

**COMMODITY SCIENCE AND ETHICS IN FOOD PRODUCTION  
AND TRADE****(Merceologie și etică în producerea de bunuri alimentare și comerț)****Prof. dr hab. Jacek Koziol**

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**Abstract**

The authors present their views on the ethics in economy with special attention to its importance in food production and trade. Basing on the concept of independent ethics promoted by T. Kotarbinski, the founder of "Praxiology", they indicate the necessity of the good quality priority especially in case of food products. This is reflected in the appearance of codes of ethical conduct prepared by scientific bodies within universities or other bodies of related branches. Analyzing the ethical code accepted by the Polish Federation of Food and Beverage Producers, the authors indicate the fact that only five out of ten are dealing with food quality. Of the remaining requirements one deals with food products, the other four are concerned upon the requirements having direct and indirect impact on the image of the company. This indicates the new trend observed in global economy, which is connected with the awareness of the consumers that the corporate social responsibility always has to be considered.

**Keywords:**

Ethical codes, Food quality, Social  
Responsibility, Commodity science

**Rezumat**

Autorii prezintă punctul lor de vedere în ceea ce privește etica în economie acordând o atenție mai mare importanței acestora în producția de alimente și comerț. Bazându-se pe conceptul de etică independentă promovat de către T. Kotarbinski, fondatorul "Praxiologiei", este indicată necesitatea priorității unei bune calități, în special în cazul produselor alimentare. Acest lucru se reflectă în apariția în coduri de comportament etic pregătite de organisme științifice din cadrul universităților sau altor societăți din ramuri înrudite.

Analizând codul etic acceptat de Federația Poloneză a Producătorilor de Alimente și Băuturi, autorul indică faptul că numai cinci din zece se ocupă de calitatea alimentelor. Din cerințele rămase unul se preocupă de produse alimentare și celelalte patru sunt interesate de cerințele ce au impact direct sau indirect asupra imaginii companiei.

Aceasta arată noua tendință înregistrată de economia globală, care este în legătură cu conștientizarea consumatorilor că responsabilizarea socială corporatistă trebuie întotdeauna luată în considerare.

**Cuvinte cheie:**

Coduri etice, Calitatea alimentelor  
Responsabilitate socială, Merceologie

## 1. Introduction

The overwhelming concern with every day's material problems shifts aside and limits our involvement into spiritual aspects and qualities of life. Nevertheless these aspects become more and more important and influence all human activities, both private and professional. To this aim one has to choose one of the existing ethical systems, which will govern our decisions and way of life. According to „Praxiology” [1], the theory of efficient action founded by T. Kotarbiński, a Polish philosopher, the most adequate to the tradition of Christian hemisphere basing on Greek and Roman philosophy and culture, is so called independent ethics.

This system is relying on conscious implementation of honest behavior and conduct, which in turn should be supported by ones' religious and/or philosophical views. From the point of view of quality-commodity science one of the most important fields of practical applications for standards of ethics is food production and trade. There are attempts to define the requirements from the side of individuals, organizations and institutions, which should be fulfilled in execution of good professional practice and ethics. Following these indications sets of standards and codes of ethics have been proposed like one consisting of 10 principles for food production, processing and trade adopted by Polish professionals. It is believed, that implementation of standards of ethics will lead to fulfillment of the requirements of quality-commodity science in the field of food production and trade, and will finally eliminate the necessity of the old Roman warning: „Caveat emptor”.

## 2. Systems of ethics

Human societies in the process of development have created rules regulating the most important features of interpersonal relations on all possible levels. In majority of cases these rules have been related to religions or in early stages of development on superstitions and prejudices born from the fear of the power of nature. Probably the best example of such ethical systems is „Decalogue” (The Ten Commandments) functioning in monotheistic religions and influencing practically all existing codices. In the course of development ethics become a branch of philosophy dealing with morality (axiology-value estimation, deontology theory of obligations) and subdivided into normative (what is good and evil, limits of morality) and descriptive (analyzing and interpreting moral nature of human activities) ethics. The tendency to construct ethical systems is observed in hierarchic structures like army, religions, professional corporations, guilds etc.

Very active in proposing ethical codices nowadays are scientific and professional societies grouping representatives of various disciplines of sciences and techniques with the aim of setting high standards of scientific level and prestige. This is usually connected with requirements to fulfill high professional competence, certified education, skills and offering privileges and benefits to members. Besides of ethical systems stemming out of religions or ideologies there also exists philosophical system named „Independent ethics” promoted by Polish philosopher T. Kotarbiński, who defined it as: „Theory of managing the spiritual life of human beings” [2]. He distinguished three main areas in independent ethics: felicitology (how to live to be happy), praxiology (how to

behave to be effective) and trustworthiness (how to achieve honesty and avoid disgracefulness). The problem with independent ethics lies in the fact that it is based on our own conscience, which should tend to achieve the status of a trustworthy guardian, a person on whom one can always rely. Righteousness and disgracefulness can be valued according to our conscience and will be limited severely in cases of conviction of having the only truth, surrender to phobia like conspiracy theories, suffering inferiority or superiority complexes. Accepting the flexibility of limits and uncertainty of standards due to differences in consciences of individual persons, still we can believe that some similarity in ethics will be achieved within societies having long traditions, respect for law, level of welfare and culture. From the point of view of commodity-quality science such level of quasi-uniformity of ethic standards will be possible when the members of the society will accept the priority of good quality, just following the definition of quality proposed by ISO: „Degree, to which the set of natural properties satisfies the requirements”, or other definitions basing on fulfillment of the consumers' expectations. In fact the good quality priority can be understood as, what can be considered good quality of human living, what in turn leads to statement of T. Kotarbiński: „Only good quality fits the dignity of human beings” [1].

### 3. Ethics and food

Food has a very distinct specificity, differing it from all other products of everyday use. The unique property is that food contains the necessary components for supporting the metabolic processes in our bodies, connected with supplementation of

energy needed for transformation into molecules and tissues of our bodies. We cannot exist, function and develop without permanent supply of components of food products, important fraction of them, namely vitamins, must be supplied because cannot be synthesized within the body. The composition of food has to be optimised in terms of requirements of different components, what depends on many factors like sex, age, expenditure of energy, body height and mass, climatic conditions (environmental temperature and humidity), generally safeguarding some kind of equilibration. The abundance of nutrients is not enough, there have to be secured also proper conditions for digestibility and absorption of the nutrients, both naturally present in food or created in metabolic processes. At the same time it has to taken into account that not only components entering metabolic pathways are important, but also some minerals regulating osmotic pressure on both sides of cell membranes, also ballast components, like fiber, playing important role in the process of digestion and detoxication of our organisms. We have also to remember that toxic compounds are present in practically all food products, some naturally occurring, some created as result of metabolic processes or food processing procedures, thus forcing us to recall all the time the statement of Paracelsus: *„Dosa sola fecit venenum”*.

It is not surprising that in the field of food production, processing and trade have been formulated ethical requirements, basing on the very justified expectation, that where health and lives of the consumers come under consideration, no compromises in safety and quality could be accepted. The International Union of Food Science and Technology has adopted “Guidelines for Professional Behavior” to set basic

requirements to societies wishing to enter the field of ethical standards [3]. According to this standard, such society should be: trusted by the community to self regulate the profession, seeking to provide objective advice to the community representatives (government, media and consumer organizations) on matters related to its sphere of activities. It is believed, that such societies will be able to formulate codices regulating ethical conduct in all operations having the influence on the safety and good quality of food products, eliminating any attempts of promoting possible selfish interests of producers and merchants and all tendencies for fraudulence. Looking at all that from the point of view of commodity quality science, entirely devoted to safeguarding the quality priority for the optimal benefit of the consumers, one would expect, that such codices will first of all contain quality requirements and regulations. At the first glance it is the case, and the primary formulations usually become the form of a list of the following guiding principles for the employees of the companies acting within the branch of food production and trade: production of safe food products, production of wholesome food products, honest presentation of information to consumers, professional behavior in business, continuation of professional development in one's area of expertise, the need for sustainability (ecological aspect). This should be additionally extended with several explanations: for the sake of public health and safety it is expected prevention or lack of action that might reasonably result in the consumption of food products that are harmful to people, it should be avoided any action, which might reasonably be regarded as fraudulent or deceptive, it has to be ensured that all products, services or information offered the consumers are

lawful, accurate and meaningfully presented, all activities should aim at preservation and enhancement of the reputation of the branch (company).

Basing on these fundamental requirements, generally accepted by all civilized countries, more detailed codices are usually formulated with some differences, reflecting the economic, tradition and cultural specificity. During the "Congress 2000 Polish Food Industry and human Nutrition Sciences" a section "Ethics of Food Production and Trade" was working with the participation of representatives of food industry, wholesale and retail trade nets [4].

The result of their activity is a code of 10 principles accepted by the Polish Federation of Food and Beverages Producers. Again from the point of view of commodity-quality science the principles should deal with the quality of food products, but when analyzed in more detail it is clear that there are other issues of special importance for the producers and merchants. The principles directly and unequivocally dealing with food and beverages quality are the following: responsibility – compliance with standards, implementation of effective control systems, health supporting pBibliography, promotion of highly nutritive products, minimization of use of additives without nutritive value, consumer priority – promotion of highest quality, broadening the market offer for consumer satisfaction, trustworthiness of producers – quality guarantee for own products, open to public quality assessment procedures (inner and outer), children requirements priority – special care for baby food quality, compliance with advises coming from research institutions specializing in children nutrition. Then comes a set of principles, which are aiming at improvement of the image of the

companies acting in the field of food production and trade. Only one of them is connected with the specificity, nature and role of food products, postulating: respect for food products – promotion of waste free technologies, optimal use of raw materials, elimination of undue losses, avoidance of passing the expiration date, participation to the charity actions. This particular requirement is really meaningful and very effective in improving the image of a company, especially in countries remembering periods of famine (like during the IIInd World War) and still respecting bread as a sacredness. Information on participation of the company in charity actions will strongly influence the competitiveness of such company, used in modest and wise way can be an important factor documenting participation in Corporate Social Responsibility.

The remaining principles are dealing with the way of doing business, what in all cases will have something to do with the Corporate Social Responsibility [5], one of the leading factors deciding on competitiveness under the conditions of global market structures. These principles are the following: reliability of information – reliable descriptions and labeling, elimination of misleading (for the consumers) formulations, reaction to criticism – analyzing and respecting all remarks on quality, public excuses in

case of any fraudulence (even unintentional), respect towards competitors – respecting honest competition for the benefit of the consumers (by raising the quality), elimination of negative advertising, cooperation – participation in national and international organizations and societies undertaking actions for the benefit of the branch. Like many others, this code is accompanied with explanatory notes, which will make it more comprehensive to the consumers, what in turn may increase the potential for noncompliance to the code to be used as the arguments against the professionals. It can be treated as some disadvantage but will strengthen the social contract with the community of the consumers. Such risk is unavoidable but also acceptable, as it will lead to quality priority and elimination the necessity of the warning formulated already by the Roman citizens in the saying: “Caveat emptor” (buyer be afraid of being cheated). Still it is wise to consider seriously another warning formulated by L. Kołakowski, one of the top contemporary philosophers, who has stated: “There is no such good principle, which could not be misused”. Hoping that the trend to formulate and implement into practice the numerous ethical codes will finally eliminate to major extend the negatives, what will lead us to much better quality of our lives.

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