Business and Behavioral Issues Surrounding the Ethics of Food Choice

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Abstract

Ethical issues arise when actions benefiting one group, harm another. Food choices impact both business and behavioral issues in relationship to economic, political, social, and environmental outcomes. If ethics is viewed as a matter of good conduct versus bad, then the business of choosing a healthful diet and advising people similarly would seem to be a virtuous action. However, this is not always the case. This essay examines the business and behavioral issues that impact the educational principles surrounding nutrition and diet to determine how these contexts make people misinterpret advice that comes from government, academics, and the food industry.

Keywords: Ethical, dietary, economic, environmental, synthesis

Introduction

When ethical judgments arise, a focus on what is right and what is wrong are the most common issues that come to mind. Ethical judgments do not stop there, however. They also focus on virtue, vice, and obligation in all types of human behavior. Ethical issues arise whenever human behavior is imposed on other people and the impact affects their choices; both past and present. Ethics denotes the general and systematic study of what ought to be the grounds and principles for right and wrong human behaviors (Johannesen, 1996). Potential ethical issues are inherent in all forms of communication. Significant influence is involved in choosing the best way to communicate messages that have both a means and an end for both communicators and receivers. Ethical communication involves all forms and levels of understanding whether a communicator seeks to present new information to increase someone's level of understanding, or persuade another about important ethical issues from the past. They are all present in the communicator's efforts. Ethics is present in the rhetoric of social movements, politics, public relations and even food.

The primary purpose of this essay is to provide information and insight concerning a variety of potential perspectives concerning food ethics. The argument of concern is based upon first, proving where food ethics exist in human communication and second, how and why any ethical judgments need to be made. A dialogic framework will be implemented to show how all human beings have provided an ongoing conversation to the common ethical issues that have been part of food ethics for centuries. An understanding of the interactional competence in relationship to ethical judgment making will hopefully help outline the dialogical framework. This should guide us and encourage other individuals in the future to develop and think more thoughtfully about how they may assess and research food ethics. In order to begin the investigation we must first clarify and define what a dialogic framework might look like and how it can aid us in framing food ethics.

This essay addresses the complexities of communication within a dialogic community and the complexities of interhuman actions and those of a social nature. The discussion is moved forward through the communicative lens of Martin Buber"s four elements of interhuman communication and the necessity of recognizing dialogue as conversation *between* individuals. These principles are developed throughout the discussion and brought forward through the works of Dr. Ronald C. Arnett, *Communication and Community.*

A Brief History: Development of Dialogue

Dialogic theory, as with all theories, has gained ground and interest with plenty of communication scholars both past and present. Dialogue has roots placed throughout history beginning with the writings of Plato. These dialogues have occupied a particularly prominent position among dialogic theory because they are placed historically with Socrates and his style of leading a discussion. To be specific, these discussions make the point of Socrates dialogue clear by introducing the relationship between two lines of argument, his argument on one hand and the level of insight of his partners in the discussion on the other. At the beginning of the fifth century B.C., young

students entered into conversation with Socrates and the art of dialogue began in earnest. By disputing Plato's writing, Socrates and his students developed an ongoing story or conversation that began to raise questions about ethical concerns that lead to self-knowledge, courage, justice, temperance and piety (Smith, 1990). The early beginnings of dialogue seem to provide a story with multiple sides or arguments that search for truth through reasoned discussion and the resolution of contradictory arguments, as Plato's Socratic dialogues illustrate.

Dialogues and dialectics have evolved with two types of meaning, one ontological and the other epistemological. Dialectics-as-ontology refers to a view of reality as the dynamic interplay of opposing forces, whereas dialectics as-epistemology refers to methods of reasoning by which one searches for understanding through the clash of opposing arguments (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Greek philosophers have emphasized an epistemological view. The art of discussion, debate, and dialogue are what modern rhetoricians are most familiar with because of their roots in rhetoric. Although an epistemological approach to understanding dialogue and dialectics is important, it is not the only view. In order to understand communication in personal relationships an ontological orientation may be more appropriate. One leading philosopher who provided an ontological world view was China's Lao Tzu. According to Tzu, this ancient Chinese philosophy a dialectic brought about the interplay of opposing forces and the Way of the Universe. From the perspective of Taoism, the physical and social world is in a spiraling back-and-forth pattern in which any given force contains within it the seed of its opposite. For example, difficult and easy support each other, long and short define each other, high and low depend on each other. These dialectical examples are more ontological because of the dynamic interplay of opposing forces provide two sides of reasoning rather then searching for reason through opposing arguments. At this point, it is crucial to stress the importance of how dialectics offer different sides, which in turn creates reason for dialogue.

Dialectic writing and elements of dialogue can also be found in early philosophers such as Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, and Rousseau. However, the leading work was done by Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian intellectual, responsible for dialogism (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Bakhtin was critical of a term called "monopolization," a social life that was closed and lacked social interaction. This was the human experience that he saw as the dominant linguistic, literary, philosophical, and political theories of that time. To Bakhtin these theories were closed, totalizing concepts and did not invite social interaction. In Bakhtin's view, social life was always in some form of social interaction. Much of Bakhtin's work emphasized the literary novel as discourse form that he regarded as dialogic expression. The point that must be emphasized here is similar to the early beginnings of dialectic; some form of interaction was significant in understanding the different positions or points of view. To enact dialogue, the parties need to fuse their perspectives while maintaining the uniqueness of their individual perspectives; the parties form a unity in conversation but only through clearly differentiated voices (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Another leading contributor who added a unique historical richness to the study of dialogue was Martin Buber. Martin Buber was one of the most influential theorists whose work focused on re-framing our understanding about how individualists interact with each other and society (Buber, 1958). Buber's I and Thou is the remarkable

beginning to the appreciation of dialogue. Buber's work arose out of the revolutionary works of Descart, Kant, and Husserl who claimed that humans can only relate to what confronts them in one, subject-object way. Buber boldly claimed that the human's basic orientation is not one but rather an interaction between the individual and the other. According to Buber, subject-object failed to do justice to the human interaction that occurred. In other words, humans do not live simply in subject-object relationships with their world; they inhabit them. In the first sentence of I andThou, Buber affirmed his insight was directed to the human experience that is lived through the nature of the basic words human speak. Buber claimed that the words spoken were not single words but word pairs. Each word led to another meaning interpreted between both parties involved in the dialogue. Buber's interpersonal ethics is truly concerned with the interaction of humans using language to create meaning. The kind or quality of meeting emerges between two or more persons when they mutually and simultaneously orient to one another. Human dialogue does not just happen and is certainly not planned. We find dialogue where there is human interaction or people who are concerned with or interested in telling a story or continuing a conversation. What we sometimes think we have control over or understand changes when our dialogue blends with another. We unexpectedly learn more and continue to carry out the conversation. As a result, we learn more about particular subjects and communities we share (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

Elements of the Interhuman: "Community of Otherness"

Dr. Ronald C. Arnett (1986) discusses the concept of one's association with the other and the relationships thus encountered. A "community of otherness" is defined as that which includes interaction and respect of the other without displays of narcissistic or self-serving behavior. Arnett explains Martin Buber's four elements of the differences between the "interhuman" and the "social".

The "interhuman" is a personal relationship in which the individual is met as a noninterchaneable, nonobjectified contributor to the activity. In contrast, the "social" realm has the person's function as the most significant.

The "interhuman" is the "between"; it is not a psychological construct, and the meaning is not found in one partner but between partners. In contrast, the "social" is found in one party and is not shared between partners.

The "interhuman" is grounded in the meaning that what one does is more important than in how one appears. Buber calls this *being.* Social life switches the emphasis from *being* to *seeming.*

The "interhuman" realm invites dialogue by permitting ideas to emerge within a conversation, unlike the "social" in which one pushes to impose a particular perspective without hearing the "others" views. The "interhuman" is based on relationship, nonpossession, the noninterchangeability of persons, and a reluctance to impose ideas on others (Arnett, 1986).

Defining Food Ethics

The concept of "interhuman" and "social" helps one address complex issues of interpersonal interaction that are required for successful conclusions when discussing food ethics. As Buber addresses, the interhuman factors are as necessary for food consumption as they are in other community communication. As mentioned before, when we think of what is ethical and what is not ethical we must also think about what might be right and what might be wrong. In the case of defining a food ethic we must first examine how food and dialogue have been traditionally placed in our society. Man was created hungry. Being hungry created the response "Let's eat, or what shall I eat?" As you can notice by these brief words as well as with Buber's words in I and Thou, the interaction of eating involves both the individual and the other. Although to satisfy hunger needs no reason; and it is as natural as sleep. We do need reason, however; to store up food for future use, to cultivate, cook, and make it palatable. All of these require a degree of reasoning through the development of tradition and custom. In order to make eating a custom, tradition, or a social pleasure to be enjoyed with one's fellows, requires some degree of cultural advancement that is learned through the dialogues of others or created through the individual monologue of reason and desire. Take any people in the world, study their eating habits and you will have a pretty good story or dialogue in regards to their social progress. The French and the English, who have reached what we consider a high degree of civilization, in the social sense, have all developed table manners that have been regarded as the right way to eat. The Australians (Aborigines) and the Africans, who are still groping at the bottom rung of civilization, eat with their hands and crude implements that are referred to as the wrong way to eat. So you can see that even though human beings need food to survive there is still a high level of reasoning between right and wrong and how we choose to make choices in the way we eat and communicate about food. While some of these decisions about food may seem simple and mundane, many other issues regarding food choices are not so.

For example, the subject of food and religion has led millions of people to decide when to eat and what to eat in relationship to their faith. The politics of food and faith are by no means neutral and significant ethical concerns relating to food and religion exist. Foreign trade generally concentrated on the movement of luxury foods. While this was beneficial to merchants and affluent social groups, it undermined the position of the poor. Food was often times exported while poor people remained hungry. Monopoly control over the food supply provided merchants with the opportunity to exploit the poor. The merchants were hungry for profits and resented the fact that the Sabbath and holidays were days of rest. The exploitation of the poor, which resulted in hunger and poverty, involved the unethical uses of power by merchants, government officials, members of the court and religious authorities to decide how to distribute food making it a social injustice and not a fateful accident. Clearly, these circumstances were limited, but they did introduce some ethical concerns regarding food and religion (Garnsey, 1999).

Another category in history that dealt with food ethics was the use of food as remedy. Even in Gorgias, Plato's dialogue on rhetoric, there was analogies of food in regards to their ethical placement in regards to defining rhetoric (Bizzell & Herzberg,

1990). A comparison is made in the dialogue to defining two arts. The first which has to do with soul or politics; and the other which concerns the body are designated in two branches- gymnastics and medicine.   In the dialogue Socrates replies, "Thus cookery assumes the form of medicine; and pretends to know what is good for the body." Socrates sets up the famous opposition between cosmetics, cookery, sophistic (political oratory), and rhetoric (forensic oratory), on one side and gymnastics, medicine, legislation, and justice on the other. This opposition suggests rhetoric is not morally neutral because it can be used to conceal the truth. The interesting part of the dialogue is how food is used in the dialogic exchange to discover the value of rhetoric. Cookery is used to help define what is right and what is wrong with the uses of rhetoric. In this dialogue rhetoric and cookery are mere flattery and temporary cover-ups for the real truth. We are also able to discover how both food and rhetoric were used to solve man's oldest ethical dilemmas (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1990).

Our last concern in food ethics history deals with the subject of the "otherness." In this category, we examine how human consumption, or eating habits, have positioned themselves with the "other." We gain access to ancient societies and cultures, mainly through the dialogue of a wide range of spokesmen. Food is often in the ethical questions, because the food we eat and the way we eat are an integral part of social behavior and cultural patterns, which themselves differ in many ways. The term "otherness" regards food as one of the significant markers of divergence. The contrast and food choices and eating customs between the urban elite and poor date back to Greco-Roman times (Garnsey, 1999). The construction is ideological because it places certain people and certain cultures in identity situations. For one group of people, or one particular culture, there has always been another group or culture referred to as the "other" which they themselves make comparisons. This is done by comparing morals, values and ethics from earlier societies to what were the right and wrong ways to eat. While this may sound rather absurd, the "otherness" has been a staring point to understand different food traditions and customs in many varying cultures for centuries (Garnsey, 1999). A major transformation of diet, food preparation, and consumption habits of Greeks everywhere occurred during the late classical and early Hellenistic period. This was the starting point of haute cuisine, an elaborate style of cooking which imports foods and technical preparations from other cultures. These new cuisines and other diets are the beginnings of modern cookery. Throughout time our culture has introduced us to other approaches of cuisine and dieting. Even today this method of "otherness" is found within the ongoing dialogue of food ethics.

The Dialogic Process of Making Social Judgments In Food Ethics Today

To this point we have learned the importance of dialogue and cultural reactions to food ethics. We have discovered that they are very diverse depending upon the contexts in history and how ethical questions were framed in relationship to food and societies. With historical bedding in place we can now turn to examining this ongoing dialogue in food ethics today. While many of us may think that food ethics have transpired into a new and unusual phenomenon, some may be surprised to learn that

food ethics still encompass the same complex issues that revolve around the uses of dialogue, religious intents, rhetorical effects, and how others react to these issues. So what is food ethics today and how do we find out the direction it is going? Our study led us to conduct a general review of literature in leading journals and books that contained research in food ethics in the fields of medicine, religion, law, and other general food topics. Journal articles with the term "Food Ethics" from 1998 to 2004 were reviewed using a dialogical interactional competency approach to see how cultural judgments have been made regarding food ethics today. Baxter & Montgomery claim that interactional competence refers to a social judgment about the goodness and interaction that define a particular relationship with exigent conditions of social context (Baxter, Montgomery 1996).

There is an ongoing dialogue among the social self and a culture that leads us to a constant understanding of the different social structures we encounter every day.

Martin Buber's discussions of the "interhuman" and the "social" may be applied to this discussion as we look to community and the communication process (Arnett, 1986). Thus, notions about competence are thought about and changed in both interpersonal and group exchanges. We experience these exchanges with group settings through cultural artifacts like films, magazines, and institutional teachings, in the form of church sermons and college lectures. From an interpersonal level we share in conversations with partners, friends and family. By observing, comparing, and talking with others in their social networks people are able to re-create and revise social judgments. This type of dialogue is common in modern food ethics because food ethics are relational in practice. Food ethics are found in our daily social practices in a wide variety of conversational exchanges. We make social judgments in regards to what we should eat, how much we should eat, and when and why we should eat. The dialogue of food is present in our daily lives, and deciding what should be right and what should be wrong in relationship to food choice is captured in these dialogical forms of interactional competency relationships. From these relationships three common themes emerge from competency literature: location, abstraction, and criteria (Spitzberg, 1994). With respect to location our dialogic view locates competence in the social unit formed between the "object" of judgment and the "subject" who provides the judgment. In regards to abstraction, a dialogic view of competence must be grounded in interactive behavior and finally, any discussion of criteria must acknowledge the dialogical view of relating well, or understanding existing criteria to draw judgments. As mentioned before food ethics revolve around issues that deal with religion, rhetoric, and the other. A significant amount of research in food ethics continues to raise ethical questions within these interact ional areas. These interactional patterns both define and redefine how and why we make certain social judgments regarding food ethics.

Food Ethics & Religion

Since primitive times, human beings have used food as a means to relate to a supreme being. Since food is so essential to the physical existence, it is not surprising that it has embedded itself in religion. Along with their religious role, dietary habits have served as a means of separating one religious group from another. In a recent article, published by Muriel R. Gillick in the Journal of Medical Ethics (2001), the role of religious beliefs

were questioned in relationship to a patient's right to accept life sustaining treatment through artificial nutrition. According to the article, the interactional competency location involved a dialogical exchange between the patient, family, and medical staff trying to decide if religious traditions would advocate the use of artificial nutrition and hydration in cases where the patient can no longer feed themselves (Gillick, 2001). Gillick (2001) extended the dialogue and questioned traditional feeding values, and religious beliefs, as the object to judge and the human as the subject being judged in regards to suffering. The dialogue between ancient beliefs and modern medical procedures show how justifiable social judgments need to be made in the field of food ethics. The meaning of life that originated in traditional Halachi Judaism poses many ethical dilemmas for patients and physicians. This is significant to the study of food ethics because a patient's rights versus the will of religious beliefs or the value of life will continue to require some form choice (Gillick, 2001). The role of food and religion continues to increase. People need to obtain spiritual gratification and thus will continue to observe certain religious traditions through dietary practices. The ongoing dialogue between food and religion will continue to play a major role in how we choose to make ethical decisions in regards to our food selection and how we practice our religious beliefs.

Food Ethics & Rhetorical Behavior

While it is customary for food to be served at the table in Western societies, many cultures still eat food on the floor and eat with their fingers. From an ethical standpoint, this may seem odd to many people depending on their cultural background. Historically, and even today, many of the world's people prepare foods in such a way that they become an essential component of the meal. Some research has provided insight to the quality of food and dietetic practices (Zigun, 1997). Both food choice and nutrition education have been a concern for food ethics in both the past and now future. Understanding which foods are appropriate for a given meal, who prepares the meal, how the meal is prepared, the way it is served, and who eats with who are all ethical concerns that encompass interactional competency of abstractive dialogue. To understand certain cultures' eating behaviors and nonverbal gestures involves some understanding or social judgment in regard to how one might behave or should behave. Thus, the study of meals and meal ethics shows how food conveys powerful rhetorical messages about social relations, personal beliefs, and many other aspects of a culture in relationship to making ethical judgments. Symbolic meaning in food and cultural behavior make up the dialogue that continues today in food ethics. As previously stated, the perception of ethical choices in eating habits may seem progressively relaxed.

Food Ethics & the "Other"

Our final area of emphasis deals with understanding the dialogue that goes on between the "other" and how certain criteria lays the ground work for making social judgments. Nearly all the ethical concerns that revolved around food the "other" was subject in some form of dialogue. For example, the Jack in Box crisis management

dialogue that was created in the late 1990s is one such case. This case involved the distribution of bad hamburgers that resulted in the death of six children. The public relations campaign already had existing criteria of crisis management rhetoric that allowed Jack in the Box to protect itself from public demise. The dialogue involved Jack in the Box against the "other", the public, to save its reputation as a hamburger chain and continue normal business. The public relations crisis management dialogue was later questioned concerning the judgments made by the corporation and why they lied about evidence and intent. (Ulmer & Sellno, 2000).

Another case involving food ethics and the "other", primarily addresses concerns dealing with diet and image. We are all faced with the dilemma of trying to measure up to the images of eating right and looking our best. Food companies and the diet industry spend millions each year trying to convince the public what and how they should eat. From this perspective the existing criteria is in advertising and persuasion by these "food giants." Consumer behavior and social science research will not always yield truthful outcomes (Zigun, 1997). The "other" in this case is the consumer who is persuaded through rhetorical techniques to change their belief about the way they look and what they should be eating. There have been ethical questions raised concerning diets and how they should be enacted as health replacements (Zigun, 1997). For many, a quick diet is not always the best thing for good health. Diet companies everywhere advertise how a person can lose a few quick pounds not taking into consideration the danger involved with mere interpretation. Medical science counters gluttony with the need for a sensible diet: it prescribes rational control over one's eating with discipline or change. Science comes to the table, controls the menus and works with the moralists (Diet Industry) in converting the natural into the cultural. Just like the institution of civility, the diet industry seeks to control bodily instincts and subject them to a form of social censure.

An educated man should know how to order his eating and control his appetite through proper meal patterns and exercise. Dialogues dating back in history contend that diet is not only part of life it is a way of life. Diet companies focus not on greed but condemnation of gluttony-one of the seven deadly sins. This moral ground seems to be the dialogue of choice for many diet plans and individuals. Secular wisdom and Christian ethics overlap here. Hunger defies reason; gluttony dulls the spirit and leads to temptation. As mentioned earlier, the condemnation of cookery as the art of deceit goes back to Plato. In the famous passage in Gorgias, Socrates attacks rhetoric, which he says is so powerful that it even convinces people of unjust things: it is but a caricature of justice and owes its power to flattery alone. At the physical level the diet industry is doing this to the "other" - the public in its dialogue to flatter us with plans that will provide us with perfect health and a new image. Cooking is doubly at fault: morally, because it cares nothing for what is best and only seeks to please, the true nature of things becomes nothing but causality. For this reason orators throughout history have adopted cookery as a metaphor of deceit. We continue to re-engage this deceit today when we think of modern food ethics. Issues concerning food ethics are squared off against the "other" every time we eat. This ongoing dialogue is the basic criteria for understanding how we arrive at the social judgments we make regarding food ethics. Right and wrong good and bad all define how and what we should eat. By no means is

a dialogue of food ethics neutral. The "other" is always present in some form or another.

Martin Buber's discussion of the "interhuman" and the "social" is evident when looking to the "diet industry" and the interconnectiveness of the community and the other. If society's views are superimposed on individuals without dialogic civility, then the interhuman actions is eliminated; the "social" takes precedence over the opportunity for exchanges of ideas. The "between" is replaced by narcissistic behavior; *being* is thus replaced by *seeming.*

Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research in Food Ethics

This essay has made an attempt to define food ethics using a dialogic framework. What has hopefully been proven is first, that food ethics do exist and second, that there has been an ongoing dialogue in food ethics for centuries. The interactional competencies that were presented in relationship to location, abstraction, and criteria are all examples of the types of dialogue that may be of interest to future researchers. It is clear that ethical issues are most important when human behavior is imposed and this behavioral impact affects a person's choices both past and present. Finally, a future in food ethics should attempt to encompass both individual ethics and social ethics. The study of food ethics should suggest standards for both individuals and institutional policies and practices. The framework offered in this essay has hopefully provided a suggestive framework that may be utilized in the future to continue a conversation in food ethics. An understanding of the individual and the individual's connectiveness to the dialogic process may open the door to an ongoing "interhuman" communicative process rather than a "social" perspective.

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