

The Philosophy of the Pontian Nutrition

Thomas Sawidis

(Department of Botany, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece)

Abstract: Nutrition in addition to its mission to nourish and keep alive the human being is a powerful cultural element for every nation. The diet of different peoples but also of all social groups demonstrates diversity and social stratification. It characterizes the cultural level of a society and at the same time can be used as a vehicle for conveying messages concerning health, morality, law and social behavior. The philosophy of the Pontian diet with experience and history of 30 centuries is an educational tool, an effective method of teaching social wisdom to future generations. The philosophy of Epicurus, despite the fact that it was misunderstood during the first Christian years, was largely preserved in the Pontian food culture and is expressed almost as it is by popular wisdom.

Key words: Pontian nutrition, philosophy

1. Introduction

Pontus is the northeastern region of Asia Minor stretching along the southern coast of the Black Sea. The designation Pontus, that was transferred to the country as well, is first found in Xenophon's *Anabasis* (Harper and Wallace, 1921). The use of the term Pontus became general after the time of Alexander the Great by many writers such as Strabo (Meineke, 1866–1877) and others. The region is a long and narrow strip of land (Figure 1) corresponding nearly to the modern province of Trabzon (Turkey). The Pontian diet developed in this area, has a history of almost three thousand years and was preserved together with the culture that accompanies it, by the Pontians that arrived in modern Greece after the exchange of populations in 1923. The main characteristics of the healthy Pontian Diet are the use of dairy products harmoniously combined with cereals (Sawidis, 2020; Sawidis, 2021) which are very often mentioned in the folk wisdom of nutrition.

Nutrition, in general, is a primary biological necessity. It is the most basic function of man, identical with life. Through it, life can be studied whereas human relationships can be defined. The plethora of quotes, opinions or proverbs that refer to nutrition aims at the effective teaching of popular wisdom using the example of the most vital human function, familiar to everyone experientially. With nutrition as a vehicle truth, messages and experiences are promoted with allegorical or mocking speech to teach, comment or exemplify. With expressions taken from diet, morality, law and what is right are convincingly taught to the wider masses and from generation to generation, while in other cases the actions and deeds of the people are satirized. Recipients fully understand these messages as the example of nutrition is familiar to everyone without exception.

Thomas Sawidis, Department of Botany, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. E-mail: sawidis@bio.auth.gr.



Figure 1 The Historical Area of Pontus Along the Coasts of the Black Sea of Turkey

2. Biological Necessity

The necessity of nutrition is identified with the normal function of the human body since: “without food you do not stand on your feet”, but also with life itself “soul from the throat (food) is held”. The expression: “food makes man”, which translates as: “we are what we eat” or “tell me what you eat to tell you who you are” shows not only the biological relationship between food and man, but also defines the identity and level of culture of a society. Beyond any other care, food should be ensured in a safe place, in the stomach: “it is better to have it (food) in the stomach than in the thought”. Whoever manages to eat will not be harmed: “The first who grab a mouthful never loses”.

3. Natural Good

Food is a gift of nature that is not self-evident for all people and in all times. Whoever has it should thank and glorify God for this goodness: “to eat once and glorify a thousand”. Of course, many precede and “praise” the anticipation of goods or the acceleration of expected benefit. This shows a reluctance and it is imperative that at least the pretexts should be observed: “first eat and then praise”. The biological need for food precedes spiritual pursuits or religious duties: “first build the oven and then the church”.

The meal should have a pleasant taste, which is enhanced with spices. Thus, it becomes attractive to the attendees and the appreciation of the taste should be generous. In this case, exaggerations are allowed, which go beyond established personal or family feelings: “the mother eats and does not give to the child” even nationally: “for a mouthful I change my faith”. In this way the hostess is rewarded, even excessively and the attendants are encouraged to enjoy the meal. The diversity of the dishes shows the intercultural osmosis of people and enriches their taste experience: “foreign food is more delicious”. In some case this expression can be taken metaphorically with a more cunning interpretation (!).

The natural properties of food express the variety of emotions, such as sugar, which expresses meekness and kindness: “I cut off your speech with sugar” (sorry to interrupt you). The impossibility of cohesion of the dough from corn flour expresses the misunderstanding and the lack of solidarity in a society: “the village became like the

dough of corn” (without consistency). The irritable man is identified with vinegar: “like strong vinegar”. Regardless of the appearance or color of the food, their properties can be completely different: “coffee is black but it whitens (revitalizes) the human face”.

4. Health

Nutrition is closely linked to health, an obvious situation when it exists: “health is not hidden”. Health is invaluable and this is expressed over time: “health is my kingdom”. Anyone who does not have health would be willing to pay very dearly to bring it back: “take a thousand groschen and give me your health”. The rules of health are easily passed on to society in the form of food orders and can be easily penetrated by square popular layers, such as austerity: “light food and pure health” or “eat and drink but sleep fasting”. Health protection takes precedence over social etiquette. The quality of the dishes is determined by the way of preparation, the pure ingredients from the immediate environment and the family care. Homemade food is a timeless value: “mate from your neighborhood and food from your home”. The guarantee of home-cooked food is contrasted with the guarantees of a good mate when he is sought in the nearby “neighborhood” environment.

Directly related to health is the bad habit of some people, gluttony which is recognized as an incurable disease: “everything is inflated, the throat, the mouth is not inflated”. Whoever gets carried away with uncontrollable eating and drinking will have stomach problems and will lose the feeling of pleasure and peace. According to Seneca, the “ethereal delicacies” that cause the feeling of well-being “delight the palate without burdening the stomach”.

5. Work

Nutrition is intertwined with work and the production of goods: “if you do not sweat, you do not enjoy bread” analogous to the principle: “goods are hard to come by”. Both proverbs are in agreement with the sayings of Paul in his second letter to the Thessalonians (iii, 10) where he mentions: “if any would not work, neither should he eat” (Best 1993). Nothing comes by itself, on the plate: “of the sea the fish do not come (alone) to the pan”. Anyone who works hard during the day enjoys the fruits of his efforts at the end of the work (at night): “work during the day and eat in the evening” or in between (noon) in the shade: “he works in the sun and eats in the shade”.

Some people are lucky and enjoy the care of their loved ones from the very first years: “with shewbread they raise the child”. There are privileged ones who can live without effort: “he eats bread effortlessly” in contrast to others who labor under the sun. Others enjoy the economic and social prosperity described by the sufficiency of selected goods, such as butter and honey: “one hand in butter and the other in honey”. This combination of these two valuable goods indicated with the same emphasis in the Bible as well (Rice, 1977). Still others pretend to be multifaceted, but in fact do not offer any specific work: “he grinds yogurt” or “he pounds air”.

The production of material goods is a value when it is accompanied by rational management. Prodigal management of goods does not ensure a smooth, timeless life: “the one who eats them all on Wednesday on Thursday has nothing to eat”. For the one who chooses to rest instead of work, he should also consider hunger, as one of the consequences: “the dog is lazy but also suffers from hunger”. In the same spirit was created the philosophy which determines the presence or absence in a place depending on the provision of food or work respectively: “you found food sit down, you found work go away”. When food is secured, there is no need to ask unnecessary questions about its origin, because the productive process will surely emerge, which will include the

forbidden word “work”: “eat the grapes, but do not ask about the vineyard at all”.

6. Food and Characters

Food is a tool of psychology that distinguishes human behaviors, such as the hypocritical innocence of the cunning. These guys, taking advantage of the joy that prevails in eating and drinking, try to win small benefits: “to your health and to my belly”. They avoid costly obligations, willingly undertaking these low-cost ones: “to you to eat, to us to dance”. While they show special performance in having a good time, they hardly put their hand in their pocket: “eat and drink and do not open your wallet”. They easily discover naive and trustworthy people: “the bread of the madman in the belly of the clever”. They use the name and prestige of others to reap temporary benefits: “the name of the bishop and the food of the deacon”. These guys can take advantage of cheerful situations where the resistance relaxes, so let the guards know: “eat and drink but watch your wife”.

7. Hunger

Deprivation of adequate food, that is hunger, manifests itself in material poverty and moral decay. Initially, it is marked by an unpleasant sensation in the stomach that is often betrayed by strange sounds: “his belly plays the lyre”. These signs, caused by uncontrollable contractions of the stomach, can hardly be masked and the person is possessed by a strong feeling of deprivation: “belly empty, teeth sharpened”. But when the meal is secured, it does not make sense to project this image, but to keep the dignity safe: “where your belly will be filled, no need to show your hunger”.

The last food stock for the body is the subcutaneous fat, which is necessarily recruited as a last resort: “he pulled fat from his skin”. The integrity of goods in the hands of the hungry cannot be guaranteed: “the embrace of the hungry cannot hold a loaf”. Extreme hunger is a bad counselor that leads man to primitive reactions, similar to those of beasts with representative examples the wolf and the dog: “hunger is dog’s son” or “hungry dog spoils ovens” or “the wolf goes down to the villages when he is hungry”.

8. Greed

Acquiring more and more goods is a mania of some people, for which dishonest methods are often used. Greed is the worst feeling of hunger: “poverty is lack of many things and greed of all”. But the lesser goods with dignity and honesty are preferable: “eat a small bite, but with the price to eat it”. The primary condition for spiritual peace is the limitation of desires and the release from the pursuit of wealth. Self-sufficiency is the greatest wealth that brings peace of mind: “pour meal and peaceful life”.

The greedy person seeks the impossible, even if it transcends the laws of nature: “from one sheep wants to get two scrolls” or “from the egg wool plucking” or “he milks and sells milk from the male donkey”. Greed is in disharmony with the normal needs of man. For anyone, what is necessary is not enough, nothing is enough. It is not poverty to have a few, but to crave more and more than you need: “the belly is full, the eye is hungry” or “he has no teeth, but he is looking for dried bread”. Greed does not allow the beneficiary to appreciate and recognize a favor, in the expectation of an even greater one: “If you give him an egg, he also asks for the hen”.

9. Hospitality

Food eaten together with other people is a symbol of love and offering. It is a bridge between people, an element of sympathy and sociability. This spirit includes hospitality, especially developed in the historic Pontus. It does not mean the presence of a guest in the house without an offer of food. In addition to the food, the host sacrifices for the guest and his time, bypassing even urgent obligations: “when someone comes to your house, you have to leave everything and you will sit”. The departure of the guest will be accompanied by the feeling of satiety: “whoever leaves your house, to leave satiated”.

For his part, the guest shows discretion and reduces his requirements to a minimum, adapting to the offerings of the host: “the guest does not eat what he wants, he eats what he finds”. Many times he pretends to be full in order to keep his image oligarchic. The host, however, acknowledging the guest’s embarrassment, encourages him. When the guest feels better, it usually turns out that: “the satiated can still eat forty mouthfuls”.

The need for hospitality is inherited from generation to generation, reflecting the manners, customs, history and cultural character of a people. The apathy of modern society to the idea of hospitality and the offering of the primary good, food, is cauterized by popular wisdom: “in our modern world the welcome is lost”. The misery and stinginess of the host during the hospitality is transferred to the taste of the meal: “the stingy bread has a bitter taste”.

10. Social Behavior

The diet procedure satirizes unacceptable social behaviors such as arrogance, genteel poverty, snobbishness, vanity, etc. which are easily perceived and often end in ridicule: “whoever has a lot of butter puts in the nettles” or “we do not have flour, but we eat noodles”. For the ostentatious waste that behaves as a holder of luxury stocks: “he has millet instead of wheat in his container”. Proper nutrition requires the harmony of ingredients and the correct observance of the measure and the proportions: “more bread and a little cheese”. Exaggeration in food, but also in speech, has consequences, which many times may not be reversible: “eat a big bite but do not say a big word”. Exaggerations create problems in health, but also in relationships that do not heal easily: “the strong vinegar, spoils its utensil”.

With the help of diet procedure, every nation teaches its own spiritual gifts, intelligence and responsibility. The consequences of the actions follow and one day they will appear in the foreground: “whatever debris you throw on your plate, it will come to your spoon”. Recklessness causes painful sufferings that create caution even where it is not necessary: “we burned in milk, we also blew yogurt”. The search for food requires thought, organization and not uncontrollable spontaneity: “he sees only the cabbages, not the fence”. Everyone is responsible for his actions: “what everyone eats, goes to his own belly”. Even in cases of complete identification in beliefs, harmonious relationship of couple or cooperation of friends, the diet is for each a separate and distinct process: “only what they eat goes separately”.

Nutrition in all social groups functions as an indicator of diversity and social stratification: “some eat and others look”. Prosperity leaves man unmoved, and unfortunately the satiated can hardly comprehend the hunger of a fellow human being: “the satiated cannot understand the problem of the hungry”. But this is a potentially transient situation that changes over time: “when the neighbor’s stomach hurts, rub yours too”. Food supply creates cohesive societies of people with different behaviors, mitigating contradictions. Especially the basic food, bread, is a symbol of friendship and communication: “whoever shows you a stone, show him a bread”. Hostility has no benefit: “hatred does not share pies”. Confrontation and anger are a deterrent when they precede the meal:

“keep the food of him who sleeps, but of the one who got angry eat it” (he is not going to eat it).

11. Epicurean Philosophy

The Pontian diet is dominated by the philosophy of Epicurus, despite the fact that it was largely misinterpreted by the Church Fathers. The highest good for Epicurus is life on earth itself, because there is no other life. The aim of his philosophy was the prospect of a pleasant life: “live happily”, with peace of mind and absence of pain. The state that follows satiety, with the fulfillment of this necessary biological desire of man, is a form of pleasure: “The beginning and root of all good is the pleasure of the stomach”. This does not necessarily translate into hedonism. But, how could man be calm with an empty and protesting stomach. Peace of mind presupposes: “food, drink, rest, love, kindness”.

Nutrition, in addition to biological need, is an opportunity for mental and spiritual communication. According to Epicurus: “you do not care what you eat and drink, but with whom you eat and drink” (Frischer 1982). The philosophy of Epicurus, whether mutilated or distorted (Isaiah XXII, 13 and LVI, 12, Paul to Corinthians A 'XV, 32) considering that he taught: “let us eat and drink, let us die tomorrow” (Grogan 1986; Best 1993) passed into the Pontian dietary culture as a value approach, repeatedly expressed by popular wisdom: “let us eat and drink, what we do will remain, from the opposite death sits and waits for us”. According to another version: “let us eat and drink and let us sing, in the world there is also death, we do not always live”. With death man returns to the state of non-existence, as he was before he was born.

12. Summarizing

Through the folk wisdom and tradition, translated into proverbs, vernacular sayings, quotes and opinions, which refer to dietary habits, the cultural uniqueness of a people is emphasized. The philosophy of the Pontian diet is valid and fully functional to this day, as it is a distillate of human experience over a long period of 28 centuries. The nutrition philosophy created in the historical Pontus with the tangible, tasty, and functional tool of food assumes didactic significance for the coming generations, distinguished by a lively language and rich imagination.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank the PHOS (Pontian Hellenic Outreach and Support) Council, Holy Institution Panagia Soumela, 253 Marshall Hill Rd, West Milford, NJ 07480 for its encouragement and support of this research study.

References

- Best E. (1993). *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians: Black's New Testament Commentary*, Publ. Baker Academic. Ada, Michigan, p. 416.
- Frischer B. (1982). *The Sculpted Word: Epicureanism and Philosophical Recruitment in Ancient Greece*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California and London, England: University of California Press.
- Grogan G. W. (1986). “Isaiah”, in: F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 6: *Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, F. E. Gaebelein (Ed.), Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, p. 144.
- Rice G. (1977). “The Interpretation of Isaiah 7:15-17”, *Journal of Biblical Literature*, Vol. 96, No. 3, pp. 363–369, doi: 10.2307/3266190 Publ.

Sawidis T. (2020). *The Pontian Diet*, Kyriakidis Editions, Thessaloniki, p. 575. (in Greek)

Sawidis T. (2021). "The basic principles of Pontian diet", *Annals of Nutrition & Food Science*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 1046.

Strabo Meineke A. (1866-1877). *Strabonis Geographica*, Lipsiae, B.G. Teubneri.

Xenophon, Harper W. R. and Wallace J. (1921). *Xenophon's Anabasis*, Seven Books Publ. American Book Co, New York, Cincinnati, Chicago, p. 575.