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Derrida and Eating

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Synonyms

Hospitality and food; Meat: ethical considerations

Introduction

Jacques Derrida makes an analogy between eating other beings or substances and assimilating others' values and ideals. He makes a distinction between assimilating others – whether food or other people – in ways that nourish and ways that conquer them as trophies. Through this analogy, Derrida is concerned to develop an ethics that respects one's differences from others while acknowledging that one needs to eat or assimilate others in order to live. He makes a connection regarding what is good to eat in both physical and moral senses.

What Is Good to Eat?

In the interview "Eating Well," Derrida wonders whether a head of state (*chef d'Etat*) could gain office by declaring him (or herself) a vegetarian and concludes, "the chief (*chef*) must be an eater of flesh" (Derrida 1991, p. 114). In the United States, political leaders are often seen hunting,

particularly bird hunting, which seems to demonstrate their manly fortitude and bloodlust that can keep citizens safe. Hunting itself as a trope has become a trophy of sorts within the rhetoric of political image making. And meat eating or eating flesh is a sign of strength and fortitude. It is interesting to note that Derrida was an "eater of flesh." In this same interview, Derrida associates eating well with ethical obligations that separate moral and physical nourishment from trophies. There, Derrida maintains that the oppositional limit between animal and man, and even between living and nonliving, has been challenged to the point that the ethical question in relation to animals is not whether they are subjects, sentient or feeling, and so forth and therefore should not be killed but rather how to eat them in the most respectful way. For Derrida, one can no longer draw rigid borders between humans and animals because one can no longer define any absolute boundary between self and other. The question of the relation between man and animal comes back to the question of the relation between the self or subject and the other. He concludes:

...the question is no longer one of knowing if it is 'good' to eat the other or if the other is 'good' to eat, nor of knowing which other. One eats him regardless and lets oneself be eaten by him... The moral question is thus not, nor has it ever been: should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since *one must* eat in any case and since it is and tastes good (*bien*) to eat, and since there's no other definition of the good (*du bien*), *how* for goodness sake should one *eat well* (*bien manger*)? (Derrida 1991, pp. 114–115).

By *eating*, Derrida means not only the physical act of ingesting food but also the metonymical act of interiorizing symbols, language, and social codes. Experience and sensation are also implicated in this eating. All forms of identification and assimilation in relations to the Other (language, meaning, and so forth) and others (including animals, plants, rocks, and so forth) are literal and/or metaphorical forms of eating. Derrida argues that all relationships invariably literally or symbolically assimilate the other; assimilation is necessary not only for war but also for communion and love: communication depends upon the assimilation of the Other (especially language and meaning) and others (friends, family, and loved ones). One learns language through assimilating words, one understands others and communicates with them by assimilating traditions and values, and so forth. Both words and food move through the orifices of the body, most particularly the mouth.

Derrida says “as concerns the ‘Good’ (Bien) of every morality, the question will come back to determining the best, most respectful, most grateful, and also most giving way of relating to the other and of relating the other to the self” (Derrida 1991, p. 114). For Derrida, the *good* of morality or ethics is explicitly linked with the *good* of eating as in *tastes good* and *eating well*. Derrida emphasizes that one *must* eat. It is both a need and a desire, and the *must* is both a natural necessity – living organisms must eat to live – and a moral obligation; in some cultures suicide, even by starvation, is considered immoral. In addition, all community or communion requires some form of assimilation – common language and customs – that Derrida metonymically links to eating. One must eat. And since one must eat both by need and by desire, the question is not whether or not to eat but how to eat.

What to Eat and How to Eat

Derrida presses the question of what to eat given that ultimately any lines one might draw between man and animal, animal and vegetable, living and nonliving are always fluid and open to debate.

The “what” of “what should one eat?” is a moving target as both needs and desires change: one is told to change diets for the sake of life and health, and customs and sensibilities oblige one to make dietary changes for the sake of ethical obligations to other creatures and renewing the resources of the planet. Also, on the metonymical level, languages and symbolic resources are shared. So the question of what to eat is never answered once and for all; it has to be continually asked in the vigilant, and ultimately undecidable, way required by hyperbolic ethics. Following Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida proposes what he calls *hyperbolic ethics* in order to insist on urgency and the necessity for constant vigilance. Its imperatives and responsibilities are hyperbolic because they demand the impossible: that one be hyper-aware of the ways in which actions and decisions fall short of ideals. Like the infinite curve of a hyperbola, we can only continue to approach the asymptote that is our ideal. Moreover, we must be hyper-aware of the ways in which ideals themselves exclude others, even others whom one may not recognize. So, although one must eat, one also has an ethical obligation to decide how to eat in a way that respects others, even those whom one ingests. Moreover, one must choose a style of eating, a lifestyle, in the face of ultimately undecidability and uncertainty about relations to others. In other words, the question of “what” is a metaphysical question that is essentially undecidable; a question that must be answered but cannot be answered with any certainty. The question, then, “is it good to eat?” is fraught with ambiguity in the face of which one has ethical obligations that one does not even recognize as such. The ethical question par excellence for Derrida, then, is not whether or what but how: how to eat-assimilate well. It is crucial, however, to point out that the questions of what and how are intimately linked. One decides how to treat other beings on the basis of presuppositions, beliefs, and conclusions about *what* they are: are they sentient, are they human, are they capable of suffering, etc. *How* one treats them – or eats them – is determined in large part by *what* they are.

Does Deconstruction Imply Vegetarianism?

Discussing Derrida's ambivalence toward vegetarianism, philosopher David Wood says, "Derrida is reported to have said at the Cerisy conference in the summer of 1993, 'I am a vegetarian in my soul'. The proper place for vegetarianism is not in the soul but in a complex reworking of the investments of the oral sphincter and all its personal and political ramifications. Carnophallogocentrism is not a dispensation of Being toward which resistance is futile; it is a mutually reinforcing network of powers, schemata of domination, and investments that has to reproduce itself to stay in existence. Vegetarianism is not just about substituting beans for beef; it is—at least potentially—a site of proliferating resistance to that reproduction" (Wood 1999, pp. 32–33). Against what he suggests may be Derrida's "beautiful soul," Wood argues for vegetarianism as a "symbolic substitute for unlimited and undelimitable responsibility—the renegotiation of our Being-toward-other-animals" (Wood 1999, p. 32). Wood refuses to accept what seems to be suggested by Derrida's remark that "vegetarians, too, partake of animals, even of men." It is not so much that Wood denies that vegetarians also participate in systems of domination and live in various essential ways off of killing and eating animals, including other human beings.

Rather, on the one hand, Wood imagines a more "deconstructive" form of vegetarianism – or perhaps a more vegetarian form of deconstruction – through which one might rethink all relationships to others; and on the other hand, he insists that there is a difference between eating beef and eating beans that cannot be so easily disregarded, even in the name of keeping vegetarians honest. In other words, although all are implicated in killing and eating the flesh of others, it still matters ethically and politically whether or not one decides to eat beef or beans. As Wood insists we have to be able to distinguish really eating animals from eating them symbolically. Even if, as one learns from Derrida, conceptually the real and the symbolic are inseparable (they have their meaning only in

relation to each other), on the level of practical ethics and politics, it is imperative to keep them distinct, which, according to Derrida, can be done only by acknowledging the ways that one is implicated in the other. In other words, one can separate really eating from symbolic eating only by recognizing how the two are always already mixed.

In his criticisms of Wood, philosopher Matthew Calarco emphasizes this later aspect of deconstruction, namely, that one cannot stop questioning investments in killing others, including other animals and other people, just because one quits eating meat. Deconstruction, as Calarco suggests, requires ongoing self-interrogation into both how and what to eat. The ethics of deconstruction must radically question what Calarco calls "the undisclosed anthropocentric and carnophallogocentric limits of the dominant discourses in animal ethics and vegetarianism," which base human responsibilities to other animals on similarities with them (Calarco 2004, p. 197). Calarco concludes that deconstruction may provide a way of thinking about ethical obligations to animals beyond what one might call taking the easy way out by finding similarities. While deconstruction may provide a much needed antidote to rights discourse based on identity, Calarco's beef with Wood sometimes seems to degenerate into a debate over the virtues of veganism over vegetarianism. As both Calarco and Wood acknowledge, however, Derrida's point is that ultimately where the line is drawn between oneself and others is radically undecidable in any certain metaphysical terms and yet at the same time unavoidable. Ethics cannot be founded on counting how many species are sentient or suffer, whether one eats shellfish or so-called animal products like dairy. What about bacteria, viruses, and fungus that feed on humans? Aren't they living beings too? Should one kill them? Can one be open even to the other who feeds? Derrida is adamant that an extreme ethics allows that one can never know from where – or from whom – an ethical call will be heard. Ethical responsibility is motivated by radical differences that multiply rather than

diminish or calculate the species of ethical calls. Derrida seems to ask “Can we eat the other in a way that nourishes her as well as nourishes us?” In other words, is there a virtuous way of eating the other? This question involves both the how and what, not to mention the why, of ethical eating.

Eating Well

For Derrida, ethics comes down to the question of eating well or in a sense good taste. Derrida says “The Good can also be eaten. And it must be eaten well” (Derrida 1991, p. 115). It is not just a matter of interiorizing or assimilating the Good but rather learning the lesson well, taking it to heart, but not by making it second nature or habit. Eating well requires vigilance and must resist becoming merely a habit. If it does become a habit, then it is no longer ethical because it does not continue to question and to “learn.” If morality becomes a habit, then one is like a trained animal, reacting rather than responding. Derrida takes the ideal of the pure heart and embraces it, but only in its impossibility; it is precisely this impossibility of the pure that separates (radical or pure) ethics from morality. But for Derrida, taking to heart is an impossible ideal that can never be realized, yet must be attempted anyway and always. Indeed, if it were realized in the sense of becoming a moral or mental habit, then it would no longer be ethical. In Derrida’s writing, the romantic faith in the purity of nature becomes a rejection of that very purity in the name of an impure purity or a taste for impossible purity, forever deferred, a purity of the future, a purity to come. For Derrida, an ethics that remains open to surprise or open to the other requires giving up moral habits along with the notion that morality is a matter of habit. Doing good as a matter of habit or convention reduces ethics to nothing more than a reaction to stimuli, and man becomes a well-trained horse or dog, doing clever tricks to impress his master.

In spite of his departures from the romantics, Derrida embraces ideals of generosity that

suggest the individual’s inherent and intimate relations with others. Derrida says that in order to be good, food must be shared. To eat well, one must share not only food but also nourishment; one has an obligation to attend to the other’s nourishment even as one feeds oneself:

The infinitely metonymical question on the subject of ‘one must eat well’ must be nourishing not only for me, for a “self,” which given its limits, would thus eat badly, it must be shared, as you might put it, and not only in language. ‘One must eat well’ does not mean above all taking in and grasping in itself, but learning and giving to eat, learning-to-give-the other-to eat. One never eats entirely on one’s own: this constitutes the rule underlying the statement, ‘One must eat well.’ It is a rule offering infinite hospitality (Derrida 1991, p. 115).

In this regard, one could learn something about eating well at table from the metonymical “eating” of speaking and vice versa (there is no private language), or one could say that to speak only to oneself or for oneself is to speak badly because (even when talking to oneself) language presupposes an addressee. Language entails response ability insofar as it is always addressed to someone, in particular or in general, near or far, radically other (like the time capsules launched into space from earth intended for extraterrestrials) or the other within the self. The “must” of “must eat” compels hospitality insofar as eating well is a social experience. Obviously food is the heart of many social and familial gatherings and events, and it is usually the result of some sort of cooperation or exchange in that (in developed countries) very few people eat only the food that they produce themselves (indeed, it would be a mighty task for one individual alone to produce – grow, harvest, cook, and so forth – all of the foodstuffs that he consumes). The ethics of eating well, then, seems to imply a politics of food through which one attends to how one acquires nourishment. Derrida’s eating well may have something to say to “slow food” and “local food” movements. In addition to food, languages, cultures, customs, and love are also shared, which more obviously raise political questions about English-only policies, multiculturalism, and globalization.

Hospitality and Eating with Others

Unfortunately, more often than not, the cooperation and social exchange that allow one to eat is built on exploitation within an economy of exchange that makes everything fungible. The fact that eating or speaking requires a group effort or global exchange should not be confused with hospitality. In addition, the ethical obligation that Derrida describes is not just to hospitality, to sharing food and nourishment (of all sorts), but, moreover, to *infinite* hospitality. To eat well is to be infinitely vigilant in one's hospitality to the other, even the very other whom one eats. In fact, as Derrida articulates this ethical obligation, it is this "who" or "whom" that incessantly must be put into question, both on the side of the "subject" and on the side of the "other": *who* claims the rights and privileges of *whom*, of subjectivity? Who has the right to judge the subjectivity or humanity of others? Derrida calls into question the ways that subjects give themselves the right to divide the world into subjects and objects/others, man and animals, those who eat and those who are eaten (both literally and figuratively).

Derrida calls this infinite hospitality "absolute" or "pure hospitality," which he envisions as the foundation of hyperbolic ethics (e.g., 2005, p. 249; 2000, p. 25). In *Of Hospitality*, he describes the rule or law of hospitality as impossible since true hospitality cannot be dictated by law, custom, habit, or training but must come "from the heart." He plays on the fact that in French *hôte* means both host and guest, suggesting the fluidity of giving and receiving. That the host can become the guest and vice versa, just as the eater can become the eaten and vice versa, indicates both the instability of power relations and the relationality of subject positions. Pure or absolute hospitality requires giving up the illusion of being at home or owning a home in which one can play host.

The Limits of Nourishment

In his first posthumously published book, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (Derrida 2008), Derrida calls his project a limitrophy, and he draws

out the etymological associations of the word *trophe*, which takes one back to eating: "In the semantics of *trepho*, *trophe*, or *tropos*, we should be able to find everything we need to speak about what we should be speaking about. . . : feeding, food, nursing, breeding, offspring, education, care and keeping of animals, training, upbringing, culture, living, and allowing to live by giving to live, be fed, grown, autobiographically" (Derrida 2002, p. 398). Derrida goes on to point out that "the first literal sense of *trepho*" is "transforming by thickening, for example, in curdling milk" (398).

One could say that in Derrida's limitrophy, paradoxically, the purity demanded by hyperbolic ethics requires the curdling or thickening of frontiers, borders, or limits. This curdling leaves them in a liminal state between fluid and solid, which opens the border onto multiple forms beyond two defined as one side of the limit or the other. Derrida seems to challenge the limits of solid borders, which appears within the history of philosophy as fixed, rigid, and pure, in the name of pure fluidity, which is, of course, impossible. In the name of pure fluidity, Derrida continually points to the curds, those strange substances that cannot be properly classified as solid or liquid. Ironically, perhaps, the "purest" forms turn out to be thickened or curdled, the in-between substances that are neither purely liquid nor purely solids. Derrida seems to prefer curds and curdling to either solids or fluids (as a metaphor for his attempts to navigate between absolutism and relativism). He embraces the ambiguities of life even while maintaining some notion of purity. In this way, Derrida endorses an ethics motivated by *trophe* or nourishment rather than *trophy* or conquest. For Derrida, there is ambiguity between the two to the point of inseparability; in other words, nourishment is always at some level also conquest.

The double meaning of *trophe/trophy* may be instructive, however, in the necessary (if ultimately impossible) attempts to distinguish eating well or good eating from devouring the other in poor taste. *Tropho*, *tropho*, and obsolete forms of *trophe* are associated with feeding and nutrition, while *trophy* is associated with the spoils of war

or the hunt that have been made into monuments. Does one kill and eat the other for *trophe*, nourishment, or for trophy, sport and triumph? Is one's relationship with the other and with others nourishing, or is it a display of power and conquest? These questions can be asked on the literal level about hunting and killing animals or people and on the figurative level about assimilating speech and cultural conventions. Are some forms of assimilation wholesome and others merely for display? Hyperbolic ethics requires vigilance in continually asking how what feeds us becomes imbricated in relations of power and domination.

Derrida's ethics cautions one not to draw this line between nourishment and triumph in a fixed or rigid way; to do so is not only to become reactionary rather than responsive but also and moreover, to shirk an ethical responsibility to the radical openness and fluidity of all moral categories. In this sense, ethics provides a kind of corrective for morality. If morality divides the world into good and evil, then hyperbolic ethics demands that one constantly questions that division and investment in it. Are these distinctions made in order to foster nourishing and healthful relationships or is the world divided in order to conquer it and take others as trophies? In terms more familiar to recent discussions in ethics one might ask, are differences circumscribed to justify hierarchies and domination or to respect them and acknowledge their value?

Derrida argues that the unity and identity of both the individual and the social bodies feed off of those very others it rejects; it both secretes its own poison and feeds off of it. Discussing the "scapegoats" cast out of the city of Athens, Derrida remarks, "the representative of the outside is nonetheless constituted, regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside. These parasites were as a matter of course domesticated by the living organism that housed them at its expense" (Derrida 1972, p. 133). The scapegoat plays the role of a *pharmakos*, both sacrificed for and yet constitutive of humanity; the animal is both inside and out.

What hyperbolic ethics requires is that one turns the sacrificial logic back on itself and gives up the need for scapegoats and sacrificial lambs (human and animal). Hyperbolic ethics requires that one continues to question investments in discourses of purity, trying to avoid any simple conquest of others, even through the triumphant moves common to philosophy. Perhaps, in the spirit of *trophe*, one can thoughtfully assimilate the lessons of Derrida's work in the hopes of feeding a robust ethical theory that speaks to the question of how to relate to others, including animals and other living creatures with whom the earth is shared, in ways that nourish rather than conquer.

Summary

In sum, Derrida argues that although one must eat or assimilate other living beings, there are more and less ethical ways of doing so. He is not arguing for vegetarianism but rather for a thoughtful approach to eating for the sake of nourishing oneself and others rather than for the sake of proving dominance over others or conquering them and making them into trophies. His hyperbolic ethics requires that one always remains open to reconsidering what is "good" to eat.

Cross-References

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- ▶ [Meat: Ethical Considerations](#)
- ▶ [Slow Food](#)
- ▶ [Systemic Ethics to Support Wellbeing](#)
- ▶ [Vegetarianism](#)
- ▶ [Waste and Food](#)

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