

ANALYTIC VS. PRAGMATIST FOOD ETHICS:

METHOD AND APPROACH

Paul B. Thompson

Department of Philosophy, Michigan State University

thom@anr.msu.edu

ABSTRACT: Analytic food ethics emphasizes the construction of logically explicit arguments, with great emphasis on establishing normative premises, and relatively little weight placed on the domain of application (e.g. food). A pragmatic food ethics begins from instances of genuine doubt about food practices and presumes that the task of ethics is complete the task of normative inquiry. Analytic and pragmatist discussions of food security are compared. While logical consistency becomes the sine qua non for analytic food ethics, a pragmatic tolerance for inconsistencies can be grounded in recent studies on the role of habits in decision making from cognitive science.

Although it may not have been noticed by academic philosophers, there has been a robust and growing literature in food ethics ever since the early 1970s. This paper will make a half-hearted attempt to draw a distinction between an *analytic* school that has emerged in that literature and a *pragmatist* school that draws its philosophical inspiration from the thought of C.S. Peirce, William James, Jane Addams and especially John Dewey. There are, of course, variations in the terminology that might be used to indicate the distinction I have in mind. One reviewer suggests the term “principalist” instead of “analytic”, but the term *principalism* has a specific meaning in bioethics that differs from the sense I will outline below.¹ And there are philosophers making

¹ In bioethics, principalism is a heuristic that enjoins biomedical professionals and anyone conducting research on human subjects to test their protocol against four independent principles (autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and justice). As developed by Beauchamp and Childress, it was not intended to be interpreted as an ethical theory. (see Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress. *Principles of Biomedical Ethics, 6th Edition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Beauchamp and Childress’ approach was extended to “the ethical matrix” approach by Ben Mepham, and is widely used in food ethics (see Ben Mepham, “A framework for the ethical analysis of novel foods: the ethical matrix.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 12 (2000): 165-176). Here, too, the applications differ from what I am calling “analytic food ethics.”

contributions on food that exemplify neither of the contrasting methodological tendencies discussed in this paper.

Whatever terminology one uses, my attempt to maintain a distinction between two philosophical approaches in applied ethics is half-hearted because no follower of Dewey could endorse a dichotomizing strategy for philosophical inquiry. In this respect this essay is uncharacteristic of food ethics done in the pragmatist tradition. The observations that follow are also uncharacteristic of a pragmatist approach in that they have relatively to do with food practices as such. What follows is best interpreted as a meta-theoretic discussion of recent philosophical work on the production, consumption and distribution of food. Although several writers are discussed, Peter Singer is taken as the paradigmatic example of an analytic ethicist, while the role of the pragmatist will be played by myself.

Singer’s work will be familiar to most readers. In a highly productive career he has made many distinguished contributions on a wide array of topics, and is probably the single individual who deserves the most credit for reinvigorating philosophical work in applied ethics. Although his work touches on food at several junctures, he has made especially significant contributions on the ethics of hunger and on the use of domesticated livestock for food. This work dates to the start of his career with the publication of “Famine, Affluence and Morality,” in the very first volume of *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, and “Animal Liberation,” in *The New York Review of Books*.² Singer has revisited both subjects many times. His 2010 book *The Life You Can Save* rehearses the basic argument in “Famine, Affluence and Morality,”³ while his 2007 book with Jim Mason, *The*

² Peter Singer, “Famine, affluence, and morality,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 1(1972):.229-243; “Animal Liberation,” *The New York Review of Books* 50, No. 8 (1973): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/04/05/animal-liberation/>

³ Peter Singer, *The Life You Can Save: How to Do Your Part to End World Poverty*. New York: 2010, Random House Incorporated.

Ethics of What We Eat is, along with hugely successful books by Eric Schlosser, Marion Nestle, and Michael Pollan, responsible for initiating the upsurge of interest in food ethics, especially among analytically trained and academically employed scholars in applied ethics.⁴

My own work is considerably less well known, and I am far from the only philosopher making pragmatist contributions to food ethics. However, I have been steadily contributing published work on ethical issues related to the production and consumption of food since accepting a joint appointment in the departments of philosophy and agricultural economics at Texas A&M University in 1982. I was rapidly swept into a cadre of scholars at U.S. public universities who were undertaking critical studies on global food systems.⁵ Through the 1990s, my research was concentrated on the philosophy of agricultural science and technology, with particular emphasis on newly emergent methods for altering the genomes of the plants and animal that we consume for food.⁶ Although I have made occasional contributions to the literature in pragmatist ethics,⁷ my most overtly pragmatist work in food ethics is the relatively recent *From Field to Fork*.⁸ Even there, the references to

philosophical pragmatism are sparse, though the argument of the entire book is structured by discussions of Dewey's theory of inquiry.

Analytic Ethics in the 20th Century

Analytic philosophy can be characterized as the expression of an ethos that arose early in the 20th century. It emerged as one among several philosophical programs hoping to provide secure epistemological foundations for the physical sciences. While Edmund Husserl pursued an approach emphasizing phenomenology, Gottlob Frege charted a different strategy that eventually became analytic philosophy. Frege pointed out a way to calve off the *reference* of terms from their *sense*. Although "the Morning Star" and "the Evening Star" connote distinct meanings with respect to their sense, both expressions refer to the same object, e.g. the planet Venus. A focus on reference promised a means for specifying the empirical content of key terms used in science. Non-empirical (e.g. *a priori*) terms would be thought of as logical and mathematical axioms. The meaning of scientific theory and data could then be specified through an analysis that reduces all claims to empirical reports and logico-mathematical relations resting on a limited set of axiomatic definitions. Statements that could not survive the withering fire of analysis would be consigned to the dustbin of meaninglessness.

Although this program began to collapse even as it was being articulated, modifications and critiques of it dominated much of the philosophy that was done in the English language throughout the 20th century. Indeed, *pragmatism* came to be thought of as a more-or-less coherent body of doctrines that emerged from criticisms and concessions that were part and parcel of the philosophical exchange that ensued. C. I. Lewis, Wilfrid Sellars, W.V.O. Quine and Donald Davidson developed the notion that meaning could not be dissociated from practical contexts of linguistic or communicative practice. As Cheryl Misak has argued, even prototypical

⁴ Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter*. Emmaus, PA: 2007, Rodale Press; Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: What the All-American Meal Is Doing to the World*. New York: 2002, Penguin Books; Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, Berkeley: 2002, University of California Press; Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, New York: 2004, Penguin Press.

⁵ Jeffrey Burkhardt, "Coming Full Circle? Agrarian Ideals and Pragmatist Ethics in the Modern Land-Grant University," in *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, P. B. Thompson and T. C. Hilde, Eds. Nashville, TN: 2000, Vanderbilt University Press, pp. 279- 303; Paul B Thompson, "Agricultural Ethics—Then and Now," *Agriculture and Human Values* 32 (2015): 77-85.

⁶ Paul B. Thompson, *Food Biotechnology in Ethical Perspective*. London: 1997, Chapman and Hall.

⁷ Paul B. Thompson, "Pragmatism, Discourse Ethics and Occasional Philosophy," in *Pragmatist Ethics for a Technological Culture*. J. Keulartz, M. Korthals, M. Schermer and T. Swierstra, Eds. Dordrecht, NL: 2002, Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp. 199-216.

⁸ Paul B. Thompson, *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*. New York: 2015, Oxford University Press.

representatives of analytic philosophy such as Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein came to hold views on language that were pragmatic in just this sense.⁹ There is thus a sense in which pragmatism came to be the dominant view among people who thought of themselves as analytic philosophers, rather than as an alternative to it.

It is less clear, however, that the same thing can be said in ethics. Although Sellars made important contributions in ethics, there are a number of ways in which the analytic ethos of the early 20th century has had more pervasive influences on philosophical ethics than it did on metaphysics and epistemology. The mere fact that ethics, epistemology and philosophy of mind continue to be practiced as largely distinct disciplines within many philosophy departments is one of these influences. As the above sketch of analyticity suggests, ethical terminology (words such as 'good', 'justice' or 'welfare') lack a Fregean object of reference. Ethical language demanded special treatment, and a number of meta-ethical theories arose among analytic philosophers during the 20th century. Deriving from a doctrinal and categorical separation of fact and value, these theories of normative or prescriptive language (such as intuitionism, emotivism and non-cognitivism), relied implicitly on analytic characterizations of argumentation and logical validity, while remaining silent on the basis for empirical claims, which were thought to lie within the epistemologist's home turf. Analytic philosophy continues to recognize ethics as a specialty that can be pursued in isolation from the problems and inquiries that characterize either epistemology or the respective philosophies of the biophysical and social sciences.

While analytic ethicists have conducted robust debates about the meaning and authority of normative concepts, they tend to take a united front on applied questions. The answer to any practical question is an

argument consisting of both normative and empirical premises. The conclusion is a prescription: a command to perform actions of a specified type. The argument must meet criteria for validity derived from formal logic (hence not a matter for ethics). The craft of the applied ethicist *qua* ethicist does not trouble itself with the accuracy, precision or warrant of the empirical claims. They must be true, of course, in order for the argument to be sound, but their truth or falsity is not regarded as a matter of relevance to ethics as such. This forces philosophical attention to the normative premises which are presumed to be the province of ethical theory. Thus even so-called applied or (as I would prefer) practical questions are of interest to analytic philosophers only in so far as they bear upon matters that must be decided entirely apart from experience. It is in this manner that ethics maintains its status as a distinct specialty, while the non-theoretical components of the applied ethics argument are consigned either to other specialty areas in philosophy (such as logic) or are deigned to be either the province of the special sciences or simply matters of common sense.

There are, of course, important exceptions to this generalization. Alisdair MacIntyre wrote a trenchant critique of applied ethics¹⁰ and analytic philosophers who have pursued "virtue ethics" have followed him in offering an alternative approach. These exceptions speak to the sense in which the dichotomy that motivates this paper is at best half-hearted. Nevertheless, the model described in the previous paragraph does in fact characterize a significant portion of the work that philosophers are currently producing on food ethics, as will be illustrated below. One additional feature of the model is that the subject matter to which ethical theories are being applied is largely arbitrary. Food, racism, abortion, and capital punishment are going to be treated rather much the same. Applications are of interest to the analytic ethicist to the extent that they

⁹ Cheryl Misak, *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein*. New York: 2016, Oxford University Press.

¹⁰ Alisdair MacIntyre, "Does applied ethics rest on a mistake?" *The Monist*, 67 (1984): 498-513.

generate interesting challenges to the general picture of a given theoretical approach. The well-known “trolley problem”, for example, is a stylized application that can be tweaked to elicit contrasting intuitions about whether it is acceptable to intervene in an ongoing course of affairs on ethical grounds.¹¹ These intuitions can be interpreted as a test of the theory, or as the upshot of habits and mores that need to be reformed. The question of *which* interpretation to offer for inconvenient intuitions itself becomes the type of generalized philosophical question that analytic ethicists love to sink their teeth into.

Alternatively, the analytic approach to formulating ethical arguments can be applied in a persuasive mode. Here, the analytic philosopher has already made up his or her mind about what should be done in a particular situation, and the task is to construct an argument that will convince others to agree with the preferred course of action. This persuasive orientation is evident in food ethics, where the goal is often to convince readers to adopt a given perspective on some issue in the production, distribution or consumption of food. Singer’s work exemplifies this latter approach in analytic applied ethics, and dozens if not hundreds of analytically trained academic philosophers have followed his lead by constructing arguments for dietary prescriptions. The model is especially conspicuous in prescriptive arguments against slaughtering livestock, raising food animals in confined settings and the consumption of meat. There are also counterarguments that contest specific premises in these pro-vegetarian exercises in applied ethics. This literature is now too large to review in a summary format, though a few recent titles testify to the philosophical community’s continuing interest in making additional contributions to it.¹²

¹¹ Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford, UK: 1978, Oxford University Press; Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The trolley problem,” *The Yale Law Journal*, 94(1985): pp.1395-1415.

¹² Stephen Sapontzis, Ed. *Food for Thought: The Debate over Eating Meat*. Amherst, NY: 2007, Prometheus Books; B. Bramble, and B. Fischer, Eds., 2015. *The Moral*

Analytic Food Ethics

An essay entitled “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One Too)” by Tristram McPherson is illustrative of the pattern described above. The title of the article announces its persuasive intent. He follows a strategy typical in analytic applied ethics by producing a numbered list of premises in support of “Modest Ethical Veganism,” the claim that it is typically wrong to use animal products. McPherson explains how, in combination with empirical claims in the list, normative premises that he develops in the article entail the conclusion “You should be a vegan.” Indeed, the bulk of the text is devoted to producing sub-arguments for these normative premises. McPherson then offers a marvelously clear statement of the ethos and moral epistemology of analytic applied ethics: “[T]he argument is *valid*...This means that anyone wishing to reasonably reject my conclusion must explain which premise they wish to reject, and how my argument for that premise is flawed,” (McPherson, p. 83).¹³

While professors are certainly able to use their power over students’ grades to enforce this norm within their classrooms, it is far from clear that it either is or should be followed as a guide to critical thinking or evaluating arguments in practical decision making. An alternative approach might be to begin by looking at McPherson’s references before one even bothers to read the essay, much less work through its careful logic. Here one would see that although he is citing scholarly sources from the philosophical literature, his empirical claims all come from advocacy groups. Although professional journals such as *Animal Welfare* or *The*

Complexities of Eating Meat. New York: 2015, Oxford University Press; Andrew Chignell, Terrence Cueno and Matthew C. Halteman, Eds. *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating*. Abingdon, Oxon UK: 2016, Routledge.

¹³ Tristram McPherson, “Why I Am a Vegan (and You Should Be One, Too),” in *Philosophy Comes to Dinner: Arguments about the Ethics of Eating*. A. Chignell, T. Cueno and M. C. Halteman, eds. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: 2016, Routledge, pp. 73-91, quote on p. 84.

Journal of Applied Animal Welfare routinely publish studies on the condition of animals being raised or slaughtered for food, these sources do not inform McPherson's argument, nor does reporting by mainstream media outlets such as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times*. The essay does not meet critical thinking standards for informed journalism, and as such it is at least questionable as to whether it warrants the effort and logical rigor McPherson demands from readers when he asserts that they must identify which premise they will reject, and then develop their own argument to expose its flaws.

McPherson might with some justice claim that this is a roundabout way of questioning his empirical premises. But roundaboutness is philosophically significant to a pragmatist, and a second problem with the argument's framing underlines an issue with insisting that the only way to reject the argument is to find fault with one of the premises. One of the good things about McPherson's article is his sensitivity to reasons why some people might find veganism to be burdensome in a morally significant way. He notes that people whose opportunities are economically constrained (consider food deserts) or who have specific medical conditions might be exempt from the normative principles he articulates. This is why he limits his argument to what he calls the *typical* case. But I will attest that in my large public university I teach many students who have virtually no access to healthy vegan options in their urban neighborhoods, neighborhoods that are often the product of structural racism. To imply that their situation as *atypical* itself reflects a kind white privilege that might be sufficient reason to dismiss McPherson's entire presentation out of hand, rather than patiently working through it on a premise-by-premise basis. This sort of insensitivity to the lived experience of others is one of the bases on which pragmatists have criticized analytic ethics.¹⁴

¹⁴ V. Denise James, "Theorizing Black Feminist Pragmatism: Forethoughts on the Practice and Purpose

Singer's work is often more carefully framed, but he, too, is focused on developing an argument and defending it premise by premise. "Famine, Affluence and Morality," offers a moral principle—that when one can do a significant good at very little cost one should do so—that with some additional empirical premises about the relative cost of aiding famine victims implies that affluent people should be donating some of their wealth to relieve hunger. Much of the philosophical sophistication in the article derives from a secondary argument that Singer offers in support of the claim that one should accept his moral principle even if one is not committed to preference utilitarianism (Singer's own moral theory). This secondary argument relies on the famous "drowning child" example. Wallowing in a shallow pool, the child's life can be saved by any passerby who will suffer the temporary inconvenience of dampening their clothing.¹⁵ Who would argue otherwise? Singer uses the example to support the putatively indisputable claim that whatever else one thinks about morality, when one can prevent a great harm a little cost to oneself, one should do so.

In fact, Singer's drowning child has elicited a robust literature of response from analytic philosophers, and an even representative survey of this literature would far exceed the remit of this essay.¹⁶ Peter Unger develops an extended series of variations on the drowning child to defend Singer's claim that affluent people have a moral obligation to give much more to relieve the hunger of needy people than they normally do.¹⁷ Although Unger again crafts his analysis as an essay on one of most salient issues in food ethics, the issue that motivates philosophical interest is the counterintuitive conclusion

of Philosophy as Envisioned by Black Feminists and John Dewey." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 23(2009): 92-99.

¹⁵ Singer, *Op. cit.* 1972.

¹⁶ Some of this literature is discussed in Paul B. Thompson, "Food Aid and the Famine Relief Argument (Brief Return)," *The Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23(2010): 209-227.

¹⁷ Peter K. Unger, *Living High and Letting Die: Our Illusion of Innocence*. New York: 1996, Oxford University Press.

that helping the poor is a strict moral duty, rather than being supererogatory or an instance of non-obligatory charity. The actual circumstances of hungry people and the structural features that reproduce food insecurity enter the discussion barely at all in Unger's treatment.

In fairness to Singer, *The Life You Can Save* is somewhat more sensitive to structural determinants of poverty, and the argument there is broadened considerably beyond a duty to offer aid to the victims of famine.¹⁸ Singer's personal commitment to aiding the poor and his grasp of the structural complexity involved in doing so are not at issue. His example is to be admired. Nonetheless, the philosophical task in *The Life You Can Save* is still one of persuasion, rather than joint inquiry or the realization of a democratic ideal. What is more the literature that Singer's work has spawned rarely addresses the question "What should be done about hunger?" but is instead focused on whether Singer's arguments should be judged successful in achieving their persuasive task. That is precisely what I take to be an expression of the analytic ethos in applied ethics.

Pragmatism, Pedagogy and Food Ethics

For decades, Singer's "Famine, Affluence and Morality," was paired with one of several similar articles by the population ecologist Garrett Hardin in readers intended for classroom use by philosophy professors. Notoriously, Hardin had argued that continuing to feed hungry people would only contribute to a continuing cycle of population growth: People fed today would only go on to have even more children in the future. Since Hardin believed that the carrying capacity of the planet Earth would soon be overtaxed by this expanding human population, he concluded that feeding people today would only insure that an even greater number of people would eventually succumb to starvation and the attendant diseases of malnutrition at some point in the future. Hardin's

reasoning appeared to be a straightforward application of the utilitarian maxim to do that which does the greatest good (or in this case, the least harm) to the greatest number of people. Since more people would eventually starve if the hungry are fed today, Hardin concluded that we must practice a form of triage in which human lives are sacrificed.¹⁹

It is not entirely clear what use philosophy teachers made of this pairing, though in my own experience it would divide the class. Those who felt the tug of emotion would side with Singer, while those resisting the injunction to open their wallet would opt for Hardin. Ironically, neither author articulated a philosophical rationale that would support the opinions being voiced by students in either group. The class discussions seemed to reflect the tension between "tough-minded" and "tenderhearted" mentalities discussed by William James far more than the way that Singer and Hardin were each reaching opposite but equally counterintuitive conclusions. As someone who was asking students to read these articles as part of a course that was dedicated to the ethics of food and agriculture, I became increasingly frustrated by the way in which this pairing of articles led students further and further from any practical engagement with the dilemmas of hunger, even if it did achieve some modest success in presenting a philosophically puzzling dilemma.

A more positive result of pairing Singer and Hardin might be to stimulate genuine doubt about what *should* be happening in response to famine and food deprivation. Taking the advice of John Dewey, a philosophically pragmatist approach in ethics follows the same general pattern of inquiry that would be appropriate for any situation in which human beings (working as individuals or social groups) find themselves in circumstances of genuine doubt about how to proceed. The idea of genuine doubt, as opposed to feigned or shame doubt, derives its role in philosophical

¹⁸ Singer, *Op. cit.* 2010.

¹⁹ Garrett Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor," *Psychology Today Magazine*, 8 (September 1974): 38–43, 123–126.

pragmatism from the founding work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Both Peirce and Dewey argued against the Cartesian ideal of full certainty, with Dewey especially claiming that pursuit of it had motivated analytic philosophy's program to develop secure epistemological foundations for science. Genuine doubt, however, is always framed against the background of habits, institutions and the results of prior inquiry. While any element in this background *might* be questioned and eventually found wanting, it is functionally impossible for inquirers to throw everything into abeyance in pursuit of absolute certainty. What should be done in response to the hunger of famine victims and of those who experience persistent or recurring episodes of food insecurity is, indeed, a question that raises genuine doubt and as such, it is a salient target for ethical inquiry.

We thus might question whether Singer's drowning child is an apt metaphor. Is it, in fact, as if we happen to pass a drowning child one afternoon, or is it more like the case where the fountains are filled with drowning children, many of whom throw themselves back into the shallow pool again immediately after being saved? Brad Hooker points out that Singer's response of patiently pulling out the drowning children hardly seems adequate to a situation in which we are confronted by an endless succession of drowning children,²⁰ though Hooker does not go on to explore how this weakness in the argument is relevant to the ethics of hunger or to the views of Hardin. As I have argued, this endless (and indeed escalating) sequence *is* the situation as Hardin imagines it. But this adaptation of the drowning child thought experiment hardly supports Hardin's conclusion that we must simply let them die. Draining the fountains seems like a more warranted response to repetitive cases of drowning children, and a pragmatist should look for analogous responses to the dilemmas of hunger.²¹

Of course, to extend the fountain-draining metaphor

into the ethics of hunger, we must actually learn something substantive about the circumstances of hungry people. In the 1970s, these circumstances were still being imagined as being similar to the hunger experienced by Europeans during the two great wars of the 20th century. European agriculture endured a virtual collapse during both World War I and World War II, leading to severe shortages in the amount of food. The U.S. Food Administration established by the Food Control Act of 1917 undertook a massive public information campaign to inculcate the idea that those with food (e.g. Americans) have a moral obligation to assist those without. In the 1950s this message was incorporated into a U.S.-led effort to address global problems of food insecurity based on the Marshall Plan, which had successfully accelerated the economic recovery of war-torn Europe following World War II. The centerpiece of the U.S. contribution was Public Law 480, better known as "Food for Peace." U.S. farm surpluses would be used both to feed and to fund relief and development efforts in less industrialized nations.²² In this manner, food aid became a weapon in Cold War politics, as American farm surplus came to be viewed as way to support client states in a worldwide competition between neoliberal capitalism and communistic socialism.²³

There are significant flaws in this overall understanding of world hunger. The most egregious one concerned the very circumstances of food insecure people in less industrialized economies. In most of these countries, as much as 80% of the population either were food producers or were in significant ways dependent on the food economy. A sudden influx of free food into these economies might well have brought relief to some hungry people, but it also contributes to a substantial

²⁰ Brad Hooker, "Sacrificing for the Good of Strangers-Repeatedly," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 59(1999): 177-181.

²¹ Thompson, *Op. cit.* 2010.

²² Helen Z. Veit, *Modern Food, Moral Food: Self-Control, Science, And The Rise of Modern American Eating in the Early Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill, NC: 2013, UNC Press Books.

²³ Paul B. Thompson, "Of Cabbages and Kings," *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 2(1988): 69-88.

destabilization of the local market. In short, why buy food from local farmers (who might be as poor or poorer than a food insecure urbanite) when the Americans are standing there giving it away for free? Although economists had begun to identify this flaw in the basic logic of food aid in the early 1960s, it has taken well into the 21st century for most national governments and many private charities to restructure the programs that they use to address hunger.²⁴ Perhaps it is time for philosophers to learn this lesson, as well.

Between Analytic and Pragmatic Food Ethics

The preceding discussion focuses on Singer's "Famine, Affluence and Morality," and the subsequent attention given to the drowning child argument. The pragmatic reconstruction of food ethics emphasizes a number of ways in which this argument is misleading. It is worth stressing that I have not subjected Singer's argument to the types of critique that analytic philosophers would typically regard as "philosophical." I have not questioned the validity of the argument, at least not in so far as validity is construed as a formal relationship specified in terms of logical consequence. I have not challenged Singer's key normative principle, his claim that if one can do something of moral significance at little cost to oneself, one should do so. I have not pursued the thought that social or geographical distance limits the applicability of this principle. Although the critique I offered in my 2010 paper mirrors Brad Hooker's in certain respects, unlike Hooker, I was not arguing that repetitive instances in which the principle is invoked limit its relevance. That is to say, the point is not to make a purely philosophical observation on the generalizability or the applicability of either Singer's principle or the drowning child metaphor. My goal is to move toward a more adequate account of the ethical questions that arise in connection with food security.

²⁴ Thompson, *Op. cit.* 2010; see also C. B. Barrett, and D. G. Maxwell, *Food Aid After Fifty Years: Recasting Its Role*. London: 2005, Routledge.

If there is any sense in which my discussion does contradict claims that Singer has made in his 1972 article, it must be in terms of his account of the facts. But analytic philosophers do not typically regard this type of challenge as philosophically significant. Indeed, one characteristic of analytic ethics is that one can still do good philosophy by continuing to discuss cases that are wildly at odds with *any* facts. This points to a further difference between pragmatism and analytic philosophy: a contrast in views on what philosophy actually is. Analytic applied ethics sees the philosopher as a master advocate, as someone who is judged on the persuasiveness of his or her argumentation. Dewey characterized the philosopher as a liaison officer, as someone whose role in socially conducted inquiries resides in making connections among the increasingly specialized sciences, and in assisting the process of integrating knowledge that emanates from distinct quarters into a more functional and satisfying whole. This picture of the philosopher's role can be derived both from Dewey's writings on the theory of inquiry as well as his conception of democracy. It will be useful to consider each in turn.

Although Dewey did make a number of significant remarks about schoolyard gardens in the process of developing his views on education,²⁵ the following discussion relies mainly on elements of his thought that hardly require exposition for readers of *Contemporary Pragmatism*. Dewey's theory of inquiry is nested within his account of the organism/environment interaction. As dependent on a metabolic process, all living things are poised for exchange with the world that envelops them. Even non-sentient organisms are oriented toward their surroundings in a manner that distinguishes them from

²⁵ Hickman, Larry A. "The Edible Schoolyard: Agrarian Ideals and Our Industrial Milieu," in *The Agrarian Roots of Pragmatism*, P. B. Thompson and T. C. Hilde, Eds. Nashville, TN: 2000, Vanderbilt University Press, pp. 195-205; Ralston, Shane J. "The Pragmatic Pyramid: John Dewey on Gardening and Food Security," *Social Philosophy Today* 30(2014): 63-76.

“a marble in a box”, to quote Dewey’s metaphor.²⁶ Situatedness is what characterizes the organism/environment totality, but as organisms become more complex, their situation or orientation reflects a repertoire of possible responses to opportunity or change in their environing conditions. A human being is certainly capable of responding to his or her environment in an enormously diverse number of ways, even if many of them remain under the sway of biological mechanisms or neurologically ingrained habit. To the extent that opportunities in this repertoire are responsive to the executive functions of the mind, inquiry becomes possible.

Dewey describes “the method of intelligence” as an explicit and consciously considered approach to discovery, ideational representation (or planning), rehearsal and execution as a thinking organism’s reply to opportunities or challenges that emerge from its environing world. The theory of inquiry is a characterization of this method from the standpoint of logic, which for Dewey is largely equivalent to critical thinking as performed by either individuals or groups. Socially conducted inquiries expand the repertoire of response by allowing for multiple perspectives or points of view to be considered and incorporated into a plan of action, and they become especially powerful when participants in the group can bring deep knowledge or unique experience to bear on the group’s preparation for action. However, as specialization in knowledge and experience increases, so does the opportunity for an internal breakdown or miscommunication within the social learning process.²⁷ Dewey believed that while

philosophers were no better equipped to assume the role of executive or “king” in a group inquiry than anyone else, their training did prepare them for identifying gaps, misinterpretations and failures in the process of collective learning and coordination of behavior. Philosophy, in other words, can be understood as a discipline for asking the questions that will allow a diverse group to formulate the problem, agree upon an end in view and creatively collaborative in responding to a problematic situation.²⁸

This picture of intelligence leads directly into Dewey’s conception of democracy, which is better understood as a collectively maintained ethos than as a specific set of governmental institutions. It is always useful to begin a discussion of Deweyan democracy by reminding ourselves that he views social groups, including political communities, through the same organism/environment lens discussed above. A family, a firm, an organized group and a polity are all social organisms, but since they are composed of individuals, their social capabilities will depend on those of their individual constituents to a significant extent. Individuals’ ability to participate in collaborative inquiry will depend upon their willingness to engage with one another in cooperative problem solving, as well as upon each individual’s capacity for making a contribution to the group effort. People who already share a mindset characterized by the work habits conducive to social inquiry are more likely to deploy the method of intelligence in social settings than those who do not. As such, communities that are able to establish institutions that reliably produce these epistemic virtues are much more likely to avail themselves of the advantages that

²⁶ From *Experience and Nature*, “to see the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems which haunt philosophy. And when thus seen they will be seen to be in, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never finished process” John Dewey, *The Later Work of John Dewey, 1925-1953, V. 1. Experience and Nature*, J. Boydston, Ed. Carbondale, IL: 1981, Southern Illinois University Press. Quote on p. 224.

²⁷ Though this is a persistent theme in Dewey’s thought

see especially “Experience and Education,” in John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 13: 1938-1939, Essays, Experience and Education, Freedom and Culture, and Theory of Valuation*, J. Boydston, Ed. Carbondale, IL: 1988, Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 49-60.

²⁸ Thompson, Paul B. and Zachary Piso, “Dewey and environmental philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of John Dewey*, S. Fessmire, Ed. New York: Forthcoming, Oxford University Press.

inquiry confers upon thinking organisms. Education is, for Dewey, a social institution that builds such capacities while also reproducing and strengthening the ethos, mentality or culture that allows them to be deployed cooperatively.

This is, of course, only a bare sketch of how Dewey links education to democracy. What is relevant here is the contrast between the analytic ethos and the democratic ethos. Analytic ethics not only privileges persuasive argumentation but goes on to dictate the standards that all subjects must use to determine whether or not they have been persuaded. The democratic ethos is geared toward recognizing situations that call for action and then working collectively to respond in a way that maintains a common faith. The role that falls to philosophy given Dewey's vision of the need to construct and reconstruct the dispositions that incline individuals toward cooperative inquiry is one of helping maintain and improve the institutions that reproduce these dispositions day after day, generation after generation. That role is often as educators who participate in the democratic culture through a discipline of self-criticism and respectful pedagogy. In the schools, philosophers must model inquiry even as they convey established truths in a somewhat didactic fashion. As I have interpreted this role, it implies that the professor of philosophy should forswear purely persuasive applications of logic, rhetoric and epistemology and concentrate on problems of genuine puzzlement. There are, of course, elements of classroom practice that dictate simple conveyance of these capabilities to one's students, yet for me, at least, when philosophers write for one another and for the larger and more inclusive groups that form the various publics of the contemporary world, they should never be writing purely to persuade.

This is not to say that there are no occasions on which persuasive speech or writing would ever be appropriate. Indeed, the performance of democracy offers many such occasions. Yet on the pragmatist understanding of philosophy, in these occasions we act

in our capacity as citizens, rather than as philosophers, *per se*.²⁹ Thus, if I have been at all faithful to the practice of analytic ethicists, their conception of where philosophy begins and ends is almost directly contrary to that of a pragmatist. When dealing with contentious or complex issues—and persistent hunger is certainly one—the role of the philosopher is not to convince others to take a particular position, but to undertake or perform an open ended inquiry in manner that invites all comers who will accept the norms of discourse to participate as equals. In this respect, Habermasian discourse ethics is a welcome adjunct to Dewey's conception of democracy.³⁰

Getting Pragmatic about Our Food

It would be disingenuous to end this essay with the concluding thought of the previous section. While I sincerely believe that applied ethicists trained in analytic graduate programs bring a different spirit to their philosophical writing than those who have more pluralistic influences, it would be false to claim that pragmatists never encounter situations in which giving an argument is precisely the right thing to do. As inquiries spawned by genuine doubt wear on, parties develop entrenched positions. Even people who are fully committed to the norms of democratic discourse will find themselves needing to persuade others of a finding that they have reached at some time in the past. As already mentioned, Dewey's democracy accommodates argumentative engagement as a function of our role as citizens, but there are quite similar circumstances that arise when people gather to inquire about how to conduct themselves as philosophers. In this vein, I want close by calling attention to some of the ways that pragmatist ethics *can* be tied to work in analytic philosophy.

²⁹ For an application in food ethics see Michiel Korthals, "Taking consumers seriously: Two concepts of consumer sovereignty." *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 14 (2001): 201-215.

³⁰ Thompson, *Op. cit.* 2002.

One of early pragmatism's distinguishing features concerns the role of habit. Peirce, James and Dewey each developed distinctive accounts of the role played by non-deterministic regularities. For James and Dewey, the habits of greatest theoretical importance are personal and social dispositions that both orient an organism or organization toward a particular repertoire of possible responses toward their surrounding environment, and produce a form of soft determinism or behavioral conditioning that explains the organism's selection of a given form of conduct, absent contravening conditions. There are several respects in which an attention to food should be of significant interest to any philosophy taking this general approach.

First, it is feeding behavior that provides a key unifying biological framework for making sense of organism/environment interactions as they are studied across various phylogenetic classification schemes. Many non-vertebrate organisms are oriented within their environments primarily in terms of their need to capture the nutrients necessary for the metabolism that fuels the life process. In short, to be an organism is, in important respects, to be situated within a food world.³¹ Given the importance of the organism/environment relationship for Dewey's general philosophy and his general strategy of interpreting both individual human beings and social activities according to a schema that denies a metaphysically grounded human exceptionalism, it is surprising that he does not give more attention to feeding behaviors than he does. However, references to food do occur in Dewey's works with some regularity, especially when he is discussing the organism/environment interaction in a manner that is intended to be inclusive of non-human or non-sentient organisms. As such, philosophical attention to food and metabolic process is a key to understanding Dewey's general orientation to conduct.

³¹ Margaret Crouch discusses the symbolic aspects of human food worlds in "Food Worlds, Film and Gender" in *The Encyclopedia of Food and Agricultural Ethics*, P. B. Thompson and D. M. Kaplan, Eds. Dordrecht, NL: 2014, Springer, DOI: 10.1007/978-94-007-6167-4_497-1

Following immediately on this point, food activity implies the strong sense in which pragmatism is committed to a naturalistic embodied understanding of the human being. Raymond Boisvert and Lisa Heldke refer to the human condition as one of "stomached being." They stress how this conception of embodiment underlines the contrast between a pragmatist conception of humanity and the disembodied subject of the Cartesian abstraction. Even in contrast to a Continental philosophical tradition that also foregrounds embodiment, this portrayal of the human subject as one who eats draws our attention to a more visceral notion of the body, and leads us to consider biophysical interdependencies that oppose a more abstract notion of embodiment.³² Boisvert and Heldke build upon this metaphysical point to discuss further aspects of food that take us into the aesthetics of preparing and enjoying food, as well as the social ethics of conviviality and hospitality associated with eating together.

As valid and important as these observations might be, there is also a more direct way in which the habituated nature of foodways becomes pragmatically significant. Because the practices of obtaining and eating food are done frequently and are highly contingent upon one's socio-economic milieu, they inevitably serve as habits or institutions that occupy a philosophically significant middle-ground. By middle-ground here I mean that they are less deep, less ingrained and less foundational than the motor responses of which pragmatic psychologists like James and Dewey were fond of discussing. While Pavlovian salivation is, indeed, a food-related reflex, the practices that I am calling attention to here are the quotidian habits that one goes through in getting one's breakfast, making a sack lunch or ordering from a menu at dinner. These are, in crucial respects, fully *conscious* activities, yet they are also routinized, even as they may encompass quite a bit of

³² Boisvert, Raymond D. and Lisa Heldke. *Philosophers at Table: On Food and Being Human*. London: 2016, Reaktion Books.

opportunity for divergence in the particular response that an individual or group makes on a given occasion. Thus frequent travelers engage in the conversation or the Internet search for an appealing eatery with the virtually the same level of habituated familiarity that peasant farmers exhibit when they prepare and consume a daily bowl of rice. Without minimizing the expanded range of opportunity that accompanies the privilege of wealth, both are undertaking complex actions that involve elements of planning and deliberateness, while at the same time neither undertaking is so problematic or unfamiliar as to require deployment of what Dewey's method of intelligence. An adventurer in a truly unknown food environment might experience things differently, but food practices are, for most of us most of the time, paradigm examples of the prosaic day-to-day that forms our background consciousness. They are middle-ground in being more prominent and more interesting than a reflex action, but less important and requiring much less reflective engagement than a truly problematic situation.

Elsewhere I have called attention to this aspect of food, claiming that the ethics of food consumption behavior is not perspicaciously described as rational choice.³³ This claim rests upon recent work in cognitive science that draws a distinction between so-called fast and slow thinking. This still-developing theory suggests that many intentional actions that are controlled by rapid and "lazy" mental processes system that rely on readily available sensory data and conceptual resources.³⁴ In replying to Jeffery Brown's worry that portion control regulations might be paternalistic,³⁵ I call attention to Daniel Kahnemann's popular summary of this research in suggesting that fast thinking is characteristic of the pragmatists' emphasis on

habit.³⁶ "Fast thinking" is characterized by "biases" that can generate well-known fallacies in some well-documented cases where more careful, quantitatively probabilistic and logical thinking would lead individuals to make decisions that conform to the traditional criteria of rational choice. However, execution of more careful, analytic thinking is both slow and experienced as difficult or taxing by the subjects of psychological research.

There are, of course, different philosophical strategies for making sense of this new work in cognitive science. Brad Hooker has drawn upon it to argue for "two-level" utilitarianism, where "fast" thinking may be morally justified by the additional cost that more careful thinking imposes on the decision maker, potentially off-setting the greater nominal utility that could have been realized by making a quantitatively correct assessment of decision options.³⁷ While Hooker's work draws analytic two-level utilitarianism closer to pragmatist epistemology, I argue that we simply should not expect people to deploy careful analytic procedures of evaluation in what I have called middle-ground cases where we are neither solving the detailed problems that call for slow thinking nor mindlessly executing a motor response. Food behavior is a particularly cogent example of situations in which we should tolerate a fair amount of inconsistency in any given individual's conduct. Here, the highly contextualized nature of action can resolve inconsistencies without needing to think much about them. Developing a line of reasoning that accords well with pragmatism, Patricia Churchland suggests that such conflicts will be characteristic of cognitive systems that reflect not only the evolutionary history of the human species, but also the evolution of habit and pattern in each individual's acquisition of multiple capabilities for modulating their responses to the circumstances they encounter in their environment.³⁸

³³ Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, *Op. cit.* pp. 241-247.

³⁴ Jonathan S. B. T. Evans and Keith E. Frankish. *In Two Minds: Dual Processes and Beyond*. New York: 2009, Oxford University Press.

³⁵ Brown, Jeffrey M., "Paternalism, health and dietary choices: Commentary on Paul B. Thompson's *From Field To Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*," *Social Philosophy Today*, 33(2017): 217-224.

³⁶ Thompson Paul B. "From field to fork and on to philosophy: Response to commentators," *Social Philosophy Today* 33 (2017): 225-232.

³⁷ Hooker, Brad. *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality*. New York: 2000, Oxford University Press.

³⁸ Churchland, Patricia S., *Braintrust: What Neuroscience*

In a summative conclusion to my book *From Filed to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone* inspired by Dewey's article "Three Independent Factors in Morals"³⁹ I argue that food-related behaviors are prime candidates for evaluative routines that combine consequentialist, deontological and virtue-oriented patterns of moral reasoning. We should regard changes in our routines as experiments that can only be evaluated in light of subsequent learning, as opposed to being evaluated in advance in terms of their conformity to the utilitarian maxim, the categorical imperative or some other ideal principle. Some behaviors will be better approached through the lens of virtue ethics. One might reconcile this pattern of response with utilitarianism through behavioral economics, as Hooker does, but does one *need* to do so? I simply reject the claim that we can reasonably (much less ethically) hold individuals to standards of rigor and consistency such as those articulated by MacPherson in his case for veganism. Teaching students that they must engage in careful logical analysis in order to act ethically is a recipe for social disaster. It is possible to explicate logical principles and to demonstrate their utility in ethical reasoning without issuing commands telling someone what they must or must not do.

This is not the place to launch a detailed comparison of alternative ways to interpret recent work in cognitive science. A pragmatist approach in ethics suggests that when it comes to actual practice, the situational complexity will swamp many of the fine points that are currently being debated by ethical theorists. Dewey's original articulation of the theory of inquiry suggests that the work of the philosopher may come as much in holding the early stages of problem formulation open for innovative alternatives as it does in defending a

prescriptive principle. In such cases the first priority for a pragmatist food ethics is to actually learn something about food, where it comes from, how ways of producing and distributing it are constrained by multiple contingencies and how attitudes toward food are ecologically interwoven among many habits and institutional tendencies. Perhaps given that background we will encounter situations of genuine doubt about what we should be doing in the food system, and the skills we have acquired as philosophers will prove useful in conducting the collective inquiries needed to resolve those doubts.

Conclusion

University-based departments of philosophy continue to pursue strands in moral theory that have roots in the early 20th century's commitment to a sharp separation between empirical fact and subjectively grounded normativity. Pragmatists of the early 20th century were already articulating a host of reasons why even the most factually-oriented statement was permeated by prior commitments having rich ethical significance. In applied ethics—including food ethics—the analytic ethos is expressed through prescriptive arguments. detailed discussion of their normative premises and general disinterest in whether the framing of the argument lends itself towards actual improvement in the practical situations to which the prescriptions nominally apply. The pragmatist ethos is one of building capacity for collective, democratic problem solving. One should not be entirely dismissive of theory-driven, argument focused approaches in analytic applied ethics. There is no doubt that Singer's work has influenced many people toward greater attentiveness and reflection on important ethical issues. What is more, the argument oriented approach does not preclude responsiveness toward situational complexities. MacPherson's argument for veganism is couched within a lengthy discussion of how the circumstances of many individuals (including

Tells Us About Morality. Princeton, NJ: 2011, Princeton University Press.

³⁹ John Dewey, *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953. Volume 5: 1929-1930, Essays, The Sources of a Science Education, Individualism, Old and New, and Construction and Criticism* J. Boydston, Ed. Carbondale, IL: 1981, Southern Illinois University Press, pp. 280-289.

relative poverty) limits their ability to make practical vegan choices. As such, his suggestion that “you should be a vegan, too” is highly qualified in ways that are reminiscent of my own writings on ethical vegetarianism.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, thoroughgoing pragmatists will be less likely to develop prescriptive arguments, especially in the absence of a fairly detailed and context-sensitive account of the empirical circumstances in which actions would eventually be taken. What is more, there are reasons why pragmatists really *should* be taking a closer look at food issues than classical figures like Peirce, James or Dewey ever did. Not only are foodways paradigmatic forms of habituated practice that should be of intrinsic interest to pragmatists, recent work in the cognitive sciences illustrates novel strategies for being pragmatic and practically relevant at the same time.

⁴⁰ See Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, *Op. cit.* at pp. 146-158.