

Food and Foods. Toward a Definition

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Abstract When I'm hungry, I try to seek some food, namely an object that is edible and that can feed me and preferably it has to be tasty. It seems a very easy task to find it for there is an alleged natural boundary between what counts as food and what does not. I can naturally pinpoint that boundary. Nevertheless, at a closer inspection, such boundary turns out to be suspicious: a roasted human being is both edible and nutritious, and someone may even find it tasty, and yet it can be hardly considered as food. Likewise, a rotten food item is neither edible, nor nutritious and however it can be sometimes considered as food, such as marcescent cheese. Our aim in this paper is to nail down the different conceptions which regulate our conception of what is a food and then come up with a proper definition. We set forth four different stances: a biological one, i.e., food is what holds certain natural properties, an individual one, i.e., food is what can be eaten by at least one person, an authority one, i.e., food is what is considered so by an authority, and a social one. i.e., food is what is institutionally recognized as food.

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0. Introduction: When Is It food?

Our concern in this paper is to provide an answer to a very basic and fundamental question, call it the Food Question. This is the question *When is it food?* raised in reference to some concoctions of (edible) stuff. Ideally this question has an answer that spell out what are the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions in order for an item to be food. Coming at it from another angle, in this paper we shall argue that the predicate 'To Be a Food' can be defined in a spectrum of positions, which we divide into four main classes.

When is it food? is more momentous than it might seem. It is worth answering for four reasons. First, the metaphysical fascinating nature of food is not yet discovered and hence it can be better appreciated once some accounts of its nature are nailed down. As many food scholars, such as Pollan (2006: 15-31) and Belasco (2008: 15-34), claim the

nature of food is more ambiguous than ever for western people are not aware of what food production and food chains amount to. Moreover, food can cast a new light over the debate about ordinary objects and social ontology and the nature/culture divide. Second, food is a central topic of many contemporary debates regarding malnourishment, eating disorders, fair trades. A good metaphysical characterization of food can improve the discussions shedding a light on the very nature of food. Third, as Pollan (2006: 1) points out such question is far from being trivial in our age of «confusion and anxiety» about food for always newer dietary guidelines are built and proposed us by many different sources. Those dietary guidelines proponents want to impose us the right way of eating, e.g., governs often support the healthier diets (Barnhill, King, Kass, Faden: 2014). Fourth, it is disputed whether some items that we shall usually find at our table really count as food: does GMO count as food?, beef?, processed items?, raw items?, wild animals?, domesticated animals? The problem is then not just whether it is ethically admissible to eat such items but whether they are food. If we assume that an item counts as food if and only if (iff, thereafter) it lacks self-consciences then cows can be considered so but even human infants. If instead the criterium is fixed in pain experience, then cows should not be considered food but comatose people do. According to some religious dietary guidelines, pork and seafood do not count as food as well as according to some alternative diets OGM are not food for it is food only what is natural.

Thus, *When is it food?* turns out to be deeply entrenched with the far more popular questions such as *What is it right to eat?* or *When is it right to eat that?* Indeed, one cannot rest assured to have provided a clear answer to what is it right, in any of it possible understandings (medical, ethical, political, aesthetical ...), unless one knows how to fix the identity of what she is talking about.

In the paper we distinguish four different positions regarding the Food Question.

- (1) A physical view on food according to which what is food is fixed by some natural intrinsic properties of the food items.
- (2) An individual view of food that holds that in order to be food an item had to be eaten by at least one human being.
- (3) An authority view of food that claim that what is food is established by an authority.
- (4) A social view of food that maintains that food is a socially constructed category.

In the rest of the paper we outline these four main views showing both pros and cons for each. We do so by spelling out sets of internally consistent conditions that have to be also consistent with human life and human preferences. As it turns out, each position must indicate the basic rules for belonging to the category of food. This category may be either semantical or ontological. In the first case the conditions should be interpreted as the application criteria of the predicate “To be a food.” In the second case the conditions should be taken as the basic rules for being a part of the ontological category of food. We outrun this dilemma and do not take a stance on the metaphysical weight of those conditions.

1. The Physical View of Food

According to the US Department of Health & Human Services, an item in order to be food has to hold a minimal nutritional value, namely it has to contain the following eight nutrients: protein, vitamin A, vitamin C, niacin, riboflavin, thiamine, calcium, and iron. The FAO, in explaining what is food security, stresses that a food item has to bear sufficient energy and nutrient intake.

Both organizations hold that food items are physical entities that bear biological components that our body converts into energy and employs in order to repair and improve itself. A food item can do those great things since it holds the appropriate biological properties that make it suitable to be eaten and to turn it into energy. That is, 'To Be Food' is coextensive with 'Being Edible' under a particular interpretation of edibility in which it means both to be not harmful and to be beneficial. Since even some kinds of drugs have the same very general properties, edibility should be in turn implemented by nutritionality. That is, a food item has to contain several nutrients useful for sustaining and developing human life.

The physical answer to the Food Question has thus the following form:

x is a food item iff it both edible and nutritious.

The answer posits two elements and a relation between them. It will be worthwhile spelling out the physical view as a three-place relation: some (typically material) entity, some diner, and a *natural* relation between the two - call it *edibility relation*. The relation may be intransitive (if something F is food for a diner $D1$, and $D1$ is food for another diner $D2$, then F need not be food for $D2$. E.g. some wood is food for some worm and that worm is food for some human, but the wood is inedible for the human.) The edibility relation may also be reflexive, for there are documented cases of autophagia. Finally, the relation may be both symmetric (e.g. human beings can eat some worms, and *vice versa*), and asymmetric (e.g. human beings can eat some apples, but not *vice versa*).

This view has the merit of being clear and to highlight that food is worth for remaining alive and developing human beings' life. It states an objective standard particularly important for feeding developing countries, too often starved.

However, such physical conception of food seems to be too poor: edibility and to be nutritious are not enough for considering an item as food (Borghini, Piras, Serini 2020). Indeed, such features should be related to a diner: what is edible for someone, say milk, is not edible for a lactose intolerant person. What is nutritious for a sedentary person is not such for a sports person, as Pogge (2016) points out. Therefore, the edibility relation is not a universal standard but at most an individual one.

There is another aspect of what food is which is worth considering: how to be feed is a capacity that has to be learnt and then developed (Korthals 2017; Thompson 2015: 22; Adams 2010: 47-63): how to distinguish healthy items from poisonous ones, how to get food, e.g., by hunting, how to prepare an item in order to turn it into food, e.g., by cooking or by removing harmful substances, how to make a distinction between tasty and disgusting foods (Pollan 2006; Pollan 2013). More in general, there is a social element that makes an item food. Indeed different human communities eat different items and sometimes there is not a universal agreement on what counts as food, e.g., Kosher cuisine that bans pork from the dietary guidelines of Jews, the western disgust for insects, and so on. Hence, the two alleged features of food do not naturally belong to certain items but often they are either obtained by some sort of human process, e.g., by cooking, or singled out of reality through a social recognition, e.g., by religious norms that baptize an item as food.

The physical view of food thus has to face three problems: (i) the alleged features of food do not ensure that an item is or is not a food; (ii) the two features cannot exist alone without being related with a diner; (iii) there is an implicit individual or social element in each food choice that the physical view does not take into account.

2. The Individualistic View of Food

Even if we all human beings belong to the same species, each of us bears their own preference and eating habits. Furthermore, sometimes it seems that what is food for a specific human being is not so for another one, e.g., people who eat stones or objects made of iron. More often, personal tastes and habits underlie the concept of food that each of us personally employ for picking food items out of the world. Not only what is a good food for me can be bad for you, but what is a food for me can turn out to be inedible for you. Due to the social life such food habits often overlap each other but it seems that just as often they are disjointed.

According to this account, food is most plausibly generated individualistically: something turns into a food if and only if it is edible for at least one individual. Under this view, some class of entities *C* turns into a food even when only one item in that class is eaten only once by only one person (i.e., even when it has not and will never be considered as food elsewhere). For instance, a human being can turn a species of reptiles into food simply by eating one of them, despite of such reptiles never having been regarded as food by anyone else.

The individual answer to the Food question has thus the following form:

x is a food item iff it is eaten by at least one diner.

Actually, this thesis has at least three interpretations, since it can be spelled out in terms of lesser or greater radicality. The individualistic generation of food may be instituted by means of an individual act, an individual preferences or an individual physiology.

The first interpretation posits that an object is a food iff it is eaten at least once by one person but that does not prevent that other persons may eat it and even find it tasty. In this case, the fact that an item is a food is occasionally discovered by a person but this discovery can open up the edible path for other people. For instance, there must have been a person who first discovered that apples are edible. He discovered that fact through an act and then apples become a part of human diets.

The second interpretation claims that something is a food iff it is tasty for at least one person. In this case what counts is the individual preference over the mere edibility. It claims that food in order to be so has to be appreciated by at least an individual. This interpretation clearly narrower and privatize the domain of food, since each person is hereby authorized to settle their own conception of food which collapse on their own standard of taste. Hence, each person can keep the preferred foods in and keep the hated foods out of the universal domain of food since each one set up their own criterium.

The third interpretation relies on the individual physical possibility to eat certain items. It does not rest on individual preference but instead on individual physiological features, e.g., celiac people should not include among food items the ones that contain gluten as well as lactose intolerant can rule milk and dairy products out of the domain of food.

Every interpretation of the individual view brings with it some cons. The first interpretation can account for the discovery of new foods, that is not based on scientific investigation insofar as what counts as food is what is eaten at least once. To put in a slogan: What count as food for a person is what she actually eat. The second interpretation can cash out the idea that each person has different tastes and what is food depends what pleases the senses. For everyone has, more or less, different senses (Cosmeyer 1999: 87-89) it can be claimed tath, as it has been once said, «people live in different taste worlds» (Spence 2017: 73). That is, what counts as food for a person is

what she would like to eat. The third interpretation assigns to each person her own food domain on the basis of their physiology. What counts as food for a person is what she can actually eat.

Generally speaking, each interpretation set forth a framework in which just the individual experience of each human being provide the right definition of food corroborating a private view on food. It entails that this view is very inclusive and respectful of each possible food domain.

However, this view has many qualities as fault. Three serious objections may be raised against this view, one for each specific interpretation. Moreover, one further objection is raised against the general approach.

All the three criticisms are properly against the privatization of food domain, by acts, preferences, physiology. Just like Wittgenstein argued against the possibility of a private language, it is contentious that a private food could exist. First, the possibility of performing certain acts rather than others is due to the common membership to human species. Indeed, certain items turn into food by means of physical acts only because our body can perform those acts, e.g., grasp an apple from a tree is possible for we have opposable thumb and the right height. That is, physical properties that we share with the most human beings. Furthermore, we can do such acts for we have learnt some basic rules about food, e.g., consistency and texture matter since we cannot bite too hard item and we learnt that ever since we were young. Finally, our metabolism is both shared by all human beings and more specifically by the ones with whom we usually share meals (Stinson 1992). Second, tastes are both genetically and socially constructed, e.g. Højlund 2015. The very fact that we share most of our gastric physiology with other human beings, more specifically with the members of our own culture, goes toward the conclusion that the food domain is constructed by more than one human beings for their taste is constructed by a collective actions, both physical and social. Third, the diseases or idiosyncrasies are usually shared by groups, diachronically and synchronically. Even if it were not the case, what a person with a specific disease can eat is picked by experts out of the food domain they are aware and therefore the food domain of that person is not at any rate yielded by an individual choice.

The last criticism concerns all the three interpretations just under a certain light, namely when the individual claim that only what she eats is food whereas every other item which is eaten by anyone else is not. It is a clear form of hasty generalization. Such inference has as a premise “only what is food for me is food” and as conclusion “what is food for you, but not for me, is not food at all”. As we have seen in each of the three interpretations such a privatization is impossible due to our common belonging to the human species and to a specific culture.

Eventually, the individual view only seems to capture the difference in eating while it rather fails to do it.

3. The Authority View of Food

When one has to decide what and how to eat perhaps she does so in according to a norm that states what counts as food and what does not. Jews know that pork is not food due to the norms written in the *Shulchan Arukh*, an European child knows that a locust is not a food due to their parents prescriptions, a person with high cholesterol knows that candies are not food due to their doctor’s indications, most of the world’s people know that other human beings are not food both for national and international legislation, and ethical rules.

Those norms have been stated by someone who exerts a power on everyone else for she/he has the authority of doing so. At least three authorities can be put forward: (i)

religious authority; (ii) governmental authority; (iii) scientific authority. Each of them exerts the authority for different reasons and with different aims: religious authority is supposed to speak on behalf of god or gods and its aim is to make people's life just and godly; governmental authority emanates from different sources and it depends on the institutional system itself. Its aim is to align people's life with more general national goals, e.g., generalized health, saving, sustainability, and so on. Finally, scientific authority derives its power to science itself which is supposed to take reality at the face value. Its aim is to improve people's well being by means of scientific inquiries.

The Authority answer to the Food Question has thus the following form:

x is a food iff it obeys the norms stated by the right authority.

Although the authority answer seems trivial for the left hand of the biconditional is not properly defined by the right one, it is not so. The right-side depends on the specific authority which has to fill the blank.

Hence, once we choose the right source of authority, we can be sure that the items it baptizes as 'foods' are really foods, for it has the right to establish what it is.

Unfortunately, each of the aforementioned forms of authority fall short to define food once and for all.

The religious authority suffers from two main criticisms: there are too many gods (for a nice survey on religions and dietary guidelines, see Corrie 2012); and there can be a division between worshippers and lays. The first criticism relies on a sort of relativism, according to which since there are many religious authorities each of which claims different prescriptions about food we cannot endorse one or another just because we chose it for reasons tied to our background (Comstock 2012). Even if we are willing to claim that our faith is the right one we should concede that we cannot impose it to other people, and here arose the second criticism: we don't have the right to say what is food to other people.

The governmental authority is free of those criticism since it is supposed to be endorsed by all the people who live under it. Nevertheless, at least two objections to that can be raised: first, not all the people under a government support it and furthermore the government could lack the right legitimacy to impose on its citizens what is food. It is possible that different cultures coexist under one and the same government, e.g., USA is a multinational state. In this case: which culture should the government endorse for defining what is food? It is also possible that an alleged homogeneous culture is rather stratified in classes or interest groups each of which with its own view on food, e.g., Ankeny 2016. Furthermore, is it contended that governs can dictate what is or what has to be food. The more frequent reprimand against this power is the so-called "paternalism argument" according to which governs do not have the power to impose their own vision to their citizens.

Eventually, there is the scientific authority that can claim what is food on the light of science which can highlight the very nature of food on the basis of the physical properties of the relevant items themselves. Its alleged plausibility is reinforced by its aim: a scientific view shall promote health and well-being. Nevertheless, even the scientific authority is undermined by two arguments: first, this view collapses on the physical view since it relies on the material features of food that are not enough, as we already stressed. Second, even the aim however noble and virtuous relies on a social function assignment that is observe-relative. Indeed, as Searle (2007: 8) puts it, «if we thought that life and survival were worthless, that the only thing that really mattered was death and extinction, then hearts would be dysfunctional, and cancer would have a useful function: it would hasten extinction». The same can be said for food: only if we

assume that health and well-being are valuable items science with its aim can underlie our concept of food.

4. The Social View of Food

The last view that can be held is that foods are social items. According to the social view of food, food is generated by a collective agency (e.g. a mutual understanding of certain linguistic and behavioural norms). The specific social conception we would uphold is tied to the social ontology we buy into.

Accordingly, an item turns into food by means of a human intentional act that may be either physical, e.g., foraging, cultivation, or mental, e.g., labelling, naming, and that should rely on a wide and shared intentionality. The social view also entails that there are no foods in nature (Montanari 2006) but at most there are items that can dispositionally be food with proviso that they have to be recognized as such by a social group.

We need not delve into unnecessary details here, but we may devise at least three ways of understanding such a recognition. The recognition may be a sort of (unspoken or spoken) social convention, as e.g. in the case of gender; or it may be the resultant of an institutional activity (as, e.g. in the case of marriage) sanctioning the application of the predicate; or it is a «non cooperative equilibria of strategic games» (Guala and Hindriks 2015: 178). Anyway the social answer to the Food question takes the following form:

x is a food just in case it is socially recognized as such.

That is, 'To Be a Food' applies to an entity just in case there is a right sort of recognition on the part of some agents within a society. Food is then a cultural item, that varies from society to society each of which posits its own food ontology, although they can overlap. As a cultural item it might lead us to figure out food as: (i) a language (Marrone 2016); (ii) a representation (Adams 2018); (iii) an identity marker (Fischler 1988); (iv) an artwork (Telfer 1996); (v) a political tool (Mendelson-Forman and Chapple-Sokol 2014).

This view clarifies why different culture recognize different items as food and why enogastronomic traditions are so different. Furthermore, it can shed a light on the import of food for individual and collective identities.

Although the social or institutional aspects of food are most often underscored, it is controversial whether all foods are social or institutional. That is, it is controversial whether the social view can provide a sufficient condition for an item being's food. For instance, the case of babies in the womb; allegedly they receive foods, but the social or institutional natures of such foods may remain questionable, at least from the perspectives of the babies. As well as it is controversial whether a patient feed through a drip has a social relation with this food. Both cases rest on the assumption that both the feeder and the feeded should recognize an item as food by means of a social act. In the former case it can be claimed that not even the feeder has to socially recognize food. While in the latter case, the fact that the feeder recognize drip as food by a social act casts doubts.

On the other hand, one may hold that all foods under the social conception are also foods under the physical conception and hence the social view cannot even be a necessary condition. That is, an item in order to be food has to be physically so and it underlies the social recognition. Yet, this may be the case, only if we deny that social or institutional norms can regard some inedible items as foods. This assumption is called

into question also by items that does not bear a nutritional import, ranging from items we eat that have mostly a symbolic function (e.g. a host during mess) to items we consume for pure pleasure (e.g. chewing gums) or items we must consume because of their medical properties (e.g. vitamins in pills).

5. Conclusion

The main aim of our paper was to survey four views about the nature of food: as a physical item, as an item generated individualistically, as given by the authority, as a social object. We went through them highlighting the main pros and cons of each view. Nevertheless, we did not explicitly buy into any of them and we rather interrelated them showing how they can be contrasted against each other. Nevertheless, we have assumed a substantive thesis across the paper, namely the right way of eating essentially depends on what is our preliminary conception of food.

The paper would like to be a reference tool for those who study food from both an ethical, political, and a more theoretical point of view. It can be usefully employed for better addressing debates over sustainability, food identity, food sovereignty, and food security and hopefully to open a new path of inquiry.

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