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You are what you eat

If food plays a major role in personal identity, does that legitimize us in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices?

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INTRODUCTION

Philosophy of food is a relatively unknown field for most philosophers, however, it exists since antiquity. Plato already described what a proper diet should look like in the second book of the *Republic*¹. He advocates for simple and frugal meals for the city guardians, as extravagance of material pleasures would lead to moral corruption. These simple meals should primarily consist of grains, vegetables, and fruits. Meat should be avoided as it could lead to unnecessary desires. He used food to demonstrate the importance of moderation and self-control which are central to his idea of the pursuit of the Good. Plato, thus, already went beyond the purely biological dimension of food to attribute aspects of morality to culinary choices. He discussed the place that food should hold in society. This thesis will further explore the relationship between food and morality but will also include a discussion on identity. I will consider where moral philosophy and philosophy of identity overlap, discussed around the theme of food. This will be a way to understand the famous sentence ‘you are what you eat’, which I understand as an overlap between identity, food, and morality.

Thus, the question that this thesis will try to provide an answer to is:

If food plays a major role in personal identity, does that legitimize us in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices?

It is important to consider this question because food forms a significant part of the lives that we live, and with new media offering a whole pallet of new diet options, promising how food can fix all your life problems, it is important to remain critical of that what is proposed to you. However, there is a growing narrative proclaiming that judgment of yourself and others is something bad, and that it is not something that we should do. Thus, there is a complexity with a whole world providing you with information and options yet arguing that it is not okay to judge the food choices of others. In this paper, I will argue how the judgment of the culinary choices of yourself and others is not just legitimized but necessary to come to a moderate and virtuous diet that balances all the information that you receive on a daily basis in current society. To form a moderate diet that does not go to one extreme or the other is an international

¹ Plato, *Republic*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 558-559

societal challenge. It is important to philosophically reflect on what the right moral choice for a diet would be.

To argue for my thesis, in the first half we will consider the concept of identity and debate if food constitutes a major part of personal identity. This will be done by covering a biological, psychological, collective and individualistic dimension when considering the connection between food and identity. In the second half of the thesis, we will look at the morality of judging culinary choice from both a perspective of self-judgment (I am what I eat), where both a rebellious approach to a societal food norm and an idea of hyper conformity to it, will be discussed. Additionally, the judgment of others (you are what you eat) will also be reflected upon. Finally, in the conclusion the arguments made are summarized and presented to show how food does indeed constitute a major part of personal (and collective) identity, and that we are not only legitimized in judging the food choices of ourselves and others, but that it is necessary for us to do so in order to have a moderate diet.



1. IDENTITY

Does food constitute a major part of personal identity?

1.1 Biological Dimension

The first important element to answer this question is biology as we exist in a biological body. Furthermore, without the body, food would be irrelevant. Thus, this is a central part for this thesis. David Kaplan defined the biological dimension to food as food as nutrition: “food is made from naturally occurring nutrients that are metabolized by and organism to sustain, grow and repair vital life processes”². In short, food is the vital fuel to life and its function is to provide necessary nourishment and energy. And yet, even with us knowing that we need food to survive, we need an additional motivation to act and acquire food. Because in order to motivate us to actually move and make choices in order to get food, we have a specific biological sensation: hunger. Through centuries of evolution, we have kept a sensation that must trigger us to act. As without this sensation we would not go out and collect food. Several examples show that, when we repress the sensation of hunger, we will mostly stop eating. Fully knowing that without food we will die.

When someone is getting treatment for cancer, the medication that they take largely represses their appetite³. The patient is usually still aware of the fact that they will need to eat, however most patients do so with reluctance. The medication suppresses the sensation of hunger and with that patients stop eating. Similarly, with ADHD medication⁴. When taking it,

² David M. Kaplan, "Introduction: The Philosophy of Food," in *The Philosophy of Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 1-23, <https://www-jstor-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt7zw2cx.3>. Page 3

³ Julie E. Marlow, Bhupesh P. Singh, Andrew P. Noakes, and Evelyn V. Telfer, "The Effects of Plant-Based Diets on the Body and the Brain: A Systematic Review," *Clinical Nutrition ESPEN* 43 (2021): pages 56-65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.clnesp.2021.03.006>.

⁴ Finn DM, Menzel JE, Gray E, and Schwartz T, "Pharmacotherapy for Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Youth with Avoidant Restrictive Food Intake Disorder: A Case Series of Patients Prescribed Stimulant Medication in a Partial Hospitalization Program for Eating Disorders," *Journal of Eating Disorders* 11, no. 1 (2023): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40337-023-00954-1>. Section: background, page 2.

you lose your appetite. You still know that you should eat, because otherwise you will die. However, people often don't eat when on medication without other reminders. Furthermore, the example still holds when not taking any medication. When someone has anorexia, or a similar eating disorder, they manage to mentally repress the sensation of hunger and ignore the need for food⁵. They rationally know that what they are doing is killing them however, they still do it.

From this we can conclude that the sensation of hunger is necessary for us to actually eat, which is contradictory. We intellectually already know that we will die without food. However, this cognitive idea is not enough to urge us to act. Thus, we have an element in our biology (the sensation of hunger) that ensures that we will actually take action. Here lies a point of tension. The knowledge that we will die without food is thus not sufficient to eat.

1.2 Psychological Dimension

Thus, food has a biological dimension as it brings us the necessary nutrients and it fulfills our hunger. But this is also where it becomes a bit more complex, because hunger is a desire for food. And to desire is to be in a particular state of mind. It is not only a sensation of the body, but also of the mind. But considering desires is difficult. Is wanting for water and a desire for knowledge the same mental state? Or wishing for a new dress? Or wanting a mango but not an apple? All these states of mind are desires, but are they all the same? There are theories that distinguish desires into stronger and weaker desires. The strength of a desire is said to be created by the desire's causal power regarding the control of action. As Anscombe (2000) said "the primitive sign of wanting, is trying to get"⁶. Thus, the strength of a desire is measured in what we will actually end up doing. If someone is both hungry and needs new clothes, often

⁵ Eating Disorder Hope. "Anorexia Nervosa and the Ignored Consequences of Starvation." *Eating Disorder Hope* (blog), June 13, 2019. <https://www.eatingdisorderhope.com/blog/anorexia-nervosa-starvation-ignored>.

⁶ G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Page 68

the desire for food will win out. Hunger as a desire is a stronger desire than most other desires⁷. Hunger triggers us to take action, make choices and eat. It creates a desire for us to go out and eat. Thus, when determining what we desire most, it is what we act upon first when given the opportunity. When we are in a moment of urgency and are truly hungry, we will eat that which we can first take action upon. However, in the case that there is no urgency we can pick what we have the most taste for. We can make a more nuanced choice. Food is not only a question of the body, but also of the mind.

1.3 Collective Identity

Food is thus a strong desire, but what is it that shapes our desires? The preference that we have for food and what we eat is not random. It is constructed. There are many different elements that go into forming what we desire to eat and what we will eat. As Aristotle has stated in the past “man is by nature a social animal”⁸. Thus, as we are social, we depend on each other. As an individual you do not produce all that you need to survive, you do this in a community. As a collective food is produced, distributed and consumed. You yourself alone do not shape what you eat; you are part of a wider community.

Different communities have specifications to which foods are to be eaten and what is to be avoided. The preparation and consumption of food is tied to the beliefs, laws and practices of nations and cultures, which forms a boundary for the collective identity. Often dietary regimentation is connected to moral conduct and spiritual salvation. Mary Douglas was one of the first writers who contributed to this topic. In the work *Purity and Danger* (1966)⁹ she described how food practices are rich in symbolic meaning and are in a way a means of

⁷ "Multifaceted Nature of Intrinsic Motivation." *Reiss Profile*. Accessed June 15, 2024. https://www.reissprofile.pl/wp-content/themes/app/files/publikacje/1_reissprofile_pl_Multifaceted-nature-of-intrinsic-motivation.pdf. Page 181

⁸ Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham, Perseus Digital Library, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D1%3Asection%3D1253a.1253a>

⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002). Page 101

communicating. She argues that what is considered a food taboo or what becomes a dietary law often reflects deeper societal structures and values. For instance, kosher laws in Judaism symbolize and reinforce Jewish identity and social cohesion. This is not only the case within religion, but also within different cultures and subcultures. For example, veganism is defined by not consuming any animal produce, and doing so would exclude one from this group. Douglas emphasizes that food is more than mere sustenance, it is a cultural artifact that encodes and communicates social norms, values and identities. Thus, food and cultures define each other. Food prohibitions are not just arbitrary or based on health, but they serve to reinforce social boundaries and group identity.

1.3.1 Large-scale Socio-economic Determinants

Food plays a highly important role in most communities. Food is necessary for humans to live together in a society to such an extent that governments often play a role in the distribution of food in accordance with some moral principle. The government of the place where one lives make the rules and regulations that will in part shape which food somebody eats as it limits what one gets to choose from. For instance, the health and safety measures regarding food shape what food we have available and thus what we can eat. For example, the difference between European and American food regulation laws (and thus the food that is available) is quite famous. While both the EU and the US must be able to offer their citizens a safe food supply, there is a monumental difference in what is considered to be safe to eat for both and thus the laws regarding permitted additives are vastly different¹⁰. This creates different options of food to choose from in both regions. Thus, the ruling power of where we live, also greatly influences our culinary options.

Similarly, the trade agreements between countries also shape what food we have available. Trade agreements shape how the national food environment and the availability and quality of nutrition. For instance, when Fiji joined the WTO (World Trade Organization) and implemented the associated economic and agricultural policy changes, there was an increase in the availability of imported fresh fruits, vegetables and whole grain refined cereals, but also

¹⁰"Food Safety Regulation in the European Union and the United States: Different Cultures, Different Laws," *Columbia Journal of European Law* 4 (1998): 525.

in fats, oils, meats and processed dairy products¹¹. It thus changes the options for food that were available. A disclaimer must be made for the distribution and trading of food by governments, as this has not always or everywhere been voluntary. For example, in 1895 Britain annexed what is now Kenya as a colony. The colonial state used white settlers to introduce commercial agricultural production as the primary product of the colonial economy. The state forcibly seized land from indigenous communities and systematically marginalized African agriculture. Thus, cash crop farming quickly became the choice source of income for settlers, who benefited from the cheap land and large African labor force¹². British colonialists introduced European food crops which replaced native crops as millet, tubers etcetera. Over time the traditional knowledge of food and its preparation became lost and communities became reliant on the new economic system. This was further cemented when the missionary school and other church institutions sought to educate 'African savages' and insisted on a 'proper British diet'. Thus, the ruling power where one lives is a significant determinant in what food is available and thus of what food one will choose. Additionally, the location where somebody lives and the history of that place is thus also greatly influential in our food choices. In Kenya and other parts of what was colonial Africa many of their traditional food practices have been lost due to colonization. Another example would be the potato famine in Ireland in the 1840s¹³. In the 17th century Ireland ate relatively little cereals and bread compared to the rest of Europe, in Ireland the staple food was potatoes for the majority of the population. With the Great Potato Famine between 1846 – 1847 the food patterns in Ireland changed dramatically. In 1900, only a short 50 years later, flour consumption per capita had increased fourfold, bread became the staple food and butter, tea and sugar became standard in any household. The standard Irish diet became much less nutritious than the potato-based diet of

¹¹ A. Ravuvu, S. Friel, A.M. Thow, et al., "Monitoring the impact of trade agreements on national food environments: trade imports and population nutrition risks in Fiji," *Global Health* 13 (2017): article 33, doi:10.1186/s12992-017-0257-1. Page 13

¹² Joe Kobuthi, "Culinary Imperialism and the Hierarchies of Food," *The Elephant*, September 27, 2019, <https://www.theelephant.info/analysis/2019/09/27/culinary-imperialism-and-the-hierarchies-of-food/>.

¹³ Jean-Pierre Poussou, "Changing eating habits in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands" *MIMMOC* (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.1733> Paragraph 19

before. These effects are still there today as Irish cuisine stayed relatively simple and characterized with the high use of butter and consumption of bread.

While on the one hand governments determine what food is available, on the other hand food does determine what kind of society is formed. When considering how communities were originally formed, food was a central aspect of this. Hunters and gatherers got their names from their way of acquiring sustenance. Finding food took most of their time¹⁴. It was also in part how their social structures were determined. When the shift was made from hunting and gathering to stationary living and farming, this was done as it increased food production and decreased the burdens associated with gathering it. Yuval Noah Harari does note that for many people life also became worse as the agrarian revolution did create social hierarchies and an increase of work for some. But with the revolution larger groups of people gathered together than had been previously, creating larger and more complex communities. Thus, food in part shapes the kind of community that people live in. A more contemporary example would be the modern western economy. This has also in large parts been shaped by the necessity for people to eat food. In the past people were largely self-sufficient, as is still seen in some more remote parts of the world today. However, in most parts of the ‘western’ world the production of food is delegated to a few people, which allows other people to do different jobs and focus on other aspects of life than producing food. This delegation of food production to a smaller part of society then allows for the production and development of different industries. But people still need food, which they now need to buy. For this money is necessary, and thus people will work in the different industries to afford it. Thus, there is an interplay in governments deciding on the availability of food, and food determining what form society will take.

1.3.2 Ontological Perspective

Another part that is important to consider when thinking of what determines food choice is what can be considered as food? The ontology of food is quite difficult. If we simply define food as all that humans eat, then humans themselves are also food as cannibals do exist. In Montaigne’s essay ‘On the cannibals’ in circa 1580, he described the Tupinamba people in

¹⁴ Harari, Yuval Noah. *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. New York: Harper, 2015. Chapter 3 and 5

Brazil who ceremoniously ate the bodies of their dead enemies as a matter of honor¹⁵. In the essay he uses these cannibals to criticize the ‘common opinion’ of Western and Central Europeans on ‘barbarians’, being anyone other than themselves. He uses the essay to question ‘why does one think those who are not European are instead barbarian or savage?’. He holds the European perspective accountable for condemning those who are different based on the prejudice of common opinion. As a society we determine what food is and judge people who make different choices as ‘barbarian’ or as the other. We judge whether something is acceptable to eat or not. However, if we were to take away the judgment of a society, there is no difference between different food other than its nutritional value. There is no food that is more or less food than other food, a society determines this difference. If it is decided that something is not to be eaten, then it is not food. For instance, murder is not cannibalism as eating the body is what makes it food. In Greek mythology when Agamemnon offends Artemis on his way to the Trojan war and she prevents the Greek troops from reaching Troy unless Agamemnon sacrifices his eldest daughter, this is human sacrifice but not cannibalism. It is only by common agreement that something is or is not food, and it is then the action of eating the food that confirms its position. Other than determining humans as possible to eat, you would have to take the action to actually eat them to confirm humans to be food. If a ‘barbarian’ would refuse to eat the meat, they would exclude themselves from the group. In that case the barbarian would not be a barbarian as they changed their food choices. So, a society judges what food is and considers those who are different as barbarian, as not belonging to their community. A note here is that Montaigne does use a provocative example here in order to make his point; there is a taboo on cannibalism that can rightly be considered as a civilizing principle that places people on a moral level compared to just their biological needs and hunger.

The first ontological approach to food is how society determines what is considered to be food. But there is a second level to the ontology of food, there is also an ontology of the identity of the food itself. A dish is a dish because of a specific recipe. There is a fixed reference to a dish,

¹⁵ Michel de Montaigne, "Of Cannibals" (c. 1580), in *The Essays of Michel de Montaigne*, ed. William Carew Hazlitt, trans. Charles Cotton. Page 233

which you can't change because then it would no longer be that specific dish. The Dutch dish Hutsport can be called Hutsport until the ingredients or preparation is changed, then it would become a different dish. Similarly to how each individual being is unique in virtue of individual specific features. If we change those features, we are no longer ourselves. An example where this is formalized is in certain French national dishes which get the status of Traditional Specialities Guaranteed (TSG)¹⁶. Meaning that the food has to be made in a certain manner to be considered that type of food, they receive a protected status. Or on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity¹⁷ if you filter on food there are seven different sections with collectively more than 160 entries, from food preparation, to dishes, to food customs. Food and the things that have to do with food receive the same status as many ancient monuments. With this formalization the identity of the dishes itself is protected as a unique being with a history and specific delimitation.

1.4 Personal Identity

Food shapes our everyday lives in countless ways. What and how you choose to eat is the result of many aspects of your life. You have a biological and a psychological dimension that triggers you to eat. Furthermore, you have a collective identity that shapes what you even consider to be food, and which creates rules describing what you should and shouldn't eat. This also forms your personal identity; the stereotypes of a community reflect on you. Like how Germans drink a lot of beer or how that they eat a lot of rice in India. As your community has decided this is what is normal to eat, it becomes a part of you. As a society you have collective ideas and values about food, however a society is built from individuals. The individual's adherence to the food choices of a society shapes society. But it also shapes the individual, as we agree with the norms of a society, this shapes our identity.

There is a significant connection between food and identity. However, nothing we can eat will ever fully determine an identity, yet dietary preferences are part of who I am as an

¹⁶ "Protected French Foods," French Waterways, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://www.french-waterways.com/protected-french-foods/>.

¹⁷ "Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage," UNESCO, accessed July 1, 2024, https://ich.unesco.org/en/lists?term%5b%5d=vocabulary_thesaurus-10.

individual and who we are as a community. The role of food in identity can be seen even in the small details, such as how I dislike kale. This is a way in which I can be recognized, it will adjust my behavior in order to not eat kale if I have a choice. However, this is something different than going against the societal food norms. This is how individual taste and identity are set within the norms set by a society. You have an individual identity without excluding yourself from society, there is a personal identity in food separate from your collective identity.

1.5 Summary

In this first section it was shown that food is a significant part of personal identity. Starting at food being fundamental to your body, but as hunger is a desire, it is also part of the mind. But the complexity in food is that it is not just something that shapes you personally, it is part of collective societal choice. Through food we get a glimpse at how complex the question of identity is as a balance between the collective and the individual. You position yourself with your food choice in a certain kind of identity, within the frame of society. This is shaped by religion, different socioeconomic determinants and even the ontology of food itself. But you do have personal preferences and taste different from the collective identity. Any personal or collective identity is formed in a social and environmental context, and food and eating are a crucial part of that context. Food does not make an entire identity, but it is a key part of the story.



2. MORALITY AND CHOICE

Are we legitimized in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices?

Having determined that food does constitute a major part of moral identity, the next part of the question would be if we can pass a moral judgment regarding culinary choice. As a disclaimer I want to mention that the complexity with food is that what you eat is not always a choice. It can be that there is a lack of food available in your area. If there is no food to choose from, you cannot make a choice. Or that there is a very limited supply, that would also impact your range of choices. Then there is a choice that there is an abundance of options, but you do not have the means to choose from all of them. Or there is the case where you could choose, but you do not know how to prepare the food. There are many instances where what you choose to eat, is not a free choice. This can be due to your means, knowledge or effort, but all these aspects of your personal situation can limit your available food choices. However, as this thesis discusses judgment regarding food choice, it will only discuss the cases in which food is a choice or the cases where food can be a choice. If you remain willingly ignorant, by for instance refusing to learn how to cook, you are not exempt. The responsibility for the awareness of your own culinary options is yours.

When considering the idea of judging a culinary choice there are two perspectives that we need to think of: the internal and the external perspective. You yourself judge what you eat, however others also judge what you eat and the choices you make regarding food.

2.1 I am what I eat

How do we judge our own culinary choices?

Your culinary choices are partially based on your personal identity, you have an internal decision-making process based on your own moral prerogatives. Individuals govern themselves with moral principles that they have chosen. Then they assess one's actions and choices based on whether they align with these self-imposed principles. This process is internal and comes from an individual's own capacity for moral reasoning.

2.1.1 Going Against the Norm.

One culinary choice that showcases your moral position is by rejecting the societal norms, take for instance veganism, which is a diet which is often based on someone's personal convictions. Vegans themselves generally refer to veganism as a political philosophy based on the rejection of the commodity status of animals, a protest against violence committed against all living beings or as an alternative way of life focused on creating a sustainable world¹⁸. Thus, there is a personal philosophy on which many vegans base their lifestyle choice. In *Animal Liberation* (1975) Peter Singer coined the idea of 'speciesism' which, similar to racism or sexism, points out the privileged position of humans in how our interest usually outweigh the interests of non-human animals. He argued how an animal's ability to suffer should be included in the moral consideration of people when making food choices and thus that eating animal products is ethically indefensible as animals suffer in the process of gathering it¹⁹. In this work he argues for vegetarianism/veganism based on a moral position, one of which is governed by considerations about the suffering of animals. This differs from food choice being determined by a moral compass as a moral compass would be universal and a moral position is personal: I think it is evil to eat animals. Peter Singer showcases how the question of morality is not universal, but it is something that we take a personal perspective towards. When a person makes a food choice, they showcase their moral position by making that choice. Here they make a claim to morality but also against the morality of others. Thus, can morality then be universal? When vegans claim that what they eat is the right way to live, they also state that the other way of doing things is wrong. But there is an opposing view that sees no problem with eating animals, assuming that they are treated well when alive. Thus, there is a battle on who owns morality. And when you make a food choice you take your moral position in this debate. Thus, arguing for a universal morality regarding food is difficult, as everyone takes their own personal position based on their personal circumstances.

¹⁸ Sofia Vestergren and Mehmet S. Uysal, "Beyond the Choice of What You Put in Your Mouth: A Systematic Mapping Review of Veganism and Vegan Identity," *Frontiers in Psychology* 13 (June 10, 2022): 848434, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.848434>. Page 2

¹⁹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1990), 12.

A more extreme example is raw vegans, it is a more radical form of veganism where there is a belief that you cannot take anything from an animal, whereby it be to eat eggs or to take wool to make clothes, nor can you forcefully take anything from plants as this would also be violent. Thus, you could only eat the fruit of a tree that has already fallen. These are very strong personal moral beliefs that significantly shape your dietary decisions and with that the belief of who you are.

Thus, I am what I eat means in part self-representation; you define who you are in part through food. Like when you choose to become a vegan, you are going against a norm, you make your own choice differently from most of the community and define through that your moral position. The idea of going against a community with your actions and norms is almost as old as written history. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412 BCE) lived on the outskirts of the city of Athens in a barrel as an act of protest to societies norms²⁰. He rejected these norms to such an extent that he gave up civilized tools to eat and ate like a dog from the floor. He believed that you eat to live, not live to eat and that thus all the rituals and norms surrounding food were unnecessary. For him, taking a moral position was taking a position against the normative position, you rebel. Similarly to veganism, as that is a dietary choice that also goes beyond the societal norm. This also showcases that morality is not universal, meaning that the same moral prerogative would hold for everyone, but it is what you think is right. And in doing so, you define yourself and what you stand for through your actions and choices. However, also my taste in disliking kale is in part a way of representing myself, this is part of who I am. Thus, self-representation through food is not only through acts of rebellion against the norm but also through matters of personal taste. I dislike kale so I make the choice not the eat it, and when people ask about my food preferences this is what I will name. It is a way for others to recognize me. Furthermore, I am what I eat also exemplifies something about your integrity, it demonstrates a part of your character. In making choices regarding what you eat you are keeping to your own personal values and adhering to your norms. For example, when you start dieting and you are capable of keeping to your diet, or if you become vegan and you can stick to your decision, it shows a strength of character.

²⁰ Julie Piering, "Diogenes of Sinope," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 1, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/diogenes-of-sinope/>.

2.1.2 Conformity to the Norms

Thus, one way of expressing your, moral position on food choices is through social rebellion, you position yourself against the norm and through doing so you define your moral position. But you also express your moral position towards food with social conformity. This, for instance, can be seen in dieting. As a society there are established beauty standards, which then serve as a basis for self-image. Susan Bordo argued in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (2003) how societal pressures to look a certain way and cultural constructs of beauty strongly shape woman's lives²¹. Meaning that an outside expectation of your body that you have then internalized shape what food choices you would see as right or wrong. Furthermore in the work *Volatile Bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz wrote how bodies are volatile, meaning that they are fluid, changeable and influenced by external forces²². She emphasizes that bodies are produced and modified through interactions with social, cultural and political forces, like racial, cultural and class particularities. Thus, based on societal beauty norms often people have a personal judgment of what they should look like and what would be healthy to eat, and you adjust your food choices accordingly. You internalize what you assume the external eyes will think about your diet. For instance, the idea that before a big moment, like a wedding, you would have to look good, and that looking good would including going on a diet to shape your body to that ideal that you hold for yourself. Similarly with seasonal diets, the idea that you would have to diet and look a certain way for a 'summer body'. Or a body builder, who shapes their body through exercise and a very specific diet to look sculpted on a stage. Both body building and dieting are a question of your own physical aesthetics, you have an idea of how you wish your body to look based on societal standards and sculpt your body to fit this ideal, thus as Grosz said, your body is violate and shaped through societal influences which you than conform to. In this case you take I am what I eat, as I physically am what I eat, food is a way to sculpt your own body, it

²¹ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 1st ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 400, <https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8441705>. Pages 99-134

²² Elizabeth Grosz, "Introduction: A Phenomenology of Corporeal Feminism," in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Chapter 1, pages 3-22.

allows you to give form to what you wish to look like. Here, you conform to the norms that society has made regarding food choices, as often being healthy and thin is praised. You take a moral position by conforming to these societal norms and going to extremes to comply with them.

However, while Grosz introduced the idea that the body is violated and thus not a static entity, but that it can be shaped to societal standards. There is a difficulty regarding the belief of malleability of our bodies through food as there is a complexity in what you can influence and what you cannot. There are some things with your body that you cannot control or change with food (or exercise etcetera). The shape of your bones, your length and body proportions are not things that you can influence. People have an image of wishing to look like X and have an idea of malleability, where they can control how they look based on what they eat. We have an internal self-representation that we are motivated by. However, we have to consider if it is rational, because there are some things outside of your control. The stoic philosophers already described how there are things you can change and things that you can't. Epictetus wrote as the first passage in *Enchiridion*:

“There are things which are within our power, and there are things which are beyond our power. Within our power are opinion, aim, desire, aversion, and, in one word, whatever affairs are our own. Beyond our power are body, property, reputation, office, and, in one word, whatever are not properly our own affairs²³”.

Thus, there are some things which we can change by our actions and some things which we can't, of which the body is one. Not being aware of what depends on us and what doesn't is dangerous. Because unrealistic standards will only create dissatisfaction and misery. You will keep desperately chasing an unattainable goal. Geneen Roth wrote that often a negative self-image and emotional deprivation can persist even after you kept to your diet successfully²⁴. So,

²³ Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, trans. Elizabeth Carter, in *The Discourses of Epictetus, with the Encheiridion and Fragments*, 2nd ed., ed. W.A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985). Paragraph 1

²⁴ Geneen Roth, *Breaking Free from Emotional Eating*, English edition (New York: Plume, 2003), Chapter. 11.

even when keeping to your diet perfectly without any exceptions, you will still not be happy with the results because not everything can be changed through food. You have unnatural expectations of what a diet could achieve. This often results in more drastic approaches such as plastic surgery and permanent body modification. Or in the case of bodybuilding the indulgence in supplements and steroids, which do more harm to the body than good. If we are not rational with how we see the I am what I eat, we move past living healthy to an unhealthy lifestyle. In a moderate paradigm there is a balance where we accept that we can't perfectly sculpt our body to what we wish as this is not in our control, but we do try to live a healthy life. You do not restrict or overindulge yourself to the point of torture. You will not eat only chocolate, but this does not mean you can never have a piece, there is a balance.

With the conformity to society's expectations of your physical appearance and the idea of makeability of the body through food you take a moral position through conformity. There is an idea of being better by eating healthier, there is an idea of superiority. It gains a competitive element when conformity shapes your moral position, the superior belief that 'I fit better to this standard'.

2.1.3 The Middle Ground

When we judge our own food choices it is important to do so in the right manner. As Aristotle described in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, there is not one good diet that would fit for everyone, just as there is no ideal weight that would work for every human. Aristotle himself gave the example of Milo the wrestler who would need more eggs than a man that is just beginning in athletics²⁵. He described virtue as the middle ground between excess and deficiency²⁶. Thus, a middle ground relative to the needs and biology of each individual. To be aware of this middle ground you need to be able to think rationally, As Aristotle stated:

²⁵ Aristotle, *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vol. 19, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1934). page 1106b

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book II, Chapter 6. <https://historyofeconomicthought.mcmaster.ca/aristotle/Ethics.pdf>

Virtue, then, is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean [...] the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it ²⁷.

To think rationally would mean to consider all your variables, your work and the effort that it takes, your place of living and the food that is available there, your own ethical considerations (all part of your identity as mentioned before). With these variables you have to consider your own middle ground, this is a personal responsibility. To live moderately is a personal responsibility, meaning that if we do not have a healthy diet this is mostly our fault (with the exception of the disclaimer made above). Thus, you are not to give this reason to an external authority, like social media or how people look on magazine covers. However, humans are irrational, this is why we binge eat, or snack more than we are supposed to. As Aristotle said: this is when pleasure becomes stronger than reason. In these moments we forget to stop and think about the different variables and to make the rational choice. Because humans do have the capacity to be rational, but this is an active choice. And this moment of stopping and thinking is the moment of judging, here I judge about what I eat. This is not a critical judgment but a judgment as understanding, as a moment of self-reflection. And so, Aristotle does show us how difficult it is to be rational and moderate about our culinary choices. It is dependent on your personal circumstances and all variables that are included in that, which you will then have to judge for yourself (as a form of self-reflection) and weight to come to a moderate diet.

Take for instance the example of dieting to conform to social norms, then you give away your rationality to an external source, which should have been your responsibility. You abandon your self-control to fit to the external image. You are governed by appearances determined by society and with that you forgot the moment where you stop, think and judge. You become irrational. If only looking at the ideal magazine model you will forget what you can and cannot influence. You are no longer keeping in mind your personal variables that would determine your moderate diet. This is why your identity is so important and your moderate diet

²⁷ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, Book II, Chapter 6. Pages 27 and 28

is relative to your personal situation. The other example of raw veganism, where you take your moral position through rebellion, is a similar abandonment of rationality. However, in this case you will have to question if you considered all your variables. For example, to live as a raw vegan you would have to eat a whole list of supplements in order to still consume the necessary nutrients. Often these supplements are chemicals and come in plastic bottles, additionally they are produced in factories. Is this than not also damaging? During your judgment of your own diet, you have to be careful to ensure that you do not make an irrational choice but that you make a judgment including all elements.

Thus, to determinate your personal moral position from a place of moderation, you yourself should make the effort to become more aware about food and what we should eat and why. Through the self-judgment we create an internal understanding of the world based on our awareness and reasoning, and this shapes the decisions that determine what is on our plates. We gather information, draw conclusions, and base our food choices on that information. I judge what I eat based on the awareness that you have regarding food and how all my personal variables weight against each other, based on this I adjust my diet to be moderate. If you remain open to new information and keep understanding more, you gain a moderate and healthy lifestyle.

2.2 You are what You eat

Can we judge others culinary choices?

When you make culinary choices, others can judge these decisions. They can take a skeptical point of view, looking at their arguments and weighing them case by case. You externally judge the internal choices of others. Are their arguments valid? With the Aristotelian framework we will be able to question both the diets of those who are radical in going against the norm in addition to those who are extreme in conforming to societal expectations. Take for instance the most extreme raw vegans, those who based on an ideal of non-violence eat nothing that comes from animals nor anything that has not already fallen from the trees. Have they considered all the variables? Raw vegans preach to do no harm to neither plants nor animals, and thus eating nothing that is not freely given by nature. It can be questioned if this is the right way to appreciate nature? When considering nature as the sublime as Edmund Burke wrote about, it

is something that goes beyond sensibility, something that would be greater than us and leave us awestruck. You cannot just appreciate the sublime, but you are involved in the experience, you are part of it. Burke described the sublime of fruits vegetables describing them as beautiful irrespective of proportions²⁸. Thus, this beautiful idea of the sublime is even present in the vegetables that we eat. Everything that we put inside our body has a value, it is part of the sublime. Eating is not just surviving, we are not just an animal, we have desires regarding what is on our plate if given the choice. And through respecting what we eat, we are respecting nature. By eating the vegetables, we are in a community with beauty and nature, in contrast, most supplements as chemical constructions go against nature, they can even damage nature. (Raw) vegans are often highly aware of what they eat and the implications of it, of all the variables that go into their diet choices. But it can be questioned if they willfully remain ignorant to the other variables of their culinary choices, and thus remaining subjected to irrationality.

2.3 Are we legitimized in judging culinary choice?

Having proven that we do judge our own and others culinary choices, the question remains if we are legitimized in doing so. Within the Aristotelian framework there is a moment of contemplation, of rationality where we stop to think about our variables, this is a moment of judgment. Not of critical judgment but of an understanding judgment. And when we judge what the other is eating, we become more aware of our own food choices and the values that build them. Because the more information that we have the more aware we become of the different variables that influence our culinary choice and thus the more balanced and rational the judgment that we make regarding food choices becomes. We are not born with an innate knowledge of what a good (moral) diet is, of what our moderate culinary choice based on the different variables would be, this is a skill that we develop. We learn what our middle ground is through judging others and our own culinary decisions. The more we judge the food choices of others and ourselves, the more aware we become of our own morality regarding the choices, the closer we come to the middle ground which helps with a virtuous lifestyle. Thus, we are

²⁸ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757), page 76

not only legitimized in judging the food choices of others, but it is also necessary for us to do so in order to develop a moderate diet. You are able to take a moral middle ground, judging between bad and good, through the knowledge you gain through others, and for this judging their food choices is necessary. Not in a sense of being better because you are morally superior, but in the sense that in observing and listening to other justifications for their culinary choices, we learn things. Not in a critical sense, but in an understanding sense. It is not a judgment leading to a feeling of superiority, it is a judgment to facilitate understanding. Where reason is the formation of a judgment of the food choices of others and yourself in order to take a moderate and virtuous position to culinary choice. This includes the understanding of the variables that go into this culinary decision and being realistic about what we can achieve, thus we have to let go of that which is outside of our control and we actively control the parts that we can, as stoic philosophy emphasized. Within this process it is important to remain aware that this is our own responsibility, and thus to not give this away to external sources like magazines or social media, which is challenging. But through taking the moment to judge you give yourself the room to be rational and not to fall into irrational and immoderate food choices. You are what you eat is a judgment in the sense that it is necessary for us to learn about others their food choices to understand our own. I am what I eat is then the self-reflection to correctly apply that knowledge without falling to one of the extremes and in order to correctly consider all variables.



CONCLUSION

If food plays a major role in personal identity, does that legitimize us in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices?

To answer our question there were two major components:

1. Does food constitute a major part of personal identity?
2. Are we legitimized in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices?

We concluded that food is a major part of personal identity. The biological dimension to our lives makes food necessary and hunger motivates us to take action and make choices in order to get food. As hunger is a strong desire, it is also a question of the mind. However, we also concluded that you yourself alone do not shape what you eat; you are part of a wider community. And different elements of your collective identity shape what you choose to eat; the preparation and consumption of food is tied to the beliefs, laws and practices of nations and cultures, which form a boundary for the collective identity. This is institutionalized by government choices. Furthermore, society judges what food is and considers those who are different as barbarian, as not belonging to their community. As a society you have collective ideas and values about food, however a society is built from individuals. The individual's adherence to the food choices of a society shapes society. But it also shapes the individual, as we agree with the norms of a society, this shapes our personal identity. Thus, it was concluded that there is a significant connection between food and identity. However, nothing we can eat will ever fully determine an identity; yet dietary preferences are part of who I am as an individual and who we are as a community. Any personal or collective identity is formed in a social and environmental context, and food and eating are a crucial part of that context. Food does not make an entire identity, but it is a key part of the story.

Thus, having demonstrated that food is a major part of personal (and collective) identity, we then explained how we are legitimate in passing judgment regarding the culinary choices of ourselves and others. You judge your own food choices based on your personal identity and moral prerogatives. This we showcased in two ways: in going against societies norms and by conforming to societies norms. When going against societal norms you define your moral

through that, as Diogenes of Sinope once did. While this was an extreme example, in modern society raw veganism can be taken as an example. Based on a very strong personal conviction of non-violence they will eat nothing that is not already given by nature. The other side is hyper conformity to the norm. Grosz argued how bodies are volatile, they are fluid and changing as a product of social norms. Thus, based on social norms you have an idea of what you should look like and you adjust food choice accordingly. Food would serve as a way to sculpt the body. However, there is a problem with the idea of makeability of the body. There are things that we cannot change by our actions and food choices, as the stoics said. Here we came to the middle ground, the idea of a moderate diet. In Aristotelian ethics the middle ground is between excess and deficiency relative to the needs of each individual based on rationality. You consider your personal variables and determine what would be a moderate diet in your personal situation. This would be your responsibility. You take the moment to stop and judge what you eat to make this rational choice. When we do not do so we become irrational. Similarly, you then judge the diet of the other of its rationality and of its consideration of all the variables.

But it is this judgment, which is so important, not as a critical judgment but as a judgment based on understanding. The judgment creates an awareness of the different food choices and the moral consideration that lies behind them. This is the moment of stopping to think in order not to make irrational choices. You are what you eat is a judgment in the sense that it necessary for us to learn about others their food choices to understand our own. I am what I eat is then the self-reflection to correctly apply that knowledge without falling to one of the extremes and in order to correctly consider all variables. Thus, judgment is not only legitimized but it is necessary.

In conclusion, to answer the thesis question: If food plays a major role in personal identity, does that legitimize us in passing a moral judgment on culinary choices? We have proven that food does constitute a major part in personal (and collective) identity and that we are not only legitimized in passing a moral judgment on the culinary choices of yourself and others, but that it is necessary for us to do so in order to find our moderate dietary position.

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