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***“Introduction”*: The Philosophy of Food, David Kaplan**

Food Ethics

Food is about life as well as luxury. It is about serious things like hunger and malnutrition, diabetes and heart disease, eating and being eaten. It is a profoundly moral issue. It always has been. Even ordinary, everyday acts of cooking and eating are forms of ethical conduct. Cultural and religious traditions since antiquity have prescribed what we should and should not eat. In fact, ethical choices about food used to be considered as important as other more recognizably moral issues. Today people in the industrialized North tend to be less concerned about the relationship between diet and moral-religious conduct than we are about more mundane matters of health and, to a lesser extent, animals and the environment. Most of us are familiar with the standard ethical questions concerning food. They are becoming increasingly commonplace. What should we eat? Is it wrong to eat meat? What should we do about world hunger? Do my food choices even make a difference? Although debatable and unsettled, these issues are at least on the radar. Ethical issues about food and eating are dizzying in scope and difficult to catalog much less resolve. Nevertheless, there are several broad sets of concerns.

Responsibilities to self and others. Part of the landscape of ethical theory is the discourse of obligation and responsibility, also known as duty. On this model, there are some things people have to do simply because they are the right thing to do. As Kant famously argues, an action must be performed out of duty to have any moral worth. Actions motivated by self-interest, or love, or anticipated consequence are, of course, permissible but not moral in this narrow sense. Kant distinguishes between “perfect” (strong) and “imperfect” (weak) duties. Perfect duties are those that are always required of us; imperfect duties are those that are contingent and only sometimes required of us. He further divides duties between those we have to others and those one has for oneself. For example, the perfect duty to myself is to refrain from suicide; the imperfect duty is to develop my talents. The perfect duty to others is to refrain from acts of violence and coercion; the imperfect duty is to help others. Obviously, there is more to say about responsibility than Kant’s schema of duties but it is a helpful place to start in considering how food figures into the moral landscape.

What are our duties to others concerning food? Minimally, we should neither eat people nor deprive them of food. We probably have an obligation to prevent starvation and to feed the hungry, although it is not clear who “we” are. Doctors have obligations to feed patients in hospitals, sometimes intravenously or forcibly for those who cannot eat. Food manufacturers, farmers, restaurateurs, and other sellers have a moral (not just legal) responsibility to provide safe food. Our imperfect food duties to others are to alleviate suffering and to be hospitable, although the latter is probably a virtue not a duty.

What are one’s duties to oneself? Minimally, neither to starve nor to endanger oneself by food deprivation (although a hunger strike is a morally justifiable form of protest). If eating is a necessary condition to realize our autonomy and human dignity then each has the duty to eat a healthy and nourishing diet. A person who dines on only cheese doodles and vodka, for example, fails to respect himself – he has “let himself go.” The imperfect food duty to oneself is to eat in a way that helps to realize one’s potential. We should eat not only to survive but to flourish and enhance ourselves. Perhaps an athlete has a responsibility to eat a specialized diet to improve performance, while the rest of us should strive to improve our well-being through diet, not simply to maintain it.

This brief list of food duties is far from determinate but is representative of the kinds of arguments that can be made. Each claim, of course, needs to be justified and further clarified to specify who is responsible, to whom, and under what conditions. The very notion of a food duty raises more questions than it answers: How many people am I responsible for feeding? At what cost to myself? What kind of food do I owe to others? How much of it? It is less important to settle these questions than to note how effectively they can be addressed within the framework of rights, duties, and self-development. This moral language is not only commonplace but exceptionally strong rhetorically.

Food virtues. Another part of the landscape of ethical theory is the discourse of moral virtue. Virtue ethics is less concerned with moral rules and principles than character traits and dispositions. The key question to ask is not “what should I do?” but “what kind of person should I become?” The answer is given in terms of virtues a person should aspire to, such as “integrity,” “courage,” “magnanimity,” “wisdom,” and so on. The heart of our ethical life is rooted in character traits, relationships, and communities. Virtue ethics (and care ethics, alike) challenge uninspiring, improperly legalistic moral frameworks. Ethical life is about being a good citizen not following rigid rules.

Vegetarianism and animals. Humans have moral obligations to animals. Even proud meat eaters appreciate that there are some things humans should never do to animals, like torture them for fun or eat their neighbor's pets. Raising animals for food is, of course, more debatable. There are two main philosophical approaches to this issue: deontological (rights-based) and utilitarian (consequence-based). Deontological approaches affirm the rights of animals, hence the obligations of humans to respect those rights. Animals, like humans, have inherent value and interest in self-preservation and thus enjoy the same fundamental right as we do not to be treated as mere thing. That implies the obligation not to eat animals or disregard their interests. Other rights theorists maintain that the legal ownership of animals is unjust and, therefore, any use of animals is unjust regardless of how humanely they are treated. This abolitionist theory of animal rights affirms veganism, not just a vegetarian diet.

Other rights theorists contend that only humans have rights because only humans have obligations. Animals cannot tell the difference between their interests and what is the right thing to do. Without that distinction it makes no sense to say that an action is performed on the basis of duty; there has to be a choice between acting out of obligation and acting from desire. Those who argue against animal rights do not necessarily endorse eating meat; they merely challenge a rights-based justification for vegetarianism.

Utilitarian (or consequentialist) approaches argue that animals (like humans) have no fundamental rights. Rather, they have the capacity to experience pleasure and to suffer and are thus no less morally significant than we are. Utilitarian approaches require that we give equal consideration to the interests of humans and animals alike. Equality of consideration is prescriptive, not descriptive. It is a moral idea, not an assertion of fact. The strength of the animal welfarist appeal is, however, the obvious fact of animal suffering and animal cruelty. Most arguments for *ethical* vegetarianism and veganism are based on animal welfare and the need to give animals moral consideration. Another set of arguments focus on different consequences, such as the vast amounts of fuel and water used in ranching, the greenhouse gases produced, wasted food on feeding animals rather than people, and increased risk of heart disease from eating meat. These are among the many good reasons for not eating meat.

Consequentialist arguments can, of course, be marshaled in defense of meat eating. Some typical arguments include that the suffering of animals is offset by the economic benefits to people whose prosperity would be destroyed were we all to stop eating meat; the special dietary needs of pregnant and breast-feeding women require more protein than a vegetarian diet can

supply (and that poor people cannot afford or do not have access to dietary supplements); or that long-standing customs and rituals trump animal suffering.

Arguments from the moral virtues are less common but make a similar appeal to animal suffering and to the character traits of those who either condone or oppose it. For example, an uncaring person turns a blind eye to animal cruelty; a compassionate person does not. The traditional virtues oppose things like the consumerism and insensitivity to animals that drives factory farming. Kant makes a similar claim when he argues that it reflects a poor character to treat animals poorly. We diminish ourselves in our acts of cruelty and become more likely to harm other humans. In other words, we should treat animals well less for their sake than for ours.

Virtue ethics can also be marshaled in defense of meat eating. This class of arguments typically finds support in the rich heritage of cultural or religious traditions that involve eating animals: ceremonial feasts, symbolic meanings, the virtues of respect and appreciation for nature's bounty, culinary virtues, perhaps even the virtues of preparing and eating an animal stalked and hunted.

Agricultural and environmental ethics: Agricultural ethics deals with issues related to the farming of food, ranching and processing livestock, and the cultivation of crops for food, fiber, and fuel. Industrial agriculture, (farming based on the use of machinery, chemicals, and monocrops) although highly productive, raises moral questions about appropriate use of the land, pollution, and animals. The ethical concerns are typically consequentialist. Industrial agriculture produces a litany of harms, such as topsoil erosion, loss of biodiversity, water contamination, and health risks to farmworkers and consumers. Sometimes the moral appeal is made in the name of future generations, who would be adversely affected by actions in the present.

By contrast, sustainable agriculture and ranching is designed to avoid these problems while at the same time satisfying the world's food needs. Sustainable production practices should enhance environmental quality, use resources more effectively, integrate natural biological cycles and controls, and improve the quality of life for farmers, ranchers, and societies as a whole. Sustainable practices are putatively more practically and morally defensible than industrialized farming and ranching. Advocates of industrial agriculture contend that sustainable

practices cannot meet the world's food needs and are, therefore, practically and morally indefensible.

Another approach to questions concerning agriculture and the environment is to call into question the *anthropocentric* (human-centered) bias of philosophical perspectives, which have traditionally devalued the moral standing of the natural environment and its members. Since the early 1970s, the literature in environmental ethics has challenged the view that only humans have *intrinsic value* while nonhuman things have *extrinsic value* as means to human ends. Some environmental philosophers argue for new, nonanthropocentric theories of natural environments and animals. Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" represents an attempt to argue that the biosphere as a whole has an integrity and beauty that deserves moral consideration. Nonanthropocentric, holistic (rather than individualist) approaches are best suited to make sense of our moral relations with the land.

A related approach to a land ethic is found in the American agrarian tradition. An agrarian philosophy stresses the role of farming and ranching in the formation of moral character and in preserving culture and traditions. By living a rural lifestyle connected to the climate and soil, we acquire a sense of identity and place that can only come about by direct contact with the land. Agrarian philosophy is critical of the social and environmental impacts of industrial agriculture. Wendell Berry, for example, argues that modern agriculture and exodus from farms to cities harms the environment, destroys communities, and eclipses the basic human dignity that comes from an agrarian lifestyle. "Eating," he famously says, "is an agricultural act" (Berry, 1991). We are all involved in agriculture and our food choices affects how land is treated.

Food Technology

Everything humans eat has been grown, raised, or processed in some way. Even the most ecologically attuned organic farming and ranching uses technologies to transform plants or animals into food. We use simple technologies for cooking, drying, fermenting, and slicing; complex ones for pasteurizing, freezing, irradiating, and flavoring. Some processing involves food additives and dietary supplements; other forms, genetic modification and nutrient enhancement. Everything we eat undergoes varying amounts of technological processing before reaching our mouths. Raw food (especially organically grown) is the least processed, then whole food (sometimes cooked), then natural food (no artificial ingredients), then conventional food (often with artificial ingredients). Perhaps the very idea of a "natural food" is dubious if all food

requires the intervention of humans. Of course, food processing in itself is not such a terrible thing. The benefits are apparent: safety, availability, nutrient fortification, and convenience.

But some technologically processed foods pose real risks and raise philosophical questions. The main issues concerning food technology – other than industrial agriculture itself – are genetic modification, animal biotechnology, and functional foods. These matters not only raise concerns about health and environmental consequences but also questions concerning consumer choice, food labeling, and animal rights, as well as the very metaphysical status of what we eat.

Genetically modified food. Genetically modified (GM) foods are plants and animals that have been altered using recombinant DNA technology, a technique that combines DNA molecules from different sources into a single molecule. The purpose of genetic modification is to produce new and useful traits otherwise unattainable through conventional techniques. Most often foods are genetically modified to contain their own pesticides or to be herbicide resistant, although a small percentage of crops are engineered to be nutritionally enhanced or drought resistant. Advocates of GM food maintain that they pose neither health nor environmental risks. They promise to increase yields, increase food security, and protect the environment.

Critics warn of unknown health risks and environmental damage. Since labeling is not required in the US, there is no way for most consumers to choose to avoid or to purchase GM foods. Critics also worry about the abuse of intellectual property rights laws that permit the privatization and patenting of life forms. For example, it is illegal for farmers to save and store GM seeds without paying royalty fees. Food security is then threatened as seeds become private property. At the very least, the privatization of GM seeds increases food dependence on industrialized nations by developing nations.

Animal biotechnology. Animal biotechnology applies recombinant DNA techniques to animals. The largest class of genetically engineered (GE) animals are designed to produce pharmaceuticals (also known as “agricultural”); another class is designed for industrial purposes; another for food. Livestock and fish are engineered to be disease resistant, have improved nutritional value, increased growth rates, decreased pollutants in their manure, or to produce antimicrobials that target *E. coli* and *Salmonella*. We have already encountered many of the arguments for and against animal biotechnology in the discussion of animal rights and GM food. Advocates cite the benefits of increased resistance to disease, productivity, and hardiness; GE animals yield more meat, eggs, and milk; and they provide more healthy food.

Critics contend that genetic manipulation violates an animal's intrinsic value (or its *telos*, its natural function) and that mixing the genes of different species tampers with the natural order. Others maintain the more defensible position that we should not engage in practices (using biotechnology or otherwise) that make food animals worse off than they are now.

Functional foods. A functional food, or “nutraceutical,” is a food-based product that has added ingredients believed to provide health benefits. Such foods are designed to assist in the prevention or treatment of disease, or to enhance and improve human capacities. They include products like vitamin-fortified grains, energy bars, low-fat or low-sodium foods, and sports drinks. Functional foods eliminate properties from the food to make it more nutritious – even to replace medicine. The key moral issue is these foods' claim to function as medicine, blurring the boundaries between food and drugs. Manufacturers can produce food items that make *general* health claims (to promote health) so long as they make no *specific* claims (to treat diseases). There is no legal definition for functional foods in the United States, and neither premarket approval for safety nor proof of general health claims is required. The lack of regulation raises questions about the proper role of governments in regulating food and protecting public health.

Food Politics

Food choices are inevitably political. Even our simple acts of eating have public consequences when aggregated. The choices consumers make ripple through the realms of food production, distribution, and consumption shaping the character of our food system. But perhaps even more important than individual choices are the political and economic realities that affect national and international food systems. Governments have tremendous power to make decisions over entire nations (and entire species). So do transnational corporations. We have already encountered several issues that have political dimensions, such as food safety, hunger, animal rights, and genetically modified food. (Any issue where there are “advocates” and “critics” is already politically charged). These issues are both economic and political. Some additional food issues that deserve to be mentioned are food security, global trade, marketing, and labeling.

Food security. Food security exists when people have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to live healthy lives. The Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 1 billion people suffer from hunger; another one billion from undernourishment. There are a number of reasons for chronic and temporary food insecurity. They include poverty, economic crises, poor

governance, and poor agricultural infrastructure. People cope with food insecurity by eating less, selling assets, and forgoing health care and education. Women are affected worse than men; girls more than boys. Food insecurity traps people in poverty and poor health and it compromises basic daily activities. It is a matter of social and international justice.

In order to prevent food shortages, nations need to invest in agriculture and infrastructure and expand safety nets for short-term, acute situations. They need to create jobs and increase agriculture and local value-added food production. Small farmers need access to resources and technologies that allow them to increase productivity. Nations need vibrant agricultural systems and strong food security governance to increase production, distribute food to those in need, and protect citizens from both natural and economic crises.

As if the practical challenges aren't enough, the philosophical challenge is to justify the claim that governments have the obligation to protect food security. If they have food duties is it because citizens have food rights? Do noncitizens? What do nations owe to each other? What role should markets and financial system play in protecting food security? What about NGOs, and consumer choice? In other words, what should we do about massive, remediable, undeserved suffering regarding food and to improve the lives of as many as possible using means that are just, fair, and culturally appropriate?

Global trade. Trade and the globalization of agriculture are increasingly internationalizing the politics of food. Producers and consumers are often vulnerable to events that take place far away and subject to decisions over which they have little control. Transnational agribusiness and global financial institutions exercise tremendous influence over national and international food policies. It is debatable whether the current global trade system helps or harms nations. The transfer of technology for the most part helps, although industrial agriculture often reduces employment and drives farmers into cities and slums. Trade liberalization is good for farmers in industrialized nations but it too often creates poverty in poor countries as subsidized commodities drive crop prices down. Local farmers cannot produce food as cheaply as the imports forcing poor nations to become dependent on wealthier nations for food. Developing countries need to have the ability to raise tariffs on agricultural products to protect national food security and employment.

A further consequence of globalization is that traditional, local diets are being replaced by a "Western diet" and lifestyle: energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods with high levels of sugar and

saturated fats, combined with reduced physical activity. Not surprisingly, global rates of obesity, diabetes, and heart disease continue to increase in both rich and poor countries.

The local food movement in wealthy nations is, in part, a response to the globalization of food. A “locavore” is someone who aims to eat only food grown or produced within a relatively short radius of where one lives, typically within 100 miles. Local networks of small farms, community-supported agriculture, co-ops, and farmers’ markets are said to enhance relationships among producers and communities while also leaving a smaller carbon footprint.

Another response to globalized food production is the slow food movement started in Italy by Carlos Petrini in the late 1980s as a reaction to the spread of fast food. Slow food is premised on the conviction that locally grown food and traditional farming and food production methods protects regional culinary practices and lifestyles. Slow food proponents claim that such food regionalism not only enhances relationships among farmers, communities, and environments but also produces better tasting food.

Critics argue that farmers in the developing nations are harmed when consumers in wealthy nations eat locally. Our moral obligation to alleviate suffering abroad (probably) has priority over our obligation to mitigate environmental degradation. In addition, the environmental impact of transportation is often exaggerated. A more thorough environmental assessment also takes into account the amount of energy used in food production. Often the energy use in food transported great distances is less than that produced locally. Some suggest that a better alternative to food-provincialism is to support “fair trade” products. These are food items produced sustainably on farms and ranches that respect worker rights, worker safety, and that pay living wages. To receive a fair trade designation, the entire supply chain must be in compliance – from production to distribution.

Labeling and marketing: Consumers need information in order to make decisions about what to purchase and what to eat. We get this information from food labels and advertising. Arguably, we have a right to know about the ingredients and perhaps even the processing and packaging of our food. The risks of false information can be harmful – even lethal. Or, less gravely, false information compromises our ability to make informed choices. How can a person, for example, avoid sodium, support fair trade, or eat kosher foods unless products are labeled? Even if we deny that consumers have the right to information (and producers an obligation to provide it) a market economy is premised on the freedom to make

informed choices. The most reasonable way for consumers to be informed is through food labels and advertising. And the only way that information is going to be made available is if producers disclose it. Granted, it is far from clear how much information is enough to inform consumers; what the limits of marketing and advertising are beyond not lying; or what kind of product liability is appropriate for food and drinks. These are legal as much as moral-political questions.

Food Identity

Food and drink figure into our everyday lives in countless ways. A diet expresses ethnic, religious, and class identification; it prescribes gender roles; it is embodied in rituals and manners; and it relates directly to our aspirations to perfect ourselves. Food and drink tap our pleasures and anxieties, memories and desires, and pride in or alienation from our heritage. This connection between diet and identity raises a number of philosophical questions. Nothing we eat (short of poison) *determines* an identity. And yet dietary preferences are indeed a part of who I am individually, and who we are collectively. Sometimes the role of food is trivial (e.g., one's idiosyncratic tastes and food memories), sometimes significant (e.g., sugar and the Atlantic slave trade, or Ireland and the potato in the 1840s). Either way, food is a marker of identity.

Gender is a particularly good example. Men and woman act out their identities, roles, and relationships through their very different relationships with food: different division of labor, access, and meaning attributed to eating. By mapping gender onto each stage of food production, distribution, and consumption we have a powerful lens through which to explain gender relations. Do the same with race or class and, again, we get a window into one realm of activities that manifests social relations. We get answers to questions to the "who?" questions: who farms, who trades, who eats, who cooks, who manages waste, who profits, and so on.

Why is this philosophically interesting? Because diet nicely manifests two basic philosophical topics: identity and justice. Any thorough analysis of these concepts cannot ignore diet. To put it noncontroversially: any personal or collective identity is formed in a (social and environmental) context. Food and eating are a crucial part of that context. Food does not make an identity, nor does it exhaust questions of justice but it is a key part of each story.