

## Organic food is just a tax on the gullible

1 **T**here are two reliable ways of telling if you have won an argument. The first is if your disputants switch from discussion of the facts to accusations about motives; the second, more obviously, is if they descend to mere abuse.

2 Alan Dangour, a nutritionist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, should therefore feel he has had an encouragingly uncomfortable week. He is the author of a meta-study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* that concluded, from 50 years of scientific evidence, that so-called “organic” food was no healthier than conventionally farmed products. He revealed that he had received “hate mail” and was “taken aback” by the “abusive” language used.

3 Ben Goldacre, an NHS doctor and author of the acclaimed book *Bad Science*, has had a similar week. In his newspaper column he had taken apart the Soil Association’s criticisms of Dangour’s paper – which was funded by Britain’s Food Standards Agency – notably his claim that the health benefits of organic food “could not be measured by the evidence identified in the FSA paper”.

4 When I called him, he remarked: “In my experience the [comments of the] organic food, anti-vaccine and homeopathy movements are unusually hateful and generally revolve around bizarre allegations that you covertly represent some financial or corporate interest. I do not; but I do think it reveals



something about their own motives that they can only conceive of a person holding a position as a result of financial self-interest.”

5 His linking of the organic movement with homeopathy is telling. They are cults masquerading as science. The organic movement, philosophically, is based on an inchoate faith in nature, seeing any human interference with nature as in some way bad and destructive of the “roots” of creation.

6 No one should have been in the least surprised by Dangour’s results. The more rational among the organic movement long ago stopped claiming as scientific fact that their products are better for humans. The Canadian Organic Growers, reacting less hysterically than the Soil Association, responded to Dangour’s survey by saying that it “didn’t make health claims based on the nutrition of organic food”. This is the scientifically responsible attitude; but it is also a deadly blow to the marketing of organic foods, which depends on yummy mummies continuing to believe that if Cecilia and Frederick are fed only organic

foods, then the little darlings will grow up healthier and stronger. It is in this sense that the organic business – ordinary food at extraordinary prices – is nothing more than a tax on gullibility.

7 Such gullibility can have dangerous effects on your health (as well as your bank balance). A few years ago my wife decided we should have an entirely organic vegetable garden. To this end she refused all man-made fertilisers and ordered a truckload of pigeon droppings. What could be more natural? Neither was there anything unnatural in the germs I inhaled through the spores of our organic manure, thereby contracting psittacosis. This developed into “atypical” pneumonia, which was of course resistant to all standard antibiotics.

8 27. If chemicals and pesticides in foods are as dangerous for humans as the Soil Association claims, we should expect conventional farmers, who handle the stuff in industrial quantities, to be dropping dead before the rest of us with all sorts of chemical-induced cancers.

9 The most exhaustive analysis of this matter was published in 2004, in a paper by Professor Anthony Trewavas of Edinburgh University. His paper revealed that “of 12 separate investigations on farmers involving in total about 300,000 people, 11 found that farmers had overall cancer rates very substantially lower than the general public”.

10 Trewavas concludes that “the reasons why farming is so healthy are not known, but these data indicate not only a null result for the hypothesis relating pesticide

exposure to cancer, but a consistent result for the alternative, that pesticide exposure may protect against cancer”. I realise that publicising Professor Trewavas’s paper might itself cause medical problems, as Soil Association executives choke with rage. But I think this a risk offset by the 28 the public as a whole.

11 The provocative professor also points out that in the period since 1950 – as pesticides and industrial farming took an increasing role in food production – “stomach cancer rates have declined by 60% in western countries”. This is generally ascribed to the fact that fruit and vegetable consumption has doubled in that period – but why did this change in diet occur? Because modern agriculture, aided by air freight, has been able to get such products to consumers at ever-cheaper prices all year round.

12 This just demonstrates the common-sense point that diet, rather than whether food is produced “organically” or not, is the key to healthy eating. A high-fat diet is as bad for you when the food has an “organic” sticker on it as when it doesn’t.

13 The general public, however, has already begun to call the organic bluff, perhaps one reason Whole Foods’ sales have suffered over three consecutive quarters in the United States and Prince Charles’s Duchy Originals has seen its profits slump. That noise you heard last week was the organic balloon bursting.

Dominic Lawson in *The Sunday Times*, 2009

## Tekst 6 Organic food is just a tax on the gullible

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- 1p 23 “he has had an encouragingly uncomfortable week” (aline 2)  
Leg uit waarom de auteur van het artikel het woord “encouragingly” gebruikt.
- 1p 24 Which of the following is/are true with regard to paragraphs 2-4?  
In these paragraphs Dominic Lawson
- 1 illustrates the amount of antipathy to the subject of organic food.
  - 2 makes clear that Dangour’s conclusions are supported by Goldacre.
- A Only 1.  
B Only 2.  
C Both 1 and 2.  
D Neither 1 nor 2.
- 1p 25 Which of the following characterises paragraph 5?  
A It defines Dominic Lawson’s stand on the organic movement.  
B It elaborates on the reactions evoked by Goldacre’s column.  
C It points out the dangers involved in tampering with nature.
- 3p 26 Geef van elk van de volgende stellingen aan of deze wel of niet overeenkomt met de inhoud van aline 6.
- 1 Alan Dangour’s findings support the point of view taken by some proponents of organic products.
  - 2 Both the Soil Association and Canadian Organic Growers discredit a truly scientific approach.
  - 3 Organic food producers need to lower prices and improve their marketing strategies.
  - 4 Organic food producers thrive on the consumers’ blind faith.
  - 5 Responsible mothers accept the high prices of organic food.
- Noteer het nummer van elke stelling, gevolgd door “wel” of “niet”.
- 1p 27 Which of the following fits the gap at the beginning of paragraph 8?  
A And there is no end to it  
B Consider the downside  
C Suppose there is no alternative  
D Think about it from the other end
- 1p 28 Which of the following fits the gap in paragraph 10?  
A benefits to  
B guarantees to  
C shock for  
D threat to

- 2p **29** Geef van elk van de volgende beweringen aan of deze wel of niet overeenkomt met de inhoud van de alinea's 11 en 12.
- 1 Developments in farming have contributed to adaption in people's diets.
  - 2 Modern agriculture may have played a role in the decrease in cancer.
  - 3 The industrial production of food has caused a rise in the consumption of unhealthy food.
  - 4 Modern farming has heightened the awareness of the role of diet in the prevention of cancer.
- Noteer het nummer van elke bewering, gevolgd door "wel" of "niet".
- 1p **30** What is meant by "the organic balloon bursting" in paragraph 13?
- A The food price explosion during the last few decades.
  - B The myth that organic food is healthier than regular food.
  - C The protests referred to in paragraph 2.
  - D The rapid expansion of the organic movement.
- 1p **31** Which of the following quotations contains sarcasm on the part of the writer?
- A "His linking of the organic movement with homeopathy is telling." (paragraph 5)
  - B "Such gullibility can have dangerous effects on your health" (paragraph 7)
  - C "I realise that publicising Professor Trewavas's paper might itself cause medical problems, as Soil Association executives choke with rage." (paragraph 10)
  - D "A high-fat diet is as bad for you when the food has an "organic" sticker on it as when it doesn't." (paragraph 12)

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**Bronvermelding**

*Een opsomming van de in dit examen gebruikte bronnen, zoals teksten en afbeeldingen, is te vinden in het bij dit examen behorende correctievoorschrift, dat na afloop van het examen wordt gepubliceerd.*