Ethics and Food Taste

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Introduction
When people choose what to eat, one of the main reasons is the taste of the food. Many people in the world don't have much choice in their diets given their poverty but in the Western world the average consumer enjoys an overwhelming variety of affordable foods. The focus of this entry is the role of taste in the food choices of those who do have a choice. With more choices comes more responsibility; deciding what to eat has a moral dimension as well since food choices have an enormous impact on the agent's health, the environment and the well-being of other humans and animals.

The core puzzle posed by taste is its involvement in the most common and ubiquitous cases of what look like weakness of will. Many people find certain foods morally bad because of their presumed or genuinely harmful consequences. For example, one might intend to become a vegetarian if one cares for animals and not to suffer. However, despite of the intention the person may fail to do so because of her high preferences for the taste of meat. Other examples include the wish to eat healthier or less fattening foods but somehow the intention gets trumped because one is unable to resist the good taste of those foods. Tastes thus seem to have much more motivating force than often acknowledged. The ethical dimension of the issue is evident when one considers the failure of large masses of people to eat foods that they know to be better for themselves, the environment, the animals and other people.

The entry is structured as follows. Section (2) clarifies the notion of 'taste'. Section (3) discusses the relation of tastes and reasons. (3.1) introduces the puzzle of unethical food choices. (3.2-3.3) discusses two alternative answers to the puzzle. (3.4) considers whether ethical egoism might explain the unethical food choices. Section (4) summarizes Korsmeyer's Ethical Gourmandism which holds that the taste of food depends on its moral properties. Section (5) asks whether there might be a moral duty to train oneself to not prefer the bad foods.

2 What Is Taste?

By a food’s ‘taste’ one normally means much more than what is actually tasted by the taste buds. What is meant corresponds rather to the notion of ‘flavor’, a sensation caused by a complex interplay of various sensory modalities, including taste and olfaction among others (Auvray and Spence, 2008). This entry follows the ordinary usage by taking ‘taste’ to mean mostly flavor. Sometimes other aspects are included in ‘taste’; for example, the texture and mouthfeel of a food is an important part of how pleasurable it is to eat so evaluations of ‘taste’ (e.g. “corn chips are delicious”) can be made on the grounds of flavor, texture, color and possibly other features.

It is well known that foods don’t taste the same to everyone (see e.g. (Prescott, 2012)) which is why one also needs to talk about how something tastes to someone. This holds both for descriptive properties (e.g. salty, sweet) and evaluative properties (delicious, tasty, disgusting). In what follows it is taken for granted that people’s tastes differ so by saying that something tastes salty, bad, delicious and so on, what is meant is that it tastes that way to the person under consideration. Finally, evaluations of foods don't depend only on taste but also on what is being evaluated; for example, sourness may be a positive quality in lemons but not in corn syrup (Korsmeyer 2012).
3 Tastes as Reasons

People act on reasons and may have reasons for actions even if they aren’t motivated to act on those reasons. This suggests one of the main classifications of reasons into internal and external reasons (also known as subjective and objective reasons). Internal reasons have motivational force and are hence connected to the desires and preferences of a person; they are also motivating reasons. External reasons in contrast are reasons that exist for a person, say a reason not to kill or drink poison, without the person necessarily having any motivation to act on that reason or even know of its existence. Many philosophers take moral reasons to be independent of anyone’s desires or other motivations (for a defense, see (Parfit, 2011)). However, once a person is aware of the moral reason or has that moral reason, then it is an internal and motivating reason (for a clear exposition and criticism of this common view, see (Schroeder, 2008)).

What kind of reasons can be provided by tastes? Suppose that a person is hungry and wants to eat (or thirsty and wants to drink: everything that is said here applies to drinks as well). Luckily they happen to have a certain good-tasting food in their fridge and they are aware of that fact. Ignoring all possible other reasons for or against eating that food, does its good taste provide a reason to eat it? Common sense clearly says ‘yes’; eating tasty food causes pleasure and everyone wants pleasure. The pleasure gained from eating tasty food offers a motivating reason to eat it as well as a prudential reason that recommends eating it.

Can tastes provide moral reasons? The answer depends on whether the ethical theory under consideration holds that pleasure is good and that there is a duty to pursue the good. Egoism would most clearly promote the idea that pleasure from taste gives a moral reason. Consequentialist theories often hold that pleasure is good but how much value there is in gustatory pleasure depends on the particular theory. It is not easy to see how a deontological theory could attribute much value to tastes except by citing duties towards oneself of which experiencing pleasures might be one. In any case, except for egoism, most ethical theories seem to hold that gustatory pleasure offers at best a very weak moral reason.

3.1 The Puzzle of Unethical Food Choices

If gustatory pleasures don’t provide weighty moral reasons one faces the following puzzle. Many people find certain foods bad; for example, they might consider the food unhealthy or its production too harmful for the environment, other people or animals. These people have an internal and motivating reason not to eat such foods. Moreover, suppose that not eating those foods is not merely something that would be morally good but optional for such a person; it is mandatory from the point of view of morality given their beliefs about the food in question. However, many of such agents do not change their eating habits because they enjoy the food’s taste so much. Hence the puzzle: How can people be knowledgeably and systematically acting against their best moral judgments?

As was mentioned, some philosophers like Parfit take moral reasons to be independent of anyone’s beliefs or desires. Such views hold that whether the puzzle of unethical food choices is a moral problem depends on whether the foods in question actually are morally bad. The puzzle thus has two important ethical dimensions: First, it shows a potential conflict in people’s moral beliefs and their actions which is a problem of moral agency. Second, if there are morally bad foods which knowledgeable agents nevertheless fail to avoid, the problem becomes one of political philosophy and raises questions about public policies towards the bad foods.

Are there genuinely morally bad foods? Leaving aside the question of where the competing moral frameworks might differ, most views would agree that foods are bad if their production causes serious environmental damage, much suffering to sentient beings or health problems to their consumers. It is worth emphasizing that most foods are not intrinsically bad: the foods whose production currently has bad consequences could often be produced in a perfectly ethical way and “unhealthy foods” are typically unhealthy only if consumed in large quantities or as a part of an unbalanced diet. Whether a food is unethical depends essentially on how it was produced, on the current state of the world in other respects, and importantly, on the quantities consumed.

Regarding the current production methods, the most plausible candidate for being bad food is factory farmed meat. Industrial farm animal production aka factory farming has been shown to have extremely negative consequences to the local and global environment, to the people living in the vicinity of the farms, to the welfare of the animals, and to humans generally due to the development of microorganisms that are resistant to antibiotics which is a consequence of routinely giving animals antibiotics to prevent them from developing illnesses. (Pew Commission on Industrial Farm Animal Production, 2008.) Pluhar argues that any existing moral theory would morally condemn factory farming (Pluhar 2010).

Even if not factory farmed, producing meat is generally more harmful than growing vegetables. The livestock industry
contributes around 20% of all the greenhouse emissions in the world (McMichael et al 2007). Even if the animals lived an otherwise good life, they suffer in transportation and when they are slaughtered. Philosophers have defended vegetarianism on the basis of various ethical frameworks, for example on utilitarian grounds (Singer 1990), or on the basis of consideration of the rights of animals (Regan 1983). However, even if one accepts that there is nothing wrong in principle with killing animals for food the current amounts of meat that is consumed is a huge burden for the environment (Cafaro et al 2006). There is also a correlation between health problems and meat consumption (see e.g. (Crowe et al 2013), (Rohrmann et al 2013)). Hence large quantities of meat can be considered bad food. Finally, some foods have little nutritional value but provide a lot of energy. Obesity and its consequences are a major risk for individuals as well as for societies in terms of health care expenses. Increasing sugar intake has been shown to increase the risk of type 2 diabetes irrespective of obesity (Basu et al 2013). Foods that are high in sugar are thus bad foods when consumed in large quantities. Also, given the sedentary lifestyle of most Westerners, foods with high calorie contents may easily lead to obesity. Hence the typical snack foods (chocolate, cookies, candies, potato chips) and sugary sodas are bad foods to people who don’t burn the calories obtained.

The above examples show that unethical food choices is not merely a problem of moral agency but also a genuine moral problem: there are foods with undeniably bad consequences given the way they are currently produced and the amounts consumed. In what follows the focus is on the puzzle from the point of view of moral agency, and hence what matters is not the actual badness of a food but what the agent believes to be bad; for simplicity, let us call the latter “bad food”. There are broadly two lines of explanation to the puzzle which will be discussed next.

3.2 Bad Food Choices as a Consequence of Weakness of the Will

The first and the most common real world explanation relies on the idea of weakness of the will. The view explains the puzzle by saying that people often fail to act according to their best moral reasons since they are not enough strong-willed to do what they think is the best. What happens is something like the following: the person judges that there is most reason not to eat bad food. But when she is grocery shopping she feels a powerfully motivating desire to eat something really tasty. And before the reflective mind (or the will) has time to intervene the shopping cart is full of bad foods. The call of gustatory pleasures can thus trump the judgments of what is best to do all things considered. The agent ends up acting irrationally, against her best reasons. The inability of the will to resist the pleasures of tastes is probably one of the best and most common cases in favor of there being weakness of will.

This view raises several difficult questions. An especially hard question is how the weak-willed action came about. The views which hold that one can only act on reasons one is aware of will have to say that there was no reason for the action, only a cause. Alternatively one needs to distinguish between “competing minds” which have competing reasons. The competing minds assumption is by no means as straightforward as it seems. For one, it seems reasonable to suppose that each person has just one self. So if the will is the self, who or what is the part of the self whose urges to eat must be resisted? As intuitively explanatory as the idea seems of the self being occasionally highjacked by one’s “primitive” wants, selves seem to be partly constituted by one's deep desires, fears and other such features. As long as one is not talking about eating disorders or genuine food addictions (if there are any), the weakness of will view may construe the realm of reasons and the self too narrowly.

3.3 Bad Food as the Subjectively Rational Choice

Another line of explanation holds that the apparently conflicted agent simply has stronger reasons for not giving up bad food than they have in favor of change. This view denies that people act irrationally when they don’t follow their avowed best reasons and holds instead that they are actually acting according to their best reasons. The puzzle is solved when one recognizes that people may be mistaken about what their best reasons are, and in fact the best guide to the reasons they have is to see which reasons best explains their actions. A similar line of thought has been defended by Socrates (Plato, 1997) and Hare (Hare, 1952).

The link between the agent's best reasons and rationality was discussed above in connection to the weakness of will view which held that in not acting for her best reasons the agent is being irrational. But that can mean two things: that the agent is being subjectively irrational, or objectively irrational. The weakness of will view need not be committed to the agent being objectively irrational; as Arpaly has argued, sometimes an agent is in fact doing the most objectively rational thing even if she didn’t do what she thought was the best (Arpaly, 2000). In contrast, subjective rationality has to do with the coherence of the agent's reasons and actions rather than with the objective goodness or validity of those reasons.
The view currently under discussion holds that a person cannot be subjectively irrational since they always act according to the best reason, whether they know it or not. Since reasons are what guide actions it cannot happen that one didn’t act for one’s strongest reasons. Call the view under consideration the subjective rationality view. Suppose this view is correct. That means that if an agent fails to give up bad food for its taste then tastes are actually extremely strong reasons to her. Given the setup of the puzzle the agent believes to have the best reasons to give up bad food. But since reasons motivate, if she doesn’t act as her alleged best reasons tell her to, then she is mistaken either about the reasons she has, or about the strength of her reasons. To her the best reason is in fact gustatory pleasure which to her weighs heavier than the reasons she has for taking the food to be morally bad.

The subjective rationality view has some interesting consequences. First, since it allows that people may not know their reasons, it doesn’t need a sharp distinction between reasons and causes. Second, it offers a simpler and more optimistic view of persons: we have just one self and there is no weakness of will. If one acts in ways that appear unwilled to the person (and she isn’t under drugs or otherwise manipulated), then she simply needs to take a good introspective look and try to find her true reasons for why she acted the way she did. The view thus holds that one's own reasons are not transparent to one and therefore one may be mistaken about them.

3.4 Are People Egoists?

If the subjective rationality view is on the right track and the food choices of the unethical agents reveal their true reasons, that suggests that their gustatory pleasure is a stronger reason to them than for example their health or the well-being of animals or the environment. Probably the only moral position consistent with such an attitude is ethical egoism which holds that one ought to do what is in one’s own best interest. So given the failure of many people to change their eating habits despite of their trying, it is worth asking if the morally puzzling agents in fact hold the moral views they claim to hold, or if they just pretend to, or are under an illusion regarding their moral beliefs?

Pleasure is a powerful motivation, and delicious food causes great pleasure to many. So giving up pleasurable bad foods might be seen as too demanding a sacrifice since with the exception of damage to health, many bad foods are more harmful to the nature and animals than to the eater. People may thus believe in the badness of some foods but still value their own pleasures more. Such excessive valuing of the pleasures of food is traditionally known as gluttony. Tefler argues that gluttony is commonly behind unethical food choices (Tefler 1996, ch. 6).

4 Ethical Gourmandism

The previous discussion supposed that there are two separate dimensions which influence food choices: the moral properties of the food and the food's taste. However, Korsmeyer argues that at least in the case of a person who is cultivated and discerning regarding foods, a food's taste is affected by the food's moral properties. The view which she labels Ethical gourmandism stands in opposition to the view in aesthetics which holds that aesthetic and moral properties of works of art are independent, and hence a work of art may for example have high aesthetic value even if it is morally questionable.

Korsmeyer's argument depends essentially on the view that the evaluative properties of a food depend on identifying the food. There is empirical support for that, for example from a study which showed how people's evaluations of a cold salmon dish depended on whether it was presented as mousse or as ice-cream (Yeomans et. al. 2008). There are plenty of ordinary cases too which support the view, for example when someone is happily eating a pie until they find out that the filling contains snails which the eater finds disgusting.

However, such cases are also apparent counterexamples; since the person was happily eating the pie, wasn't she simply wrong in thinking it is disgusting? Korsmeyer avoids the problem by distinguishing evaluations of tastes from evaluations of tastes of foods (Korsmeyer 2012, 92). Thus she could say that even if the ignorant pie eater finds its taste nice, it doesn't follow that she finds the taste of snail pie nice because to her snails are disgusting. If that is right, then food tastes have an essentially cognitive component to them.

The next step in her argument is that being a cultivated and discerning eater (a gourmand) requires knowing the origin and production methods of the foods since these are essential to discerning the tastes. She gives an example of a Scotch whisky whose flavor is described by an expert as follows: "The spirit has a fine, golden color, got from long years in cask in a dark, stone-walled, slate-roofed, earth-floored warehouse above the river Spey. The nose is vinous, floral and smoky,
like gardenias in a cigar box.” (Hills 2000, 171; cited in Korsmeyer 2012, 93). Korsmeyer argues that to truly appreciate and discern the color and the flavors requires knowing the conditions in which the Scotch was produced since, as is illustrated by the description, the methods leave traces in the taste. Given the cognitive component of evaluations of the tastes of foods and the requirement that a gourmand knows the means of production of foods, Korsmeyer argues that moral evaluations also influence tastes. Hence, if one condemns the force feeding of ducks for making foie gras one should not enjoy the taste of it. However, such cases do occur; they are instances of the puzzle of unethical food choices. Korsmeyer holds that the agents of such cases are being inconsistent. Her suggestion seems to be that if one undergoes a careful scrutiny of one’s moral beliefs and taste preferences, one cannot go on enjoying unethical foods.

5 Is There a Duty to Train One’s Taste?

Unethical food choices is a problem of moral agency. But the problem becomes one of public policy if there are genuinely bad foods which knowledgeable agents nevertheless fail to avoid. For the sake of the argument, suppose that there are bad foods. Can people be blamed for their knowledgeably unethical choices? If tastes can cause even a moral person to act against what they take as their best reasons maybe they just don’t have the choice to act otherwise. So they can't fight against the call of gustatory pleasures but what is more, they can't choose which foods cause them gustatory pleasures. As unfortunate as it is, most people prefer the tastes of bad foods.

The assumption here is that one can be morally blamed or praised for an action only if one chose the action. We have seen that the unethical food choices may be a consequence not of one’s genuine choosing, but of either weakness of will or of unacknowledged reasons. Those people thus can’t be blamed for their food choices, goes the argument. Now, maybe people can’t resist delicious food, but they can influence what they find delicious. So even if one can’t be blamed for originally having morally bad tastes, tastes can be trained. Despite of the genetic basis of our tastes, the biggest factor in our preferences is habituation (Logue, 2004). As Korsmeyer argues, we cannot blame the nature for our food choices since our tastes are a result of cultivation (Korsmeyer 2012).

If one is unable to resist bad foods, one may have excellent reasons to train one’s taste so as to prefer better foods. By far there has been a contrast between two kinds of agents: those who think that the best reasons support giving up bad food, and the explicit ethical egoists who think that they have a moral right if not even a duty to themselves to eat bad but tasty foods. The former agent certainly has a duty to train their tastes; not only will it ensure that they will make the moral food choices, they are also causing themselves more pleasure by learning to prefer good foods.

Surprisingly, the egoist as well may have a duty to train their taste. This can be illustrated by comparing two egoists: one who trained their taste to prefer good foods and one who didn’t. During the taste training period the egoist’s gustatory pleasure diminished but once she is adapted to the new tastes she gets equally much pleasure out of food as before. In addition she is healthier, probably weighs less and hence looks better which matters to most people, and, she might also be better off due to external consequences. And even if we suppose that good food can never be quite as delicious as bad food - for which there is no evidence -, the slight loss in gustatory pleasure is certainly gained in pleasures coming from better health, and of all the pleasures one gains while possibly living longer.

Summary

Nowadays an informed food choice must take into account the ethical considerations regarding the consequences of the food and its production. Many people are unable to resist bad foods due to their taste even when they know it would be morally better not to eat them. This puzzle of unethical food choices raises questions on the role of tastes as reasons. Are they not reasons but merely causes which trump the best reasons of the weak-willed agent? Or are they in fact reasons not recognized by the agent? If tastes are the strongest reasons, that suggests that people might in fact be ethical egoists or gluttons who don’t give much weight to the negative consequences of bad foods compared to the pleasure of tastes. The entry also asked whether people have a duty to train their tastes to prefer better foods and suggested that even an egoist has reasons to do so.
Cross-References

Cooking, Food Consumption, and Globalization: Ethical Considerations; Eating and Environmental Sustainability; Environmental Justice and Food; Informed Food Choice; Intensive Farming and Animal Welfare; Meals: Ethical Considerations; Pleasure and Food; Self-Interest in Food Ethics and Policies; State Role in Food Policy and Governance; Vegetarianism

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