotifs* that runs through his entire philosophical reflection¹, from which it emerges that man in eating is not content with consuming food but together thinks about it and derives from it that activism and vital energy capable of improving his way of relating to the world and others².

The act of eating and food choices immediately relate us to the environment around us and living beings different from us. Topics such as eco-gastronomy, environmental sustainability, organic food, animal issues, vegetarianism, veganism, and synthetic meats are now on the agenda. The choice regarding what kind of food to follow is, in this sense, an ethical choice. It is no accident that the term "diet" comes from the Greek word *diata*, which means way of life. Only over time did the word take on the meaning we attach to it today, namely "dietary regimen," aimed at specific therapeutic purposes. Still, even in this case, the concept refers to the fact of proposing to the patient a dietary lifestyle suited to his or her needs. Therefore, "diet" is not only a medical act but also a way of life, and where the way of life is in question, as well as the concept of therapy, referral to ethics is inevitable. The latter is built around concepts such as responsibility, justice, and value. In each of them, the question of food is present: the act of eating is always also an expression of meanings, values, and moral choices. Moral responsibility to people living in conditions of undernourishment or malnutrition raises, for example, questions of justice concerning one's diet, the care of one's body, and the protection of one's own and others' health.

Food thus lies at the foundation of human wisdom and virtue³: just think of how the culinary, gustatory experience is a factor in discerning between what is good and what is

¹ It is no coincidence that in newspapers and popular books Feuerbach is often remembered exclusively for the *slogan* "Man is what he eats", to the point that he himself appeared in his time annoyed - but sometimes amused- that his thought was often reduced to this one phrase, while the rest of his production fell into oblivion. "However," as emerges in Tomasoni's *Introduzione* to the text *L'uomo è ciò che mangia*, "the motto in its drastic simplification was intended by him precisely in order to break out of an inner circle and make inroads with the people by upsetting the usual certainties and provoking reflection"; F. Tomasoni, *Introduzione*, in L. Feuerbach, *L'uomo è ciò che mangia*, edited by F. Tomasoni, Morcelliana, Brescia 2015, p. 6.

² According to Feuerbach, only food is able to instill that activism, that vital energy that theology, on the other hand, hinders, inculcating the idea of man as an incorporeal entity, separate from nature, independent, pagan in its detachment from the world and other men. In this regard he argues, "If you want to improve the people, give them, instead of rants against sin, better food. Man is what he eats. If he eats only vegetable food, he is likewise only a vegetative entity and has no energy" (*Ibid.*, p. 50).

³ The main moral virtues related to food are hospitality and temperance (See E. Telfer, *Food for Thought. Philosophy and Food*, Routledge, London 1996). Hospitality is mainly concerned with our relationships with others, while temperance is mainly concerned with the way we eat. To regard hospitality as a food virtue is to regard food as something that contributes to being a good person and developing good character. Not least, the act of eating can be proposed as a situation that can contribute to the development of virtues such as fellowship and solidarity among people. Temperance is a classical virtue, discussed as early as Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), whose corresponding vice is gluttony. Thus, temperance consists in the ability to correct a deficiency or avoid an excess (See P. Foot, *Virtues and Vices: and other essays in moral philosophy*, Oxford University Press, USA 2003; E. Telfer, *Food for Thought, op. cit.*).

not, forming a pattern of appreciation that, barring minor modifications, can last a lifetime. The kitchen is the context in which knowledge of good and evil is experienced with the body. The experience of the body, moreover, allows us to continually review the hierarchy of value of the goods that are part of our lives and to always put health, which is the prerequisite for all other goods, first because it is indispensable so that we can procure what we need without allowing ourselves to indulge in attitudes of overpowering towards it.

Having, as the barycenter of one's actions and relating to other living beings, including non-humans, the body means having as a prerequisite of all our interactions the protection of one's own and others' health and thus being able to achieve more authentic cooperation among humans, without intermediaries, but above all regardless of the appeal to any transcendent principle capable of establishing what is good and what is evil. Our own body, and no longer an entity other than ourselves, judges and becomes, in this sense, also the interpretive key to our own and others' existence.

In addition, imprinted in our bodies is the omnivorous nature of our species, which can eat a wide variety of living things but is also faced with the complex problem of choosing among them, engaging -- in addition to the body -- the brain in a variety of dietary challenges. In fact, humans -as Michael Pollan argues in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* - and some other mammals, such as rats, have to devote quite a bit of time and gray matter to trying to figure out which dishes, among the countless offered by nature, can be eaten without risk⁴. So while individuals may enjoy the pleasure of the variety of food made available by nature, they are also faced with an oversupply that destabilizes them and leads to a "Manichaeian view of food, a division of nature into The Good Things to Eat, and The Bad."⁵

Hence, the need to give ourselves rules, limits, and ethics, holding firm to the fact that even the evolution of our species, Pollan teaches in his text on the omnivore's dilemma, has equipped us with complex sensory and cognitive instrumentation to make choices among the potential foods that can be eaten without taking risks. The first of these tools," Pollan explains, "is the sense of taste, which allows us to make an initial selection between sweet and bitter foods and to disdain the latter as a source of disgust. The latter is defined by Paul Rozin - a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania - as "the fear of letting harmful substances enter one's body. [...] Disgust is an extremely useful adaptation because it prevents omnivores from ingesting potentially dangerous animal matter, such as meat gone bad that might be contaminated with toxins, or an infected bodily fluid."⁶ Along with the sense of taste and flavor, which is not always a sure guide for deciding what is healthy - think of the sense of disgust that some medicines cause us - cooking and the various types of food processing and preservation⁷ also constitute a valuable tool for disentangling the omnivore's dilemma: it has made foods more digestible, opening up new food horizons and rendering harmless, for example, the toxins of various plants or fungi.

However, it is good to bring out that if nature does not put constraints on the human appetite and the wide range of food choices open to the individual, culture must take care of fixing precise rules to our eating habits: taboos (such as, for example, the one against cannibalism), customs, labels and culinary usages are found in all societies of the world and allow us not to have to face, at every meal, the dilemma concerning what is suitable to eat. Yet, today, the situation is made more complicated because, in our societies, many

⁴ M. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, The Penguin Press, New York 2006, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

⁷ "And most recently, industry has allowed us to reinvent the human food chain, from the synthetic fertility of the soil to the microwaveable can of soup designed to fit into a car's cup holder. The implications of this last revolution, for our health and the health of the natural world, we are still struggling to grasp"; (*Ibid.*, p. 7).

of the traditional tools with which humans have faced such a food dilemma have failed. Just think of the American case: America is a young nation that lacks a strong culinary tradition to serve as a guide. But this is a phenomenon that affects us all; we are all prey to a food industry that confronts us with an abundance of products that bewilder us, bringing the omnivore's dilemma back into vogue:

And so we find ourselves where we do, confronting in the supermarket or at the dinner table the dilemmas of omnivorousness, some of them ancient and others never before imagined. The organic apple or the conventional? And if the organic, the local one or the imported? The wild fish or the farmed? The trans fats or the butter or the "not butter"? Shall I be a carnivore or a vegetarian? And if a vegetarian, a lacto-vegetarian, or a vegan? Like the hunter-gatherer picking a novel mushroom off the forest floor and consulting his sense memory to determine its edibility, we pick up the package in the supermarket and, no longer so confident of our senses, scrutinize the label, scratching our heads over the meaning of phrases like "heart healthy," "no trans fats," "cage-free," or "range-fed."⁸

These are all issues on the agenda, making us realize the urgency of developing ethical principles that can support our food choices. Peter Singer⁹ enunciated some fundamental ones¹⁰, including transparency, which is the right to know how our food is produced; fairness, which aims at the production of environmentally sustainable food; humanity, which has as its primary goal empathy and compassion for nonhuman animals and humans; social responsibility, whose overriding goal is to ensure that everyone earns a living wage sufficient to meet his or her basic needs; and the protection of life and health as needs to come before any other desires. To place principles such as these at the basis of our diets and food choices is, at the very least, to have become fully aware of the connection between food and ethics.

3. Food Ethics and Philosophy

It emerges from what has been said so far that the idea that the pleasure of food is not only a private matter but refers back to social duties and responsibilities and raises ethical issues that involve all levels of our lives. This also emerges from Gomasasca's analysis regarding the depth and breadth of the problems that food ethics raises: "the act of eating now has a very high specific ethical weight. It is probably also for this reason of gravity that the ethics of food, today, has become not only a very complex area of study, but also a full-fledged academic discipline."¹¹ In this passage, Gomasasca refers specifically to a course taught in 2015 at Cornell University specifically on the Ethics of Eating, which had as its primary objective to make students understand some of the dominant ethical theories and empirical issues related to the production, distribution, and consumption of food, starting with the underlying assumption that

Whenever you decide to eat, you are faced with a difficult moral decision. How does animal rights impact your decision? How bad is the suffering involved in meat, eggs, or dairy products to the point that you are convinced you should go vegan? How much do your food choices impact the economy and the environment? Should you

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁹ A professor of bioethics at Princeton University, he is one of the leading exponents of utilitarianism, known primarily for his battles for animal liberation and for inspiring movements in support of animal rights; he gained international fame with the publication of his book *Animal Liberation* (1975), recently published in a new, fully revised and updated edition (P. Singer, *Animal Liberation Now*, Bodley Head, London 2023).

¹⁰ Cf. P. Singer, J. Mason., *The Ethics of what we eat*. The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne 2006, e-book, pos. 5083-5102

¹¹ P. Gomasasca, *Etica del cibo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2021, p. 9.

become locavore? Should you eat only sustainable farm-to-table food? Or is industrial food better for the environment? But we also encounter difficult food-related issues at the socio-political level. Should states restrict their citizens' food choices so as to encourage healthy diets? Should governments issue patents for genetically modified crops? And how do we, as a society, implement effective Food Policies for a rapidly expanding world population?

The syllabus of the course in question outlines the close connection between the act of eating, ethics, and global justice. According to Gomarasca, contemporary food ethics works to maintain this nexus.

It thus becomes clear that eating is not only something that concerns a subject closed within himself but rather an act that is framed in the broader context of relations with other living beings: the act of eating is, in every place and every age, a cultural, relational, social act. Therefore, it has its distinctive history, and to this history, philosophy could not help but look from its origins. For example, Plato deals with food in his *Republic*, where he questions its role in human existence. He goes so far as to admit that food itself, while not a pleasure, can easily be mistaken as such. More specifically, in his view, more than food as such, it was the removal of pain in the form of hunger that could be considered a pleasure.

Aristotle, in his *Metaphysics*, reminds us that philosophy comes into being when a man has resolved his basic needs. In particular, as part of his ethical reflections, he insists on temperance as a virtue related to food, which is necessary to be exercised and pursued, unlike gluttony, which was instead considered a vice to be avoided¹². Even before Aristotle, the Pythagoreans laid the groundwork for the issue of vegetarianism—specifically, fivism—as a life practice, believing that humans should not eat meat since souls can also reincarnate in animals. In tune with the Pythagoreans, Porphyry also advanced the vegetarian cause. He wrote a treatise titled *Abstinence from Animals*, in which he also advised such abstinence from a religious perspective: a diet of fruits and vegetables, besides being healthier for the body, is better for the life of the soul, more suitable for the religious man who wants to detach himself from earthly pleasures in order to be reunited with the divine. During the Middle Ages, food ethics were mostly worked out in the context of monasticism, especially in terms of fasting, abstaining from food as a sinful and harmful element for the spirit. It would have to wait until Luther for there to be opposition to such a view since the Protestant reformer recommended food consumed in large quantities as a remedy for melancholy as well as the most diverse temptations.¹³

So even in modern times, we find philosophers far more lustful and devoted to the pleasures of food, such as Nietzsche, who is said to have followed an excessive and unbalanced diet, juxtaposing sausage and eggs, nuts, and cheese. In *Ecce Homo*, he argues:

If you add on top of all this the positively swinish way older Germans—but by no means just the older ones—need to wash everything down, then you can also understand where the German spirit comes from—from distressed intestines... The German spirit is a case of indigestion—it can never be done with anything.—But the English diet, too—which, in comparison with the German, even the French, is a kind of 'return to nature',* in other words to cannibalism—is profoundly at odds with my own instinct; it seems to me that it gives the spirit heavy feet—the feet of Englishwomen... The best cooking is the *Piedmontese*.*— [...] A big meal is easier to digest than one that is too small. The first prerequisite of good digestion is that the

¹² For a discussion of Plato's and Aristotle's positions on this issue See C. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, New York 2002.

¹³ Cf. M. Luther, *Discorsi a tavola*, edited by B. Ravasi and F. Ferrario, Claudiana, Turin 2017.

stomach as a whole should be actively involved. You must know the size of your stomach. [...] All prejudices emanate from the bowels.¹⁴

The philosopher in *The Gay Science* claims the need for a future philosophy of food that does justice to the value of food. And so materialists, aesthetes, refined gastronomes, and philosophers saw food and its pleasures as a factor of primary importance not only as a mere ontological fact (without food, one cannot live) but also as a cognitive, cultural, and social element.

It is, of course, impossible to review the countless positions that have emerged throughout the history of Western philosophy, but there is one that is emblematic of the idea that food is paradigmatic of the link between body and mind and of the belief that food is not only a vital necessity but also a constitutive factor of personal and social identity. This is the perspective of Ludwig Feuerbach, who argued in the 19th century that “Man is what he eats.” The context in which he was moving in those years, the Germany of 1848, was one in which philosophy came out of the German universities and the abstract patterns of thought - the Hegelian one in particular - to question the reality of the established order to review the relationship between the real and the rational, between reason and the existing state of affairs. Food, Feuerbach argued in those years, has not only bodily but also spiritual significance since man takes it in not only his stomach but also in his head. It follows that what he does results from his eating style, to the extent that a bad diet was incapable - according to Feuerbach - of infusing the people with the energy needed to bring about a real revolution. After criticizing the potato diet that condemned the German people to succumb, he goes so far as to identify a food substance that is the guarantor of a better future, the starting point for a gradual and solid act of renewal: “it is legumin. It is characterized by its richness in phosphorus, and the brain, as we already know, cannot subsist without fats containing phosphorus. Moreover, it is an albuminoid body and such that it clearly surpasses not only the glutinous content of bread, but also the fibrin contained in meat.”¹⁵ So eating well to act better: a man and a people improve by improving their nutrition.

In this way emerges the scope and importance that the Feuerbachian statement “man is what he eats” can still have today, which refers only in some ways to the problem of resource distribution but which is first and foremost a call for effective change that starts from ourselves, from our feeling, from the knowledge concerning our bodies, can involve the entire context of life in which we are embedded.

Feuerbach often repeats that eating is much more than eating: eating always contains a hermeneutic and symbolic surplus, so such an act is *never* resolved in pure physical eating, encompassing a whole series of conceptual, symbolic, and metaphorical determinations that cannot be ignored.

These are just a few examples to say that the question about the possibility of a positive relationship between philosophy and food - we say in a broader sense between mind and body, theoretical and practical - is almost as old as philosophy itself.

Even today, philosophical reflection cannot disregard the primary, essential act of nutrition, which produces happiness for human beings. In this regard, Franco Riva¹⁶ argues that it is almost obligatory that philosophy deals with nutrition; since its origin, this discipline, being interested in man’s relationship with his body, has examined the individual’s relationship with food. Indeed, its analyses show that food constantly reminds us that we are a body and must relate to other living beings, territories, and natural resources. Eating ultimately confronts us with a lived and intense everyday life.¹⁷

¹⁴ F. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007, pp. 20-21.

¹⁵ L. Feuerbach, *L'uomo è ciò che mangia*, op. cit., p. 51.

¹⁶ Philosopher and professor of social ethics, philosophy of dialogue and philosophical anthropology at the Catholic University of Milan.

¹⁷ Such reflections can be found in: F. Riva, *Cibo ed etica. L'altro e la fame*, Castelveccchi, Rome 2021; Id., *Filosofia del cibo*, Castelveccchi, Rome 2015, digital ed.

So, eating involves the entire field of human subjectivity and individual and social consciousness. Riva emphasizes that “eating is a great thing because it awakens the fundamental human condition, the being-body, from a torpor that has lasted too long. Not for itself, as any being in the world, as merely living, as a living organism. As a condition instead that alone allows one to approach the other in its hunger and poverty, in its misery and height.”¹⁸ Riva again writes:

eating is a great thing because even in food, in the daily bread without which one does not live, one is questioned about how much justice and how much injustice, how much peace and how much violence, how much work and how much robbery, how much custody and how much waste, how much sharing and how much selfishness, how much truth and how much hypocrisy there is in one of the most necessary, most taken for granted, and smallest gestures of existence. Great because eating summons man to the dignity of a responsibility for others while still sunk in the oh-so-earthly abyss of daily and animal need, of carnal smallness, of first-person necessity for individuals and communities¹⁹ .

According to Riva’s words, the centrality of the human being needs to be rethought. This centrality can no longer be understood as its superiority, its importance over the world and nature, but rather as the possibility that each individual has to take responsibility for what he or she is in relationship with.

It is, therefore, a matter of making responsible choices and taking responsibility for the consequences of our actions and our relationship with those other than ourselves. Recognizing the need for every other being in the world, different from us, means having respect for them. This is not such an easy view to accept since we are daily induced to think, even unconsciously, that nature has created everything for our use. To refute such a claim, the teaching of Singer, who in his writing *Animal Liberation* induces us to reflect precisely on the rights of nonhuman animals and the tyranny of humans toward them, can be taken as a model once again: “This tyranny has caused and today is still causing an amount of pain and suffering that can only be compared with that which resulted from the centuries of tyranny by white humans over black humans. The struggle against this tyranny is a struggle as important as any of the moral and social issues that have been fought over in recent years.”²⁰

It is necessary, therefore - according also to Singer’s teaching - to examine our relationship with all living beings, widening our gaze far beyond insistence on a single kind of relationship. It is impossible to avoid an intrusion on our part into other lives, whether animal or vegetable, just as all living beings carry out a similar intrusion into the lives of others. Due to their sheer being and from such intrusion, it is impossible to refrain. The first form of intrusion into the existence of other living beings is precisely the food relationship, in which a certain amount of violence is naturally inherent. In this regard, Pollan argues that choosing what to eat can be a source of conflict, even when it seems to be a harmless and unimportant action.

What man can do, however, is modify, limit, and correct the relationships involving all living things so that intrusion does not become overpowering. In this regard, one can opt for a so-called top-down approach, that is, providing us with a set of norms and patterns of behavior that, from above, from outside, regulate our peculiar eating habits.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pos. 475.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pos. 467.

²⁰ P. Singer, *Animal Liberation*, Open Road, New York 2015, p. 14.

4. The Top-Down Approach to Food Ethics

According to the analysis conducted by Michiel Korthals in *Before Dinner: Philosophy and Ethics of Food*, the *top-down* approach can be divided into three different macro-models.

The first is *cost-benefit analysis*. In this case, the key players are governments, which, after making an accurate calculation of a given innovation's quantitative and, thus, financial advantages and disadvantages, make the appropriate decisions while assessing the risks to the environment and public health. For example, when foot-and-mouth disease, a disease that affected sheep in particular, spread in the United Kingdom in 2001, the British authorities calculated in detail the pros and cons of proceeding or not with a vaccination campaign. They decided that the best solution was to cull the animals. The EU Council, on the other hand, gave the option to countries that deemed it appropriate to conduct emergency vaccination campaigns without the culling requirement. Of course, the risk of such analyses is sometimes the consequential costs and benefits. In such cases, Korthals suggests, it is best to adhere to a precautionary principle, "which entails that it is better to refrain from innovation if the outcome is too uncertain and good justification is lacking."²¹

The second model is that of *utilitarianism*, a form of consequentialist ethics, which embraces the perspective that an act is correct if its effects are good. So, this perspective is based on the consequences of a given action, which are to be evaluated on the principle of the greatest possible welfare for the greatest number of individuals. The initiator of such an approach is J. Bentham, who speaks precisely of "the greatest good for the greatest number": an action must be considered correct even if somebody may derive harm from it since what matters is that the majority derive benefits from it. Therefore, an action that benefits the majority while disadvantaging a small minority will generally be approved by a utilitarian.

Utilitarianism, in some ways, approaches cost-benefit analysis insofar as the established principles and rules reduce the risk of the most violating the welfare of the most. It should also be said that these principles are not rigidly set but are only *prima facie* valid. Utilitarianism is generally permeated by the idea of causing no harm and doing good. In the former case, we are dealing with a negative orientation according to which the harmful consequences of an action should be limited; in the latter case, it is, in favorable terms, a matter of promoting the good to the most significant possible degree. Among the main protagonists of this orientation is undoubtedly Peter Singer. His utilitarianism is characterized by its emphasis on the fact that not only human beings but also all animals capable of experiencing pleasure or pain have an interest in pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain. The central idea is that suffering is an evil to be avoided wherever it is found; therefore, Singer's ethical vision is based on the principle of equal consideration for the suffering of all animals. It is not species membership, let alone the possession of rationality and language, that the Western ethical tradition mistakenly believed so central. It is the capacity to suffer that marks the boundaries of the moral community. One of Singer's most significant conclusions is the duty of humans to become vegetarians, and this is not because there is a general ban on killing nonhuman animals but because it is forbidden to inflict unjustified suffering on them. Our eating meat would be justified in this sense only if we were certain that those meats came out of farming practices compatible with the dignity of the animal.²²

²¹ M. Korthals, *Before dinner. Philosophy and Ethics of Food*, Springer, USA 2004, p. 47.

²² For an in-depth study of Singer's utilitarian perspective Cf. P. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Beyond Singer's perspective and in the wake of his anti-specism is Tom Regan²³, who introduces us to Korthals' third model, the *deontological* model, which sets out the obligations and principles from which to assess whether an act is correct or not. Regan comes to admit more specifically the notion of "animal rights" and the prohibition against killing them not only because they are capable of suffering, but more generally as subjects-of-a-life. Such insight made him the intellectual *leader* of the animal rights movement. To say that nonhuman animals²⁴ are subjects-of-a-life means that they have a personal history, a past, a capacity to project into the future, and a biography, and they go through the various stages of their existence in much the same way as humans. Each has its own vicissitudes and represents something unique, not an instrument at our disposal; moreover, the lives of nonhuman animals also evolve: they can get better or worse. Each is capable of experiencing pain and seeking pleasure, and they tend toward that which can make them happy, and we humans cannot in any way get in the way of this pursuit of happiness. Therefore, according to Regan, we humans have unconditional duties toward nonhuman animals, and consequently, we must make every possible effort to prevent any animal from dying an unnatural death. The violation of animal and human rights, in his view, travel hand in hand, both being equally part of the universe of moral rights.

The discourse on rights is inseparably linked to that of duties, and it is precisely the focus on the question of duties that allows us to place Regan squarely within the framework of the deontological model, which has as its forerunner the philosopher Immanuel Kant. The latter, on the subject of duties, first sets a precise criterion that people acting morally can use to determine whether or not something can serve as an obligation. That criterion is the categorical imperative, and precisely one of its formulations, that one must act so that the maxim of one's own will can always apply as the principle of universal legislation. However, while Kant's perspective was all about respecting human dignity and recognizing the intrinsic value of man, who as a moral subject should always be treated as an end and never as a means, Regan goes beyond this position by recognizing even nonhuman animals as moral subjects and thus having equal dignity.

In the field of food ethics, one can see a not-so-clear dividing line between these three approaches, which sometimes end up intermingling. This is particularly the case with the deontological and utilitarian approaches. Korthals, in his work, cites the case of Mepham, who, starting from the medical ethics studies of Beauchamp and Childress, elaborates on four principles suitable for solving ethical nutrition-related problems. These are respect for autonomy, the principle of justice, non-maleficence (not inflicting harm on humans and nature), and beneficence (contributing to the welfare of nature and humans). Mepham applies these ethical principles to food production processes, distinguishing between several participants: consumers, various types of producers, a treated organism (which may be an animal or plant), and nature as a whole (which he calls biota and in which he also includes future living beings). To each of these participants in the food production process, he applies his principles: autonomy, justice, and welfare (which comes from the union of non-maleficence and beneficence).

However, such a principled approach has significant shortcomings. First, because they take the form of mere ideals at which one can aim but which are unlikely to be achieved; second, because such principles in concrete situations may conflict with each

²³ He is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at North Carolina State University and is universally recognized as the greatest philosopher spokesman for the animal rights movement. For an in-depth discussion of his deontological perspective See T. Regan, *Empty Cages. Facing the challenge of animal rights*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2005.

²⁴ Regan when he speaks of nonhuman animals refers in the first instance to mammals and birds, but leaves open the question of whether fish, reptiles and amphibians, may also be worthy of moral consideration. In particular, with respect to these species he advances the so-called argument from doubt that *since we cannot* be certain that *other* nonhuman animals (besides mammals and birds) are not capable of feeling pain it is preferable to act as if they do.

other-sustainability and animal welfare do not always go together, as do health and animal welfare-in the sense that we cannot determine what priority each should have. So, the main limitation of such a principles approach is that these principles have an analytical rather than a synthetic meaning, i.e., they are tautological, they apply a priori, i.e., they are not constituted from concrete experience.

5. A Possible Alternative: the Bottom-Up Perspective

From what has been said so far, it is clear that the *top-down*, external rules-and-criteria approach is not the only one possible, let alone the best one, because consumption styles, behaviors, and food practices vary among the parties involved in an ethical dilemma, depending on the contexts, as well as in the transition from one generation to the next. The issue is, therefore, empirical and contingent. Therefore, universal, all-encompassing, a priori principles may be misleading to the extent that very often, it is in practice that we find far more effective courses of action and courses of action for making our food choices responsibly. Moreover, given the urgency of the problems related to food ethics, it would be a waste of time to work first to reach a consensus on a system of principles and only later to seek a solution to concrete problems. It would be much more effective to adopt an approach that starts from the bottom, from the issues and the ways in which people can solve them by deliberating and consulting with each other. The latter aspect, related to public consultation, is not taken into account at all by the principled approach, which is oriented instead toward individual decision-making.

Providing a possible alternative to the *top-down* approach is, once again, Michiel Korthals, who places at the center of the discourse concerning the ethical dilemmas aroused by food not only principles but also the values, ideals, and preferences of individuals embedded in various life contexts. He coined the term "*applicationism*" in this regard to indicate an orientation toward applications of principles, rather than their exclusive justification.²⁵ This entails a focus on the sociocultural contexts of ethical issues in food and a communicative and deliberative approach involving continuous exchange and constant consultation between consumers and producers (including additional parties, such as government authorities). Applicationism, then, does not aim to set prohibitions and imperatives but, at most, to provide advice and establish guidelines to guide in resolving food-related ethical dilemmas; guidelines that consider that there is not always an optimal solution for each moral dilemma.

Ethics thus becomes synonymous with possibilities and not prohibitions, the discovery of new horizons, new relationships, and alliances. This attention to the provisional, experiential, and experimental character of ethical solutions already found its formulation in the analyses of the philosopher John Dewey, who emphasized precisely the concept of experience. This keyword serves to remind us that the lived, suffered, enjoyed world always has the last word overall human investigations and assumptions. This is not to say that human beings should maintain an attitude of passivity toward the

²⁵ "Tackling ethical dilemmas is a process that involves compromise and debates, where not only principles but also values, preferences, and ideals play a role. I have given this approach the sobriquet applicationism, the orientation on applications. What it involves is that philosophical ethics has been overly concerned with the justification of principles (such as obligations) and far too little with the altogether different issue of their application (see Korthals 1994; Weston 2000). Application-focused orientation thus does not mean that we should simply apply principles; it does not work that way. Applicationism is an extension of the work of ethicists such as Williams, Foot, and Gert, who stress the constructive design of coping with dilemmas. Application requires a constructive viewpoint, an orientation that is altogether different from the justification of norms or the identification and analysis of ethical problems. It implies a focus on the sociocultural contexts of ethical problems, for example via the concept of practice. The strong emphasis on the rights and obligations of persons acting as individuals ignores the fact that their rights have limits and that collective implications and presuppositions deserve ethical attention as well." (M. Korthals, *Before dinner. Philosophy and Ethics of Food*, *op. cit.*, p. 51).

world of experience, but rather that acting on it forms opinions and standards of behavior destined to change constantly.

Thus, the pragmatic approach does not envisage universally acceptable solutions: it is a bottom-up approach because it does not start from abstract rules and principles but takes into account the ethical intuitions of the actors involved, who will have to come to terms with the consequences of their decisions, by the ethics of responsibility. Stakeholders will be stimulated to seek constructive ethical responses rather than resigning themselves to old solutions.

Based on this approach, within societies, it will be necessary to learn to live with the conflicts that arise between norms and values: for example, the value of low prices and producer profit might conflict with animal welfare; organic farming might conflict with maximizing crop yield; and the value of climate sustainability might conflict with consumer autonomy. And so on, the list could be extended. In such situations, a weighing of values can be helpful, as can a reliance on an ethic that disengages from those utilitarian, deontological approaches based on universally valid rules to focus on the character dispositions humans should possess toward the natural world. Moving beyond predefined rules of behavior, we will focus on the question regarding what kind of people we should be when we relate to our environment and what character trait - associated with the act of eating - can contribute to an optimal disposition toward the world around us. In other words, it is about understanding how to relate environmental well-being to human virtue.

More specifically, it is a matter of taking as a starting point the character traits to be promoted in order to adopt increasingly appropriate eating styles to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. We must, therefore, start with those virtues that enable human beings to cope best with the circumstances and situations in which they find themselves and to interact responsibly with other living beings. To identify such virtues, it is first necessary to clarify under what circumstances a character trait can be said to be virtuous. In this regard, it may be helpful to follow the criteria established by Philippa Foot in her essay *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* to first define what a moral virtue is. Foot lists three: first, virtues are the qualities that a human being must possess for his good and that of his fellow human beings; second, virtue is a quality of the will (in this sense, it is distinguished from bodily strength and intellectual ability); and third, it is, in accordance with Aristotelian teaching, the proper mean between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Once we have established what can be said to be virtuous, we will proceed to select from among the virtues those that can be applied to nutrition.

E. Telfer, in his paper *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*, refers to the virtue of hospitality not only because it fits well with the three criteria identified by Foot but mainly because it puts the other, whether another human being or the natural world, at the center. It is the virtue of sharing lodging, food, and drink with friends, strangers, and guests and, in so doing, recognizing in the other a commonality of needs. Therefore, hospitality is an inherently social virtue grounded in the concept of responsibility - a responsibility that may even reach beyond the immediate members of the relationship in which the act of hospitality is performed - and one that encourages looking beyond one's own needs to those of others.

An additional virtue to which Telfer refers and which can be applied to food consumption is temperance, also translated as moderation in one's food choices. If hospitality is primarily concerned with our relationships with others, temperance, on the other hand, has to do more specifically with our personal way of eating. In this regard, unregulated eating not only produces negative consequences for the individual who wants to lose weight, but also contributes to imbalances in food availability. Cultivating the virtue of temperance in this sense also has social and environmental significance relevant to discussions of cultural and ecological well-being. Indeed, it can help preserve the value of sustainability, as it encourages us to use the whole produce when we cook

without throwing away food, thus avoiding wasting common resources, as well as being a virtue that contributes to our health, as it prevents us from obsessive eating and developing unhealthy obesity. On the other hand, when food is enjoyed in an unhealthy and unregulated way, one of the risks it runs is to become nothing more than an instrument of social *status*, a tool of identity and success: think of the photos proliferating on *social networks* of food used only as a means, as props to flaunt a lifestyle to which anyone should want to aspire. Therefore, the call for temperance in food ethics also becomes a call for a non-anthropocentric view of nature, one that moves away from the idea of it as a fund (*Bestand*)²⁶ available to every human whim.

Warning against such a human impulse to arrogance is an additional virtue, namely humility. The sharp distinction between arrogance and humility is addressed by Lynn White in her essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, in which she polemicizes Western religious traditions, foremost among them Christianity, as being responsible for environmental degradation for inculcating arrogance in humans, convincing them that they are superior to the rest of creation.²⁷ White proposed looking to Francis of Assisi as an alternative model based on humility to counter the anthropocentric arrogance of this form of Christianity. In his view, he represented a minority view that proclaimed humble equality between humanity and members of the natural world, to the extent that Francis could be referred to as the patron saint of ecologists. This same humility can be understood as a food virtue, in the sense of the renunciation of the concept of customization and ready availability of food - what one wants when one wants - as well as a commitment to accept the limits of a sustainable food system, that is, one that does not go beyond what nature can handle. These virtues will manifest themselves in different ways in everyday practices.

But whichever approach one decides to embrace-the *top-down approach* that provides for ethical principles that apply to all or the *bottom-up approach* that focuses more on the values and virtues associated with the good life - it will be a priority to make a commitment and a willingness on the part of human beings to restructure their moral postures within the consumer society in which they are immersed, even in light of the maxim that "We are not only what we eat, but how we eat, too."²⁸

6. Conclusions

From the analysis conducted so far, it is clear that the issue of food is not merely an individual choice or an isolated act but rather an interweaving of ethical decisions that reflect and shape human relationships, respect for other living beings, and impact on the environment. It emerged that, behind theoretical dichotomies, food is configured as a field in which ethics is closely intertwined with lived experience, inviting us to reflect on our responsibilities to the world around us.

In this sense, the critical message desired to be conveyed is the urgency of adopting an approach to food that is not limited to meeting personal needs but moves toward a broader awareness, where the choice of what, how, and why we eat becomes an expression of a global ethical commitment. In this context, the philosophy and ethics of food urge us to reconsider not only our eating habits but also our role and identity in the

²⁶ This is a Heideggerian concept found in M. Heidegger, *La questione della tecnica*, in *Saggi e discorsi*, edited by G. Vattimo, Mursia, Milan 1991.

²⁷ Lynn White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, Science 155 (1967), pp. 1203-1207. With respect to the Christian's arrogance toward the environment White writes, "what did Christianity tell people about their relations with the environment? [...] Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. [...] By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects"; *Ibid.* p. 1205.

²⁸ The expression is from M. Pollan. On this subject see M. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

larger fabric of life on Earth, emphasizing that true wisdom lies in the ability to harmonize our needs with those of others and our host environment.

In light of these considerations, the future of food and our society appears to be a horizon of possibilities. Individual and collective ethical commitment to conscious food choices can actually contribute to building a more just, sustainable, and life-friendly world in all its forms.

The two approaches examined—top-down and bottom-up—show that food ethics cannot be restricted to a single perspective. In fact, the two alternatives, far from being antagonistic, prove complementary in drawing an ethical map of food capable of incorporating both universal principles and contextual specificities.

The top-down perspective, with its normative framework, provides a stable and coherent framework to guide food choices toward goals of justice and sustainability on a global scale. These principles, outlined in the reflections of thinkers such as Singer and Regan, lay the foundation for ethical coexistence among species and the promotion of responsible nutrition. However, anchoring them in lived realities, needs and local traditions is necessary to avoid abstractions without practical effectiveness. On the other hand, the *bottom-up* approach immerses us in the everyday dynamics, the continuous flow of choices and interactions that characterize the act of feeding ourselves. It emphasizes the importance of experience, cultural context, and community participation, showing how food ethics manifests in everyday life's simple but meaningful gestures. This perspective emphasizes the value of hospitality, temperance, and humility, virtues that guide our behavior and strengthen the social and environmental fabric.

Therefore, integrating *top-down* and *bottom-up* approaches requires a continuous dialectic between theory and practice, between the global and the local, taking into account universal ethical guidelines and cultural and individual specificities. In this dialogue, new ethical understandings emerge that are both flexible and grounded, capable of adapting to changes in society and the environment.

So, reflecting on food ethics means embracing a holistic approach that considers food not only as a biological necessity but also as an act rich in moral, cultural, and social meanings. It is an invitation to think critically and act consciously, where every food choice takes the form of an act that reflects and shapes our identity, our culture, and our relationship with the world.

Indeed, issues of justice, responsibility, sustainability, and respect for other forms of life require a constant dialogue between theory and practice, universal and particular, individual and collective. Our challenge is to integrate these approaches, valuing the richness of different perspectives and promoting a food ethic that is both reasoned and sensitive to contingent realities.

Ultimately, such a food ethic questions how we live and how we can live better and in harmony with ourselves, other living beings, and the planet. It is a constant journey of discovery, reflection, and action, a journey in which the question "What should we eat?" becomes a broader reflection on "How should we live?".

References

- Feuerbach, L. *L'uomo è ciò che mangia*, edited by F. Tomasoni, Morcelliana, Brescia 2015.
- Foot, P. *Virtues and Vices: and other essays in moral philosophy*, Oxford University Press, U.S.A. 2003.
- Gomarasca, P. *Etica del cibo*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2021.
- Heidegger, M. *La questione della tecnica*, in *Saggi e discorsi*, edited by G. Vattimo, Mursia, Milan 1991.
- Korsmeyer, C. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, New York 2002.
- Korthals, M. *Before dinner. Philosophy and Ethics of Food*, Springer, USA 2004.
- Luther, M. *Discorsi a tavola*, edited by B. Ravasi and F. Ferrario, Claudiana, Turin 2017.
- Nietzsche, F. *Ecce Homo*, Oxford University Press, New York 2007.
- Pollan, M. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, The Penguin Press, New York 2006.
- Regan, T. *Empty Cages. Facing the challenge of animal rights*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2005.
- Riva, F. *Cibo ed etica. L'altro e la fame*, Castelvechi, Rome 2021.
- Id., *Filosofia del cibo*, Castelvechi, Rome 2015.
- Singer, P. *Animal Liberation*, Open Road, New York 2015.
- Id., *Animal Liberation Now*, Bodley Head, London 2023.
- Id., *Practical Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- Singer, P., Mason, J. *The Ethics of what we eat*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne 2006.
- Telfer, E. *Food for Thought. Philosophy and Food*, Routledge, London 1996.
- Tomasoni, F. *Introduzione*, in L. Feuerbach, *L'uomo è ciò che mangia*, edited by F. Tomasoni, Morcelliana, Brescia 2015.
- White, L. *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis*, Science 155 (1967).

