

Out of the Box



My text for this and the next column, as for my two previous columns, is that part of *The Giessen Declaration*¹ concerning the general principles of the new nutrition science. It states: 'All sciences and all organised human activities are and should be guided by general principles. These should enable information and evidence to be translated into relevant, useful, sustainable and beneficial policies and programmes'.

And after 'the overall principles that should guide nutrition science are ethical in nature', the Declaration goes on to state: 'All principles should also be guided by the philosophies of co-responsibility and sustainability, by the life-course and human rights approaches, and by understanding of evolution, history and ecology'. Here, I begin to reflect on the concepts of evolution and of adaptation; and of history; and also culture and tradition. All these take time, and time is my theme.

Whose right?

First though, a squib about another guiding principle of the new nutrition science: rights. The Declaration uses the term 'human rights'. A supportive paper of which I am co-author also alludes to our co-responsibility with the living and physical world, mentions animal rights, and prefers the broader 'rights approach'². For myself I do not repent me of this affirmation that the human species is part of a greater whole.

Well! The response from some of the heavy hitters in the food and human rights movement to such a challenge to anthropocentricity has been impressive. One salvo has been fired by my old chum Arne Oshaug³: 'Is this New Age, or Gaia, or something similar?' he asks. Well, we are living in a new age, not a mere new chronological millennium, and the Gaian philosophy does envision the biosphere of which we are one part⁴: so the answer is yes. But then: 'If so, maybe this is not at all about public health nutrition and thus misplaced in the journal of *Public Health Nutrition*?'³. Well no, it's about the new nutrition science, which perhaps makes the heresy of our esteemed editor-in-chief even more heinous.

But that's almost as nothing. Exchanges with Arne, Wenche Barth Eide and Urban Jonsson on the new nutrition science and the issue of (human) rights, have given me the feeling of how it would have been to develop some new insights on liberty, fraternity and equality around Year Two of the Jacobin Republic, and as a result to be dragged before the Committee of Public Safety, to be examined by Antoine de Saint Just, Maximilien Robespierre and Georges-Jacques Danton. This here, I have

been told by members of the Nordic tribunal, is The Line. Rights are human rights only. And furthermore, here are the authorised texts: use them, preach them, or expect everlasting darkness. Jeepers!

I am all for general agreements on general principles. We should read, mark and inwardly digest Wenche's big blue book on food and human rights⁵. We should salute the vast amount of work and progress it represents and records, achieved by her, Arne and Urban; and also by equally admirable pioneers with calmer dispositions, including Asbjorn Eide, Uwe Kracht, George Kent, Roger Shrimpton and many others, notably since the 1996 World Food Summit in successive sessions of the UN SCN.

But on rights, I stand my ground. The only sustainable future for the human race is not in separation from but union with the whole of nature.

Humans in their place

If the house style of this journal allowed, I would now illustrate the point in the manner of Alain de Botton⁶, with my snap taken this March of a tree growing outside the Imperial Palace in Rio de Janeiro. This is one of the primal kind that has been bred out in countries whose culture is comfortable only with individual separated species, but luxuriant in the tropics, for it is also two trees grown symbiotically together as one.

Contemplation of symbiosis, such that properly perceived 'we' are also bacteria, as Lynn Margulis shows⁷, lets us see that our exaltation of our own species as lords and masters of the world is a mistake already causing us grief, and now heading us towards catastrophe. So yes, animals and forests cannot make their case in court (and nor could the native peoples of the Americas after their discovery by Europeans) and this should remind us of their rights and furthermore of our duties and responsibilities to them, as Mary Midgley points out⁸.

If we persist in the mistaken idea that rights should be reserved to humans, we will be part of the problem; we will accelerate the devouring of the living and physical resources by our species. I think this view is beyond serious debate. Certainly, it will not be guillotined.

All we can know

And now, to aspects of food and nutrition that relate to time.

One of my influences is Prakash Shetty, whose prescient forum held 10 years ago, showing that chronic diseases were already by then pandemic⁹, set me on the road that

led to my work and life now in Brazil. Prakash has reminded me that we all come from our own backgrounds, culture, times, families, upbringing, education, interests, knowledge – and influences.

Two hundred years ago people thought differently from us, about food, nutrition and health. We know this, and tend to forget that, in today's world, there are oral and written knowledge systems different from those recorded in journals reflecting the current dominant conventions. We can be sure that nutrition scientists of the twenty-second century will know things now unknown, and also will have concepts of disease, health and well-being not yet conceived or accepted, which may come from what came before us. What we can do, is to make the best of who we are and what we have got; and also do our best to think ahead as far as we can, which means that we will do well also to look back.

So I take down from my shelves the first book I bought, my 14th birthday present to me: EB Ford on British butterflies, first published in 1945¹⁰. This was the beginning of a two-year enthusiasm during which I rediscovered the habitats of the Purple Emperor, White Admiral and White-Letter Hairstreak in the woods of the West Sussex weald around Christ's Hospital. I also tried breeding, and underestimated the appetite for nettles of my Peacock caterpillars; the butterflies that emerged from their chrysalides were miniatures, but flew. Whether they then followed Barker's Hypothesis and gorged, became obese and crashed, I do not know.

The editors' preface politely indicates that the magisterial book, then #1 on my shelf, is somewhat more brainy than the average butterfly hunter might expect. And the author says in his preface: 'It has always appeared to me that evolution is the key-note of biological study and research... Furthermore, deeply impressed as I am with the importance of the past in interpreting the present, the historical setting of a subject has a value which, so it seems to me, is somewhat underestimated, at least in science'.

I read this now with a shock of recognition. The style and the substance of this passage must have become engraved in my mind at that time. For it has always seemed to me that mentioning oneself is not just a trick of the New Journalism, but the way to flag that there is no single Truth; and what Dr Ford says is what I now believe, although I would omit 'somewhat'.

The collapse of time

Now though are times when time is almost at an end. Here in Brazil I notice a firm that advertises itself with the slogan *20 anos de tradição* (20 years of tradition). A young colleague objects to me using the terms 'North' and 'South', and points out that Australia is in the South. To me North/South is a modern concept; to him it is meaningless. He thinks I have made the terms up, I guess because the report of the Brandt Commission¹¹ was published in 1980,

some years BC (before computers) and so has disappeared from the syllabus.

In 1966 the zoologist GG Simpson, referring to the question 'What is man?' and the year of first publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, said: 'All attempts to answer that question before 1859 are worthless and... we will be better off if we ignore them completely'¹². This brutish sentiment was celebrated by Richard Dawkins almost as an anthem in the first paragraph of his *The Selfish Gene*, first published 10 years later in 1976¹³.

Thirty years later, last month as I write, 'scientific progress' seems to be so exponentially accelerated that time has collapsed. The novelist Ian McEwan, referring to University College London, said in a speech to faculty¹⁴: 'Last year, my son William completed an undergraduate biology course at UCL. When he came to study genetics, he was advised to read no papers written before 1997'. He continues politely: 'One can see the point of this advice. In recent years, estimates of the size of the human genome have shrunk by a factor of three, or even four. Such is the headlong nature of contemporary science'. And he concludes poetically: 'But if we understand science merely as a band of light moving through time, advancing on the darkness, and leaving ignorant darkness behind it, always at its best only in the incandescent present, we turn our backs on an epic tale of ingenuity propelled by curiosity'.

The elimination of life

True. But there's more to it than that. There is a dark ideology at work. The statements cited here are indications of an attitude to all the biological sciences, including that of nutrition so perceived¹⁵, that has dominated teaching and practice in the last 150 years, which is completely mistaken. This is brought into the light by Lewis Wolpert¹⁶, who after an initial cautious 'in a sense' states: 'All science aspires to be like physics, and physics aspires to be like mathematics'.

Putting aside what modern physicists think physics is, here is why the first scientists who framed nutrition in what still remains its dominant form, identified the discipline as a type of chemistry. It was their aspiration to gain the highest honours that led them to kill time in their work, and to plunge nutrition down the rabbit-hole of the laboratory, in search of The Truth. Before scientists, nutrition was a philosophy of life. After scientists, it became represented by the grave man in a white coat posed peering into a microscope. For chemistry never changes, it is out of time, perceived as being 'out there' waiting to be known. Such iconography says it all. Nutrition scientists are among the new priesthood. At least, that's the idea.

What's happening here is more than the attitude that deems all work done BC and so not on a database to be non-existent, and all work not done by the team of which the presenter is a member to be sub-standard. These are

signals of an altogether more alarming ideology, which is that time is irrelevant to science, and all that counts is the latest knowledge, identified as such only by scientists. The great unrobed are not supposed to understand but to accept and believe. If you think I am exaggerating, spend the next week reading nothing but papers in journals publishing the results of experiments and studies in a subject in which you are not trained.

Conventional biological science, for all its technological progress, is like the culture of ancient Egypt, building elaborate structures designed to deny the basic fact of life – tombs for bodies meant to be eternal, represented by a frozen style of art.

We can set the biological sciences free and let them flow, by realising all the implications of them really being, like the social and environmental sciences, concerned with life in time; and therefore, with tradition, culture, history, adaptation and evolution. More of this next time.

The evasion of morals

In my February column I noted that UN and such-like policy statements on malnutrition evade moral language, and stop far short of suggesting that anybody is responsible, let alone that malign agencies may be at work. The example I gave was the World Declaration agreed in 1992 at the International Conference on Nutrition¹⁷, of which the next to last and final drafts of the opening statement of the Ministers and Plenipotentiaries representing 159 states were significantly different.

Here is how. I show this by striking through the words cut by the international civil servants in control at the last stage, ~~as here~~. Thus: ‘We all view with the deepest concern the ~~shocking and~~ unacceptable fact that about 780 million people in developing countries, 20% of their population, still do not have access to enough food to meet their basic daily needs...’ ‘Shocking’ got the chop.

‘Unacceptable’ is a clever ambiguous term, it flip-flops between being qualitative and quantitative. Thus, ‘unacceptable’ ranges of vitamin A intake could – it might be supposed – become ‘acceptable’ by mass administration of retinol pills, and maybe in time by manufacture and distribution of body-free liver grown in offal farms also designed to supply shiny vital organs to injured, diseased or decayed rich people.

Chopping out text that seems to point a finger indicating that some specific entity has some responsibility for any troublesome state of affairs, creates a curious floaty effect: yes, so many things are still going wrong in the world, and here are lots of data about just how wrong things are, but... well... it’s all very troublesome... more interventions are needed... more money... higher priorities... greater sense of purpose... concerted effort... However, this is not so when a finger of congratulation indicates that wonderful work is being done by say industry, public-private–people partnerships, or UN agencies. As Kofi

Annan hums to the mirror in the morning, always look on the bright side of life.

Plus ça change. The theme of the 33rd session of the UN SCN, held this March in Geneva, was ‘the double burden of malnutrition’ One global agenda was proposed.

To this end, delegates were asked to develop a ‘participants’ statement’ meant to say what the three groups that make up the UN SCN (the UN agencies, national governments and civil society organisations) thought about this, and what they proposed to do. The initial statement said that ‘malnutrition remains a pervasive global problem’. We all agreed that such truths needed to be beefed up. A drafting committee was formed, which I was asked to join perhaps because of my wordsmithing skills.

New thinking on malnutrition

The final text¹⁸ includes some rather excellent if inelegantly expressed concepts that emerged in drafting and discussion. Thus: ‘This double burden of malnutrition has common causes, inadequate foetal and infant and young child nutrition followed by exposure (including through marketing practices) to unhealthy energy dense nutrient poor foods and lack of physical activity’. Yes, as you may guess, the bit in parentheses was a battleground, and whose marketing practices were being referred to, was unstated.

Then: ‘The window of opportunity lies from pre-pregnancy to around 24 months of a child’s age. Schools provide a natural setting for effective interventions for older ages and to promote adequate nutrition to future mothers’. This revolutionary concept was boosted by a presentation at the session made by Jean-Louis Sarbib, senior vice-president of the World Bank, and by a new Bank report on the lead role of nutrition in development masterminded by Meera Shekar¹⁹. It implies that international and national food and nutrition policies should from now on be mainly concerned not only with infants and children, but also be targeted at young people for the sake of their children. This applies in all societies, rich as well as poor. The evidence is that after the age of 2, much of the vulnerability to diseases later in life is already determined.

Furthermore: ‘Malnutrition in all its forms amounts to an intolerable burden not only on national health systems but the entire cultural, social and economic fabric of nations, and is the greatest impediment to the fulfilment of human potential’. Not quite socking it to anybody, but *pas mal*. Action points were agreed as the joint responsibility of UN agencies, national governments, the private sector and civil society. These include:

- Empower all women and protect their nutrition, human rights and entitlements and those of their children, through knowledge, skills, policies and regulations.

- Recognise that the basic determinants of health and disease are social and environmental, and ensure healthy choices are accessible, affordable and safe.

This was all good stuff. But somehow another point agreed in the drafting stages was cut. This was:

- Regulate the marketing and advertising of breastmilk substitutes and energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and drinks, especially when directed at children.

On the last day, it was lost. Most delegates did not realise this: they came into the final plenary session with what they thought was the final final draft for discussion, but in the meantime a final final final draft had been agreed that chopped any reference to r*g*lt**n, m*rk*t*ng and *dv*rt*s*ng, and to formula feeds.

The fate of outrage

But I stray further from my point. From the start of drafting everybody agreed that the issues must be stated and the attitude of the participants made clear up front, in phrasing not cobbled together from other UN statements made over the last 10 and 50 years. And so, after a preliminary clearing of the communal throat: ‘We live in a world of great and increasing inequity between and within countries. This is outrageous and unacceptable’.

The first sentence was crafted initially to hint at responsibility. Second sentence? Well, successive drafts of the whole statement went to the general meetings of all three groups. (By the way, anybody who drafts text of this sort is in no sense its author. Once discussed and agreed by any assembly, the ownership of the whole text and of its constituent parts is collective. The drudges who trudge back to their laptops and knock back the eight mini-bottles of sparkling and still water in their hotel room mini-bars at 4 Swiss francs a pop, while cutting and pasting text and emailing anybody else still awake until sparrow-fart, are technicians, and don't you ever forget it!)

The interesting word of course is ‘outrageous’. If anybody had suggested cutting it, my response, taking off my wordsmith hat and putting on my civil society or indeed concerned citizen hat, would have been that it is ‘unacceptable’ to attend UN SCN sessions in a bathing suit, and that increasing global inequity is a bigger issue needing a stronger term. But nobody objected! Not a murmur! There was no debate. Gosh, were we making a little bit of history? This expression of moral concern seemed to be consensual! Everybody seemed to be ‘comfortable’, which I think we should not be, faced with the facts of malnutrition, but that's the term in vogue.

And then? After the session was over and we had all jetted out of Geneva International, we received by email a

copy of the final final final draft already released to the media. And: ‘We live in a world of great and increasing inequity between and within countries. This is ~~outrageous and~~ unacceptable’. Snip snap!

I asked a colleague, who is a member of the inner UN SCN steering group, if the deed had been done in some final closed session. She said no. So I asked, was the final final final (final?) draft discussed or circulated? I got some kind responses from a number of busy people which I take to be saying: ‘Get real, Geoffrey’. Perhaps the transcendental responsibility of all of us concerned with public health is to refuse to get real.

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