

Virtuous Salads and Sinful Desserts:
How the Rhetoric of Morality Taints our Relationship to Food
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A. Introduction

We have a judgmental relationship to food. One has only to examine the rhetoric surrounding food choice to see this: people label desserts “sinful,” talk about how they are being good for having a salad, sing the praises of superfoods, and so forth. While clearly food varies in nutritional value, by labeling it “good” or “bad” without qualification, we are claiming that nutrition is the only determiner of value. This is not the case and has dangerous consequences.

I will begin by examining some of the rhetoric associated with food, before considering what it would mean for a food to be good or bad. Following Aristotle, I take goodness to relate to function; a good food, then, is one which fulfills a particular function. However, food has multiple purposes. In addition to providing nutrition, it has emotional, aesthetic, and ritual uses; a food which is good at satisfying one function may not satisfy another. As such, we cannot judge a food to be good or bad in any absolute sense.

Moreover, I will argue that it is not simply short-sighted but morally problematic to make this sort of judgment, since we tend to judge not simply the food but those consuming the food as well. This tendency embodies particular assumptions about class and culture which are not defensible. It also assumes a view of risk which is inconsistent with how we treat other potentially hazardous activities; as such, we need to cease making absolute moral judgments about food and recognize that its goodness or badness depends on context.

B. The Rhetoric of Food

Moral terminology is frequently employed in discussions of food. Desserts, particularly chocolate desserts, are labeled “sinful.”¹ People talk about “being bad” for having eaten a slice of pizza or a piece of cake. Contrariwise, they see themselves as “being good” for sticking to a diet and eating salads or vegetables. This is underscored by the fact that recipes are written for “not-too-virtuous” salads (Wanderash 2009), thus confirming the general image of salad as virtuous.

This division of foods into good and bad is not simply a personal matter – as a society we have also endorsed this categorization. In 2012, Mayor Michael Bloomberg pushed for a law in New York City that would ban the sale of sugary drinks over 16 ounces in size in restaurants and similar venues; he argued this to be necessary in order to fight the growing obesity problem.² Similarly, there are a number of locales banning the use of trans fats in school and restaurant

¹ Ghirardelli’s recipe for “Sinful Chocolate Truffles” exemplifies this sort of dessert. (Ghirardelli Chocolate Company, n.d.)

² See (Lerner 2012); this ban is now being challenged, although it is not yet clear how the courts will resolve the matter.

meals.³ The idea that these foods are bad for you (or bad in certain quantities) pervades the discussion.

Furthermore, many cultures subscribe to the idea that giving up food has a positive benefit. This can take the form of denying oneself a particular food for a period of time, such as giving up sugar for Lent, or denying oneself food altogether by fasting. This underscores a purported connection between abstaining from food and purifying oneself, as if to emphasize a dichotomy between the body and the mind or soul: to deny oneself food is to focus on the “higher” aspect of existence.⁴

Even those foods which are seen as good for you, such as those designated “superfoods,” are generally only viewed as such because they conform to a very narrow definition of goodness: they are high in nutrients and low in calories or fat. Yet this raises the question of what goodness is in relation to food. Is nutrition the only relevant quality for judging food? Or are there other views of goodness which render this question more complex?

C. What is Goodness?

When discussing the goodness or badness of anything, it is worth establishing criteria for judgment. As Aristotle (n.d./2000) noted, if an object has a function, then its goodness cannot be judged without reference to that function. For instance, I cannot judge whether a particular knife is a good knife unless I know what it is to be used for – an appropriate knife for cutting bread is different than one used to skin a deer. Due to its context-dependence, goodness for the knife is not absolute; the same properties which make a knife good in one context may make it bad in another.⁵

To label food “good” or “bad,” then, we need to consider what the function of food is; only then will we be able to assess its value. However, as we shall see, food possesses multiple functions. This complicates our categorization, because food which is ideal at satisfying one of those functions may not be useful in another context. To see this in more detail, we shall consider four common ways in which food is used.

First, food is typically valued for its ability to provide our body with fuel. As a result, we often judge food as a vehicle for providing sustenance, basing our evaluation on its nutritional content and other digestive properties. Food is judged here both on its own merits and on its interaction with our bodies. Hence we may generally praise soy as a source of protein, but if a person is allergic to soy then she is unlikely to view it as a good food.⁶ I will argue that this function of food is the one most commonly referenced when evaluating food as good or bad; however, we should not neglect other common uses of food.

³ A useful website for referencing all relevant state legislation on this issue is maintained by the National Conference of State Legislatures (2013).

⁴ The connection between food and virtue or sinfulness is not new; see Allen (2002) for a fascinating discussion of historical forbidden foods.

⁵ This is, presumably, why my kitchen has various types of knives – some things are easier to cut with serrated knives and some with non-serrated knives, for instance. Both types are useful in different contexts; neither is appropriate in all contexts.

⁶ Or at least unlikely to view it as a good food for her.

A second very common function of food is to provide emotional support or sustenance – witness the popularity of comfort food and the concern over emotional eating, particularly in response to stress.⁷ Most people have emotional reactions to certain foods; a person may be comforted by chicken soup when she is sick, or reacts with pleasure to a particular food she always has on her birthday. We attach memories to food, which can provide a source of value for the food corresponding to the value of the memory.⁸ Similarly, many people see cooking for a loved one as a way of expressing their affection; the food becomes an embodiment of the relationship between or among people.⁹ Food thus has an emotional function at times; in such cases, a good food will be one which provides the emotional resonance the eater is seeking.

Similarly, food frequently serves an aesthetic function as well. The pairing of various dishes in a single course, or of various courses in a complex meal, is seen as an aesthetic task by chefs. There are certain tastes, smells, and textures which are pleasing together; a chef who wishes to highlight the aesthetic properties of food will consider these in designing a menu. A good food, then, will be one which complements the others being offered – it should fit in well with the particular aesthetic of the chef. This will, naturally, vary by chef, since each has his own tastes; it will also vary by the particular meal, since a chef may have different aims with each meal. This is akin to how a painter may not view burnt sienna as the best color at all times, but it may be the best color for a particular occasion. Hence while an artichoke may not be objectively perfect as a food, it could well be the best food in a particular aesthetic context, independent of any nutritional or emotional concerns.

Lastly, food is frequently used for ritual or ceremonial purposes. We see this in both secular and religious contexts. For instance, a Pesach (Passover) Seder traditionally involves particular foods such as matzah, bitter herbs, and so forth; each food has a particular representative function which makes it important to include in the meal. On the secular side, celebrating Thanksgiving in the United States would seem a bit odd to many without a turkey, pumpkin pie, and other similar accompaniments. While the foods may not have strong representative functions on their own, there are cultural traditions about the proper recreation of this meal. There are thus many foods which we judge good on other grounds but would not seem correct as part of these celebrations: lasagna is not a good fit for a traditional Thanksgiving dinner, no matter how tasty it is. Similarly, leavened bread is not permissible during Pesach for many Jewish people, hence it is a bad food to have at a Seder. Once again, the goodness of the food in question derives from its ability to fulfill a particular ritual purpose.

Note that a food which excels in fulfilling one function may not satisfy another. A person from the southern United States may find traditional food of the south such as fried chicken and biscuits to be comforting; however, she may also acknowledge that such food is frequently high in fat and thus may not be as laudable from a nutritional point of view. Similarly, food which is

⁷ Dallman, Pecoraro, and la Fleur (2005) address these concerns, as do Bennet, Green and Schwartz-Barcott (2012).

⁸ Puhl and Schwartz (2003) discuss the influence of childhood memories on adult eating. Interestingly, from Bernstein and Loftus (2009) we see that memories do not have to be correct in order to influence us; our eating behavior is influenced by false memories as well.

⁹ Hence the connotations entailed by the phrase “a home-cooked meal.”

aesthetically pleasing may not satisfy hunger pangs, if the emphasis is on presentation and flavor rather than portion size.¹⁰

Given that food may have multiple distinct functions, it follows that it may be good or bad depending on the circumstances – something cannot be a “bad food” without relativizing the label to a particular context. Yet by passing laws against particular foods or labeling them “sinful,” we seem to be judging the food outright, as if only one particular function could be relevant to making such a judgment. How do we explain this dichotomy?

D. A Narrow View of Goodness in Food

When we label chocolate truffles as “sinful” or see ourselves as virtuous for eating salad, we are generally concentrating on a single aspect of food, namely, its impact on our health and nutrition.¹¹ This is why we tend to categorize entire categories of food as good or bad: those which are high in fat, sugar, or calories tend to be viewed as bad; those which are lower tend to be viewed as good. Similarly, foods which we view as promoting our health in some way – such as those containing “good” cholesterol – are viewed more positively than those which have a negative or neutral impact on it.

Yet, this is surely a narrow view of goodness. To focus solely on health and nutrition can, perhaps, be seen as a pragmatic view of food. The purpose of food (according to this view) is to fuel our bodies, and we wish to fuel our bodies as efficiently and with as few negative consequences as possible; thus we judge food according to that goal. This is presumably correct, so far as it goes, but it ignores the fact that even objects with pragmatic functions can be made beautiful and have aesthetic value. An artisan may construct a chair so that it serves a pragmatic function – it can be sat upon – yet also may endow it with particular aesthetic qualities. It is thus possible to appreciate the chair in terms of its utility or in terms of its aesthetics. Indeed, a person may even make chairs which are useless pragmatically but are still prized for their aesthetic qualities; they are viewed primarily through an aesthetic lens, not a pragmatic one.

This is true of food as well. While we can concede that food has a pragmatic purpose – even that its original purpose was to provide fuel – it has developed many other purposes as well. It can be valued for its aesthetics, for its representative function, or for the emotions it evokes. These purposes can eclipse the food’s pragmatic purpose. For instance, bitter herbs are used during a Pesach Seder to represent the bitterness of being enslaved; in this case the representation is more important than any nutritional value gained by eating the herbs.

I shall argue in the next section that focusing on the health impact of food as the only measure of goodness is morally problematic. However, we should note that often our rhetoric is misleading as well. The rigid division of food into value categories makes it easy to assume, whether implicitly or explicitly, that there is a universal value to food: not only is there only one valuation

¹⁰ Indeed, this is a stereotypical complaint about nouvelle cuisine.

¹¹ Sometimes people will also label organic or locally-grown food as “good” because of its environmental impact; that is less a commentary on the food itself, however, as on the practices surrounding the growth or harvesting of that food. Since this practice will label some oranges, say, as good and some as bad, it highlights the point that goodness is relative to context.

which matters, but that valuation is completely objective. This seems improbable. Over time, foods have changed their valuation, from being seen as bad to being seen as good (or vice versa); egg yolks, for instance, have long been viewed as bad for being high in cholesterol but are now being reconsidered.¹² One could argue that this example illustrates a change in our knowledge of food's objective properties, not a change in the properties themselves; much as our view of the solar system changed, so too our view of food has changed as we gain more knowledge. However, this rests on an overly objective view of science which is difficult to maintain. Once we concede that science itself has certain social or cultural factors influencing it, we are unlikely to be able to maintain that our valuation of food is itself objective and untouched by these factors.¹³

E. Why This Narrowness is Problematic

This narrow focus on the purpose of food – and assigning value based on that focus – is problematic for three reasons. First, there is a noted tendency to move from judging the food to judging the person eating the food. Second, there are social implications that arise from our condemnation of particular foods. Third, it assumes that any food posing a risk to our body should be condemned; this is not consistent with how we treat risk in other circumstances. I shall discuss each of these problems in turn.

The first issue with this sort of judgment is that people do not simply judge food; they also judge the consumers of food. There have been a number of studies demonstrating that we form moral judgments about people based on whether the food they consume is perceived as healthy.¹⁴ Furthermore, ample research shows that people associate overweight and obese people with negative moral terms, judging them as lazy, incompetent, or undisciplined.¹⁵ When certain foods are designated as things to refrain from, we negatively judge any we believe consume them; since we view such people as unable to control themselves with regard to food, we also see them as lacking willpower in other realms.¹⁶ Rarely do people consider that the person's weight may reflect factors besides discipline – his weight may be a result of genetics, a medical condition, a difference in valuation or aesthetics (since not everyone believes that thinness is the aesthetic ideal), and so forth. Even if they do consider other controllable factors, many seem to find something suspect about people choosing a lifestyle that would lead to such a body; the deviation from the social norm is viewed with suspicion.¹⁷

¹² See (Kanter et al. 2012) for more details.

¹³ The argument over the objective nature of science has its roots in Kuhn (1996/1962), but of course has been widely discussed by feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science such as Helen Longino (1990) and more recently Janet Kourany (2010).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Barker, Tandy, and Stookey (1999), Oakes and Slotterback (2005), and Stein and Nemeroff (1995).

¹⁵ Numerous studies have observed this. Two recent papers of note include Andrade et al. (2012) who observed the attitudes of medical students towards obese patient avatars and Vartanian and Silverstein (2013) who examined the relationship between obesity and presumed social status. In each case, obese people were viewed as lazier, less competent, and so forth than their thinner counterparts.

¹⁶ For instance, see the recent controversy over a New York University professor who tweeted that obese graduate students lack the willpower to finish a Ph.D. dissertation. (Trotter 2013)

¹⁷ The idea that obesity could be caused by factors beyond one's control simply seems to be ignored much of the time, despite the fact that studies, such as those by Maes, Neale, and Eaves (1997) and Silventoinen and Kaprio (2009), have shown that genetic factors play a large role.

Thus distaste for certain foods codes a distaste for certain bodies: as our society praises a particular view of fitness and health, we praise foods which we see as likely to lead to those bodies. Similarly, we condemn those foods which we believe lead to “undesirable” bodies. Yet this imposition of a single societal standard of beauty and desirability is harmful. Not all bodies develop in the same way, so it is not possible for everyone to attain the purported ideal; the prevalence of eating disorders in young girls (and increasingly in young boys) reflects this obsession with a particular body image.¹⁸ Hence not only are we imposing a single bodily ideal by our judgments of food, we are imposing an ideal which is unattainable for many; no matter how “virtuous” they are, they will not reach that ideal form.

The second problem with judging food in this way rests in the cultural implications of those judgments. Cultural traditions with respect to food vary; by labeling a food as bad, we may thus condemn an entire culinary tradition as wrong. For instance, lard is a mainstay in traditional Mexican cooking. However, since many in the United States view lard as unhealthy, this may lead them to judge Mexican food as bad for containing lard; Mexican cuisine either must be abstained from or requires revision to remove lard from its recipes – it cannot be virtuous as it is.

Similarly, there are class implications to our judgments. Many lauded choices such as organic produce are simply too expensive for those of lower income. Some things which middle-class people may take for granted, such as access to the ingredients to make a salad, are not obtainable for those living in food deserts; since food deserts are predominantly associated with the lower socio-economic classes, the result is that these healthy choices are impossible for a portion of society.¹⁹ Legislation regarding food often reflects this middle-class assumption. For instance, consider the New York City ban on larger sizes of soda. In general, buying a single 32 ounce soda at a fast food restaurant is less expensive than buying two 16 ounce sodas; hence two people on limited incomes may split a single large drink relatively inexpensively. Since we are not banning sugary sodas completely, all we are doing with this legislation is effectively restricting them from those with limited resources.²⁰

These social implications are particularly problematic when combined with our first point, namely, that judgments of the food results in judgments of the eater. If we condemn particular foods which are integral to the cuisine of a particular culture, we have essentially condemned anyone who participates in that culture’s traditional cuisine. Similarly, if we praise foods which are unobtainable to those in lower socio-economic brackets, we have limited virtue to those of particular classes. We thus run the risk of condemning people for their food choices based on culture and class.

The third issue with judging food lies in the implicit expectation that we should avoid foods which pose some kind of health risk to our bodies. There are many activities which pose a risk –

¹⁸ The classic discussion of this is by Levine and Smolak (1996); for a more recent overview of the subject I recommend Harrison (2013).

¹⁹ A food desert is a place where it is difficult to obtain nutritious food at an affordable price.

²⁰ This is presumably also what is happening with attempts (“Wis. Assembly” 2013) to limit the use of food stamps to healthy purchases – we have declared that certain foods should be unobtainable if one is below a certain income and that those people may only use food for sustenance, not for any other function.

frequently a greater risk – to our health and lives than eating specific foods. We can take up skydiving or drive on a busy interstate without inviting moral judgment for those actions. It is true that we may be urged to be careful while pursuing such activities, but the activities themselves are not usually judged as bad simply for putting our bodies at risk.

Moreover, there are many things which we see as morally permissible despite being harmful in excess; for instance, many medications may be overdosed on or pose a threat to one's health if taken in large quantities. Yet few people see a problem with taking them in smaller quantities, since the gain is viewed as worth the risk. A person with spinal problems may take a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug to control the pain, despite the fact that such medication poses a threat to her liver in the long run. Indeed, few would likely judge her for choosing to take that medication, despite the risks; we believe that she is able to make that decision for herself.²¹

This ability to weigh risks and benefits is one we exercise frequently in our everyday lives. It is true that we may invite moral condemnation for taking unreasonable risks, but clearly not every risk results in this kind of judgment. If we are permitted to take reasonable risks in other arenas without being judged bad, it is inconsistent to treat the consumption of food differently. Many foods eaten in moderation will not pose a significant risk to a particular individual; a single piece of chocolate cake is not going to seriously harm a person unless they have some specific medical condition (such as diabetes) which interacts poorly with it. Hence the argument that a food, when eaten in excess, leads to health problems is not sufficient reason to condemn it. Even in the case where a specific food poses some kind of threat or where a person is engaged in a pattern of food consumption which may lead to a health risk, that person can presumably weigh these risks against the potential aesthetic, emotional, or ritual benefits of that food. The fact that a food poses some sort of risk to a consumer should not lead to its automatic condemnation; the food itself is no more good nor bad than skydiving is.

F. Conclusion

We use moral rhetoric when discussing food, labeling certain foods as “good” or “bad,” and ourselves as being “sinful” or “virtuous” for eating them. This overlooks the fact that food has a multitude of functions and thus a multitude of goods; what is good nutritionally may vary from what is good aesthetically or emotionally. Instead, our rhetoric concentrates on a single function of food: we see food as having only nutritional or health-related purposes.

Judging food based solely on nutritional grounds is not merely short-sighted – it is morally problematic. We run the risk of condemning the food of particular cultures, or of praising foods which are unobtainable for people of lower socio-economic status. Furthermore, judging the food is simply one side of the coin; we also judge the person consuming the food. This results in condemning people for their culture or social class, which is ethically untenable. While some might argue that this condemnation is necessary to help people avoid risky behavior, such activity is not consistent with our treatment of risk in other contexts. We frequently engage in

²¹ She may make this decision in consultation with a physician in order to understand all of the risks, but if the medication is one which is generally acknowledged to help with her condition, we ultimately believe she has the right to decide that the risk is worthwhile.

behavior with some degree of risk if we view the potential benefit as worthwhile; moreover, we do so without inviting moral condemnation.

Claiming that certain foods are good or bad tacitly asserts that nutrition is the only approved use for food. This is implausible. Even those objects with pragmatic functions can be made beautiful and have aesthetic value. Food is no different – we must acknowledge that it has different uses and thus different goods. No food is good or bad absolutely; our rhetoric to that effect is misleading at best and potentially harmful at worst.

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