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The Philosophy of Food.pdf

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The Philosophy of Food by Henrik Lagerlund

What is a philosophy of food? Well, it can be many things. The way I understand it is as a way of life. I take my inspiration of what a philosophy is from the Ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. To understand what Socrates meant with philosophy one must look to Plato's famous dialogue The Apology. This book is about the trial of Socrates. He had been accused by the Athenian government of seducing the young and leading them astray. Basically they saw him as disturbing the peace and causing unrest in the city. As part of his defense, Socrates outlines what philosophy is and its relation to practical life. For him, it includes four things: (1) intellectual modesty, (2) questioning habits, (3) a devotion to truth, and (4) a belief in reason.

Even though the Oracle of Delphi had claimed that no one in Greece was wiser than Socrates, he denied this, but claimed that there was one thing, a kind of wisdom, that he had that most others did not possess, namely an open awareness of his own ignorance. The slogan that Plato uses to express Socrates intellectual modesty was that the only thing that he knew was that he did not know anything.

We are also supposed to question our habits according to this philosophy. The goal of the Socratic dialogue, that is, a kind of interrogative investigation, is to achieve genuine self-knowledge. This is done by taking apart the things that one thinks one knows and expose illusions about reality as well as misconceptions about one's own state of mind.

What about his devotion to truth? Socrates states famously that "the unexamined life is not worth living". He would rather die than give up philosophy as he understands it. This is the choice that the city of Athens finally present to him and he chooses to take his own life. He is devoted to the pursuit of truth in all matters.

His belief in reason is as strong. Even though he is found guilty and sentenced to death he refuses to give up on the power of reason. He presents a powerful defense of rationality and reason in a world gone crazy.

Plato offers up in his dialogue a picture of a man willing to face death rather than abandoning philosophy. It became a model for all future philosophy. We are seldom presented with such choices, at least not in this part of the world; philosophy (thoughts/ideals) or death, but all of us are daily faced with opportunities to decide between what is convenient and conventional, and our devotion to truth and reason. It is those choices that determine whether we deserve to call our lives philosophical.

This is what I put into the philosophy of food. It is a commitment to an examined life in relation to our daily food choices. To be a philosophical foodie, as I like to call it, is to examine one's own habits and decide to lead a certain life that upholds certain global values, and if truly lived would change not only your life but the world as well. It means saying no to many things that are convenient and seeking alternatives that, for example, do not promote human rights

violations, contribute to injustice and leads to a sustainable world that we can pass on to our children with good conscience.

Now, I am not a fanatic, which perhaps Socrates was, and I realize that truth and reason needs to be balanced. We cannot live up to our ideals. If you try, you will always fail, and as a result you will be very unhappy. Finding the right balance between living an examined life and the life you can live given your own real possibilities is part of the philosophy of food. But we must always examine our life using reason, and strive to know ourselves better as well as do better.

The philosophy of food is obviously about food in all its aspects, but at the heart of it is a way of life. I believe we all need to face up to an alternative way of life in order for our world to remain a place where we will want to live and flourish.

How would it affect your life to become a philosophical foodie? One of the first things is to examine your own values. What matters to your choice of food? Is it taste? Is it price? Is it health? Is it convenience? Is it some moral value, like animal rights or human rights (I will explain this soon)? Do you eat local food? Does it matter to you where your food is produced? Etc.

Inquire about food. Be curious. Philosophy as Socrates thought about it is about asking questions. Where does your food come from? How far has it travelled to get to your plate? You'd be surprised how little most people know about the production or distribution of what we eat. Remember the intellectual modesty. Do not assume you know best and just because you, and your family, have done something for a long time, it does not mean it is the best way or right way to do things. Try to broaden your value system and you will be surprised how this will change your habits and your choices. In the long run it might also make you happier.

I will touch upon two things that is close to my heart.

Food is now cheaper than it has ever been in the history of the world. On average we spend less than 10% of our income on food in North America (a little less in the US than in Canada). Have you ever asked yourself why food is so cheap? Obviously, we have over the years industrialized the food system to be able to press down the cost of production. Few companies control the food chain and family farms are almost gone. One way we have managed to push down the costs of food is by paying very low wages to farm works, like pickers. Much of our cheap food rests on the backs of extraordinary exploitation or workers and is sometimes even based on slave labor. Fish from Thailand and other parts of Asia might come from boats run by slaves, but closer to home we have an enormous dependence on immigrant labor in California and Florida. Much of our vegetables and fruit in the winter come from these places. These workers get very little pay and they work under harsh and very unsafe conditions. Very close we need to mention our own seasonal or migrant workers program that has been running for decades virtually unchanged. They come from mostly Central and South America and travel far, leaving their families, to work for very little and in unsafe conditions. Did you know for example that they have to pay EI, but they are forbidden to benefit from the program? The migrant worker

program that should be shut down or substantially change. I am glad the present government is reviewing the program. The problem is that without them we would not enjoy such cheap food or perhaps food at all. We have grown dependent on this exploitation.

This is what I would call violations of human rights in the food system. As a philosophical foodie we need to reflect on whether this is acceptable and what we can do to avoid eating food produced or picked by humans working under such conditions. How do we do that? One idea would be to try to eat food that you know is not produced under such circumstances. What kind of food is that? Join a CSA, get to know your farmer... There are ways, but in the end we need to change the existing food system.

This is even more important in relation to the other issue that I feel strongly about, namely sustainability.

In 2050, the Earth is predicted to be the home of more than 9 billion people. To feed all these people UN estimates that we need to double our food production. This is an enormous challenge for us in the coming decades. It is hard to see that we can do this without changing something substantial in how we produce our food and what we eat. Just to mention one example. Most of our protein now comes from meat (beef, pork and chicken). Something like 60 billion farm animals are slaughtered every year and we are going towards 120 billion. The implications of this large meat consumption are vast. Think about the increased production of corn to feed all these animals, the increased use of oil to produce that food, the increased problem of housing all these animals, worry about avian flu, increased use of antibiotics, the unusable bio-waste from all these animals etc. Not to mention the increased methane production contributing to global warming. All this is just unsustainable. There are many well-known problems that will face us in the very near future. I think this is together with climate change the most difficult problem facing humanity. How do we find a new and sustainable way to produce food?

As a philosophical foodie we need to adjust our attitudes to what we eat to accommodate this. We need to think about alternative ways of getting protein. Fish has its own problems and will not likely be able to replace meat. Some scientists advocate for bugs. I am sure we will see bug-hot dogs soon.

Many people look to science to solve our problems. GMO's will become more and more common, but they have problems as well and as a philosophical foodie we need to pay attention to this debate. What are the arguments for GMO's? Are they safe? We already have a GMO salmon approved in Canada...

By making global values like human rights and sustainability your own, you will be able to think about your food choices in a new way. We can all contribute to making our world a little bit better. Incorporating these values into your choices and into your life will change your life, but the first step is to become more reflective about food and your own values, that is to make your life a philosophical life.