

Who You Are Is What You Eat: Food in Ancient Thought¹

What to eat and when. How not to starve. How not to eat that which should not be eaten. How to learn something about others by eating their food. How not to forget one's own culture by no longer eating one's own food. How to think, feel, and act while hungry. What role to give food in one's life. Historically, when does discussion of these matters begin? Surely not with philosophical or scientific theorizing, given how basic food is to human life. I will use the *Odyssey* as the starting-point of this essay and as an extended example, illustrating the ideas under consideration.

Plato, Aristotle, and skeptical-relativistic philosophers explore a wide range of questions about eating. They are interested in the nature of hunger, the moldability of food-related desires, the role of custom in eating, and more. In their discussions, they refer to Homer as a predecessor. My essay takes its structure from these references, starting with Homer (section 1), then turning to Plato (section 2), Aristotle (section 3), and relativistic-skeptical discussions (section 4). Plato, I argue, pursues the question of what hunger is—in which sense it is a bodily, natural, and necessary desire—and what hunger is *for*: for the eatable, or for specific kinds of food. Aristotle has much to say about control and lack thereof, and the ideal set of attitudes an agent may have with respect to food. Relativistic and skeptical

¹ I am grateful for feedback to Thimo Heisenberg, Sam McVane, Christiana Olfert, and Nandi Theunissen; and for extensive input and discussion of the material to Jens Haas.

discussions, finally, address difference in eating habits and disagreements about what to eat.

It should not come as a surprise that ancient ethics, which asks questions about a good life and is thus broader than standard approaches in modern moral philosophy, has much to say about eating. In everyday life, eating is conflicted, in ways that relate to scarcity, adversity, health, one's attitudes to nature and other living beings, mastering one's desires or failing to do so, encountering foreign cultures, and more. It makes sense for ethicists to address these conflicts. From this perspective, food ethics is not primarily or exclusively about what may be morally right or wrong. Some questions belong, according to today's distinctions between fields, to the philosophy of mind, as when one asks what kind of presence hunger has in the mind and how it motivates action. Others sit at the intersection of psychology and medicine, as when one asks how one should and should not mould one's food-related desires, to what extent they are moldable, and so on. Yet others are about identity and disagreement, as when one navigates different cultures by sharing or not sharing in their eating habits. Arguably, all of these questions are recognizable to us. The central proposal of this essay is that contemporary food ethics should include them, thus starting out, like ancient thought on eating, from ordinary experiences.

1. Food in the Odyssey

The *Odyssey* is the most famous instance of a genre, so-called *nostoi*, home-coming stories. This genre holds its own next to stories of war, as exemplified by the *Iliad*. Return

from war, or so the balance between both poems suggests, is as challenging and complex as war itself. How is one to navigate one's own former culture, to relate to those who once were closest? Is one even the same person? In the *Odyssey*, the clash between war-on-foreign-shores and returning-home is highlighted by the alienness of what is in between: territories of peoples who may or may not be human, monsters, divinities, the underworld, and more.

In willfully anachronistic language, one might say that Odysseus suffers reverse culture shock when he finally arrives back home in Ithaka. He does not recognize the place, asking "who lives here?":

"Ah me, what are the people whose land I have come to this time,
and are they savage and violent, and without justice,
or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly?" (13.200-2)

His inquiry is a refrain, recurring throughout the poem.² The organization of a place can be lawful and just or savage and violent. In the *Odyssey*, it matters greatly how those who are unknown and from distant places are treated. Whether and what kind of food is offered to strangers is often a matter of life and death. Moreover, it expresses the cultural identity of a given group, their level of civilization, and their commitment to friendly interactions with others. The Cyclopes are, more than anything else, lawless (9.106-115). They have no political institutions, no agriculture or any other achievements of

² For example, cf. 8.573-76 and 9.175-6. All citations from Lattimore (1999).

civilization.³ Their extreme lack of culture translates into the opposite of hospitality.

Visitors are not invited for dinner: they are the meal.

In response to Odysseus' questions about (as of yet unrecognized) Ithaka, Athena says, before she even reveals the country as his homeland, that much grain for bread is grown (13.244). This is a sign for relief: Odysseus has arrived at a place with a human population. Human beings are as a species identified via their basic food, they are bread-eaters. Here food signals physical identity, indicating what kind of being one encounters. This does not mean that, in the *Odyssey*, human beings live on bread alone.⁴ On the contrary, they also eat meat and drink wine. But the expression "bread-eaters" is used to refer to humans (1.349).⁵ Other foods may change one into another kind of creature.⁶

³ The Cyclopes' lack of culture is further reflected in their disinterest in ships (9.126-9). Cf. Bakker (2002). Openness towards strangers is associated with travel and exploration. Life 'with' the sea is also life with salt. Salt permits preservation of food and is associated with the sophisticated life of an agricultural society. The strangest way of life would be one that is far from the sea and without salt. Odysseus, according to prophecy, shall go on yet another journey (11.121-125): "then you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey/ until you come where there are men living who know nothing/ of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never/ have known ships whose cheeks are painted purple, who never/ have known well-shaped oars, which act for ships as wings do."

⁴ Odysseus and his crew eat various kinds of meat; don't drink milk (the Cyclopes do), though they eat cheese when it is available (9.232, cf. 17.224); seem never to drink pure water (though wine mixed with water); and eat no or almost no vegetables and no spices.

⁵ Polyphemus differs from human beings precisely in so far as man is "an eater of bread" (9.191).

⁶ To eat fish, and even to eat game or to live on milk-products as the Cyclopes do, is seen as a kind of exploitation, a life that lacks the progress of a well-regulated agricultural civilization. On the absence of fish-eating in the *Odyssey*, cf. Berdowski (2008). Combella (1953) argues that Homer's fish are another group of cannibals; Davidson (1996) and Bakker (2013) argue that meat is crucial to ritual practices.

Thus Lotus-Eaters are non-human, or if they are, they are humans who are fundamentally shaped by their means of sustenance, in such a way that they differ from human beings who do not eat lotus. They embody a thought-experiment of the most condensed form. Lotus-Eaters are who they are and lotus-eating is all they care about. What they want from newcomers is that the newcomers too eat what they eat, namely lotus. But lotus is a food and a drug at the same time. It illustrates a more general lesson about eating foreign food: the experience that it changes one's state of mind, making one forgetful of one's native culture or in other ways conflicted about one's alliances.⁷ Divine beings like Calypso live on nectar and ambrosia. Calypso too aims to make Odysseus what she herself is by having him eat what she eats (10.509). In offering this kind of food to Odysseus, she offers a life of divinity to him. If Odysseus were to accept her invitation to eat divine food, he would not just change physically into a divine being. He would also become Calypso's long-term companion, opting for her way of life rather than life at home in Ithaka. The Cyclopes and Laistrygonians on the other hand are cannibals. What they eat, namely humans, is one of their most conspicuous features. Here assimilation takes an even scarier form, that of being literally devoured, rather than incorporated into another form of life. Another option, with its own horror, is to be fed drugs that transform you into a different creature. Circe initially uses her potions not to make a divine companion out of Odysseus, but to transform his companions into pigs.

⁷ For Odysseus, the main danger is forgetting his purpose, namely his return home to Ithaka (9.100-104). Cf. Circe's spell for Odysseus' companions: "malignant drugs, to make them forgetful of their own country" (10.236). This applies not only to human travelers. When Polyphemus, the dangerous Cyclops, drinks wine he is not accustomed to, he forgets his purpose and is outwitted by Odysseus (9.196-205).

Throughout the *Odyssey*, desire and control over desire are explored. Food is one of the primary objects of desire. The plot is driven, again and again, by whether some agents give in to the desire to eat a given food. Moreover, the desire for food competes with other thoughts and desires in the minds of the poem's protagonists. And it affects one's cognitive powers. Eating, forgetting, and remembering stand in complicated relations. Hunger makes you forget other kinds of suffering as much as feasting does, and for those who suffer, forgetting itself is a temptation.⁸ That is, eating is desirable not just qua eating, or insofar as the food is desirable; it is desirable as a means of forgetting, of lessening the presence of pain in one's mind. For Odysseus, it is a maddening feature of human experience that, no matter how bad things are—with companions devoured by monsters, and so on—the mind of a hungry person does not hold on to the gravity of events.⁹ Throughout the poem, Odysseus remonstrates with himself, finding it despicable how loudly and relentlessly hunger speaks to him, when his motivations and thoughts should be elsewhere.¹⁰ The mind seems to require a delicate balance in order to be able to recall things and adequately take in the seriousness of drastic events: it must be the mind of a body that has been fed, and fed in the right way.

⁸ Forgetting is in general associated with temptation. For example, the song of the Sirens is so sweet that it makes people stop in their tracks, and all they want is listen (12.39-43).

⁹ For example, Odysseus' companions are able to grieve for their lost fellows, perished in the hands of Skylla, only after a first meal. "But when they had put away their desire for eating and drinking/ they remembered and they cried for their beloved companions" (12.308-9).

¹⁰ For example, right after his arrival at Alkinoos' palace, Odysseus asks the Phaiakians to leave him alone to eat. He says it is shameful that, in spite of all his troubles, there is always hunger asserting itself, telling him to eat and drink and forcing him to forget (7.215-221).

2. *Plato on Hunger*

Plato forefronts the motivational force of hunger/thirst both in the *Republic* and in the *Philebus*, and that is, in two extensive investigations into human psychology. The *Republic*'s famous account of a tripartite soul with three motivational faculties (appetites, spirit, and reason) starts with an extended analysis of hunger/thirst. Hunger/thirst are flagged as the clearest instances of desire (437d1-3).¹¹ The *Philebus*'s famous discussion of pleasure begins with the example of hunger/thirst as well. Socrates makes the suggestion to turn to hunger/thirst because they are ordinary and conspicuous, and thereby presumably easier to analyze than other desires (31e). That is, hunger/thirst are considered paradigmatic examples of desire, well-suited starting-points for a general theory of desire.

The *Republic*'s discussion of hunger/thirst (437d-439a) contains a hard-to-decipher claim: that hunger/thirst aim at the eatable/drinkable, not at that which is good-to-eat/drink (438a). And yet, as Plato holds, in agreement with a long-standing tradition, to desire something is to relate to it as good—as something that is seen as good and

¹¹ Scholars used to read the passage as differentiating hunger/thirst qua desires of appetite from the desires of reason. Only reason, they argued, aims at the good. Cf. Cornford (1941), Irwin (1977) and (1995), Reeve (1988). Today, there is broad consensus that all desire aims at the good; this includes the desires of the appetites, spirit (which is unaccounted for in the traditional reading), and reason. Cf. Carone (2001), Bobonich (2002), Lorenz (2006), Moss (2008); for an in between position, see Cooper (1984). My views are in agreement with the current consensus, and take it further. As I see it, Plato does not address any one particular part of the soul at this point. He is characterizing all motivational attitudes, introduced via a range of Greek terms (437b-c, esp. 437b7-8); he uses hunger/thirst to make a general point about desiderative attitudes. However, nothing in my argument depends on this. A weaker version of my proposal is that hunger/thirst are paradigmatic for a sub-class of desires, which Plato calls appetites.

something that is, qua good, an object of pursuit. How, then, should one understand the claim that hunger/thirst are on the one hand paradigmatic desires, and aim on the other hand at the eatable/drinkable, not at the *good-to-eat/drink*?

Plato emphasizes that he is making a larger point here. He argues for a distinction between F-simpliciter and its simpliciter-relatum, and F-qualified and its qualified-relatum (438b). For example, knowledge is of the knowable, and knowledge of housebuilding is of how one builds a house (438c-d). This is the structure of his proposal about hunger/thirst. There are two relations: hunger/thirst simpliciter is for the eatable/drinkable; and qualified hunger/thirst is for something specific to eat (439a).¹² Good food is just one of several examples; similarly, hot food or cold food count as qualified relata (437d-e). Why postulate these two relations? My suggestion would be that they are postulated in order to analyze the states of mind of being hungry and of being hungry-for-X. This suggestion may appear straightforward, merely stating the obvious. But interpreters do not commonly take seriously that Plato is here engaged in the philosophy of mind side of an analysis of desire. And thus they do not commonly ask whether, rather than being far-fetched, Plato's twofold distinction actually captures two recognizable aspects of a complex state of mind. Readers of the *Odyssey*, attuned to the motivational phenomena relating to hunger, may share Plato's view that these are worth keeping apart.

¹² I speak of Plato's proposals, setting aside questions of whether Socrates is, in every respect, Plato's spokesperson at this point.

Consider some relevant scenarios. (i) Upon registering that one is hungry, one may register just that: I'm hungry! Provided that one takes oneself to have choices, it may be a second step to figure out what it is that one is hungry for—what one wants to eat or should eat. (ii) In ordinary cases, there may be no experiential sequence of this sort. One may wake up hungry in the morning. One is acculturated to having breakfast in the morning, and thus one wakes up hungry-for-breakfast. One is accustomed to having porridge for breakfast, and thus one wakes up hungry-for-porridge. And so on. (iii) At times, one is out of porridge, or traveling, or sick, or subject to someone else's instructions, and so on. If X is unavailable/forbidden/etc., X may be substituted by Y. In settling on Y, one may come to see Y in a positive light, deciding that after all, Y is what one feels like eating. One may also have to substitute X with Z, where Z is not at all something one is able to see in a good light. Z is eatable, though not good to eat by one's standards. One may make oneself eat Z (bark perhaps, or insects), without being hungry-for-Z. The motivation to eat Z may consist in seeing survival in a good light, and Z as eatable, and yet so inherently repellent that its status as means-to-survival does not suffice to make it the intentional object of hunger. If this is roughly why Plato postulates the two relations, then his proposal captures eating in adversity as seen in the *Odyssey*: eating like a pig from the ground; eating potentially dangerous things like lotus because nothing else is available; and so on. Given the pervasiveness of war, travel, scarcity, and other external

constraints, these are familiar phenomena.¹³ What follows, then, for the question of whether hunger/thirst are desires, assuming that desire is for the good? One thing to say is that the eatable, though falling short of what is by the lights of the agent good-to-eat, meets some norms, simply on account of qualifying as eatable. It is in this sense, I propose, that Plato calls the eatable/drinkable the *natural* object of hunger/thirst (437e). The eatable/drinkable meets weaker norms than the good-to-eat and good-to-drink.¹⁴ But it differs from the uneatable/undrinkable. The way it differs depends on the way in which eating/drinking is a natural feature of human existence: it is a matter of our physiology and of the composition of various objects in the world that, say, stones are not eatable.

Another argument in favor of the two-relations view of hunger/thirst may appeal to the acquisition of desires. *Republic* VIII-IX discuss how agents come to desire what they desire; how, for example, one gets hooked on a habit such as desiring a certain amount or quality of chocolate. It seems that for an agent to desire to eat/drink X, the agent must have acquaintance with X and memory of it. One cannot, say, desire Tarte Tatin if one has

¹³ For present purposes, there is no need to settle how this carries over to other desires. Perhaps desiring knowledge has the same two-fold structure. One might be motivated to learn, study, and so on, without yet knowing what it is that one wants to study (arguably a widespread experience). More generally, it is conceivable that one feels like ‘doing something’ (analogously to ‘I’m hungry!’) without yet having a specific motivation for doing this-or-that.

¹⁴ Moss (2008) aims to explain Plato’s proposal via a distinction between desire for good drink and desire for drink as a good. But the core distinction is between desire for an unqualified object, and some addition (τὰ προσγγνόμενα; 437e8-9) by virtue of which objects are qualified (τὰ ποιὰ; 438b2). Barney recognizes that Plato is here making a metaphysical point of some generality, related also to his discussions of knowledge/belief/ignorance in Book V of the *Republic* (2010, p. 45 and 76-77).

never eaten Tarte Tatin and recalls this event as the eating of Tarte Tatin.¹⁵ Perhaps one can desire Tarte Tatin if one has tasted apple cake and other French fruit tarts and so on, allowing one to put together some idea of what a French upside-down baked apple tarte might taste like. But even here, it is unclear whether one would desire Tarte Tatin, or whether the object of desire, as represented by the agent, would be some kind of taste and texture—sweet, apple-like, tarte-crust-like, etc.—that one puts together in one’s mind based on other earlier eating experiences. In this kind of case, it could happen that one mistakenly takes oneself to desire Tarte Tatin, while really one was desiring some other kind of apple cake. To properly desire Tarte Tatin, so the argument goes, one must have had a taste of it such that one relates to it as the object of desire.¹⁶ Thus it may seem that for anything to be a desire, experience, memory, and so on, are necessary. And yet, hunger/thirst prevent the desire theorist from going down that route in an unqualified way. Infants are hungry/thirsty without yet having memory of this-or-that food/drink.

The *Republic*’s proposal, that hunger/thirst are for the eatable/drinkable, captures this phenomenon. In another formulation of this point, hunger/thirst are *by nature* for food/drink. This proposal corrects a simpler and misguided notion of hunger/thirst as ‘natural’. Hunger/thirst are not natural as opposed to culturally-acquired; for surely, they also are the latter. They are natural insofar as they have natural objects, the eatable/drinkable.

Another way of putting this is in terms of limited plasticity: as much as one may shape

¹⁵ Plato discusses, for example, how one gets hooked on “foreign delicacies” (*Republic* 559b8).

¹⁶ These matters are discussed further in the *Philebus*, where Plato explores the role of cognitive faculties in desire, pleasure, and pain.

hunger/thirst, their objects must fall into the domain of the eatable/drinkable. And yet everyday occurrences of hunger/thirst, which tend to be instances of being hungry-for or thirsty-for *X*, are subject to acculturation, habit, and so on.¹⁷ Thus much of what an ordinary person experiences in being hungry/thirsty is far from natural. This is significant for anyone who takes food ethics seriously. Instructions on what to eat and what not to eat may be more successful if it is possible, at least to some extent, to habituate oneself such as to be hungry for that which one approves as good-to-eat. At the same time, the fact that the natural object of hunger is the eatable sets limits to such instructions. *In extremis*, agents must negotiate their acculturated commitment to certain foods on the one hand, and hunger simpliciter on the other hand.

Consider next the related question whether hunger/thirst are ‘bodily’ desires, or whether that term even makes sense. In the *Philebus*, Plato formulates a discovery that, once stated, sounds trivially true: for anything to be a desire, it must be ‘in the soul’ (33c-35b). Qua desires and motivations, hunger and thirst cannot be bodily. Physiological goings-on, if they are not psychologically recorded and represented (say, growth and decay of cells), have no motivational power. The expression ‘bodily desire’ is a misnomer. Assuming that there is, nevertheless, a sense in which hunger/thirst are bodily, a theory of hunger/thirst must be both physiological and psychological. The proposal Plato puts forward in the

¹⁷ Hunger/thirst are so much subject to these forces that it can seem to an agent that she is hungry-for-*X* without being hungry. For example, she claims to be hungry-for-dessert without being hungry simpliciter. It is a difficult question whether this state should count as hunger. Moreover, in extreme cases the object in such problematic instances of being hungry-for-*X* may not even count as food, but, say, as a drug.

Philebus aims to adjudicate the sense in which hunger/thirst is both.¹⁸ It conceives of hunger/thirst as depletion and re-filling. Much of the relevant physiology falls below the threshold of perception. For example, after you just drank a sufficient amount of water you are not thirsty, even though the process of dehydration re-starts right away. Only once a certain threshold is met, depletion is perceptible as thirst. Hunger and thirst, on this account, are perceptions of physiological states. As perceptions of physiological states, hunger/thirst are afflictions, *pathê*. They are passive in the sense that the agent records a state of hers. These perceptions, however, are not as if one read off a level from a scale or some other measuring device. They are painful recordings, and thereby motivational. It is the registering of a state that is inherently such as to motivate one to get rid of it. Along the same lines, newborns are hungry/thirsty without memory of former instances of eating/drinking because living beings strive for the opposite of such experiences as depletion (34e9-35a9).¹⁹

Finally, hunger/thirst may seem to be ‘necessary’ desires. According to the *Republic*, there are necessary and non-necessary desires (558d f.). Food is Plato’s primary example for necessary desires, and that is, desires that are impossible to get rid of *and* useful. That is, the claim that hunger/thirst cannot be eradicated is not put forward on its own. People can succeed in quite radical schemes of silencing hunger. That hunger/thirst are useful

¹⁸ I am here following Frede (1997). The *Philebus* modifies the *Republic*’s claim that hunger/thirst are for the eatable/drinkable, namely by saying that they are for the ‘filling caused by drink’ (35a). I am setting aside the question of whether this is a revision or a specification.

¹⁹ Price (forthcoming) also argues for reading the *Republic* and *Philebus* conjointly on this question.

sets limits to the extent to which one should aim to mould hunger/thirst. There are not only limits to their plasticity set by them having natural objects. There are, in addition, normative limits to their plasticity: constraints regarding the ways and extent to which one *should* mold them. Though Plato would not have thought of it in our terms, disorders like anorexia are by no means outside of the spectrum of desiderative conditions discussed in *Republic VIII-IX*. The decline from bad to worse (and worse and worse) amounts to an urgent warning: the reach of our ability to form our desires, and the extent to which they can get out of hand if this effort is misguided, should not be underestimated. The difficulty of moderation is not simply one of cutting down or of doing without certain kinds of food. Desires that are valuable for human life, on this view, must not only be shaped but also be preserved.

3. Aristotle on Measure

Turn now to Aristotle, and another prominent feature of the story with which I began. Odysseus and his companions display various attitudes with respect to eating. Odysseus stands out as someone who suffers from hunger, deplors its prominence in his mind, but is all things considered remarkably unaffected by drugs and ultimately able not to eat anything that should not be eaten, or at least, to stop eating foods that make him forgetful of his purpose. While he is not seen by philosophers as a model of virtue, the difference between him and his companions is stark.²⁰ It is a starting-point for asking which attitudes one should cultivate with respect to food and hunger. Aristotle's account of the

²⁰ Cf. Elster (1979).

character virtues uses moderation and eating as a core example. It zooms in on the differences between control, lack of control, and moderation. The classic texts on these matters are *NE* II.1-6, where Aristotle develops the framework for his view of character virtue, and the (presumably earlier) *NE* VII.1, where he sets up a scale of better and worse states to be in. The highest is a super-human excellence. Then comes virtue, understood as human excellence; then control; then lack of control; then vice; and finally brutishness, which lies outside of the regular human spectrum as much as the quasi-divine state that is better than human virtue.

Aristotle's conception of human virtue employs five basic ideas:²¹

PP [Pleasure/Pain]: character virtue is situated in the domain of pleasure/pain.

RR [Right Reason]: a philosophical reconstruction of the adage "do as right reason says."

M [Measure]: a philosophical reconstruction of the adage "everything in measure."

H [Habituation]: desires are moldable according to RR and M.

A [Activity]: one acquires a firm motivational state by acting in the relevant way.

PP has two dimensions. First, character virtue is 'about' actions and affections in the sense that the virtuous person not only performs the right actions, but also has the right affections (*pathê*). Here actions and affections are on a par, namely insofar as both are reflective of a person's virtue. Second, character virtue consists in having acquired the

²¹ Each of these ideas is much-debated and subject to different reconstructions. Leunissen (2012) explores a further angle of Aristotle's theory, namely how environmental factors including diet affect character. Aristotle discusses these matters in his biological treatises.

right affective states. Here the formation of one's affective states is considered as prior to, and constitutive of, one's virtuous or less than virtuous actions. The virtuous person takes pleasure in what she should take pleasure in and finds painful what she should find painful; and her actions are motivated accordingly. This means that virtue does not consist in restricting oneself or successfully implementing control-mechanisms, say, a strategy of not buying gummy worms in order to not eat gummy worms.²² This is control, which, though better than lack of control, is not virtue. Virtue is to desire to eat X, and enjoy eating X, where X is what one should be eating.

But who says what one should be eating? Perhaps gummy worms, say, are precisely right for me at a given moment. To this Aristotle would agree. There is no set of general principles on what to eat and when and to what amount (and so on) that one could adopt and thereby become a moderate person. Here RR comes in. One should eat what right reason says, and right reason, here, is ideally one's own mind.²³ One's own mind—one's motivations and reasoning—must be such as to guide oneself toward the right food, drink, and so on. This state of mind involves, ultimately, all of the virtues: the character virtues and the excellences of thinking. The relevant person has the right affective

²² The virtuous person, McDowell (1998) argues, *does not want* an n-th doughnut, assuming that n-1 is the right number of doughnuts for her.

²³ On the translation of *orthos logos*, cf. Moss (2014). Aristotle's first observation about the slogan is: it is true but not clear (as in: in need of elucidation). Roughly, the right reason formula is as if one said "one should do what's right." Many different positions in ethics share the premise that one should do what is right, and yet differ in the substance of their proposals.

attitudes, is a good deliberator, and also an excellent thinker in various other ways.²⁴ Put together RR and M and this person, often called the *phronimos*, is the measure. In this state of mind one is able to ‘measure’ what one should be eating, drinking, and so on.²⁵

Given that we tend to be far from such a state of mind, right reason is often represented externally. In Aristotle’s example, a trainer determines how much food a beginning athlete should eat. The beginner should not eat as much as Milo, a champion. The trainer has the expertise to determine the right amount and kind of food for everyone in his class, from beginner to accomplished athlete. This is the well-known idea of a mean relative-to-us: right measure is relative to a given person at a given moment in time. In this case, what-to-eat takes the form of an instruction or prescription. But according to H, as one takes up exercise and related kinds of eating, one comes to desire the exertion of movement and the kinds of food that sustain one in that kind of life. This is how habituation works. Moderation (as well as any other virtue), or so premise A says, is acquired by performing the very actions that the moderate person performs. Say, one comes to enjoy exercise by regularly exercising. This process is supported by the pleasure one takes in doing what one thinks one should be doing, say, feeling good about oneself as one is running in the park.

²⁴ Different scholars spell out differently how this person acts. Classic contributions are Burnyeat (1980) and Cooper (1986). According to McDowell (2009), having the right affective attitudes *is* having the correct conception of a good life. My own sketch gives more room to excellent thinking of various kinds (rather than merely excellent deliberation) than is currently customary.

²⁵ On the *phronimos* as measure, compare Heda Sedvic (2009).

Understood along these lines, Aristotle's mean relative-to-us is a non-relativist version of Protagoras's "man is the measure." The agent is the measure in the sense that, if one's desires are well-habituated they guide one to take pleasure in what one should take pleasure in, and thereby they guide one to do what is right. Interpreters disagree about the extent to which a well-habituated person still needs some on-the-spot reasoning or even long-term deliberation; or whether she is fully guided by her desires. Though this is not the place to defend my views on this matter, I'm assuming that even the moderate person needs to continue to learn and think about, say, what to eat, if only because new information, new foods, and so on, become available. But much of her ordinary life—what to prepare for breakfast in a daily routine; whether to stop by the vending machine at the office several times a day; and so on—is guided by how her desires are habituated. Our desires are such that we *can* mould them. We can come to take pleasure in what we think we should take pleasure in. Moldability is a tool for someone who wants to live a certain way. It is, however, also a fact about desire that cannot be side-stepped. One way or another, one's desires will be shaped by what one does, what one tries out, what habits one picks up, and so on. If one fails to consciously direct this development, one's desires are likely to get out of hand. Addiction is a cousin of habit, and the plasticity of desire provides ample room for both. Before one knows it, one is such as to desire, all the time, fried food or sugared beverages or heroin or whatever. Examples of this kind should suffice to highlight the relevance of these ideas to everyday life—indeed, from the point of view of ancient ethics, the *urgency* of thinking this through.

These ideas involve empirical claims about which today one may want to know more. To what extent can agents mould their desires? Is it true that the structure of coming-to-desire something is such that repeated ϕ -ing, combined with the pleasure of approving of one's ϕ -ing (say, praising oneself for going running) typically leads one to come to enjoy ϕ -ing? If the answer to both questions as far as they apply to food is “yes,” or at least a qualified “yes” with provisos about limits and exceptions, then contemplating food ethics may be more than an academic exercise. Figuring out what we should be eating can be a significant step towards actually eating accordingly, not just for a brief period of restraint or in a joyless manner, but such that one embraces it as an aspect of one's way to live. Food ethics could be a genuinely Aristotelian kind of ethics, namely one that ultimately aims at becoming a better person, rather than merely at knowing what a better person would do. According to a prominent line of Aristotelian ethics it is not even possible to come up with a set of principles or guidelines on what to eat and not to eat (at given occasions, in given quantities, etc.) from a point of view that is external to the sensibilities of the well-habituated person. What one should and should not do only comes into view, as it were, through having acquired relevant sensibilities. It is through these very sensibilities that features of situations are salient to an agent that otherwise might go unnoticed.²⁶ On a less extreme reading, ethical reasoning—the kind of reasoning one may engage in when discussing questions of food ethics—continues to play a role in the Aristotelian framework. Indeed, there might be a reciprocal relation between reasoning and molding of one's sensibilities. As one comes to learn more about

²⁶ McDowell (2009).

some matter, both in terms of empirical information and of ethical arguments, one may habituate oneself further; and as one does, one may become more sensitive to information and arguments that come one's way.

4. Relativism and Skepticism about Difference and Disagreement

Until today, philosophical responses to difference and disagreement use examples that involve eating. Two phenomena are often explored separately, each raising their own sets of puzzles: disagreement of taste, where *A likes X* and *B dislikes X*; and disagreements about the *rightness* or *wrongness* of eating *X*. Ancient philosophers take a different approach, but not because they fail to understand the distinction between “do you enjoy *X*?” and “do you think eating *X* is good/right?”. Rather, they think that usually enjoying *X* goes along with being committed to the view that eating *X* is good. Today as in antiquity, few people eat what they do not like, or only if they have to. And many would defend their eating habits as right, perhaps even aiming to persuade others to eat what they eat. Ancient philosophers devise a range of responses to these phenomena, some of them broadly-speaking relativist, others broadly-speaking skeptical. I address both in turn.

One line of thought is associated with the sophists, and that is, traveling intellectuals, some of whom are eminent philosophers. The sophists observe that typically people consider their customs as natural and right. Surveying this pattern, they ask whether

everything is merely custom, and hence nothing right or wrong by nature.²⁷ The presumption that one does what is natural or right crumbles in the face of the identical presumption by any number of other people who live differently.²⁸ The resulting perspective is sometimes referred to as relativism. It is a perspective that asks whether there are true answers to questions on how one should live. One feature of these ancient discussions is especially pertinent to food ethics. While today's debates about moral relativism tend to focus on questions at the core of morality, much of the evidence about ancient discussions is about cultural practices such as, for example, burial rites or customs of eating. With respect to such practices even committed moral realists may wonder whether there is a truth of the matter: whether, say, there is a right mode of burial or a set of correct eating habits.

The sophists' experience is more widespread now than in antiquity, when fewer people were 'traveling intellectuals.' A semester of study abroad, say, may prompt these sorts of observations and reflections. The relevant lines of thought may induce some degree of distancing from one's own convictions and practices. One may realize that one would likely hold different convictions and engage in different practices had one grown up elsewhere. One may 'convert' to some extent to practices that one shared for a while, integrating some of them into one's own life abroad or even at home. And one may entertain the thought that none of the relevant beliefs are true.

²⁷ A formulation of this charge is contained in *NE* I.3; Aristotle sets out to refute it.

²⁸ Similar considerations are found in Herodotus' *Histories*, an imaginative quasi-record of the ways of life of peoples throughout the larger Mediterranean—the further away from Delphi, the stranger.

Alternatively, one may argue that each set of practices is right and all relevant beliefs true. Protagoras, famous sophist and proponent of relativism, arguably makes this move. According to his work *Truth*, what seems to anyone is the case for them.²⁹ This is often reformulated as follows: what seems to anyone is true for them. On this reconstruction, Protagoras puts forward the view that all views, including different views about what should be done, are true. One of the views that are true, on this proposal, is this very proposal itself. Another view that is true, on this proposal, is its denial. Put this way, Protagoras's relativism seems untenable, perhaps even so that one cannot coherently formulate or defend it.³⁰

Another response to difference and disagreement is to hold on to the intuition that there are true answers to such questions as what to eat and not to eat.³¹ These answers may not be the same for everyone, or at every point in time. But they may still be true. Witness Aristotle's example of Milo the athlete: Milo needs more food than he would if he stopped exercising. Thus what he should eat is relative to him. But the truth of such

²⁹ "Man is the measure of all things, of things which are, that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not [. . .]. (Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a2–5; this is a quote from Protagoras's book *Truth*; "[A]s each thing appears to me, so it is for me, and as it appears to you, so it is for you. (152a7–9); "What seems to each, he [Protagoras] says, that is also as it seems to him" (170a3-4);

³⁰ Plato prominently explores Protagorean relativism in the *Theaetetus*, refuting it multiple times, each of which is difficult to reconstruct. For more detail on the relativist and skeptical construals of difference and disagreement, cf. Vogt (2012).

³¹ I refrain from saying "objectively true," a go-to phrase at this point for many authors. The subjective-objective distinction is not part of ancient philosophy; to introduce it here would be anachronistic.

claims is *not* relative: it is true, not just true-for-Milo, that Milo needs more food than he would if he did not exercise. To take another example, Calypso should eat nectar and Odysseus should eat food suitable to humans. These claims are true (if they are), not true-for-Calypso or true-for-Odysseus. Arguably, many questions about eating are of this sort. In outline, the answers seem straightforward: athletes need lots of nutrients, human beings should live on food suitable for humans, and so on. And because such truths seem to be available, it seems that one can push further, aiming to make the answers more precise. This is a premise of food ethics: that it makes sense to ask ourselves what we should eat.

And yet, making such answers more precise may be far from straightforward. Assuming there is a fact of the matter of what Milo should eat, how is one going to determine this fact? What, say, should athletes include in their diet so as to improve their chances to win championships? Think of substances that are harmful or illegal for competing athletes, or of scientists doing research on nutrients. More generally, which foods are suitable for humans? Think of the problems discussed in this volume. The ancient skeptics are committed to investigation, even though answers may not be readily forthcoming. They are committed, in Sextus Empiricus' terms, to *ongoing* investigation (PH 1.1).³²

³² All quotes in this section from Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Skepticism* (abbreviated as PH). The Greek terms for difference/disagreement are *diaphônia* and *diaphora* (PH 1.87). Sextus Empiricus's writings as well as Diogenes Laertius's report on Pyrrho and Timon in his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 9.61-116 are our main sources for reconstructing Pyrrhonian skepticism.

The Pyrrhonian skeptics are well-known for so-called ‘modes’ of argument, types of argument they bring to bear on any question, thereby leading themselves and others to suspension of judgment. By considering differences/disagreement, the skeptics come to suspend judgment. With respect to food, they put together examples of the following sort. Sweet oil is agreeable to human beings but intolerable for beetles and bees (PH 1.55); human beings get sick from eating ants, not so bears (PH 1.57); some person drinks with impunity hemlock (PH 1.81); someone travels through arid Libya without drinking (DL 9.81); someone else gets a heart attack from eating pepper (PH 1.84); Ethiopians eat scorpions and snakes (PH 1.83). Why do the skeptics collect such examples? Suppose one suspends judgment on whether ants are good to eat, based on observing humans versus bears. Is this not a non-sensical move? If anything, it would seem surprising if bears lived on the same diet as human beings. Also, the story that someone traveled through Libya without drinking seems either incredible, or in need of some explanation that invokes highly unusual circumstances. If someone had a heart attack from eating pepper, it would seem that, at least in principle, a medical explanation regarding her particular condition can be found. Etc. That is, the skeptics seem to record phenomena as puzzling that are not particularly puzzling, or only insofar as one may seek explanations. Why should the consideration of such phenomena lead one to suspend judgment on what (how much, etc.) is good to eat/drink?

The bear example comes from Sextus’ illustration of the First Mode of the so-called Ten Modes. It argues from differences that occur between kinds of animals. Subsequent

modes of argument zoom in, more and more narrowly, looking at differences between human beings, between different sense-perceptions, different states and dispositions, and so on. These differences can be invoked when one tries to make sense of discrepant phenomena: say, one may assume that ants are good for bears and bad for people (if they are) because bears differ in relevant ways from human beings. These attempts at explanation lead one, or so the skeptics stipulate, to look at things ever more closely, along the lines of the progression of the Ten Modes. For example, the Fourth Mode invokes different circumstances: the same food seems agreeable when hungry and disagreeable when sated; actions that appear shameful when sober do not appear shameful when drunk; and so on (PH 1.109). Eventually, one is considering a particular agent under particular circumstances at a given time. One person in one given context/time/circumstances/state of mind/etc. pursues X as good and another person, or the same person, in a given context/time/circumstances/state of mind/etc. pursues Y as good.

Add now the premise mentioned earlier: people tend to be committed to viewing their actions as good or right. Accordingly, or so it is stipulated, people who act differently hold different evaluative beliefs. The manifold discrepancies that are observed thus imply that there are manifold different evaluative beliefs. The skeptics argue that, with respect to any two such beliefs, one can either attempt the impossible: to believe both, holding contradictories—that, say, X is good, and that it is not the case that X is good—to be true. Or one suspends judgment on how things really are (PH 1.87-88). In matters of value, this means one suspends on whether there is anything good or bad by nature, or in

another formulation, on whether there is such a thing as expertise in matters of how one should live. Are the skeptics thereby unable to eat anything, as it were paralyzed by not endorsing any particular view? This is a well-known anti-skeptical argument, the so-called Apraxia Charge.³³ Skeptics, by not holding views about what is right and wrong and good and bad and more generally, about the way the world is, are presumably reduced to inactivity. The skeptics, however, argue that this objection is misguided.

Consider an example that is much debated today, whether one should live on a vegetarian diet. Suppose one considers this question as unresolved. This is compatible with being quite taken by one side of the argument, enough so in order to live accordingly. One's tentative view may be good enough for oneself to go along with, though one continues to think through the issues, fails to have responses to some objections raised by those who are more taken by another position (vegan, omnivore, etc.), and so on. This is how Academic skeptics, and that is, philosophers in Plato's Academy who endorse the Socratic legacy, respond to the Apraxia Challenge.³⁴ They argue that one can go along with what is persuasive (*pithanon*) or reasonable (*eulogon*), while at the same time suspending judgment on how matters really are. Their actions are based on their 'best bet', given their current thinking—and that includes an on-going effort to investigate and figure things out. Future evidence, new arguments, and so on, may lead one to modify,

³³ I'm here sketching the moves leading up to suspension of judgment as they are envisaged in Pyrrhonian skepticism. A different story, albeit also leading to suspension of judgment, needs to be told for Academic skepticism. Both schools encounter the Apraxia Challenge. Cf. Vogt (2010).

³⁴ Vogt (2010).

correct or refine one's suppositions. But given a Socratic commitment to an examined life, it is preferable to act based on the best thinking currently available on a given matter, as compared to being either inactive or acting on unexamined, dogmatic notions. This is the stance that, arguably, many of us take with respect to questions in food ethics.

Pyrrhonian skeptics are more radical. On their way of telling the story, investigation leaves one so puzzled—torn between arguments for different sides of an issue, acutely aware of problems within each of the competing views—that one finds oneself genuinely in-between these positions. Rather than leaning one way or another, one is in an 'equal' state of mind (*isostheneia*). What, then, guides one's actions? In Sextus' terms, the skeptics adhere to appearances. This includes being compelled by necessary affections like thirst/hunger and going along with custom and convention (PH 1.21-24).³⁵ On the skeptics' analysis, custom can be the custom of human beings, of one culture, of one family, one person, one person in a given context, and so on. Thus a Pyrrhonian skeptic might eat what is eaten in her culture; or she might eat what her family eats; or what she habitually eats in a given season; and so on.³⁶ This too is a highly recognizable approach today, compatible with taking questions of what we should eat to be deserving of on-going investigation.

³⁵ Note that this invokes the Platonic two-relations view of hunger/thirst discussed in Section 2.

³⁶ Sextus highlights the fact that skepticism should not be understood as conservative through the example of whether a skeptic might give in to pressure from a tyrant, performing unspeakable deeds because the tyrant threatens him. Here one might suspect that 'convention' speaks for submission. But according to Sextus, it all depends. Someone could have grown up with rebel parents, or be part of a group of political activists, and convention pulls the other way.

5. Conclusion

Ancient ethics has much to say about eating and my discussion in this paper was by necessity selective. I addressed three topics that strike me as pertinent to the ways in which eating is conflicted in ordinary life. What is the nature of hunger, and how does the nature of hunger shape its motivational force? How and to what extent can one habituate one's food-related attitudes? How can one make sense of the differences between eating habits; and how should one respond to disagreements about what to eat? I assigned each of these topics to one ancient philosopher or group of philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, and the mixed group of relativists and skeptics respectively. This is no doubt somewhat artificial. To some extent, they all engage with the full range of questions under consideration. But Plato, or so I argue, makes a unique proposal about the nature of hunger, namely, that hunger has two dimensions: being hungry, and being hungry-for-X. Aristotle, my argument continues, puts forward a premise about the moldability of desire. Repeated ϕ -ing, combined with the pleasure of approving of one's ϕ -ing, typically leads one to come to enjoy ϕ -ing. This premise may require empirical confirmation or refinement. Minimally, it signals that, if food ethics is to be more than an academic exercise, some connection between theorizing about eating and adjusted eating habits is needed. Finally, I take it that difference and disagreement are pervasive features of how people today experience eating. If one does not want to give up on the idea that there are answers to the questions that food ethics asks, the stance of the Academic skeptics seems promising. As they argue, one can investigate these questions, considering them as so far

unresolved, and at the same time be guided in one's eating habits by one's best current thinking.

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