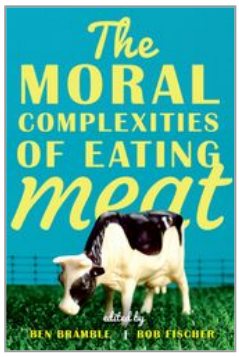

The Moral Complexities of Eating Meat
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Beetles, Bicycles, and Breath Mints

How “Omni” Should Omnivores Be?

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Abstract and Keywords

Much of what is sold under the label “food” in contemporary society lacks nutritional value, and many potentially nutritive foods are ruled out as “food,” facts that complicate attempts to explicate what counts as food and why. This chapter argues that disagreements over whether to eat meat can be recast as disagreements over which concept of food one ought to employ. They are therefore verbal disagreements, and may well turn out to be irresolvable. But, contrary to what many philosophers have claimed about “merely” verbal disputes, disagreements about what counts as food are morally significant and therefore worth engaging in—even if they cannot, in the end, be resolved.

Keywords: concepts, food, nutrition, verbal disagreements, omnivorism

Introduction

It is a familiar truism that humans are, by evolutionary design if not by choice, omnivorous. But this is not literally true: we don't eat, nor are we expected to eat, *everything*. In part this is due to physiological constraints: with the exception, perhaps, of Guinness-record holders, humans lack the capacity to ingest and digest such items as glass, automobiles, or bicycle tires. But much of what is sold under the label "food" in contemporary society lacks nutritional value, and many potentially nutritive foods are ruled out as "food," facts which complicate attempts to explicate what counts as food and why. In fact, "food" is not merely a descriptive label but a kind of normative status. Disagreements over whether or not eating meat is permissible can therefore be understood as disagreements over what should count as food. I'll suggest that by understanding the dispute between vegetarians and meat-eaters this way, we can situate it within a larger debate over how to conceptualize food; I'll go on to examine different dimensions along which we might distinguish food from non-food. What I'll suggest is that, while we typically think that the label "food" is best applied or withheld (p.200) depending on the *kind* of thing in question, we ought instead to consider the processes a thing is subjected to when deciding whether to call it food. Viewing the issue in these terms helps draw our attention to the degree of autonomy we enjoy with respect to food—and the moral responsibility that comes with that autonomy. It also demonstrates that the debate over meat-eating is a worthwhile one to have, even if it turns out to be irresolvable—its moral value does not hinge on anyone's changing their mind about the permissibility of eating animals. What's at stake in the debate between vegetarians and carnivores isn't just meat: it's food.

Moral Disagreements

Some philosophers believe all moral disputes are, at least in principle, resolvable. That's because if two people disagree morally, one of them must be making some kind of error, and even if that error is extremely difficult to detect, given enough time, information, and cognitive powers, the parties to the disagreement will eventually discover it and thereby come to

agreement. For example, I may disagree with your claim that it's morally wrong to kick puppies for fun, because I mistakenly believe that puppies are actually robots, and therefore incapable of feeling pain. In this case, once my mistake is corrected, I will come to agree with you about the wrongness of kicking puppies. Virtually no one denies that some moral disagreements are like this—many moral disputes have been based on faulty factual beliefs, and when these factual beliefs are corrected, the dispute is resolved. What is controversial is whether *all* moral disputes are like this.[1]

I'll be interested in a different kind of dispute, one that turns not on questions of fact but on more difficult issues about which concepts to employ. I'll suggest that debates over meat-eating are like this; I'll also suggest that we view them not as aimed solely at resolution, but at realizing a distinctively moral kind of value. What might this mean? Defining moral value is difficult, and I won't attempt to defend a particular definition here. But a comparison with epistemic value might be useful. As a first pass, we might say that a dispute has moral value if it makes us better moral agents, if it helps us fulfill our moral obligations, or if it produces some moral good. I'll return to this issue later in the chapter, and discuss it with reference to the debate over eating meat. First, a few more words about the kinds and causes of moral disputes are in order.

(p.201) As we saw above, some moral disputes turn on matters of fact; these can be resolved, even if only in principle, by bringing both parties into agreement on the relevant facts. Others may arise because some party or another is being irrational, or is being selfish, or is failing to appraise the situation properly. But some disputes may arise from a difference in concept. The dispute over the moral permissibility of abortion may be like this. What seems to divide the two sides is a difference in the concept of a person. One side believes that a fetus is a person, and therefore that abortion is the killing of a person. Another side believes that a fetus is a collection of cells—and that a collection of cells cannot be a person. Is this a factual difference? Certainly some disputes over abortion come down to factual claims about a fetus's ability to feel pain or its viability outside the womb. But at bottom, the question of what to count as a

person is a conceptual question, not a factual one. We may use factual considerations in deciding the issue, but we will also have to use normative considerations. For example, should intelligent non-human primates count as people? Biology alone can tell us a lot about the intelligence of primates, but it can't answer that question for us; answering the question requires weighing the importance of various factors in determining personhood.

Below, I'll suggest that disputes over the permissibility of eating meat can be viewed as disputes over conceptual questions. But first, I need to address one potential line of objection. Some philosophers have argued that disputes that arise because two parties are using different concepts are really disputes about which terminology to use. Indeed, philosophers have referred to such disputes as "merely verbal"—note the derisive connotations—and have argued that they are not, therefore, worth engaging in (see, e.g., Sosa 2005). I think this view is mistaken. Sure, if we are arguing over whether Paul McCartney is a star, and you are using "star" to mean "a celestial body," and I am using it to mean, "a famous person," this is a pretty silly dispute to be having. As soon as each of us realizes what the other means, we can happily resolve our dispute—both are perfectly respectable uses of "star," and only one correctly applies to Paul McCartney. So here the dispute disappears when we realize that it is a dispute caused by confusion about words. But not all verbal disputes will be "merely" so—some may be worth having. Perhaps we are disputing whether someone is a good philosopher, and we cannot seem to agree. It emerges that your standard of "good," for a philosopher, is to be equal in fame and stature to Socrates—nothing else will do. Here, we are using "good philosopher" to mean different things, so the dispute is, arguably, a verbal one. But I do not foresee a happy resolution. After (p.202) all, your concept is ridiculous! On your view, there have only been, perhaps, two or three good philosophers in all of history! And not only do I find your concept laughable, it may even be practically pernicious—if, for example, we are trying to hire someone to fill a key position, and you reject all the candidates because none of them are "good philosophers." The dispute is verbal, but that

doesn’t mean both parties have equal claims to truth here. Your concept is simply a *bad concept* to be using, and it seems well worth my while to dig in my heels and insist that I am in the right here (for more discussion of this point, see Sundell 2011). Thus, contrary to what some philosophers have claimed, it is not the case that the realization that a dispute is due to terminological or conceptual differences gives us reason to abandon it—especially not when practical matters hang in the balance. We can have meaningful and useful debates over which criteria ought to guide our application of a certain term or concept. And as we shall see in the next section, this is exactly what we find when we turn to the debate over the moral permissibility of eating meat.

Food Fights

We think of the debate over eating meat as a debate over what foods to eat. But what if, instead, we reconceive it as a debate over what food is and is not? That is, rather than think of the relevant question as “What foods are ethically permissible to eat?” we could think of the question as “What is and is not a food?” Reframing the issue in these terms situates it within the larger debate over what we ought to eat—and what criteria we ought to use to rule out certain items from the domain of food. I’ll discuss two such criteria and suggest that they correspond to two different motivations for vegetarianism. Once we understand the debate as concerned with our conception of food, we can see how it offers the opportunity for moral progress even if there is, ultimately, no consensus on whether or not to eat meat. We can also become more attentive to our role in shaping the food choices available to us and others and the moral consequences of those choices.

One motivation for this reconceptualization of the debate is the recognition that the label “food” is both normatively significant and a function of our attitudes and choices. By labeling something “food” we implicitly assent to the idea that it’s something to be eaten. This might seem odd—isn’t food a descriptive label? When I say that something is food, aren’t I merely describing it as having certain properties, such as being nutritious or digestible? In fact, a look at how we use

the label “food,” and the things we apply it to, (p.203) reveals that this isn’t the case. While scientists define food as substances that contain nutrients essential for life and are consumed to sustain life, this definition seems ill-equipped to help us navigate the eating habits of the developed world.[2] For one thing, much of what we consume to sustain ourselves has little to no nutritional value (diet soda, sugar-free candies) or represents unnecessary caloric intake (how many of us have mindlessly munched on some chips or popcorn while watching television?). And our intention when consuming food is rarely sustenance of life—we eat as a form of socializing, we eat to experience new or familiar things, we eat to be polite, we eat from boredom, or from curiosity . . . as the saying goes, in many developed societies today, we live to eat, rather than the other way around. So the scientist’s definition, while perhaps helpful to those interested in studying the feeding behaviors of various species, is inadequate for those who are interested in studying what *people* eat, and why.

Even the agencies charged with regulating it have trouble defining what food is, except in terms of what we take food to be. The United States Food and Drug administration (2010) defines food as “articles used for food and drink” and also chewing gum. The European Union defines food as “any substance or product, whether processed, partially processed, or unprocessed, intended to be, or reasonably expected to be ingested by humans” and also includes chewing gum in this category (European Parliament, 2002). Notice that unlike the scientific definition we looked at earlier, these definitions make no reference to the nutritional value of food or to its contribution to sustaining life. (The inclusion of chewing gum makes it pretty clear that these are not requirements that something actually be food!)

What these definitions *do* share is this: they all define food in terms of what we consume or ingest. That is, part of what makes something food, rather than just a plant or an animal, is that we regard it and treat it as such. We don’t eat corn because it’s food; it’s food because we eat it. Of course, the fact that corn thereby becomes food makes us much more likely to eat it—which in turn further entrenches its status as

food, thereby making it all the more likely to be eaten . . . and so on. The process by which an edible substance becomes food is, well, eating.

(p.204) Of course, not every substance that is eaten becomes food as a result. Michel Lotito, a Frenchman aptly nicknamed “Monsieur Mangetout,” has ingested everything from airplanes to robots to bicycles (broken down into small parts, of course). Individuals with a condition known as “pica” experience urges to consume clay and dirt (among other substances). And of course, in certain contexts, humans consume one another’s bodily fluids (saliva, semen). But in none of these cases does consumption render the consumed object or substance *food*. A lover may be happy to exchange saliva in some contexts, but spit on their morning muffin, and they are going to be less than overjoyed. This further reinforces the point that “food” is not merely a descriptive label: what’s required for something to become food is not just a behavior—consuming it—but also a certain attitude toward it. (This also explains why items consumed under extreme duress, e.g., in times of extreme hunger, don’t therefore become food. Seventeenth-century European writers describe instances of autophagy in times of extreme hunger, but they do so in a very different tone than that used to describe willing cannibalism. See Camporesi 1989.)

This feature also reveals the normative significance of labeling something “food.” To say that something is food is to say more than that it is edible. There are many substances in our environment that would be relatively harmless to ingest, and are perhaps quite tasty, but which we would never think of eating; conversely, many of the things that we do eat are actually pretty bad for us. To say that something is food is, rather, to grant that we are prima facie justified in eating it; its status as food gives us a kind of permission. The act of eating an orange needn’t be justified or explained; the act of eating orange clay does. Even if both are occasioned by a craving, the former is treated as normal, the latter as pathological. A similar distinction applies to reasons for rejecting foods. If, at a restaurant, I find a grub in my salad, I don’t need to justify my decision not to eat it—it’s not food (at least, not to us Westerners—but we’ll get to insects in a bit).

But if I refuse the salad, I may be asked for a reason. The fact that something is not a food means that the question, “why won’t you eat that?” represents a kind of category mistake—it’s just not the kind of thing one eats! On the other hand, the fact that something is a food licenses certain kinds of reasons for rejection. Typically, these involve considerations of taste (I hate hard-boiled eggs) or of health (I’m allergic to strawberries; I’m lactose-intolerant; I’m watching my cholesterol). These sorts of reasons are personal, insofar as we don’t expect others to share them, and we don’t try to impose them widely (though we may ask a host to refrain from cooking with nuts, or encourage someone to (p.205) try a food they claim not to like, or ask someone not to eat hard-boiled eggs in front of us). My dislike of eggs is not a reason for you to reject them.

Why “Food” Matters

I’ve suggested that whether or not something is food not only affects how likely we are to eat it, but influences the kinds of reasons we think are (and aren’t) required for eating (or not eating) it. To say that something is food is to say that it is the kind of thing that is acceptable to eat; it’s to sanction eating it. And given that what and how we eat has morally significant consequences, calling something food also has morally significant consequences. The essays contained in this book demonstrate the moral implications of one of those choices: meat-eating. Even for vegetarians, the choice of what sorts of foods to consume has moral significance: conventional farming techniques have environmental impacts, as does the transportation of produce across long distances; both organic and non-organic produce is often picked by laborers working in conditions that amount to slavery; the use of genetically modified ingredients by food manufacturers—particularly those in soy products—influences what sorts of seeds farmers plant and how they must alter their farming practices. In 2001, Monsanto pulled its genetically modified NewLeaf potato seeds off the market, after McDonald’s, responding to perceived consumer opinion, said it wouldn’t sell GMO potatoes. And of course our food choices affect our health, which in turn has personal as well as social costs: as our concept of food has broadened, we’ve consumed more and

more highly processed foods like hot dogs and Pop-Tarts—after all, they're food!

This last point illustrates one of the potential dangers of the label "food": it can lead us to feel justified in making choices that are harmful both to ourselves and to society. When highly processed meat and dairy products are sold alongside their (relatively) unprocessed counterparts, we are encouraged to think of them as the same kind of thing, and therefore to adopt the same attitude toward them—you might prefer one thing to another, but that's a personal preference. At root, they're both foods, right? And yet when the journalist Michael Pollan, a prominent critic of the contemporary food system, urges his readers to "eat more food," he is not encouraging them to go for another Big Mac or Twinkie (2007).

But it's not just the consequences of its application that make "food" a morally significant label. To call something—especially a living thing—"food" is to assign it a certain moral status. In some cases this assignment may appear unduly degrading. In the United States and most of Europe, for (p.206) example, we think of dogs as pets. We coddle them, cuddle them, feed them—but never eat them. To call a pet dog "food" would be to somehow reduce its moral standing to a sort of object; to *eat* a pet dog, even if it died in an accident, is something most of us would find morally objectionable (see Haidt 2001 for empirical evidence to this effect). For a more dramatic example, consider the moral outrage that often accompanies reports of (non-starvation-induced) cannibalism. What is it about this practice that seems so objectionable to us? I submit that we object to the treatment of human flesh as mere *food*.

In other cases, we may object to labeling something food on the grounds that it would elevate something we consider base or unworthy of being eaten. Take, for example, insects. Insects are nutritionally superior to animal flesh in many respects. From an environmental perspective, they are vastly superior: they require far fewer resources to farm, and they emit far fewer waste products. Furthermore, because they're cold-blooded, insects can be frozen before they're killed, which puts them in a sleep-like state before death; they can therefore

be killed with a minimum of suffering. And because they require less room, it's possible to raise many insects without causing suffering due to confinement or overcrowding. Thus rearing insects for food avoids many of the moral issues surrounding raising animals for food.[3] Indeed, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization recently released a report urging the adoption of entomophagy (eating insects); as the report bluntly states, "what we eat and how we produce it needs to be re-evaluated . . . we need to find new ways of growing food" (2013: ix). There are persuasive moral and environmental considerations in favor of eating insects: we can feed many more people and reduce both pollution and the consumption of valuable resources (in the form of grain and water, as well as the cost of raising and transporting animals) by switching to insect-based protein rather than animal-based protein. There may even be aesthetic reasons to consume insects: in many cultures they are considered a delicacy. Aristotle himself, in his *Historia Animalium*, favorably comments on the sweet taste of cicadas; the females, he notes, are sweetest after "copulation," when they are full of eggs.

What's stopping us? If asked, most of us Westerners would probably evince a kind of disgust at the thought of eating insects on the grounds that they're not *food*. (I confess to feeling a bit squeamish at the thought myself.) That is, we reject the thought of eating insects because of the *kind* of thing they are: dirty, disgusting, polluting. But can this reaction be justified as (p.207) anything more than a prejudice? Consider: many of the features that make insects so unappealing—exoskeletons, antennae, their segmented bodies—are present in some of the most expensive and prized foods in Western cuisine.

Certainly many of the insects we encounter in our daily lives—especially if we are urban dwellers—do fit this description and are unfit to be eaten. Even the most enthusiastic proponent of entomophagy is not arguing that we trap and eat cockroaches from New York City streets! But this is a consequence of the environment in which these insects grow and are found. Those who advocate eating insects are interested primarily in how we might breed insects for this purpose—Mansour Ourasanah,

in collaboration with KitchenAid, has recently designed the "Lepsis," a home system for raising grasshoppers for food.

We can't change the kind of thing insects are—we could disguise them as crackers or as candy, but a bug is a bug. What is interesting about the approach taken by Ourasanah is that it doesn't attempt to deflect attention from the fact that what's being eaten is a grasshopper, but instead draws our attention to the manner in which that grasshopper—that food, even—is raised and produced. Our refusal to consider insects the proper *kind* of things to eat may, in the end, stem from a kind of confusion between disgust at the origin or environment of the thing and the thing itself. And the result of this confusion is that we overlook or rule out a food source that is morally, environmentally, economically, and perhaps even aesthetically superior to much of what we choose to consume.

In sum: what we call "food" matters. It has important personal, social, and moral consequences. And with every choice we make about what to eat or not eat we incur some responsibility for those consequences. Unfortunately, our active role in defining the label "food" and deciding what it gets applied to is, all too often, opaque to us.

Why Meat Matters

So far I've been discussing food generally, rather than meat specifically. In the remainder of the chapter, I'll turn my attention back to the debate over meat-eating. What I will suggest is that the debate over whether to eat meat be understood as a debate over how to characterize food: specifically, whether meat ought to be considered food, and for what reasons. I'll then go on to argue that regardless of whether the debate can be resolved (I doubt that it can, for reasons that should become clear), it is nonetheless a morally valuable (p.208) one to engage in—in fact, it's one that both meat-eaters and vegetarians alike have a moral responsibility to engage in.

First, a clarification is in order. When I talk about vegetarians, I'll be talking about those who refrain from eating meat for moral reasons. Some people may be vegetarians for health

reasons, or for practical reasons; that's not the kind of vegetarianism I'm interested in here. I'm also not talking about the kind of vegetarian who simply dislikes meat, as a personal preference.

We can distinguish between two versions of (moral) vegetarianism. The first is what we might call "extrinsic" vegetarianism. On this view, there's nothing *intrinsically* wrong with eating meat; rather, it's the way meat is raised, slaughtered, and processed that makes it morally impermissible to eat. Peter Singer, for example, objects to meat-eating on the grounds that it causes unacceptable suffering in animals; presumably, if no animals suffered as a result—if we ate only animals that died of natural causes—Singer would not object.[4] The second kind of vegetarianism, which we might call "intrinsic" vegetarianism, holds that there's something intrinsically wrong with eating meat; under no conditions would it be morally permissible to eat meat. They don't just object to the process by which meat is produced, they object to the very idea of eating meat.[5] For intrinsic vegetarians, what's wrong with the idea of meat is that it involves eating the wrong *kind* of thing—sentient beings. Indeed, such vegetarians might well object to the term "meat" itself, connoting as it does not a living creature, but a food product. And that's the real issue between intrinsic vegetarians and meat-eaters: for the former, animals are simply not the right sorts of thing to be considered food.

Even the most committed carnivores typically draw the line at some types of meat. We don't see a peacock and think "dinner," as sixteenth-century Europeans might have done. For some of us, the line is drawn at horses (recall the horror with which the UK reacted to recent news that their frozen hamburgers and lasagna may have contained up to 30% horsemeat); for others, dogs; for all but a very few of us, humans. (Though the media has recently seized on the "trend" of mothers consuming their newborns' placentas; whether or not this counts as meat, I leave as an exercise for the reader.) What the intrinsic vegetarian insists is that we draw this line differently: (p.209) around all animals, perhaps, or all sentient creatures.[6] Thus, the dispute between intrinsic vegetarians

and meat-eaters is a dispute over whether sentient beings are food.

The carnivore who has trouble understanding the intrinsic vegetarian's rejection of cows and pigs as food would do well to consider their own attitude toward consuming dogs or guinea pigs or even humans. The intrinsic vegetarian is not stating a personal preference against eating meat and asking others to share it. They are not asking us to avoid eating animal flesh because of extrinsic facts about its production. Rather, they are asking us to change our mind about what food is—and what animals are. This is, at root, a dispute that turns on a conceptual difference.

What about the extrinsic vegetarians I mentioned above—those who object to meat-eating because of facts about the way that meat is farmed and slaughtered? In this case, it might seem that the dispute between extrinsic vegetarians and meat-eaters is *not* a conceptual one, since these vegetarians do not deny that it is permissible to eat meat in some circumstances—circumstances where the meat is obtained without causing pain or suffering to the animal—they just deny that we are actually in those circumstances. So for extrinsic vegetarians, the problem with meat isn't the meat but the means. The dispute isn't over what counts as food but over what counts as a morally permissible means of obtaining or producing it.

But why can't the production process play a part in whether or not something is food? I'm not talking here about certain processes necessary to render a substance edible or non-toxic, as when barley must be hulled in order to be edible, or cassava must be soaked and cooked to remove toxins. Rather, I'm talking about instances in which the same substance is either regarded as food or not, depending on how it has been treated or produced. In fact, some of our judgments about whether or not something is food are already guided by how that thing is produced or treated, whether or not we realize it. We eat a deer whose meat is bought at the farmer's market, but if we come across that same deer on the side of the road, after it's been struck by a car, it's roadkill—not food.[7]

If we can rule out the possibility of eating something on the grounds of, that's not what food is, why can't we rule out eating something on the grounds (p.210) of, that's not where food comes from? Most of the animals sold and consumed as food in the developed world have been bred to maximize the amount of meat—even at the expense of their ability to move and mate—and have been given hormones, antibiotics, and other drugs, partly to ameliorate the effects of the overcrowded and inhumane conditions they're raised in. Is denying that the resultant meat is food really that different from denying that nondairy creamer, or a sugar-free lifesaver, is food?

In fact, many carnivores do make discriminations like these. As Americans have become less and less inclined to view unprocessed offal as food, producers have looked for ways to transform those parts of the animal into palatable creations such as hot dogs, bologna, McRib sandwiches, and so on.[8] And yet when we're confronted with the process behind such products, we repudiate them: witness the recent outrage at the "revelation" (though it should hardly have been surprising) that many fast-food hamburgers were composed of so-called "pink slime": a sort of paste consisting of animal trimmings (official name: "lean finely textured beef trimmings") that had been treated with ammonia to kill salmonella and e. coli bacteria. Carnivores' outrage and disgust at this discovery might seem like hypocrisy or worse—if we're going to eat animals, we should eat the whole animal, rather than eating some "choice cuts" and letting the rest go to waste. But it might also be viewed as a kind of discrimination worthy of cultivation, insofar as it indicates that no matter what kinds of things we are willing to eat, there are certain kinds of processes whose result we cannot admit is food.

And here I think we can see room for, if not moral consensus, moral progress. The intrinsic vegetarian argues that it is the *kind of thing* meat is, the fact that it comes from a sentient being, that makes it unfit to be considered food (indeed, they may even object to the label "meat," connoting as it does something to be eaten). The extrinsic vegetarian argues that it's the *process* by which meat is obtained that makes it unfit.

The carnivore thinks at least some animals are food, while perhaps denying that all parts of an animal are food. This gap may be unbridgeable. We may never come to consensus on what kinds of things count as food—nor, perhaps, should we want to. The diversity of cuisines across cultures and across history is, arguably, a good in itself; the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has declared certain traditional cuisines (Mexican, Japanese, French) as part of our "intangible cultural heritage" and thus deserving of (p.211) protection.[9] But absent a consensus on what food is, we can make progress by attending to the processes by which we allow that food can be arrived at. In the final section I say more about the form such progress might take.

Food Technology, Food Transparency

Our attitudes toward food, as evinced by popular culture, display a striking ambivalence. On the one hand, the last decade or so has witnessed an increased desire for unprocessed, natural, and of course, whole foods. Sales of organic foods are through the roof, and even cereals like Froot Loops brag that they contain "whole grains." Domino's brags about their "handcrafted" pizzas; the McDonald's website invites visitors to "meet their suppliers" and brags that their milk is "from farm to restaurant" (neglecting to mention that perhaps there are a few steps in between). On the other hand, we live in an age of unparalleled technological innovation—20,000 new "food products" were introduced in 2010, according to the USDA. We have yogurt—sorry, "Go-Gurt"—that comes in tubes and candy-corn-flavored Oreos. The same company that brags about Froot Loops' "whole grains" markets a *breakfast* cereal called "Krave S'Mores" with a marshmallow and chocolate filling. We even flock to restaurants with "factory" in the name—not just The Cheesecake Factory, but also The Burger Factory, even The Food Factory. This ambivalence reveals a conflicted attitude toward the means by which our food is produced; we can no longer ignore the role that technology plays in our food supply, nor should we, as it has implications for the way we approach debates over the nature of food.

The role we accord technology also has implications for how we approach the debate over meat-eating. According to intrinsic vegetarianism, technology might well be the solution to the problem of meat-eating, since it can replace animal flesh with other substances, such as Quorn, tofu dogs, imitation lunch meats, and so on. Technology also promises new and improved versions of these products—Silicon Valley is investing tens of millions of dollars in developing new vegan "eggs" as I write this. Not to mention the possibility that we might someday have access to affordable, laboratory-grown meat (at the moment, a lab-grown hamburger costs about $100,000; at that price, it's unlikely to be making an appearance in the grocery store any time soon). These innovative substitutions for meat may represent the vegetarian's best (p.212) hope of eliminating animal flesh-based foods from our diet. On the other hand, insofar as they succeed because of their resemblance to meat, they may not represent a change in our attitudes about what food is so much as a willing suspension of disbelief.

On the other hand, if the objection to meat is based on the highly mechanized, industrialized process by which it gets to our tables (or cars, or desks—in 2012, about half the money spent on food was spent on food eaten away from home), then technological innovation may not be the solution, but instead part of the problem. If our conception of food is based in part on the process by which that food was made, then the ability to judge whether or not something is food requires a kind of transparency that highly processed foods may be unable to provide. As it currently stands, consumers often don't know where the meat they eat comes from or even how many cows the meat in a single hamburger comes from. The enzyme transglutaminase can be used to bind scraps of meat together into something that is visually indistinguishable from a steak.[10] If we reserve the label "food" for meat produced by non–factory farms, then consumers will have to seek out suppliers carefully, and only deal with butchers who are transparent about where they obtain their animals. A process- or production-based conception of food demands less distance between the source and the consumer; replacing meat with technological advances in food places more distance. And

distance can be morally dangerous, insofar as it allows us to maintain moral blind spots.

Drawing a distinction between food and non-food with reference to process rather than kind is conducive to moral progress on several fronts. It allows us to overcome certain biases we have against foods that may be morally preferable to our current choices, such as roadkill and insects. It forces us to attend to the ways that what we eat is produced, which may seem obvious, but is something that consumers in the industrialized world rarely do. In doing so it opens up room for discrimination between apparently similar options: no longer are we choosing beef or chicken: we're choosing between beef and a factory-produced item. As consumers demand more transparency, corporations are likely to find that the most objectionable aspects of meat and animal product production are no longer economically viable. (p.213) And, importantly, it makes us aware that we are active rather than passive agents in the construction of food: it reveals that we don't just make food; we make *food*.

Conclusion

I've presented two ways of drawing a line between food and non-food—in terms of the kind of thing it is and in terms of the process by which it's produced—as if they were opposed to one another, but they needn't be. In fact, even once one takes a stand on what kind of things are apt to be considered food, the question of how process and/or production should affect our choices remains wide open. My point here is not, primarily, that one way of drawing the distinction is in itself better than the other—though I have suggested that—but that we can characterize food both by what *kind* of thing it is, and by *how* it is produced or processed. Because of the way food is manufactured, regulated, and sold, this latter option is often invisible to us—we are encouraged to view cheese as cheese, whether in a can or in a block of cheddar. We're encouraged to choose food based on its nutritional content, but to pay no attention to the difference between the vitamin C in an orange or the vitamin C in Kool-Aid. The dimensions of kind and process, then, are not just grounds on which to reconsider the

status of meat, but grounds on which to reexamine our treatment of food generally—and offer a way of navigating the ethical challenges posed by a world that presents us with tens of thousands of new “food products” a year.

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Notes:

(1.) For further discussion, see Doris & Plakias 2008.

(2.) Most of what I'll say in what follows is directed at industrialized societies, where our problem is overconsumption of food rather than starvation. Of course, within these societies, the extent to which people have choices about what to consume varies a great deal, so the statements I make will not apply to all Americans, or all Western societies, or all industrialized societies. Whether, and to what extent, ethical obligations regarding food depend on one's material resources is an interesting and important question, but I can't take it up here.

(3.) For a moral argument in favor of entomophagy, see also Meyers 2013.

(4.) See, for example, Singer 1975; for another example of what I've called "extrinsic vegetarianism," see also Rachels 1977.

(5.) See, for example, Regan 1983; for an interesting discussion of related issues—though not a defense of vegetarianism per se—see Diamond 1978.

(6.) Some vegetarians think it's acceptable to eat certain kinds of mollusk, like oysters and mussels. Others refuse any animal at all.

(7.) See Bruckner (this volume) for an argument to the effect that we are, in fact, morally *obligated* to eat roadkill.

(8.) Up until the eighteenth century, the French viewed the udder as one of the preferred parts of the cow; beef itself was slower to catch on. See Flandrin 2000, ch. 31.

(9.) http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=en&pg=00002.

(10.) Fortunately, the USDA requires that, when sold in stores, such products must carry a label informing consumers that they are buying “reformed” meat; unfortunately, there’s no such requirement for restaurants, which, perhaps not coincidentally, is where most of these products are sold and consumed.