

Religion, Virtue, and Eating

I. Religious Imperatives

Many religions have strict laws about the production and consumption of food. It may seem that these are arbitrary or senseless in this day and age. However, the basis for food restrictions are often deeper than they might seem on the face of it. Our relationship with food is so meaningful and pervasive, and also so connected to everything around us, that it seems to be a manifestation of our way of being in the world, our broader approach to life.

Religion is one of the main ways that cultures have attempted to understand the world and the individual's place within it. It attempts to answer questions like:

- Who am I? Why am I here? Am I the master of my universe, or a small part of something larger?
- What is the right way to live? What values should I stand for?
- What do I owe to others? What do I owe to the world, the cosmos?

Many religions promote an attitude of humility, of care and concern, and of fairness and justice towards others. Many also promote an attitude of mindfulness in all one's actions, respect for one's body and mind. These values have implications for the food system: production (treatment of farm workers and slaughterhouse worker, treatment of animals and the environment), distribution (treatment of other food workers and concern with hygiene), and consumption (what I eat, how much I eat, when, why, and with whom). In other words:

Food and the regulation of food plays such a huge role in the spiritual disciplinary regimes of these religions because food connects us to every level of being in the cosmic vision – what we eat affects the health of our bodies, the sustainability of ecosystems and human communities, the well-being of other creatures, and on and on. *FES*, p. 286.

Moreover, for many, religion is central to their identity.

For some religious people...acting morally is not simply a matter of producing the most well-being but, rather, of being a certain sort of person or standing for certain things or siding with God. Such a person abstains from pork not because of its effects on well-being but, rather, because doing so is a way of showing her devotion to God or a way of indicating the alignment of her being with a certain vision of the world. Refusing to eat animals is like wearing a flag lapel pin or voting for a candidate who is sure to win anyway: It's a way of showing support for something. But, in the food case, because our eating practices are often central parts of our identities, showing support for this dietary regime over that one is also, typically, a way of showing who you are. Moreover, its value is not reducible to the effects it produces. *FES*, p. 284

One need not be religious, however, to think that one's actions *stand for something*. There are secular forms of this as well. For example, Robert Adams suggests:

A central part of living well is being for the good and against evils. We face the question how we can be for and against goods and evils that we are relatively powerless to accomplish or prevent. One of the most obvious answers is that we can give more reality to our being for the goods and against the evils by expressing our loyalties symbolically in action. *FES*, p. 285

II. Virtue Ethics

For most of the 20th century, utilitarianism and deontology were the main contenders within moral theory. In the past two decades, however, Virtue Theory has seen a resurgence. Virtue theory is historically associated with Aristotle who was, perhaps, its most eloquent defender. The core idea shared by all virtue theories is that moral theory should be concerned with the character of agents. In particular, it should be concerned with harmony of mind, acting for the right reasons, being naturally disposed to the

right thing, and so forth. The organizing claim of virtue theory is that:

An action is right insofar as it is the manifestation of a virtuous character trait, where virtuous character traits are [those that are present in the fully flourishing human being].

The portion of the claim in square brackets is distinctive of Aristotle's theory; virtue theorists disagree amongst themselves about what character traits constitute the virtues. Aristotle's further elaboration is this:

Virtue (excellence), then, is (a) a state of character (b) concerned with choice, (c) lying in a mean, the mean relative to us, (d) this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it. (*NE* 1106b36-1107a2)

On Aristotle's view the happy life, i.e., the *eudaimon* life, is a life of human excellence. Human excellence consists in the rational activity which best realizes our rational capacities, i.e., the excellence of our rational part. Our rational part has two sub-parts: theoretical reason and practical reason. Moral virtue is the excellence of practical reason, but also depends on the exercise of theoretical reason.

Examples: courage (rather than brashness or cowardice), consideration (rather than sentimentality or callousness)

How do we employ virtue ethics in deciding how to act? Note that virtue ethics doesn't say: do this, do that. Rather, it tells us how we should *be*, what sort of character we should cultivate. The rough formula for action is simple: do what the virtuous person would do in these circumstances. But how does that help? Are we supposed to mimic virtuous people? Yes and no.

Virtue, i.e., the dispositions or capacities to act and feel in the right sort of way, is something one cultivates by habituation. One does not simply decide to have a good character; nor does one become virtuous simply by understanding what virtue is. One must establish in oneself the stable disposition to behave properly. To become virtuous, we must start by acting properly, by imitating the behavior that would arise from a virtuous person's state of character. Through repeated practice we develop in ourselves the right sorts of dispositions, and along with these dispositions we gain an understanding of our action and its relation to the good. Eventually we not only perform the virtuous act, but perform it as a result of our virtue.

From the point of view of some virtue theorists, your relationship to the environment and your food practices are deeply connected to the sort of person you are, i.e., they connect the disposition to respect the environment, animals, food workers, etc. with other human excellences or virtues. Rather than looking for moral principles that require we give to famine relief or forbid eating meat, they ask "What sort of person would want to allow someone to starve?" or "What sort of person would cause the pain and suffering of an animal just to enjoy the taste of bacon?"

III. Virtue and the Environment

We may think it a virtue to appreciate nature. The question is why? Is this defensible? Thomas Hill suggests¹:

...though indifference to non-sentient nature does not *necessarily* reflect the absence of virtues, it often signals the absence of certain traits which we want to encourage because they are, in most cases, a natural basis for the development of certain virtues. (10)

What virtues?

1) *Proper humility*, which is connected to "an attitude which measures the importance of things independently of their relation to oneself or to some narrow group with which one identifies." (15)

¹ See Thomas Hill "Ideals of Human Excellence and Preserving the Natural Environment," in *Additional Resources on Environmentalism* on the Stellar site.

2) *Self-acceptance* (sometimes treated as part of proper humility), which includes a full appreciation of the fact that “despite our awesomely distinctive human powers, we share many of the needs, limits, and liabilities of animals and plants.” (20)

3) *Aesthetic sensibility*, which is not just an ability to “distinguish beautiful from ugly people,” but involves “curiosity, a mind open to novelty, the ability to look at things from unfamiliar perspectives, empathetic imagination, interest in details, variety, and order, and emotional freedom from the immediate and the practical” which, Hill argues, is probably necessary “to appreciate the best in human beings.” (23)

4) *Gratitude*, which involves cherishing things that give pleasure. “People who have no tendency to cherish things that give them pleasure may be poorly disposed to respond gratefully to persons who are good to them.” (24)

Consider also further issues raised in the *FES* introduction to “Food and Religion”

- Authenticity
- Moral Taint
- Moral Motivation
- Food as Fuel
- Farms as Organisms
- Profiting from Wrongdoing and Having Others Do Wrong

Hill is clear to note, however, that:

- The appreciation of the environment that provides evidence of these virtues is not merely a matter of scientific knowledge of the natural world, but requires “a certain perspective which is quite different from being able to recite detailed information.” (12). It is an attitude that concerns “what one values as well as what one knows.” (14)
- The connections between respect for the environment and these virtues are not logically necessary, but may be psychologically almost universal.

IV. Questions

1. Is there anything wrong with just viewing food as fuel, as a necessary but not very meaningful part of life?
2. How do we determine whether behaving a particular way is virtuous or not? Aren't there disagreements about this? Who is right and how would we know, anyway?
3. Acting in ways that are “symbolic” of virtue is not the same thing as being virtuous, e.g., wearing a flag lapel pin does not mean one is actually patriotic. What is the real value (if any) in acting symbolically?

For more information about the “Day without Women” see:

<http://www.womenstrike.org/>

<https://www.womensmarch.com/womensday/>

<https://socialistworker.org/2017/02/24/why-were-taking-action-on-march-8>

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24.03 Good Food: The Ethics and Politics of Food Choices
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