

Food Philosophy

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Food Philosophy: An Introduction, by David Kaplan, is thought provoking in the best possible way, challenging me to think more deeply about lots of things that I had previously taken for granted. For example, I've always comforted myself with the thought that if I want to eat meat, then at least the animals should have a good life and, if possible, a good death. But can there even be such a thing as a good death?

David Kaplan is professor of philosophy at the University of North Texas, and although he doesn't always aim to provide answers, he does raise the questions. It was a treat to talk to him, starting off with perhaps the fundamental question: why does food, as a topic, need its own philosophy?

David Kaplan: I think very few things need philosophy, but we often find ourselves doing philosophy whether we know it or not. We professionals are, frankly, just better at it than most people are. People often find themselves having conversations, thinking to themselves about food in a way that is either directly philosophical or bumping up against philosophical questions.

The obvious one for food is just how something tastes, and whether or not we taste the same thing, and whether or not tastes are objective or relative, who gets to say and so on. That's actually bumping up against a really interesting philosophical question about where flavours are and whether or not all preferences are equal and so on. I think people are actually doing something like a philosophy of food, just not that well. [chuckles]

Jeremy: Yes. Ethics is the other one where I think people do. You structured the book very carefully to take us through different aspects of philosophy, and I think that as a professional, you've done it in an order that makes sense. Let's just go through like that. You start off with metaphysics, which, as I understand, it is about the nature of things. To a simple non-philosophical type like myself, food is food.

Occasionally, people say, “Let food be your medicine.” They don't mean that literally, I don't think, but isn't food just things we can eat?

David Kaplan: I think sometimes people really do mean let food be your medicine, maybe not to cure some condition or disease, but just for maintaining health. Your oatmeals or getting your Omega-3s or something like that. We often do see food functioning as medicine. Is food just food? For the most part, it's pretty unproblematic — until it is. It's when you would eat something and you say, “That's not a taco. You call that pizza?”

Jeremy: That's a kind of authenticity issue.

David Kaplan: Yes. I nudge that into a metaphysical issue. I think that's, you could say, a purely social category. I think you're asking a metaphysical question about what the nature of something is, whether or not it's up to standard, whether or not it has the necessary or sufficient conditions to be something? I think that's another example of ways in which people often find themselves doing something philosophical, maybe, just without being fully aware of it.

Jeremy: Lab-grown meat or cashew cheese and various other things, does that figure into that? Is it cheese? Does it matter whether you call it cheese or something else?

David Kaplan: Right.

Jeremy: You consider that a metaphysical issue?

David Kaplan: Yes, I consider that a metaphysical question. Is it ... whether or not it's food? Arguably. Some people might protest. Look, I try to eat vegan as much as possible, some vegetarian, a little dairy, occasionally fish. I don't know, I don't have anything consistent. But yes, I often find myself eating these fake meat products and then looking at the list of ingredients. They run 30 or 40 ingredients long. I often wonder, “You know what? Who am I kidding?”

Surely, in that sense, a chicken leg is much more wholesome because at least it's just a chicken leg. It's not filled with all these other things that aren't really recognisably food items. I think that's why a lot of people balk at the artificial foods.

Jeremy: Yes, I feel that quite strongly. It shades into your next category of epistemology and how we learn about things and know

about things. The very fact that these “artificial” foods have names like meat or cheese or burger or whatever is already trying to tell us something about them.

David Kaplan: Right, and often, that can be contentious. When the dairy lobby sues the soy milk industry for the use of the word milk, out of fear that people might mistake soy milk for cow milk, or the case I mentioned in my book about Just Mayo, the company that made vegan mayo, the fact that they were challenged, because, strictly speaking, it's not mayonnaise. It doesn't have egg in it.

Jeremy: Because the FDA says it must have egg in it.

David Kaplan: Yes, it must have egg in it. The compromise was interesting. They had to emphasise the “just” in the meaning of justice rather than just as in “only”. I think they had to change their logo to make it appear more like a plant.

Jeremy: I must say I think that pivot on the word “just” was scrambling a little, shall we say.

David Kaplan: [chuckles] Yes.

Jeremy: This question of how we learn about foods and what ... They all shade into each other these questions. I think separating them out is hard, but the stories we tell about foods we eat, is that part of the epistemology that, I know this is a good food because of the stories I've heard about it?

David Kaplan: Yes, I think so. The reason why I spent some time on food narratives was, when you read some in media and journalistic accounts or in alternative media and criticisms typically of large-scale industrial agriculture, there are these themes, these motifs, frankly. These narratives that just start appearing over and over. Once you learn how to spot them, then you find that they are just recurring, and are sometimes helpful, usually a little bit tiresome, and often close off and narrow the debate.

I think the most typical ones are this techno-utopia, where new developments in science and technology are just going to make everything better for everyone. Food more healthy, better for the environment, better-tasting. Then the flip side is a techno-dystopian one, where we're all just doomed, frankly, because of science and

technology that's pulling us away from our roots. Then the flip side or the third part of the techno-dystopian is the romantic narratives. Those are the ones that colour our perceptions of what's natural and wholesome and organic.

Jeremy: The bucolic scene with the cows grazing on the grass ...
Yes.

David Kaplan: None of these are entirely false, I think that's what's interesting about the narratives. I think they get at something that's right, but got to be mindful and know when to get off that trade.

Jeremy: Moving along. I know [chuckles] we're doing this rather bite-sized ...

Anyway, aesthetics. You mentioned that right at the beginning, the question of taste, the question of good taste. Do we taste the same thing? Can we compare them? How do we judge? That's always been one of the great mysteries to me. Not good taste in the sense of refined people like this thing, but what tastes good.

David Kaplan: I think these are vexing questions and so much of it with tasting because it's in our mouths, because we come into contact with it. It's, I think, much easier to see how we affect what's there, how we affect the nature of flavour. It's possible that our ears affect, distort, shape what things sound like in our eyes, how things appear. With tasting, it's really undeniable. Namely, how things taste can depend on the time of day, what I have just eaten, some biological quirk, all sorts of idiosyncratic factors just having to do with my mouth and my tongue at the time.

Jeremy: There's that amazing body of work by Charles Spence at Oxford on things like a crunchy potato chip tastes fresher than a less crunchy potato chip. That seems to be a general thing. Then there's also the strange genetic things, which I suppose are a bit like colour blindness. My wife hates cilantro, it tastes like soap to her. There are those as well, that interfere with thinking ... Whenever you say "taste is in the food," people say, "Well, how come cilantro tastes different for some people?" It's a really complicated question.

David Kaplan: It's a really complicated question. If the people who have the soapy cilantro gene come to dominate the population, then those of us who find cilantro fresh and delightful will be viewed as the

outliers who have something wrong with us. It's hard to say what cilantro really tastes like because it seems to depend on us really, essentially.

Jeremy: Are you interested also in expert tasters or trained taste panels, where ... People have to go through quite rigorous training in order to enable them to judge things consistently and for their judgments to be comparable. Does that tell us anything about the nature of flavour and the nature of taste?

David Kaplan: I think so. I tend to be somewhat of a taste realist. I think there's something there. I don't want to say we can get it right, but I think we can come to some kind of agreement on it. In some sense, it doesn't matter what the Taste-O-Meter says is in it or what the space aliens or what the omniscient being says how it tastes, it's about humans and what we like and dislike.

I think we can often come to some kind of consensus about how things taste, but we often need help with the vocabulary that often you and I don't have. And that's, I think, part of what the experienced tasters do, is they know how to not only pay attention, but they're just good at attaching adjectives to some of the same things that you and I can taste.

What I would liken it to is, I remember when I started listening to jazz, it was just listening to something with someone who was a good listener. And he would just say, "Do you hear that baseline? Listen to this trumpet playing, it's really bright." He'd put on something else, "Now, this one's a little bit less lively." Lo and behold, I think you're right, I hear it as well, but now suddenly, I have this vocabulary of brightness and swinging and so on.

Jeremy: That shades into the connoisseur thing, especially, for example, with wine, where the wine connoisseur says, "This has got hay and a slight green pepper to it." They don't mean hay and they don't mean green pepper in the ordinary sense, but they've learned to attach those words and you can learn to attach those words to the ... It's developing a vocabulary and agreeing what those words mean.

David Kaplan: There's a class here at my university, I think it's called Beverage Survey. It's in the School of Hospitality and Management and it's required for such and such major, but I think

anyone can take it. I often get students who've taken this class, Beverage Survey, and whenever this topic comes up about objectivity and relativity of tastes, they're always the first to jump in and tell the class. They say, "I'm telling you, in our class, we tasted a bunch of different wines, we tasted beer, we tasted soda. I swear to God, it's actually in there and we all tasted the same thing."

They're often really helpful to have in class providing firsthand testimony that there's something there and you can get it right, in the sense of at least coming to some kind of agreement with your colleagues. There's something, I don't know, cultural, sociological going on about mocking the wine connoisseur. That's part of our just, I don't know, working class, everyman heritage, where it's sport to make fun of the wealthy class. That's just the wealthy snoot getting their comeuppance. We love that.

That's why we love reading the articles that point out how even these experienced wine connoisseurs were tricked. The white wine is in a bottle that's red and they think it's red wine and so on. We love it, "Aha. Those rich snobs, they think they're better than us and they're not."

Jeremy: That's the high taste, low taste or high culture, low culture thing as well, isn't it, that judgmental thing? Let's move on to ethics, which for a lot of people means only one thing, and that's killing animals to eat them. My view is, I don't eat a lot of meat, but I like the idea that the meat I eat had a good life and even better a good death. Is that fair? I can live with it, but should I be changing my view?

David Kaplan: It depends who you are, and where you are, and when you are. If that's your only option ... Again, students often bring up these examples, these desert island life or death scenarios, where it's you, your family, and a cow, and the challenge is: wouldn't you rather kill this animal than face death? By the way, I don't know if I would, but it's not life or death for you.

Those of us who live in advanced, industrialised Western societies, we have options, we can leave the animals alone if we like to, as opposed to those who live in livestock-dependent societies, as the name suggests. They depend on livestock for labour, for milk, for wool, for food, for money — you take the little babies and sell them — and so on. We're not dependent on our animals in that sense. But look, there's nothing wrong with the way you frame it.

We don't get to ask the animal about what kind of death it would prefer. We know what kind of life it would prefer, they certainly give us those indications. I would wager that they don't want any kind of death whatsoever. The argument that I was toying with that, I might be right, is just let the animal live out its life and let's take its life not on our schedule, but on its schedule. We've all been around enough people who are aged. When it's time to go, often they know it's time to go. Like, "I've broken my hip, my heart's not getting any better. I'm not living for much at this point." I'm sure there's some kind of animal equivalent to that, where it's lived its decent life and it's had enough. At that point, I think if it's given, not just a painless death, but a death that's free from fear.

Jeremy: Is it a question of ethics or political philosophy whether we have any duty to feed hungry people?

David Kaplan: In terms of its consequence or efficacy, then yes, that's a political matter. I guess maybe a way to frame it is, people are hungry and deprived because of political circumstance, so it has a political cause and should have a political solution rather than just relying on the goodwill of individuals, often in faraway places. There's certainly nothing wrong with helping others, and I think we have a general obligation to help others; not all the time, but sometimes. I think we have to do something. I don't know if we have to necessarily feed people, but we have to help, we have to give to charity, we have to give blood, we have to do things for others.

Jeremy: The other point in which politics plays a huge role or government plays a huge role is in this whole question, which is becoming louder and louder and louder, fix the food system. The food system is broken, we need to fix the food system. Mostly, it seems the food system isn't going to fix itself because it's run by large corporations, their duty is to their shareholders, I guess, and they're not interested in fixing the food system except in as much as they can get us to buy more food. Is there a duty on government to fix the food system or to balance the inequities of the current food system?

David Kaplan: Yes.

Jeremy: [laughs] That's perfect. I ask a long and complicated question, you give me a great simple answer. I love that.

David Kaplan: No, but what that consists of is immensely complicated because the food system itself is just immensely complicated. If you were to try to map it out, it's just this dizzying assemblage of connections between land, air, water, energy sources, animals, governments, institutions, laws, customs, economies and so on. Where to find the justice among all of these interrelated parts is no small task.

Ultimately, that's the charge of a government. At least there's a couple places they have to focus. That's on humans and on animals. Because we're all dependent on these environments, something about this nexus of food-animal-environment are the things that they have to take care of.

Jeremy: Okay. Final area, existentialism. It's hard to know really what the existential question is, because if we're to continue to exist, we have to eat something. What does it matter what we eat?

David Kaplan: I think what I'm getting at with food existentialism, it's some ways following the tradition of the Mount Rushmore of existentialists. One of the main questions is: what's our relationship to the dominant goings-on? What's our relationship to other people? What's our relationship to our societies? What attitudes can we take on it? How can we be free in light of these limitations, bodily limitations, limitations due to, whatever, our mortality if we die, and limitations imposed on us just by the natural world? We can't fly, we can't breathe underwater and so on. How can we live? How ought we to live in light of the conditions that also constrain us?

Food, it may seem to be the thing that we only interact with a few times a day provided, again, we're not subsistence farmers or so on, but you can give it some thought and it may not be the kind of thing that we can really ever fully detach ourselves from. It's not just the rhythms of our day. It's our hunger and our thirst that's also affecting what we can and can't do. Our lives are often, again, shaped and constrained by our food environments. It's, again, these clusters of influences and effects, including one's own body, that I think describe our existential situation. Food is embedded and ingrained at every different level.

Jeremy: There is a trivial level for all this in the sense that you use the example of the pineapple pizza or pineapple on a pizza. I am not the kind of person that eats pineapple on a pizza. Maybe you are, I

don't want to pre-judge that, but I define my existence by the foods I won't eat, if I were kosher or halal, and by the foods I do eat. In that sense, food is tied up with my existence, my idea of myself. It doesn't need to be. There's a sense in which that's almost a luxury because I have a choice of what to eat.

David Kaplan: Yes. I suppose I'm going to defend those little trivial choices. You know what it's like. You have your little piece of pizza in front of you and you don't quite like the way the toppings are arranged. You take a moment to make sure that this bite actually has a mushroom and you don't get too much anchovy in that bite. That's right, nothing could be less important. Literally, nothing could be less important in the world than what your next bite is like.

You know what? It's your life. We don't live our lives on these big broad scales. Most of us are very small and we can't really have much in effect on our existence. So, yeah, we do what we can to make the world around us better. There's nothing wrong with dwelling over that next little morsel.

Jeremy: I think that's why we find the idea of people existing on Soylent or the dream, the utopian dream, of a meal in a pill, I find that abhorrent. I guess you do too because one of the things you say towards the end of the book is you say, "What better way to affirm the goodness of life than with good food." To me, that's going to speak to the people who like food and the rest of them are probably not interested in the philosophy of food anyway.

David Kaplan: About a year or so ago, I went to a presentation of my colleague down the hall who had taken a trip to Antarctica. He's an entomologist. He gave a presentation and a slideshow about some little insects that live in this really cold water in Antarctic. He and his team and some grad students were there fishing through this freezing water with their bare hands. That looked really unpleasant to me, but whatever, that's what entomologists do.

I think he spent as much time talking about the food on the ship and the food in the camp as he did on his research. That's what one does. When you have a little bit of time and a little bit of resources, you want to seek out new foods. That's often what colours an experience. What makes it better or worse is what you had to eat.

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