



**Sylvia R. Karasu M.D.**

The Gravity of Weight

## Some Philosophical Musings on Food

Only a philosopher can ask, 'What is the metaphysical coefficient of lemon?'

Like 30

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French essayist Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, bust in Belley, France

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“Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you who you are.” So wrote the late 18th, early 19th century French essayist Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin in his classic book *The Physiology of Taste*. Of course, it is not so simple, as David M. Kaplan explains in the introduction to his book *The Philosophy of Food*, (2012), “Philosophers have a long but scattered history of analyzing food...Food is vexing. It is not even clear what it is.” So predictably, says Kaplan, “There is no consensus among philosophers about the nature of food.” He notes that even our most essential questions about food, such as what we should eat, whether food is safe, or what is considered good food are “difficult questions because they involve philosophic questions about metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, politics, and aesthetics.” For example, Kaplan wonders what are the differences between natural and artificial foods, between food and an animal, between food and other things we take into our bodies such as water or medication. Or even how food can change its identity over time as it goes from raw to cooked to spoiled.

Kaplan describes food as nutrition (e.g. objectively required for the body); food as nature (e.g. the

more natural the better); food as culture (e.g. with social and cultural meanings and significance, such as categories of good and bad, legal and illegal, ritualistic and symbolic foods); food as a social good (e.g. food distribution as a basic institution of society); food as spirituality (e.g. central to religious traditions); food as desire (e.g. object of hunger and cravings); and food as an aesthetic object (e.g. has taste and appeals to the senses.) To Kaplan, “Food is about life as well as luxury...It is a profoundly moral issue,” especially when we consider the basics of not eating other humans and the responsibility to provide food for others, as well as the three food virtues: hospitality (e.g. being a good host); temperance (e.g. moderation in food and drink), and table manners (e.g. all cultures have rules that may involve health, enjoyment and community.)

Other than Hippocrates, whose body of work is replete with references to the importance of a healthy regimen involving a balance between food intake and proper exercise, Plato was one of the ancient Greek philosophers to address the importance of diet and its contribution to disease. Skiadas and Lascaratos (*European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, 2001) review the many references to diet and even the dire health consequences of obesity throughout Plato’s writings. For example, in *The Republic*, Plato writes, “...the first and chief of our needs is the provision of food for existence and life.” In *Laws*, he writes, “For there ought to be no other secondary task to hinder the work of supplying the body with its proper exercise and nourishment” and he describes the obese as “an idle beast, fattened by sloth.” In *Timaeus*, “...one ought to control all such diseases... by means of dieting rather than irritate a fractious evil by drugging.” Skiadas and Lascaratos summarize Plato’s contribution by noting that Plato’s writings on diet reflected his general theory of moderation that had been a major concept dominating ancient Greek philosophy.

Michel Onfray has written a charming book, *Appetites for Thought: Philosophers and Food*, an *amuse-bouche*, if you will, or rather an *amuse d’esprit*—a book to stimulate our mind’s palate. Originally published in the late 1980s, it has just recently ( 2015) been translated from the French. Onfray, who believes that one’s food choice is really “an existential choice,” imagines a “banquet of omnivores” where some of the world’s greatest philosophers have come to dine.

For example, ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes, (born in the 400s BC), as typical of his group of Cynics, is “possessed of a resolute will to say no, to flush out the conformism of customary behavior,” says Onfray. There are numerous reports of Diogenes’ unconventional behavior, such as urinating, defecating, and even masturbating publicly. The first principle, though, of the Cynics (from the Greek word for “dog”) is to eat only simple, pure raw foods. This is reflective of Diogenes’ rejection of fire as a symbol of



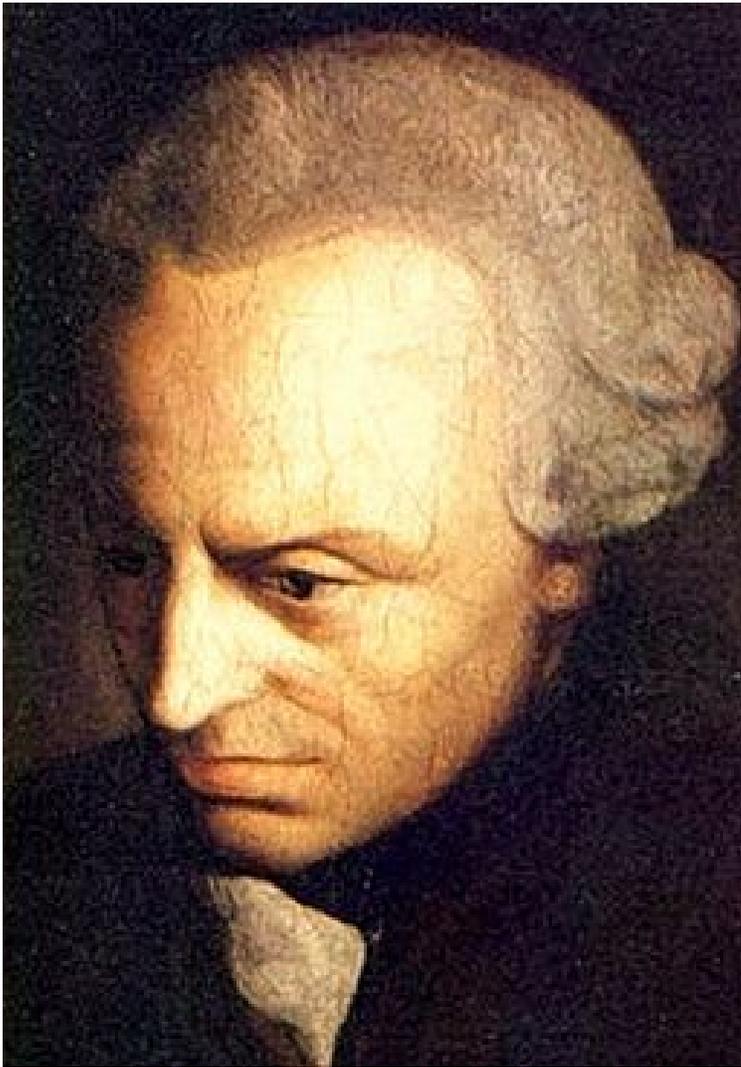
Mosaic of Greek Cynic Diogenes, Römisch-Germanisches Museum, 2nd or 3rd century AD

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civilization—“limiting your needs to those of nature.” One dies as one lives so it is not surprising to learn from ancient historian Plutarch that Diogenes risked his life in the process of eating a raw octopus.

Onfray describes 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, famous for his treatise on education *Emile* as a “gastronomic self-denier” who developed a “spartan theory” of food whereby eating “is an imperative for survival, not for enjoyment.” Rousseau apparently ate food that required the minimum of preparation: milk, bread, and water. Says Rousseau, in his autobiography *Confessions*, “I do not know know...any better fare than a country meal.” In his novel *Julie; or The New Heloise*, he writes, “In general I think one could often find some index of people’s character in the choice of foods they prefer.”

Eighteenth century Immanuel Kant, famous for his *Critique of Pure Reason*, distinguished between the “superior (and objective) senses” of touch, sight, and hearing from the “inferior (and subjective) senses” of smell and taste. In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes, “Brutish excess in the use of food and drink is misuse of the means of nourishment...A man who is drunk is like a mere animal, not to be treated as a human being. When stuffed with food he is in a condition in which he is incapacitated for a time...” According to biographers, Kant suffered from irregular digestion and stomach problems throughout his life and admitted to being a hypochondriac. He apparently had nothing more than weak tea for breakfast and ate only one meal a day, at midday. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, he writes, “...an impulse to have an evening meal



Immanuel Kant, 18th century painting, unknown painter

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after an adequate and satisfying one at midday can be considered a pathological feeling...”

Nineteenth century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, famous for his statement “God is dead” also suffered from digestive issues, among his many ailments. There has, in fact, been considerable speculation on the nature of his illness. For a discussion of six possible hypotheses, see Tényi’s 2012 paper in the journal *Psychiatria Hungarica*. Nietzsche wrote, in *Ecce Homo*, “I am much more interested in a question on which the ‘salvation of humanity’ depends far more than on any theologian’s credo; the question of nutrition.” In *The Gay Science*, he writes, “What is known of the moral effects of different foods? Is there a philosophy of nutrition? (The constant revival of noisy agitation for and against vegetarianism proves that there is no such philosophy.)” Onfray notes that Nietzsche tended to avoid restaurants because they “overfeed” their customers. “Know the size of one’s stomach,” writes Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*. According to Onfray, Nietzsche “never put into practice the dietetics of his theories” and again, in his *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche writes, “I am one thing, what I write is another matter.”

Twentieth century French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre had a concept of the body that “was above all sick, mutilated, butchered, and unrecognizable,” says Onfray, and Sartre had strong likes and dislikes among foods. He is, not surprisingly, the author of *Nausea*. Sartre’s lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir, quotes Sartre as saying, “All food is a symbol.” Onfray notes that Sartre accepted only food that had been technically altered or prepared. Apparently, so unlike Diogenes, he



Norwegian painter Edvard Munch's portrait of Nietzsche, 1906, Thiel Gallery

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disliked the natural and found “only manufactured, artificial products to his liking.” De Beauvoir quotes him as saying, “Food must be the result of work performed by men. Bread is like that. I’ve always thought that bread was a relation with other men.” In *Being and Nothingness*, he asks, “What is the metaphysical coefficient of lemon, of water, of oil?” Sartre thought it was for psychoanalysts to explore why someone “gladly eats tomatoes and refuses to eat beans, why he vomits if he is forced to swallow oysters, or raw eggs.”

Over the centuries, philosophers never developed a consensus about food and eating but many have had strong opinions about both. For the 21st century, with widespread and pervasive obesity and overweight, perhaps a simple philosophy that we might agree upon is that we should eat to live, rather than live to eat.



French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, (photographer unknown), who asks, "What is the metaphysical coefficient of lemon..?"

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## About the Author



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**In Print:** *The Gravity of Weight: A Clinical Guide to Weight Loss and Maintenance*

**Online:** my own website

