Obesity: The Bioethics We Need Now, or What We Owe to Each Other

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What We Owe To Each Other

A Call to Action in our Obesogenic Environment

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INTRODUCTION

Do you consider your waistline an ethical issue? More importantly, do you consider the waistline of your neighbor a cause for your own ethical concern? If, by the end of this lecture, your answer to both of these questions is 'yes', then this has been a successful endeavor. The goal here is not to construct a new philosophy for the betterment of society at large, but rather to do a bit of deconstructing—in the true Heideggarian sense—of that which has been veiled most intimately to each of us. Indeed, a philosophy exists in an imperfect form—imperfect in that it has been incorrectly understood and enacted—and it is the duty of each of us to rouse one another to its proper call. The consequences are dire for society if we fail to answer this call. Currently, analysis after analysis of data has foretold of a new epidemic: one of expanding waistlines. Usurping smoking's crown which had long been thought cemented firmly and permanently in place, obesity has claimed its status as the new killer as it threatens to shorten our generation's life-expectancy rate for the first time since the advent of the modern age. We can, and should, ask ourselves the most basic of questions. What is killing us? Is it something in the food? Is it something in the water? Or, perhaps, is it something more, something bigger? It is my intent to unmask the alienating and oppressive mechanism by way of a critical analysis and a proper critique of the ideology of the current age. The work of culture critics of the Frankfurt and (much newer) Slovenian Schools, with their Lacanian, Freudian, Hegelian, and Marxist influences, can be usefully applied to the next big ideological power—that of the Western food culture. The time is ripe for such a critique, and it is my hope that this new understanding of an everyday issue will
free our minds to the ideological oppression occurring within each of us.

Firstly, no critique would be successful without an understanding of the status quo—the proposed problem at hand. The American culture can most accurately be described as obesogenic. By obesogenic, I mean that it contains a fattening, sloth-inducing characteristic that is inherent in its everyday operation. Taken literally, this environment behaves in such a way that produces obesity—it is a machine that mass produces mass. Current statistics show that approximately two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese. The population of overweight and obese children is also on the rise, so much in fact that what was once known as Adult-Onset Diabetes must now be referred to as Type II Diabetes, since every day more children are diagnosed with the illness. The obesogenic environment becomes exacerbated in low-income neighborhoods, as more and more studies are tracing a direct link between low socioeconomic status and poor health. It is highly evident to us now that obesity is not merely a problem of personal responsibility. It is a political, social, cultural, and economic issue. The response must match the cause. To slow, and one day cease, the functioning of this obesogenic machine, we must attack it at its ideological core. This will require a new understanding and an awakening of our duties to one another. Our response must be to humanize the way in which we feed our citizens. It should be understood that the root cause of such a failing by our food system and culture is that the human has been forgotten, covered over. This obesogenic machine requires a dismantling through the efforts of the entire citizenry—by a re-learning of our social contractarian moral duties to one another.
What do we owe to our brothers and sisters? How is the weight of my neighbor a bioethical issue? I plan to demonstrate just this. In fact, it is a connection that must be made quite lucid in order for people to have care for the plight of the overweight and obese. It is so easy not to care--to file the problem as one of personal lifestyle, and thus solely one's individual responsibility. However, it is clear that our brothers and sisters are in need. With two-thirds of us suffering, can it really be that this isn't a collective failing? It is increasingly clear that the American culture yearns toward individualism, and away from communitarian values. We must re-learn the social contract upon which society is inherently based. The fact that obesity has become a new epidemic with very little in the way of support and rehabilitation only proves how alienated we have become in this era of liberalism. To think that some can rise while so many others fall is a lesson in societal failure. It is a lesson on the destruction that can arise out of such myopia. Let's begin to have foresight--to make lucid our duties to one another.

UNDERLYING PHILOSOPHY

Our most basic ethical duty arises out of our very existence in a society. This means that none of us lacks this duty; there is no way to escape the responsibility, since it was laid at your feet upon your first breath. The very fact that, at your birth, there were hands to grasp your naked body, and to pull you towards the comfort of a life borne upon the shields and upon the backs of the most skilled of laborers, demands that you provide for others. While it may seem overly simplistic to point out that one's root is in society, it is not so commonly
understood that this requires actions that are consistently done out of care for the Other. It was with such care in mind that great social contractarian thinkers John Rawls and Immanuel Kant (he may object to being called such, but there is a great need for his concepts in the contractarian realm) proposed maxims upon which individuals should rationally think and act. These social laws are intended to yearn toward a better-functioning society—one that is more coherent and less systemically violent (to use a Zizekian political phrase). Yet, the number is quite few among us who think and act with respect to these most basic social maxims. It is even more frightening to think that U.S. policy-makers rarely have an understanding of Rawls' Original Position, even though placing oneself under the "veil of ignorance" promotes other-regarding thinking. It is an attempt to consider and care for the Other which most successfully promotes the health of a society at large. The fact is...the social contractarian way of thinking isn't a theory to be proposed or to be considered. It is a statement of fact, a description of the precise way that things actually exist, and for each of us. You cannot check out once you have checked in. Further abandonment of one's duties to others will only promote further degradation of society, and new societal problems of epidemic proportions will inevitably follow.

With this most basic of moral imperatives in mind, we must now understand that the obesity epidemic requires our efforts. I argue that this epidemic requires our collective care because it is the most pervasive illness that one could have--and what's more--the majority of Americans (and far too many children) struggle with it. It is an illness which, in my view, damages the beating heart of the most basic human interest—that of a romantic Other. The person
conflicted with issues of weight leads a life of quiet desperation, one too disempowered to call for help. The basic human need to love, to desire, and to have such love and desire returned is often sacrificed by the insecurities that are inherently bred out of the struggle with obesity. Far too many of us look at one another without seeing—without seeing the deep-seeded loneliness and inferiority that comes with struggling with one’s weight. It is our moral imperative to help one another regain this control in our lives—to give back to one another the opportunity to live in reciprocal love and desire once again. Thus, a shift in our understanding is what we need, and we need it to happen as quickly as possible.

The enlightened work of journalists and environmentalists Eric Schlosser, Michael Pollan, Marion Nestle, and others has begun to shift our focus towards the political and economic causes of our newest epidemic. It is with humility that I stand upon the backs of these giants and propose a further analysis, one that they have so far failed to include in their effort to change our obesogenic environment. They have raked the muck of all of the primary players, but have failed to call them by their proper name. We should have no reservations in calling a duck a duck. The agribusiness corporations and their political and scientific cronies are the newest model of players in what T.W. Adorno called the "mass deception." Who would have thought that the same political deception--and subsequent domination/oppression--would transfer to the food industry? It is most likely due to the fact that commodities have been made out of both what goes on our bodies as what goes into our bodies. The capitalistic system inherently provides a breeding ground for the production of a political fabric that allows such commodification to occur, and I suppose that this critical
analysis should place as much blame on it as it places upon the corporations that thrive within it. Put simply, the profit motive that is endemic to any capitalistic enterprise cannot avoid the dehumanization and mass deception that we are seeing today. It is my hope that, by struggling with our obesogenic cultural fabric, we also see that we are struggling with all existing commodifications and oppressions. As I understand it, only the people can help the people. Who else have we got?

There is much more to be said about this mass deception. Firstly, it is promoted by an industry that operates in such a way as to produce culture. This industry actually creates the cultural environment that the majority of people assume arises quite naturally and, therefore, inevitably. The truth of the matter is that the deception becomes more pervasive each day. This tragically occurs even more swiftly in the food industry. The only fact that one needs to understand about food companies is that their R&D must drastically overproduce new products. The fact that stiflingly few new products ever become "killers" (create a new market space and consistently sell) means that food companies must flood the market with value-added products, with the hope of hitting at least one killer. However, there is a problem inherent in this new product development: that food and its list of possible ingredients aren't exactly as infinite as producing new t-shirt designs. The sum of truly natural ingredients in the world has already been formulated into their various arrangements and foods, so there isn't much point in re-issuing these traditional ideas. New foods need to be created, and thus, new ingredients must be used--chemical alterations and enhancements are now used to make things "better than nature." This is how
profit is made. As various members of the Frankfurt School have pointed out, the mass deception occurs because new needs are being produced. A popular example is that of the hygiene industry—think of all the new products, and thus new 'needs', that have been produced just in our lifetimes. Culturally and socially, I know that I need *at least* a gel body wash, shampoo, conditioner, facial scrub, and deodorant to be considered 'clean.' Does anyone know what was so wrong with using a bar of soap? No. That is because nothing is wrong with using a bar of soap for these various hygienic duties. Our grandparents—and our parents in their younger days—could be just as clean as we are today, even if they had to purchase merely one item to do so. It is easy to see the rationality: the more a company can atomize the daily task of hygiene, and provide items whose "specialty" is cleaning X part of the body, the more products can be sold to each and every American. The same system of specialization is apparent in our industrial food production. I see that the largest portion of these created needs lies in two areas: snack foods and health foods. As Pollan submitted in his New York Times Magazine article "Unhappy Meals", your great grandmother would have no idea that these concepts were two completely separate food markets, requiring their own specialized products—to her, the words 'health' and 'snack' were both just qualifiers of that now muddled term 'food.' I will not digress further into an analysis of these two product lines, but it will suffice to say that they are undoubtedly created needs, and they are now the two most profitable investments that food corporations have made for the past few decades.

I would presume that one could say that the creation of new needs for the citizenry is not all that bad. I suppose that one could hold that having specific
products to do specific things is positive in that it makes our lives easier, more efficient, and improves overall quality of life. However, this current case does quite the opposite. Supporting a system of need-production requires that such products must work toward the benefit of society rather than its detriment. In the food industry, we are seeing an increasingly expanding line of products that fail to work for its consumers. The earliest signs of this systemic failure is the rapid rise in obesity linked to the Western diet. We should heed the biological warnings of our bodies and understand that our consumption of adulterated and 'enhanced' foods--which aren't really foods at all--is far from a successful way to sustain a society. If we each adopt the foresight to consider future generations, as well as our current society at large, we will understand that we now owe two things to one another: (1) a proper rehabilitation of the current Western food culture, and those most affected by it and (2) an adoption of preventative measures, both politically and socially, to keep our obesogenic environment in check. At this point, stopping the bleeding would be a noble goal; however, it is my hope that we can return to a sustainable food production system, for the health of both the environment and its various inhabitants.

In what ways can we accomplish these two goals? It is my feeling that the first step must be to inform the citizenry of its own reality. This is the primary task. It is no surprise that once people read books by Schlosser, Pollan, and their colleagues, they begin to reform their agricultural lives. However, we ought to live in a society where reality need not be pointed out in a series of books, where only a minority of the population will ever access the information. Transparency has a profound humanizing effect. Industry motives and techniques need not be
covered over, just as political endeavors need not be veiled. Providing individuals with a basic understanding of realities which affect them daily is an inescapable duty for any political body (including major industry players). So, in the interest of clarity and concision, the remainder of this essay will be devoted to explicating various policies through which we can promote a food culture that is morally acceptable.

Before beginning, however, one must note that the two goals listed above require equal and simultaneous focus. The needs are great on both sides of the divide. In fact, by actively deconstructing our obesogenic environment and preventing its ill effects upon future generations of eaters, we do just as much in rehabilitating those who have fallen prey to such a toxic environment. It is now time to remove the barriers built by the few to control the many.

**PROPOSED POLICY ANGLES**

Any such policy towards changing our obesogenic environment must begin with education. Commercials and media messages from coalitions, such as those now promoting consumer awareness of high-fructose corn syrup's ubiquity, are a good start. However, it is my feeling that any education to combat such an environmental problem must take place, and strongly so, in the K-12 system. Naturally, this will require a bit of education reform and a slight shift in philosophy. There are larger issues here. The most damaging is quite possibly the extension of what I will call "younger oppression" that has so easily pushed its way into the public school system, a place where no oppressive ideology need be allowed. For the same developmental and philosophical reasons that religious
doctrine should not be promoted in public schools, the food industry's major players should not be allowed to control the diets of millions of schoolchildren daily. The fact that children are subjected to a diet that, for all intents and purposes, is demonstrably poor for their overall health is a clear display of ideological domination. The same way that the McDonald's corporation uses its Play Places to lure young children to its restaurants causes both psychological and physical addiction to its low-quality food, major food corporations utilize the captive audiences of the public school sector. Students have little choice but to eat foods that contain incredibly horrible ingredients, require almost no preparation by cafeteria workers, and cause them to experience the mental highs and lows of a high-fat, high-sugar diet. The result is a child that is both psychologically and physically unhealthy, and ultimately had no choice in the matter. What's more, the child becomes much more likely to model her eating habits upon those learned in her K-12 years. There cannot be a clearer example of oppression upon the young.

A second crucial fact is that recess and physical and nutritional education courses are being cut nationwide due to various concerns, particularly over the "learning" that is going on here in American schools and how it has become "deficient" due to rival countries' superior math and science test scores. Such moves only promote an obesogenic environment that is already thriving far too well in school systems. Small improvements have been made, such as some states considering cutting sugary (more precisely, HFCS-sweetened) sodas and snacks. These sorts of improvements are laudable, and need to be given more universal consideration. However, the reality is that the students' education (and
its underlying philosophy) does not cohere with these minor environmental changes. K-12 students are not taught the interconnectedness or the value of their natural environment, nor are they even taught the social determinants of health. Quite clearly, these concerns only reflect the failings of an outdated educational philosophy in all K-12 courses. The supreme lack of liberal arts-style teaching, much less the promotion of cultural, social, and political understanding is entirely detrimental to the overall health of the student. Students, beginning at the earliest of ages, ought to be taught the most basic principles of life--ideas and concepts of the world, representing the very reality of each human life, are often first introduced in undergraduate courses. How can this be so? Why would anyone want this to be so?

During the first week of class, of any grade level, teachers ought to point these things out. Our cooperative upbringing of each subsequent generation requires us to inform them of basic world ideas, beginning with how the environment and its occupants form one intimate global organism. It is required of us to teach that the world will rise and fall because of our actions, that our health is inherently dependent upon the health of our planet. And to effect change in the current obesogenic environment, children ought to know that the food on their plate is the direct result of the sun and the soil. It is a case of tragic irony that students actually aren't taught this--and that their food most likely didn't have anything to do with the soil on the ground, but rather a team of chemists in a lab. More tragic still is the reality that I, one of the top students in my high school, managed to graduate being able to name, in order, all of Henry VIII's wives, but could neither articulate nor understand the basic political and
economic ideologies that truly governed my daily life.

When Garrett Hardin articulated the *Tragedy of the Commons* in 1986, he stated that "Education can counteract the natural tendency to do the wrong thing, but the inexorable succession of generations requires that the basis for this knowledge be constantly refreshed." It is my belief that we have failed in this most basic of duties. Restoring our educational philosophy to include environmental understanding, in all of its contexts, will greatly assist our return to a health-promoting environment. It will be the most effective prevention when an understanding of the American food system becomes commonplace. When each young student emerges from the Cave, catching first glimpse of the light, she will not only find it necessary to inform her unenlightened peers, but also will find it unimaginable to live in her previous darkness. The social ignorances which allow ideological control to become the status quo will no longer be tolerated by even the youngest of citizens. In this way, our primary preventative measure must be to reform the way in which we educate our subsequent generations--to instruct them on the most basic of human understandings.

Our primary rehabilitative policy must be to reconstruct our understanding of human wellness, or, rather, to realign our healthcare and our politics with such an understanding of the social determinants of health. While most healthcare professionals understand these determinants, they have little power to stop them from negatively affecting their patient. The physician is unfairly placed in a situation where he or she can merely inform the patient as to the various systemic causes for her obesity or obesity-related illness. *The physician, then, is reduced to nothing more than an onlooker in an obesogenic*
environment that requires political muscle to truly affect the patient's health. It should therefore be our goal to give voice to these healthcare professionals who treat patients "on the ground", and abandon our reliance on politically-charged testimony from "specialists" on such things as new food products and their associated health claims. Understanding both politically and socially why someone cannot seem to feed themselves in a healthy way requires hearing their individual plight. In a way, this should be obvious and unnecessary to state. However, it is increasingly clear that agribusiness and other food corporations have forgotten the human behind their consumers and their profits. Our efforts to politically humanize our food system will do as much for the health of our citizens as it will for our environment. One could call this the anthropological approach, or rather the common sense approach, to deconstructing the most damaging aspects of our food culture.

An additional rehabilitative and preventative measure that deserves major policy consideration is that of improving food labeling. This might be the most overt form of the critical theorists’ conception of the “mass deception.” As Michael Pollan points out adely in his In Defense of Food, federal agency regulations have in the past made it unnecessary for imitation foods to be marked as such, as long as they can be proven to include at least as many nutrients as the real thing. Even more horrifying is the case made popular by the 2009 movie Food, Inc., in which a federal hearing was held concerning the labeling of cloned meats. The regulation failed, mostly because the FDA spokeswoman felt that such information wouldn’t be useful, and possibly confuse, the consumer. The fact that food producers need not properly label their products, even to the extent
that their fake foods aren’t marked as fake, is a clear violation of basic consumers’ rights. The public at large, operating in a market which promotes and champions autonomy, have been placed in an environment in which their autonomy can reveal only a very limited reality of their purchases. The classic paternalistic-libertarian argument arises here, but it seems increasingly evident that, in terms of the food industry, a bit of paternalism and protectionism would go a long way to preserve the American consumer’s genuine autonomous choice.

CONCLUSION

It would be prudent to state that this endeavor is far from its end. The environmentalists, economists, journalists, and philosophers working on this most intimate of issues—on the way in which a society feeds itself—understand that it is a rapidly developing and complex issue. It is an issue that requires the utmost of care and the most comprehensive of perspectives because it affects the human at least three times daily. The reach of the food industry, therefore, must be the most carefully administered and most transparent of industries. Corruption—or just plain ignorance—can cause the direst of effects on the largest possible scale—more so than any other industry. It is for this reason that we each must remember to care for the other, and to ensure that our new industrial food system promotes a healthy environment for the humans for whom it operates. This simple fact—this most basic moral imperative—cannot be forgotten. It is clear to more of us each day, though, that we have forgotten it: that we have fouled our own nest. We must remember that each of us is at least partly responsible for the expanding waistlines in this country.