

“We are what we eat”

Antonio Gasbarrini, Professore Ordinario di Medicina Interna, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Fondazione Policlinico Universitario A. Gemelli IRCCS di Roma.

Corresponding Author: Antonio Gasbarrini, MD; e-mail: antonio.gasbarrini@unicatt.it



This is the most cited aphorism about food ever. The indicted sentence appeared for the first time in a review that the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, father of German materialism, dedicated to the Treatise on food for the people by the Dutch physician and physiologist Jakob Moleschott, published in Germany in 1850. It was a revolutionary work, because it made nutrition as the driving force of human history, placing food at the origin of society, of thought, of religion and even of cultural and class differences. Among other things, it is worth remembering that in 1861 Moleschott was called by Francesco De Sanctis, then Minister of Education of the first Cavour government, to the chair of Physiology at the University of Turin and he also became a senator of the Kingdom of Italy.

The Treatise, translated into Italian in 1871¹, very topical in the light of contemporary “cibomania”, was followed by the essay entitled The mystery of sacrifice or Man is what he eats, which Feuerbach wrote in 1862, twelve years after his controversial review, to respond to the attacks made on him².

The disruptive force of the Treatise for Feuerbach, lies in the fact that it supports a new philosophy, scientifically demonstrating that thought starts right from the stomach and then reaches the head. But the

author goes even further. Starting from Moleschott’s affirmation that “without phosphorus there is no thought”, he gives another affirmation used in the common sense: “For you to introduce something into your head and into your heart it is necessary that you have first put something in your stomach”³.

Far from praising gluttony, the two make a radical speech that calls into question the dualism that divides a man from the other side of himself. The body and the mind, the soul and the flesh. For Feuerbach, the unity of the human being lies precisely in nutrition, which is the link between nature and culture. And this is true for humans as well as for animals, starting precisely from the observation that if the nourishment has transformed the wild cat into a domestic cat, from carnivore to omnivore, why should we be surprised if nutrition influences the nature of mankind, his social expressions, including politics, religion, economics, ethics and the rules of civil life?

The fact that eating and live are the same thing, is demonstrated by the word bios, which in ancient Greek meant life, but also survival. And a trace of this familiarity, also remains in the Latin word victum, voice of the verb to live and translated in English as meal.

Nutrition is not only essential for survival but also to maintain health. In so many diseases, nutritional changes represent the key point to achieve improvement and healing. The journal Nutrimentum et Curare, which means nutrition and cure, is then born to provide scientific support to this vital area.

REFERENCES

1. Today reprinted by Volumnia Editrice (pp. 171) with a very useful set of texts by anthropologists, nutritionists, scientists.
2. The Mystery of Sacrifice or Man is what he eats by Ludwig Feuerbach Cyril Levitt, Translator, 2007.
3. Feuerbach, Ludwig. (1850). “The Natural Sciences and the Revolution” (“Die Naturwissenschaft und die Revolution”) (German → English). Publisher.