

## REVIEW

**John Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning, The pleasure and anxiety of eating*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (London: Routledge Books, 2006). Hardcover. \$125.00. ISBN 0415376203 216 pages. Paperback. \$41.95. ISBN 0415376211. 188 pages.**

In a day when carbohydrates strike fear into people and calories are neurotically calculated, John Coveney's *Food, Morals and Meaning: The pleasure and anxiety of eating* surfaces as a timely and lively discussion of our difficult "relationship with food and eating."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, it bears witness to the pragmatic power behind the ideas of Michel Foucault. *Food, Morals and Meaning* shows Foucault's thought constructively seeping into fields beyond philosophy: namely, into the disciplines of medical sociology and health policy (under which the book is classified). Though this observation is unsurprising when thinking about Foucault's sway in the social sciences, it is notable here because Coveney is actively applying Foucault to the pressing issues of our obsession with health and nutrition, showing him to be relevant in perhaps unforeseen ways. However, while Coveney talks to the concerns of today through Foucault, we also learn that "the science of nutrition is but a modern development in a moral history of food and eating that can be traced to earlier systems of thought in Western culture."<sup>2</sup> This genealogical approach is where Foucault's thought comes to weigh heavily on Coveney's project.

Foucault's method (I prefer "style") reverberates throughout the work in several critical ways: Coveney discusses "the historical and cultural basis" of "the outpouring of concern and anxiety" regarding health and nutrition, and seeks to "provide an explanation of why we fear what we fear, and where in Western culture the foundations of anxiety about food originated."<sup>3</sup> This echoes two crucial characteristics of Foucault's "style," found in the Foucault who is the "historian of ideas," and the Foucault who is the "historian of thought."<sup>4</sup> Coveney assumes the persona of the "historian of ideas" when he

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1 John Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning: the pleasure and anxiety of eating* (London: Routledge Books, 2006), ix.

2 Coveney, ix

3 Coveney, xi.

4 The distinction between the "history of ideas" and the "history of thought" is discussed by Foucault in his lectures at the University of California at Berkeley in the

deftly traces “our current attitudes to food, pleasure and the body.”<sup>5</sup> This mirrors Foucault the genealogist who explored the historicity of our perspectives, our feelings, and our selves, or, more precisely, the context in which these emerge. Then Coveney becomes the “historian of thought” where he asks “how eating became a problem for the individual body, and, importantly, how it became a problem for the social body.”<sup>6</sup> This represents the Foucault who wished to problematize our opinions, our desires, and our anxieties to enable change on both a personal and public level. Coveney, in this Foucaultian spirit, boldly asks how worries “about our appetite for food have given and continue to give rise to concerns about the very moral fabric of society.”<sup>7</sup> This is not an innocent question in a day when we are bombarded with differing reports about food, how it relates to our health, and even our ethical view of ourselves: we are “bad” when we eat the chocolate cake with vanilla ice cream, and we are “good” when we avoid such delights. Coveney, like Foucault, provokes us to rethink our stubborn positions (“stubborn” because they seem without history, and are the everyday) on such issues to provide the chance for a certain freedom in relation to them; that is, a freedom in relation to ourselves.

This sense of freedom, I would say, is central to Foucault’s thought. Coveney advances this aspect of Foucault’s thought in relation to food, and the fear and pleasure it causes. Coveney claims

Warnings and admonitions constantly alert us to the fact we could be digging our own graves with our knives and forks. These concerns are usually couched in terms of our health, especially in terms of the scientific, calculated understanding of food that we recognise as the field of nutrition. However, nutritional knowledge does not merely consist of facts, figures and recommendations from scientific experts. As a knowledge about what, when and how much to eat, nutrition provides a guide for individuals to assess their eating habits in terms of what is ‘good.’<sup>8</sup>

The potential for freedom (in relation to our ideas about food, health, and what is “good”) is suffocated by relentless “warnings and admonitions” that we could be “digging our own graves with our knives and forks.” This sort of “terror alert” when it comes to food makes critical thinking on these matters even more difficult than it is by definition, because it creates panics and

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Fall of 1983. These lectures are captured in his *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, CA.: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2001).

5 Coveney, xii.

6 Coveney, xii.

7 Coveney, xii.

8 Coveney, xii.

“epidemics.” These are common terms in current discourse and literature in the arena of food and health. Coveney, though, creates an avenue through which we might thoughtfully examine our fears, and perhaps conquer them or approach them in novel ways. This certainly would be relevant today when anxiety seems to pervade a number of arenas where knowledge and power collude. However, freedom in regards to our “understanding of food that we recognise as the field of nutrition” and “nutritional knowledge” is irrelevant unless we remember that for Foucault “subjects are constructed through relations of knowledge and power” and that he “does not understand power to be oppressive or dominating.”<sup>9</sup> Rather, Coveney notes, Foucault saw power as “*productive*,” as “produc[ing] ‘subjects’, for example, subjects of food choice; it also produces ‘objects’, for example, bodies that require nutrients; and it produces facts or ‘regimes of truth’, for example, nutritional knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> This is an illuminating, though abbreviated, reading through Foucault because it demonstrates how he “offers the possibility of a different account of nutrition, one that renders other histories of nutrition problematic because it takes as its ‘object’ the very individual that has been fundamental to them: the modern subject of food choice.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Coveney refers to the pragmatic influence of Foucault that courses through *Food, Morals and Meaning*: by applying Foucault’s ideas to suggest “a different account of nutrition,” Coveney continues Foucault’s ethical project in terms of rethinking “the emergence of nutrition, as a science and morality,”<sup>12</sup> so that we may be able to see what we eat, why we eat it, and who we are because of what we eat, in a new way that is, in a sense, freeing. In this vein, Coveney proposes that his book may allow us “to see nutrition for what it is: a government of food choice which situates individuals within a field of knowledge for explicit objectives, and, at the same time, provides them with a way of constituting themselves as ethical subjects through a decipherment of their pleasures and fulfilments.”<sup>13</sup> This is clearly a conclusion that Coveney derives by thinking with Foucault on these topics. The freedom that is primary in Foucault’s ethical thought is present here in the reevaluation of the “field of knowledge” that is nutrition. Coveney uses Foucault to clear a space where we are able to reevaluate our view of nutrition and see our “eating habits” as unavoidably bound with “moral concerns about food and the body,”<sup>14</sup> so that we may refashion ourselves in light of these revaluations.

*Food, Morals and Meaning*, then, though perhaps not classified as such, is a work of philosophy. The work is not only a discussion and application of

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9 Coveney, xv.

10 Coveney, xv.

11 Coveney, xv.

12 Coveney, xiii.

13 Coveney, 161.

14 Coveney, 161

Foucault's thought, but also a clarification of many of his ideas. Coveney notes that the "terrain" of *Food, Morals and Meaning* ("food, eating and health") is "familiar to most people."<sup>15</sup> The everyday and practical content of the book should introduce Foucault to readers who might not otherwise have encountered him.

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15 Coveney, xi.