

# WHAT DO WE DO WHEN WE EAT?

## Part I

### AN INCONCLUSIVE INQUIRY

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#### Abstract

*What do we do when we eat? In the first part of this contribution it is observed that this question is surprisingly seldom addressed in philosophical, ethical and theological literature in such a way that the evolutionary rootedness of human eating, the role of predation and the necessity of death in any form of eating are addressed. A crude typology of interpretations of the act of eating is offered on the basis of concepts such as survival, human (male) supremacy, asceticism, hedonistic consumption and conspicuous consumption. It is argued that all of these positions remain unsatisfactory in the sense that they cannot do justice simultaneously to scientific, ecological, cultural, ethical and theological considerations. The underlying problem is that the need for predation is either employed as a point of departure or minimised, if not avoided or denied.*

**Key Words:** Asceticism; Christianity; Conspicuous Consumption; Eating, Evolution; Food; Hedonism; Human Supremacy; Joy; Kenosis; Predation; Survival

#### An often avoided Question?

In an earlier contribution entitled “Eat or/and be Eaten: The evolutionary roots of violence?” I tested the distinction between natural suffering and socially-induced forms of suffering by exploring the roots of violence between species with reference to the emergence of the act of eating in evolutionary history. I concluded that the violence embedded in evolutionary history in the form of killing for food cannot be avoided. There seems to be a theological inability to come to terms with the role of predation. I added that “I truly hope that such conclusions are wrong both on logical and on theological grounds”. In this contribution I will continue to explore the meaning of the act of eating.<sup>1</sup>

The question is in a way simple: What are we doing when we eat? One may, of course, offer physiological and biochemical explanations given the role of biting, salivating, tasting, chewing, swallowing and absorbing – and the tools (mouth, teeth and a tongue) that our human evolutionary heritage bestowed on us for such tasks.<sup>2</sup> However, the focus here is on how the significance of the very act of eating, all too often simply taken for granted, is to be understood. My interest is not so much on food (as a commodity or a symbol), on appropriate diets, menus or recipes, but on eating. The issue at stake is not so much whether

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on a paper first delivered at the annual meeting of the Theological Society of South Africa on “From Farm to Fork: Theological and Ethical Reflection on the Production, Distribution and Consumption of Food”, held as part of the “Third Joint Conference”, University of Pretoria, 11-15 July 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For a philosophical discussion, see Kass (1994:57-93).

we eat (starvation), how regularly we eat (hunger), how much we eat (stunting, obesity, eating disorders and the need to make food choices on a daily basis),<sup>3</sup> what we eat (the so-called omnivore's dilemma amidst cultural preferences, religious taboos, health prescriptions and vegetarian debates), how nutritious the food is that we eat (GMO foods, the use of pesticides), how we eat (culture), with whom we eat (commensality, companionship and exclusion), where and in what setting we eat (the role of homes amidst contestations over family life), when we eat (the impact of working days), how long it takes us to eat (debates on slow food), or why we eat (which is indeed a related question). Each of these questions is intriguing in its own right and has an own body of literature.

How, then, is this act of eating to be understood philosophically, ethically and theologically?<sup>4</sup> More specifically, how is the role of predation, implied in the act of eating, to be understood? Some forms of life absorb minerals from soil, air and water but any act of eating almost by definition implies the prior death of what is eaten. Eating fruit, nuts, seeds and organic leftovers does not imply killing (what is eaten is no longer a living organism), but eating vegetables and meat typically does require killing other living organisms before they die naturally. As I will argue below, a satisfactory answer to this question remains elusive, perhaps even as elusive as the question "What are we doing when we pray?" (with apologies to Vincent Brümmer). In fact, I would suggest that eating (and therefore preying) is, also from a theological point of view, as important (if not more so), and as intriguing, as praying.

It is certainly important to inquire about the 'we' employed in this question given differences of class, culture and gender and the likelihood of domination in the name of such differences. The question is best addressed within the context of food insecurity and food contestation<sup>5</sup> so that the 'we' may refer primarily to the hungry. The hungry do eat from time to time or else they will starve. They are not merely the passive recipients of food but are subjects whose agency matters. As Gustavo Gutierrez once noted, the poor are not merely poor; they are also people with normal human needs for beauty, meaningful relationships, productive labour and an expression of their talents. What, then, are 'we' doing when we eat?

Then there are also differences of species. I will focus here on human acts of eating without losing sight of how this is situated in evolutionary history in order to avoid a crude anthropocentrism or a disconnection between nature and culture. The story of evolution is often described in terms of the survival of the fittest and competition over food, habitat and

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<sup>3</sup> For one study of the multiple influences on making daily food choices, with a focus on the dangers of eating more than one should, see Wansink (2006).

<sup>4</sup> One may argue that food is by itself an amoral issue that should not be subjecting to unnecessary moralising. Christianity has tended to secularise eating by taking religious rituals out of animal sacrifices (Webb 2012:3) and by minimising food regulations around ingredients, cooking and commensality (see Freidenreich 2011). The counter-argument would be that if eating implies killing it is necessarily a moral issue open to theological inquiry. The danger of such an emphasis on food as at best amoral is illustrated by Webb's own argument, as pointed out in the response by Cavanaugh (2011).

<sup>5</sup> The term, "food contestation is derived from a Mellon-funded project, entitled *Food Contestation: Humanities and the Food System*. This project is situated within the context of the Centre of Excellence in Food Security" located at the University of the Western Cape. The project has two components, namely on "The gendered politics of food systems" and on "The symbolic construction of food consumption in the context of food insecurity". In the first semester of 2016 I offered a postgraduate course on "Religion and food contestation", working alongside a number of postgraduate students with research projects in this area. This contribution emerged from teaching this course. I am grateful to JR Bergman, George Byarugaba, Beauty Dasheka, Ridtwaan Gallant, Mohammed Luqmaan Kagee, Cassiem Khan, Manitza Kotzé, Elias LaCour, and Gloria Roman for collaboratively helping to digest the material.

procreation. This is a story based on predatory habits, from the early appearance of parasitic bacteria to the emergence of herbivores, carnivores and omnivores. All living organisms have to ‘eat’ by taking in matter and energy to reproduce themselves. It is also a story of procreation and therefore cooperation, especially amongst social species, but such cooperation (also for hunting and gathering) cannot and does not qualify the need for food. The logic seems to be one of “eat or be eaten”, or (better) “eat *and* be eaten”. One has to continuously remind oneself that the exchange by which one form of life becomes food for another is rarely if ever a voluntary one!<sup>6</sup>

Human evolution has to be understood in the context of (if not in terms of) this history of predation. We are equipped with teeth which points to the role of predation in our evolutionary history – even though our teeth are less pronounced if compared to other apes. How, then, are such predatory habits (not only of humans) to be understood? Moreover, how is this to be understood theologically? May predation and parasitism be declared to form part of God’s good creation? Is predation, in fact, that which is so good about creation? Or is it an aspect that should best be underplayed or even overcome? Does predation point to a fault in nature’s design? Or is predation an unambiguous evil brought about by a human or even a cosmic fall?<sup>7</sup>

The biblical food regulations in Genesis 1 allow for eating organic leftovers in the form of fruit, nuts and seeds – each of which minimises violence and only limits the potential of the seeds that are eaten to become plants. Every species can potentially produce far more offspring than can possibly survive on a finite planet so that each specimen must necessarily compete with others to survive and flourish. Limiting potential therefore does not seem too harsh. In the case of eating fruit, the act of eating often helps with the distribution of the seeds. Likewise, the food consumed in the Holy Communion (bread and wine) require human cultural inputs but not the killing of other living organisms – although fermentation implies billions of bacterial deaths. The meaning of the Last Supper is also tied up with the slaughtering of lambs during the Passover feast. Drinking milk and eating cheese, honey or eggs do not entail killing those that produce such food products, but may well amount to theft by those in positions of power over other living beings. Again, the exchange is hardly voluntary. One also needs to factor in what the cows and chickens are eating. By contrast, eating vegetables, roots and especially various forms of meat implies that one living metabolism is absorbed by another. While this cannot necessarily be described as a form of ‘violence’ (pending definitions of violence), it begs numerous questions. Some (vegetarians) would suggest a distinction between uprooting vegetables and killing other sentient beings for food (meat). Such a distinction is not arbitrary but surely plants have interests of their own too. What about carnivorous plants? What about the evolutionary continuity between non-sentient and sentient forms of life. What about the bond between what is organic and what is inorganic? Where would one need to draw a line to legitimise eating other forms of life? Only where eating other humans (cannibalism) is concerned?

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<sup>6</sup> See Wilkinson (1975:22).

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Linzey (1998:28) has no hesitation in declaring that “parasitism and predation are unlovely, cruel, evil aspects of the world ultimately incapable of being reconciled with a God of love.” A loving Creator must have created a world that is morally good. In other words, predator/prey relations do not constitute God’s original will for creation. For Linzey, lions disemboweling gazelles, cuckoos pushing non-cuckoos out of the nest, tarantulas eating their prey are indeed moral matters. If predation is regarded as the “law of the universe”, if “predation is ‘beautiful’, there can be no moral imperative to live without injury” (1998:31). Linzey suggests that condoning (or imitating) predator/prey relations results from a denial of the impact of the fall. He argues that human beings can now approximate the peaceable kingdom by living without killing sentient animals for food. He remains agnostic on the question whether this has always been the case.

Should eating (red) meat be outlawed as well so that ‘meat is murder’? And fish? Is sentience an appropriate point of demarcation? Or does the problem go far back in evolutionary history – to the emergence of parasitic bacteria? Would drawing any such a line apply only to humans or should carnivorous animals (and plants) be expected to change their ways as a “prerequisite for a more peaceful nature”?<sup>8</sup> How, in other words, can human eating be situated in the evolutionary history of predation?

Even if food is produced in a relatively ‘humane’ manner, it seems non-sensible to think that the need for predation can be avoided from an evolutionary perspective. In fact, as many have argued, predation is in the interest of the prey; perhaps not in the interest of the individual animal that is killed but certainly in the interest of the species and in the well-being of the ecosystems in which they are situated.<sup>9</sup> It is of course also in the interest of the one who eats and the evolution of the predatory species. In early hominid evolution eating meat evidently contributed much towards the proteins necessary for growth in brain size. Vegetarian or vegan habits are now possible, but humans would not have evolved without scavenging and later hunting for meat. Would humans therefore need to ‘humanise’ nature, by resisting and overcoming their predatory evolutionary heritage? If nature is (not so) good, is culture at least potentially a bit better? Does humanising nature not amount to another, slightly more subtle form of anthropocentrism in which the story of evolution culminates in the human species?

There are similar theological questions: Do we have to ameliorate the violence-ridden work of the triune Creator? Is the very act of eating (and the implied need for predation) not an almost inevitable manifestation of human sin? How, then, should the act of eating be understood theologically – with Manichean or Gnostic disdain over the crude biological nature of eating, with an Augustinian innocence or with a cultured Pelagian sophistication? How should the story of eating be told? As a story starting with Paradise where there was no killing for food (eating only seeds and fruits) to one of condoning the eating of meat to a return to a vegan ideal? Could this version of the story help to make sense of (human) evolution? Or should the story be told along a development path from violent forms of predation to a humanised civilisation? Does this version not remain anthropocentric? Or is this simply a story of the survival of the fittest? What would the moral of such a story be? For theologians the emergence of eating in evolutionary history would have to be told as a story of creation, sin, salvation and consummation, but the plot of this story is understood in diverging ways.

### **Gaps in the Available Literature?**

It is surprising to see to what extent the role of predation in the very ordinary (in most cases) daily human act of eating seems to be avoided in philosophical and theological literature on food.<sup>10</sup> There is of course ample secular literature available on the production,

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<sup>8</sup> See Webb (2001:29).

<sup>9</sup> Michael Pollan (2006:322) captures the gist of the argument: “But however it may appear to those of us living at such a remove from the natural world, predation is not a matter of morality or politics; it, too, is a matter of symbiosis. Brutal as the wolf may be to the individual deer, the deer depends on him for its well-being. Without predators to cull the herd deer overrun their habitat and starve – all suffer and not only the deer but the plants they browse and every other species that depends on those plants.”

<sup>10</sup> In an unpublished paper Rian Venter (2011) speaks of the “weird anomaly in Christian theology: despite the prominence of a symbolic meal in the centre of the liturgical service, food and eating do not assume a central place in Christian thought.” Perhaps this is influenced by Romans 14:17: “The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”?

distribution, preparation and consumption of food. The same applies to literature on world hunger, stunting, malnutrition, obesity, eating disorders and so forth. There is ample literature on the dimensions of nourishment that include self-renewal, self-fuelling, self-maintenance, self-healing, self-development and self-maturation.<sup>11</sup> There is also considerable attention to ethical debates on a vegetarian or vegan diet.<sup>12</sup>

In philosophy there is the famous saying from Feuerbach that “Der Mensch ist was er isst”: *Man* is what he eats. This is literally true (also of women!): the food that is ingested changes the composition of the body that received it. This shapes the biological evolution of a species. Culturally what and how you eat reveals who you are. This is also true intellectually: learning takes place through assimilation.<sup>13</sup> Food shapes culture. As is the case with architecture, we produce and consume food and are in turn shaped (even ‘consumed’) by what we had produced. Indeed, one cannot separate the way people eat from the way they work (prey) and pray.<sup>14</sup> One may even say with William Ralph Inge that “The whole of nature is a conjugation of the verb to eat, in the active and passive.”<sup>15</sup> In eating the eater destroys the distinctive otherness of the form of what is eaten by transforming and *reforming* that into the eater. Eating is a strategy of assimilation and, quite literally, incorporation.<sup>16</sup> In his *Phenomenology of Life* Hans Jonas offers a helpful reflection on metabolisms and the distinct ways in which plants, herbivores and carnivores have to absorb food.<sup>17</sup> All living organisms require continuous self-renewal through the metabolic process. Plants dissolve and absorb nutrients through their roots by a process of osmosis. By contrast, animals require a mechanical stage of conveying and shredding before the direct chemical stage of metabolic appropriation. Through their roots plants are relieved of the necessity of movement, while such mobility enhances the freedom of animals but this implies a more precarious metabolism, an inability to become fully integrated in its environment and a temporal discontinuity between need and satisfaction. This gap between animal organism and environment is spanned by the role of perception, emotional embeddedness and mobility. All animal life is therefore parasitic on plant life. Jonas (1996:105) comments: “Thus animal metabolism makes mediate action possible; but it also makes it necessary. The animal, feeding on existing life, continually destroys its mortal supply and has to see elsewhere for more. In the case of flesh-eaters, whose food is itself motile, the need is increased in proportion and forces the mutual development of that agility in which so many other faculties of the animal must participate.”

In *The Hungry Soul* Leon Kass also recognises the role of predation in any form of eating. He calls this the paradox of life that is embodied in the necessity of eating. He explains:

Living form, to preserve life and form, threatens life and form. Eating is at once form preserving and form deforming. What was distinct and whole gets broken down and homogenized, in order to preserve the distinctness and wholeness of the feeder. In the case of predatory meat eaters, what was alive is killed in order to preserve life... Nature

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<sup>11</sup> See Kass (1994:31).

<sup>12</sup> The best available theological contribution remains the volume edited by Grumett & Muers (2010).

<sup>13</sup> See Wilkinson (1975:20), drawing on Bertholt Brecht.

<sup>14</sup> See Versfeld (1983:138), almost verbatim. For a discussion on Feuerbach’s saying, see Versfeld (1983:70f).

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Kass (1994:17), without specific reference.

<sup>16</sup> See Kass (1994:26).

<sup>17</sup> See especially Jonas (1966:102-104).

manifests both variety and vitality; in living things vitality presupposes, conserves, but also threatens variety.<sup>18</sup>

There is also a rapidly expanding corpus of biblical,<sup>19</sup> theological and ethical literature<sup>20</sup> where reflections on the Eucharist, the soteriological motif of feeding the starving and a call for distributive justice given the inequalities of the global food economy are offered.<sup>21</sup> However, eating is seldom placed within an evolutionary context. The elusive question thus remains: what are we doing when we eat?

In the discussion below I will first offer a rather crude typology of views on the act of eating. In a subsequent contribution this typology will be extended by an analysis of the available theological options and by a necessarily provisional, modest proposal.

Each of the options in the typology may be assessed in terms of differences of species (who eats what), in terms of human gender (who produces the food, who prepares that and who may eat first) and especially in terms of class (who eats well). Each of the options may also be assessed in terms of whether they manage to do justice to evolutionary history on the one hand and (where appropriate) to core (Christian) theological convictions on the other.

There is a need to avoid both reductionism (reducing culture to nothing but nature) and disconnection (separating culture from nature). Much-maligned forms of dualism, seeking to maintain the tension between, let us say, 'body' and 'soul' (or munching and dining) in order to justice to both, may, in fact, be better able to do justice to human forms of eating than reductionism and disconnection since both poles are at least held together. However, there may well be a fluctuating tendency to skew the one or the other of the polar opposites, all too often leading to disconnection or reductionism in any case. Some may wish to avoid binary oppositions, e.g. by adding 'spirit' to body and soul or a range of other concepts such as embodiment, self-consciousness, transcendence, personhood, relationality, being as communion and so forth. Yet others may opt for multi-dimensional models where the underlying complexity is acknowledged but where the relatedness of the various dimensions is hard to explain.

Again, my sense is that all the available options fail in one way or another in terms of evolutionary (scientific), ecological, ethical and theological criteria. In offering such a typology I hope to be reminded of other not yet recognised options for understanding the meaning of eating.

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<sup>18</sup> See Kass (1994:54).

<sup>19</sup> See the contributions by MacDonald and Horrell in the volume edited by Grumett and Muers (2010), also for further literature references. The difficulty here is that even if eating meat is regarded only as a temporary permission for humans, there is still a need to come to terms with the role of predation in evolutionary history. Even in the radical vision of Isaiah 11, the cow grazes on grass and the lion eats straw like an ox – both assume that some living organisms have to die to provide food for others.

<sup>20</sup> See the entries in the bibliography, including monographs by Ayres (2013), Capon (1967, 1978), Jung (2004), Méndez-Montoya (2012) and Wirzba (2011) – all from within the North American context.

<sup>21</sup> There is no need here to offer references to available literature. One quotation from Michael Northcott (2010:240), drawing many strands together, may suffice: "Eucharistic eating enacted a new society and a new creation in which class division was absent, and the violence and killing involved in meat-eating were no longer necessary. The meal became a microcosm for the divine plan to redeem the whole creation from the effects of sin: physical food became spiritual food as bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ and through this transformation the Church was said to be constituted, and the world redeemed from sin and violence."

## **A Crude Typology of Eating**

One may plot various positions on the human act of eating on an axis of condoning the use of force, ranging from (social) Darwinian positions to equally extreme forms of asceticism. In the discussion below I will caricature such positions to some extent in order to demonstrate the underlying problem, namely an apparent collective inability to come to terms with the act of eating and the role of predation that is implied in that.

### *Food as Fuel*

A crudely Darwinian position would situate eating in the context of an ongoing struggle for survival. Accordingly, food is nothing but fuel. Any organism needs to eat in order to live. The most basic rule here is that one needs to spend less energy in obtaining food than it yields in consuming it.<sup>22</sup> Eating often implies killing and absorbing other metabolisms and this cannot be avoided. Such killing may be accompanied by more or less brutality, but this is only a matter of degree compared to ‘humane’ slaughtering – or for that matter compared to ruthlessly pulling a carrot from the soil, mowing the lawn or biting off the leaves of living plants (as herbivores do). This is epitomised by the predatory habits of carnivores (including carnivorous plants) and omnivores, but herbivores also feed off living plants. To grow fruit and vegetables requires some pest control regarding insects, snails and rodents so that some form of (indirect) predation seems inevitable. Indeed, nature is ‘red’ in terms of claws but also teeth. That humans are equipped with a set of teeth is a reminder of our evolutionary heritage in this regard. At best eating implies scavenging for organic leftovers, including fruit, seeds and nuts, but also decomposing plants and carcasses. It is rather telling that plants and animals have developed defence mechanisms to avoid being eaten. As Steven Pinker observes:

Except for fruits (which trick hungry animals into dispersing seeds), virtually every food is the body part of some other organism, which would just as soon keep that part for itself. Organisms evolve defences against being eaten, and would-be diners evolve weapons to overcome these defences, prodding the would-be meals to evolve better defences, and so on, in an evolutionary arms race. These weapons and defences are genetically based and relatively fixed within the lifetime of the individual; therefore they change slowly. The balance between eater and eaten develops only over evolutionary time.<sup>23</sup>

Eating therefore assumes the death of such organisms. Even a refreshing pot of tea cannot revive the dead tea leaves. Death is implied in eating in three ways: eating is a daily reminder for multi-cellular organisms that they require food to postpone their own inevitable deaths; it requires the deaths of the other organisms that will be eaten and there is the (for many) unpleasant reminder that one will eventually be eaten by other organisms.<sup>24</sup> To assume that eating does not imply death may well hide a Gnostic if not a Manichean tendency, amongst Christians a refusal to accept creation on God’s terms.<sup>25</sup> In fact, many

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<sup>22</sup> See Webb (2012:2).

<sup>23</sup> See Pinker (2009:188).

<sup>24</sup> See Wirzba (2011:110) who recognises the need to eat in order to survive and the need to kill in order to eat, but seems to shy away from the notion of being eaten. He does say that “Creation is an altar on which creatures are offered to each other as the expression of the Creator’s self-giving care and provision for life” (2011:112), but this prompts gratitude and seems to eschew the reality that human bodies are food (an offering of love?) for others.

<sup>25</sup> See Wirzba (2011:135).

other organisms feed off a living body (bacteria, mosquitoes, the recycling of poo). One may seek to prevent being eaten, ultimately through cremation, but then one may have to be reminded that the ashes from the crematoria at Auschwitz and Birkenau were released into ponds and rivers as food for fish (as I was told by a tour guide).

The (violent) conflict embedded in this position is of course open for interpretation. There are different models that can be employed here. One may offer a capitalist eulogy for the advantage of competition in a 'free' market, based on the same intuition that one (first) needs to attend to one's own self-interests, including the need for food. Or, even better: food may be bought and sold as a commodity for self-enrichment far beyond one's own need for fuel. Or one may employ a Marxist model of class conflict that will eventually yield a classless utopia. Alternatively, one may opt for a Freudian analysis of the conflict between the pleasure principle (*eros*) and the death instinct (*thanatos*) or perhaps a Nietzschean defence of human supremacy (see below), or, if you like, a defence of an unashamedly colonialist quest for land and resources, or a white supremacist condoning of slavery. In each case the inevitability of food contestation lies at the very heart of the defence. Such embedded conflict may of course also attract a Macchiavelian or a Hobbesian interpretation. Some form of contract theory may well be required to curtail the use of force entailed in the very act of 'grabbing a bite'. This allows for cooperation, but the purpose of such cooperation is often tied to the production, distribution and preparation of food in order to provide 'fuel' for those in positions of economic power.

### *Eating as a Demonstration of Human (or Male or White) Supremacy*

One may argue, along similar lines, that human eating epitomises and symbolises human power and indeed supremacy. This is not merely because humans (as omnivores<sup>26</sup>) tend to be at the top of the food chain (although our evolutionary ancestors were often cat food) or because of the sophisticated culture associated with eating. There is a long lineage of authors that include James Boswell, Claude Lévi-Strauss and more recently Richard Wrangham and Michael Pollan who have described *homo sapiens* as a 'cooking animal'. In human evolution cooking significantly increased the availability of food for humans, also rendering it more digestible. Some argue that cooking was the main factor that allowed for the increase in the size of the human brain from approximately 1.9 million years ago. Since then, the teeth, jaws and intestines of our human ancestors began to get smaller because it became increasingly less necessary to digest raw food.<sup>27</sup> Cooking enabled humans to spend less energy on chewing and digesting food and this allowed for smaller guts and bigger brains. Our biological make-up now depends upon a diet of cooked food. Moreover, as omnivores our metabolisms are biologically dependent upon a variety of plants and animal for specific nutrients. Variety is for us humans a biological necessity, not only the spice of life.<sup>28</sup> What we eat quite literally shapes who we are. As Pollan puts it, we have come a long way as a species; "we have indeed lifted ourselves out of nature red in tooth and claw, achieved a kind of transcendence. Cooking sets us apart, helps us to mark and patrol the

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<sup>26</sup> Kass (1994:56) recognises the hierarchies of supremacy at stake here: "finding and taking nourishment are more genuine accomplishments for the mobile than the sessile, for the carnivore than the grazer, for the intelligent than the dumb. Yet, though growing omnivorosity (direct or indirect) seems to correlate with – and perhaps to require – growing awareness of the limitless variety of the formed world, omnivorosity means, in principle, the willingness to homogenise and destroy the world as formed and ordered, to put it all to use for oneself, or rather, to swallow and to turn it into oneself.

<sup>27</sup> See Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:24), almost verbatim.

<sup>28</sup> See Pollan (2006:189).



borders between ourselves and nature's other creatures – none of which can cook... Cooking transforms nature and, by doing so, elevates us above that state, making us human."<sup>29</sup> Indeed, "Cooking symbolically marks a transition from nature to culture, and also from nature to society, given that while raw is natural in origin, cooked implies a step that is both cultural and social."<sup>30</sup> Of course, eating what has been cooked then serves as a physical and symbolic reinforcement of such supremacy.

Pollan admits that such an affirmation of human supremacy by domesticating, killing, cooking and eating other animals "has never been anything less than a momentous, spiritually freighted, and deeply ambivalent occasion".<sup>31</sup> He suggests that this recognition may lie at the root of ritual (animal) sacrifices. It helped people to think about what they are doing, especially when eating meat. He then adds:

This points to something else ritual sacrifice did for people: It drew sharp lines of distinction between humans and other animals on the one side, and between humans and the gods on the other. Other animals don't clothe their killing or eating in ritual; nor do they cook their food over fires they control. When people participate in ritual sacrifice, they are situating themselves in the cosmos at a precise point halfway between the gods, whose power over them they acknowledge by making the sacred offering, and the animals, over whom the ceremonial killing demonstrates their own godlike powers. The recipe for the ritual tells us exactly where we stand.<sup>32</sup>

If eating symbolises human supremacy, it may also become indicative of male supremacy. Feminist scholars have described the interlocking dualisms associated with the pairs female and male, nature and culture, body and soul, brain and mind, passion and reason, private and public, earth and heaven. In terms of a hierarchy of senses eating is associated with the senses of touch, smell and taste – which are less differentiated and therefore allegedly rank lower than sight and hearing that are associated with knowledge. There is a tendency in philosophy, religion and literature alike to associate food with the body, with what is female, with cooking in the domestic sphere (men tend to cook in public) and with appetite. If so, 'civilised' men (with hints of white supremacy) may wish to overcome such bodily passions through knowledge and reason. However, instead of avoiding such passions, the bitter irony is that hunting, braaing and eating thus becomes a way of demonstrating and reinforcing such male dominance – even in the act of succumbing to bodily needs.<sup>33</sup>

That eating may become indicative of white supremacy is illustrated by a brief comment from Willie Jennings on the fragile ecology of slave ships where some slaves tried to commit suicide by refusing to eat. He observes that the simple yet profound act of eating became an occasion for torture: "Eating on a slave ship did not carry the symbolic weight of affirming community and of offering thanks to God. Africans who refused to eat, choosing instead a slow death at sea rather than a slow death on the plantation, were forced, often by use of a horrific piece of technology called the *speculum oris*, a contraption that forced the mouth open."<sup>34</sup>

One can take the argument on human supremacy further for the sake of a critique of the

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<sup>29</sup> See Pollan (2013:53).

<sup>30</sup> Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:4).

<sup>31</sup> See Pollan (2013:51).

<sup>32</sup> See Pollan (2013:52), also Visser (1991:41).

<sup>33</sup> See Pollan (2013:17), drawing on the work of Janet Flammang in her work *The Taste of Civilization: Food, Politics and Civil Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>34</sup> See Jennings (2010:179).

plight of domesticated animals on large commercial farms that have been turned into meat factories, enforcing a life of pain on such animals and with considerable health hazards for humans consuming such meat. There is ample secular literature available in this regard that need not be repeated here. Does this imply that any domestication of animals necessarily lead to a form of slavery and exploitation? This seems to be overstating the case as domestication clearly has been in the interest of the domesticated animals if the numbers of cattle, sheep, pigs, dogs and chickens are anything to go by. Such animals are more likely to survive in alliance with humans than on their own since they have lost the ability to fend for themselves. Admittedly, this comes at the cost of providing humans with their milk, eggs and indeed their very flesh.<sup>35</sup>

Such supremacist views are seldom condoned in the available literature, but this seems to be a widespread cultural assumption. Why else would a society condemn cannibalism but condone the slaughtering of non-human animals for food? Why else would vegans reject eating meat but condone eating vegetables if there was no tacitly assumed hierarchy based on complexity, consciousness or sentience? We swallow something else not only because of our need for fuel but also because we regarded ourselves entitled to do so given such a hierarchy of complexity. Of course, we also do so often simply because we like doing so (see the discussion on hedonistic consumption below).

It has to be said that such a notion of human supremacy may be understood as an extreme form of a notion of civility that is widely endorsed despite cultural differences. As Leon Kass notes, civility comprises behaviour thought to be appropriate amongst 'civilised' people, regulating dignified bodily posture, eating, drinking, excretion, sleeping, ordinary courtesy, propriety, politeness and tactful speech. It is expressed most clearly in terms of eating practices – not so much what we eat but where, when, with whom and how we eat. It is often contrasted with being barbaric, bestial, rustic, disorderly and primitive. Such civility is certainly also contested, not only because of notions of civilisation that it entails, but also because it seems to inhibit spontaneity, because it is a matter of etiquette more than ethics, or because it is not conspicuous enough as an example of high culture.<sup>36</sup> Yet, such a notion of civility forms a crucial part of educating children in all cultures. The role of having a meal together and proper table manners should not be underestimated in understanding what we (humans) are doing when we eat (and not just feed) – even where no table is involved, when one is eating on one's own in front of a TV. This is distinctly different from the ways in which other animals eat, partly because it requires some preparation, hospitality, leisure, proportional justice (in allocating portions) and civil conversation. Human eating literally takes place at an elevated level and not off the ground. We lift our food up to our mouths rather than take our mouths down to the food.<sup>37</sup> However, such cultured elevation cannot and does not abrogate the implied deaths of other living organisms (often the need for killing them) in order to eat. This is well recognised by Margaret Visser in a discussion of taboos around cannibalism in her *The Rituals of Dinner*:

Somewhere at the back of our minds, carefully walled off from ordinary consideration and discourse, lies the idea of cannibalism – that human beings might become food, and eaters of each other. Violence, after all, is necessary if any organism is to ingest another. Animals are murdered in order to produce meat; vegetables are torn up, peeled and chopped; most of what we eat is treated with fire; and chewing is designed remorselessly

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<sup>35</sup> See Pollan (2006:320).

<sup>36</sup> See Kass (1994:131).

<sup>37</sup> See Kass (1994:135).

to finish what killing and cooking began. People naturally prefer that none of this should happen to them. Behind every rule of table etiquette lurks the determination of each person present to be a diner, not a dish. It is the chief role of etiquette to keep the lid on the violence which the meal being eaten presupposes.<sup>38</sup>

Visser's argument is that being human means to regulate the intake of food through a system of codes designed to control appetite and maintain a social awareness of the needs of others. This system is culturally induced by precept, example and social conditioning in order to promote civility and to inhibit the violence embedded in killing other forms of life for food.

### *The Ascetic Vision*

At the other end of the spectrum one may find attempts (only amongst humans?) to minimise or at least lessen the use of force entailed in eating. This is epitomised in contemporary calls for a vegan or vegetarian diet, but this approach has roots in religious forms of asceticism and in the Sanskrit notion of *ahimsa* (to have compassion, not to injure). There are diverse ethical, environmental,<sup>39</sup> health and religious considerations that may be offered in support of such a diet. On each of these concerns there is a vast literature. My concern is not a specific diet but assumptions about what eating anything entails. The core intuition here is to avoid violence as far as this may be possible, especially violence to sentient animals. Admittedly, the terminology is loaded. One may describe the very act of eating as an act of 'violence' but this depends on how violence is defined. To talk about animal 'brutality' (with many famous examples) is likewise a matter of perspective. The message seems to be: if we eat beasts, we become beasts. In eating meat we are not ennobling the flesh but we are dragging ourselves down to the bestial.<sup>40</sup> To say that 'meat is murder' seems to assume a notion of personhood, unless one also wishes to admit to murdering carrots and cabbages in order to eat them.

Nevertheless, in all forms of eating some use of force is required in order for one metabolism to absorb another. The underlying task remains the same whether the meal is animal or vegetable or mineral: devouring the stored energy of life in order to sustain life. Even plants deplete the bacterial life in the soil.<sup>41</sup> Growing vegetables not only entails killing the

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<sup>38</sup> Visser (1991:8-9). Visser (1991:45-46) follows up her discussion of cannibalism with a remarkable passage on the significance of the Eucharist as a conclusive sacrifice. She explains that sacrifices are not abolished but included in something larger than that, namely communion with God where the congregation gathers at the table to eat God (given that Jesus is 'truly divine'): "All the boundaries are crossed: between individual and group; death and life; spirit and body; meaning and fact; beginning, lasting, and ending; old and new; here and elsewhere; eternal and temporal; linear and cyclical time; host and guest; God and humankind" (p. 45). No animal and no new death is required; one past death is ritually repeated in such a way that this leaves no room for further violence or scapegoating. Injustice, betrayal, torture, murder, and sacrilege – all of this is transformed into grace, forgiveness and salvation, leading to initiation into a new way of life. She then adds: "As a meal, the Mass spans all of the meanings of eating at once – from cannibalism to vegetarianism, from complete fusion of the group to utterly individual satisfaction, from the breaking of the most fearful of taboos to the gentlest and most comforting restoration" (p. 45).

<sup>39</sup> There is a vast literature on the environmental consequences of contemporary food production. One comment on water consumption may suffice here: "On average, an individual utilizes 2 to 4 liters of water per day for drinking, while virtual daily water consumption to feed oneself varies from approx. 1,500-2,600 liters for a vegetarian diet, to approx. 4,000-5,400 liters in a meat-rich diet" (see Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition 2009:26).

<sup>40</sup> See Versfeld (1983:75), almost verbatim and paraphrasing the vegetarian rationale.

<sup>41</sup> See Wilkinson (1975:5-6), almost verbatim. He adds: "Vegetarianism does not loose us from the bloody tree of life."

plant in the end but also protecting the plant from other plants (weeds) and from eaters such as insects and rodents. Would one need to distinguish between the violence done to vegetables in cooking or baking them or in eating them raw?<sup>42</sup> If such a use of force cannot be avoided, it can at least be minimised in order to establish a more 'humane' society.

It should be clear that this approach is attractive in order to reduce the levels of brutality in society (assuming some notion of what being a 'brute' entails). The prototypical South African braai (with its excessive consumption of meat and reinforcing of patriarchal structures) comes to mind here. It serves as a much-needed corrective to the excesses of consumerism. This argument may be used to promote a (more) vegetarian diet, i.e. then not so much as a principled position but as a critique of consumerism and of the treatment of animals on commercial farms.<sup>43</sup>

Yet, such an ascetic approach cannot and does not come to terms with the underlying problem of predation. It also raises odd questions about the relationship between nature and culture. In the name of compassion to non-human animals it seems necessary to reinforce a sharp distinction between humans and such animals. If all humans are to become vegetarians, does this apply to other predators as well? If not, how is human eating to be situated within an evolutionary context? Does a failure to address this question not point to an underlying discomfort with our own animality – and also with the animality of other animals?<sup>44</sup> At best, the message seems to be that there is a need to steer biological evolution in a different direction with the emergence of human beings and of human civilisations, namely towards cultural evolution. To fail to do so is to allow our 'animal instincts' to reign supreme. The ascetic ideal may thus be accused both of erasing and of reinforcing a distinction between humans and other animals. Alternatively, all animals, humans included, may be called to live in peace and harmony with each other. Evolution by natural selection is by definition in need of redemption!<sup>45</sup>

Such an ascetic approach is therefore not one that can be maintained consistently (a period of fasting cannot last forever either) – short of an act of literal self-sacrificing in order to offer one's own body as food for others. The longer one lives, the more one needs to consume other living organisms – so that such self-sacrifice is best done sooner rather than later (if this argument holds, which is hopefully not the case!). This again poses the problem of interpreting the very act of eating. As far as I can see the options here are not very attractive either:

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<sup>42</sup> See Capon (1978:111).

<sup>43</sup> Stephen Webb (2001:217) employs such a more pragmatic argument in promoting Christian vegetarianism: "Some Christians affirm a meat-oriented diet today as a way of proclaiming their faith in the goodness of creation as a gift from God, but they thereby risk affirming the hedonistic values of our consumeristic and gluttonous society, where meat-eating is a symbol not of the Christian doctrine of creation but of the right of humans to satisfy all of their desires at the cheapest possible price."

<sup>44</sup> See Pollan (2006:321).

<sup>45</sup> See the defence of Christian vegetarianism by Webb (2001). He says: "[T]he world, including the violence of the animal kingdom, is not what it is was meant to be; fortunately, God is working toward and will one day restore the world to its original state of peace and harmony" (2001:37). Elsewhere he adds that, "We live in a fallen world, where the animals have turned against us and each other as much as we have turned against them, so we cannot based our moral decisions on what is presently the case. We must look to the past to see God's original intentions for the world and to the future to see where God is directing the world" (2001:78). Moreover, we should not take our moral principles from the wild since Bible tends to favour the role of domesticated animals (2001:79, 81). Untamed nature is fallen so that human dominion entails naming and hence domestication other animals – presumably encouraging them to become more vegetarian since God gave only green plants as food for mammals, birds and reptiles (Gen 1:30). There is simply no cognisance of evolutionary history here!

- One may opt for a revised form of Gnosticism where that which is material, bodily and earthly is treated with some disdain.<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, eating is a necessary evil. This is best done with a sense of shame over bodily functions (saliva, gluttonous desires, blood, guts, defecation) in order to discipline oneself to focus on the ‘higher’ virtues pertaining to the life of the mind. It is not food, but food for thought that matters.<sup>47</sup> The Jesus of the Gnostics ate and drank in such a way that food was not corrupted in him and so that there was no need for defecation.<sup>48</sup>

This approach is almost inevitably elitist and probably dishonest given the lavish feasts often associated with the parties of the cultured elite – where slaves and servants are tasked to do the slaughtering but may not share in the feast, only in some leftovers. Some Gnostics were strictly ascetic by attenuating contact with matter through fasting and celibacy. Others were notorious for their orgies. Given the crudeness and brutality embedded in eating, one cannot but recognise the continued lure of the Gnostic temptation. This is expressed as the longing for a different world, “absolutely free of necessity and harshness – a world of ease, pleasure, and comfort – in which the lion will lie down with the lamb, and all will eat seeds, delicately boiled in their shells, and graze away indefinitely.”<sup>49</sup>

- Alternatively, one may opt for a Manichean dualism where the conflict between bodily desires and the life of the mind is acknowledged but not resolved. Accordingly, eating is indeed ‘from the devil’ but this is a ‘necessary evil’ in order to explore the ‘good’, the ‘true’ and the ‘beautiful’. Christians need to partake of the Eucharist in order to taste a slice of what is heavenly.<sup>50</sup> Such dualism may well be a more honest attempt to harmonise what cannot be easily reconciled, namely killing other living organisms for food and being ‘civilised’.

Given these two opposite ends of the spectrum, can one find some middle ground? Or can one plot the act of eating on a different, more congenial axis? This may be possible but tends to eschew the underlying problem. I think one can find at least two such middle positions, namely hedonistic consumption and conspicuous consumption.

### *Hedonistic Consumption*

Hedonistic consumption is arguably a variant of a (social) Darwinian view on eating except that it focuses on pleasure rather than on inducing or avoiding pain. Eating is indeed pleasurable and this applies not only to humans but evidently also to other animals. Admittedly, the pleasure of the one who is eating comes at the cost of the ‘pain’ of the one who is eaten (again, there is no voluntary exchange). In such an emphasis on pleasure any

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<sup>46</sup> This is of course not how the best exponents of the ascetic tradition understand its core intuition. As Wirzba (2011:207) (rightly) observes: “Asceticism is not contempt for bodily, material life. Rather, it is the inner detachment that uses and enjoys creation’s gifts without needing to possess them.”

<sup>47</sup> Martin Versfeld (1983:52) is nevertheless right I saying: “Eating is not only a physical process; it is also a spiritual process. Your food could not enter your mouth did it not first enter your mind. You are what you eat, but you also eat what you are. You pour a spiritual sauce on what enters your mouth, like an act of sex which is clothed with imagination.”

<sup>48</sup> See Fredrikson (2012:69).

<sup>49</sup> See Kass (1994:117).

<sup>50</sup> See Wirzba (2011:149): “the Eucharist is the place where Christ’s offering of himself invites a transformation of eaters so that their lives can become an offering for others too. It is the site where people, having consumed Jesus as their food and drink, are re-created by Christ and so taste a slice of heaven.” Wirzba here employs the notion of kenotic sacrifice (see also below).

notion of sacrifice is rejected as macabre, albeit that the mass slaughtering of animals is simultaneously condoned as normal on condition that this is done at a remote location, far removed from the place where meat is to be consumed.<sup>51</sup>

Such an emphasis on pleasure can be extended in different directions, including the sheer enjoyment of stimulated taste buds, gluttony and the refined taste experiences associated with the culinary arts and wine tasting. The food and restaurant industry caters for a wide variety of tastes and invites clients to explore new products, exotic foods and ever expanding levels of pleasure. Not surprisingly, this view of eating requires considerable attention to food preparation with the associated industry of sharing recipes derived from around the world.

The association with the culinary arts is closely related to conspicuous consumption (see below) although the emphasis in the latter case is not so much on the act of eating but on what is associated with eating. Either way, the pleasure of eating is enhanced by doing so with a fuller consciousness about choices made in terms of the production, distribution, selection and preparation of food.<sup>52</sup> The experience of pleasure in hedonistic consumption may therefore be extended beyond the taste buds to a general sense of well-being. This is expressed in the choice of food types but also, for example, in the accessories of fine dining: table dressing, crockery, glasses, cutlery, ambiance and the like. In short, the world as food is the world humanised.<sup>53</sup> This of course also allows for social cohesion and conviviality. The salvific potential of this view of food is emphasised in a study document entitled “The Cultural Dimension of Food” released by the Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition:

But the greatest challenge of our era is probably that of reacquiring a more profound, richer and more motivating relationship with the process of eating, in which the relationship with food is returned to an aesthetic one based on taste and pleasure. As has been mentioned on several occasions, time is decisive in this regard. Time which extends to allow new space for the eating experience. Just as important is regaining the aspect of conviviality which, in many ways, creates the possibility for a gratifying experience.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, such a retrieval of the pleasure of eating has some quasi-religious connotations:

Our postmodern society is one of disenchantment, the loss of the magic of symbolic exchange and distortion of space and time in our lifestyles. Globalization creates an incumbent presence of what is ‘diverse’, denying people of the human aspects of tangibility, resemblance, durability, connection and profundity. The risk is that a desperate need to interact with others and the progressive fear and inability to do so, will tend to make communities fragile and ephemeral, and emotions fleeting and fragmented.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the pleasure associated with culinary arts and a sense of homeliness there are the related pleasures of instant gratification associated with fast foods, meals on the go, pre-prepared meals and TV-dinners. These may meet our needs for fuel and may yield some pleasure but it has to be said that they also diminish opportunities for conversation, communion, hospitality and aesthetic discernment. This produces a culture where kitsch becomes exalted and where the superficial is glorified.

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<sup>51</sup> See Grumett & Muers (2010:107).

<sup>52</sup> See Pollan (2006:11).

<sup>53</sup> See Versfeld (1983:24).

<sup>54</sup> Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:30).

<sup>55</sup> Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:30). The ‘profundity’ that is emphasised here is far from the profanity of hedonistic consumption but scarcely addresses the problem of predation.

### *Conspicuous Consumption*

The notion of conspicuous consumption is derived from Theodore Veblen's famous analysis suggesting that in the act of consuming (food) people often try to convey their social status in comparison with the consumption patterns of their neighbours. "Conspicuous consumption" is a form of cultural communication in which signals concerning wealth and social status are telegraphed to others with the aim of improving one's social status by emulating the 'leisured class'. This prompts the leisured class to invent other status symbols in order to demarcate their social identity. This leads to a spiral of social climbing where consumers are motivated by a mix of envy (keeping up with the Joneses) and anxiety to maintain their relative positions. Actually, 'we' do not need to keep up with the Joneses but have to stay ahead of them. Conspicuous consumption is therefore consumption not merely for hedonistic excess; it also serves as a marker of class identity, of social stratification and of adherence to norms of style and taste. It is not only a matter of *what* is being consumed but also *how* it is being consumed. The elite create distinction for themselves through their 'superior' taste, distancing themselves from those with 'inferior' taste (Pierre Bourdieu). Conspicuous consumption, flaunting the luxuries of success, receives little censure in a consumer society where people are socialised to accept the need for competition and acquisition.<sup>56</sup> In more traditional societies food and drink could not be hoarded so that hosting a feast (for all in a village) to share the surplus also functioned as a leveller – even though this enhanced the host's prestige and influence.<sup>57</sup>

That consumption is a marker of social identity is not by itself problematic given people's need to express themselves and to be socially acceptable (e.g. in terms of clothing and sanitation).<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, the demonstration of more sophisticated products (e.g. a better washing soap) would naturally lead others to experiment with the same product.<sup>59</sup> The same may apply to food products and food types. However, when this generates a spiral of social desires, it can undermine the formation of virtue. It undermines the so-called four cardinal virtues of wisdom (e.g. being lured into buying on credit), justice (living only for oneself), courage (to break with consumer habits) and especially temperance. Such virtues would normally be required to govern human judgements and to moderate desires, to find a mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess.<sup>60</sup>

It should be clear that hedonistic consumption can easily revert into conspicuous

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<sup>56</sup> See Childs (2000:109).

<sup>57</sup> See Visser (1991:36).

<sup>58</sup> See the essay by Judith Lichtenberg (1998) on "Consuming because others consume." She argues that levels of consumption are necessarily relative and that people do not only consume because others consume, or for the sake of what Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption'. In order to function within a modern urban context people have a varied range of basic needs in addition to absolute human needs for air and food. Many items once thought of as high-tech luxuries are now becoming increasingly necessary for citizens in a technologically sophisticated society. These would include television sets, telephones, computers and so forth. Moreover, some forms of consumption such as public transport is necessarily linked to the consumption patterns of others. Lichtenberg (1998:171) concludes that there is a need to distinguish between four categories of "consuming because others consume": 1) consumption dependent on infrastructure and networks; 2) consumption dependent on the demonstration effect; 3) the status-related desire for equality; and 4) the status-related desire for superiority. In each case a different moral judgement would be required.

<sup>59</sup> Lichtenberg (1998:160) notes that the impact of this 'demonstration effect' should not be underestimated: people in less affluent communities have constant access through the mass media to the life styles of the affluent.

<sup>60</sup> That consumerism undermines virtue and breeds vices is one point of entry for a critique of consumerism. For a discussion see Conradie (2009).

consumption and vice versa. The same study document of the Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition raises the question: “What will the role of food be in this newly-emerging world?” (i.e. a multifarious and uncertain society). Its answer is telling:

Image will increasingly tend to form the basis of consumption. It will not be products themselves that determine a choice, but their codified meaning. To convince people to consume, and continue to do so over time, products must be integrated into functional and emotional aspects through symbolic elements that meet the need for roots, localization, duration and respite from anxiety, with a reassuring physical and mental boundary.<sup>61</sup>

In a final conclusion the elitist connotations of this view of eating becomes apparent. There seems to be little awareness of what eating may mean in contexts plagued by food insecurity:

Lastly, spreading the culture of enjoyment of the eating experience and the taste for good living through authentic food, because restoring the magic and wonder of food and its rituals and the delight of its carefree enjoyment – as existential and cultural fuel – are ways of rediscovering the central importance of people and their emotions. In the future, luxury and good health will both reside in great measure in the art of living and conceiving of food in a cultural key.<sup>62</sup>

### A Preliminary Assessment

Again one needs to ask whether these are the only available options. None of these positions are very attractive if scientific (evolutionary), ecological (non-anthropocentric), ethical and theological considerations are to be held together. Let us review these in inverse order: The elitism of conspicuous consumption hides the use of force in obtaining food products and eschews ethical concerns over food sufficiency and the just distribution of food. The poor can hardly afford whole foods. Hedonistic consumption may indeed be pleasurable but one may raise the same ethical concerns if my pleasure comes at the cost of your pain. Within human communities food (and the pleasures associated with that) is of course habitually shared but not equally distributed so that food contestation is inevitable. Gnostic views on ‘spiritual’ eating, eating without consuming anything, remain strangely popular.<sup>63</sup> The ascetic ideal may be ethically attractive in its commitment to reduce violence but can scarcely do justice to the evolutionary origins of human eating – unless the story is told as one of increasing complexity allowing for moral development (which remains rather anthropocentric). The assumed hierarchy is also the underlying problem with understanding eating in terms of human (or male or white) supremacy. A Darwinian reminder is also necessary here, namely that the consumption of food almost always (short of grazing, bacterial processes and photosynthesis) requires the death of other living organisms.

One may be forced to conclude, then, that a (social) Darwinian emphasis on food as fuel is

<sup>61</sup> Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:30).

<sup>62</sup> Barilla Centre for Food and Nutrition (2009:31).

<sup>63</sup> See Wirzba’s emphasis on “abiding in Christ in the context of a discussion of ‘eating Jesus’”. He observes that in eating bread we physiologically deform what is eaten. What is distinct and whole gets broken down and homogenised by the one who eats. In Eucharistic eating, Wirzba (2011:157) believes, the other is not completely destroyed but abides in the one who eats: “*The other, that is, Jesus, continues to live on in me not as a de-formed matter but as food that in-forms and re-forms life from the inside.* This is eating founded on mutual abiding” (his emphasis). If such imagery is to be interpreted literally it would amount to a macabre form of cannibalism: giving your own body to be eaten by others. Since this is clearly not the intended meaning, the bodily significance of such formulations has to be bracketed in order to stress a communal identity.



at least brutally (!) honest and descriptive of social conditions in the context of food contestation, if rather unattractive from an ethical or theological perspective. It seems to me that the question “What do we do when we eat?” therefore remains unresolved.

- **Bibliography:** See the bibliography provided in Part II.