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Special Issue

Metaphysics at the Table

Edited by

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Metaphysics at the Table: Introduction

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Contemporary philosophers have studied food and its consumption from several disciplinary perspectives, including normative ethics, bioethics, environmental ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, and aesthetics. Many questions remain, however, underexplored or unaddressed. It is in the spirit of contributing to fill in these scholarly gaps that we designed the current issue, which represents the first collection of papers dedicated to food from a perspective of analytic metaphysics.

Before presenting the five papers published in this issue, we shall briefly frame the current research on food linked to analytic metaphysics and point out future directions of research in this area. We begin with the most basic interrogative, namely *What is food?*, and then offer three illustrations of more specific research questions. We hope these examples suffice to demonstrate that food is a fertile terrain of inquiry for analytic metaphysics and that it deserves to be developed.

1. Overarching Research Question: What Is Food?

Food is so ingrained in our ordinary worldview that the question *What is food?* may seem a trivial one with a straightforward answer. Well, it isn't. When you start taking it seriously, the question opens a canister of tricky sub-questions. Here are some examples. Why is a banana a food while a raw olive is not? Are common medicines, such as aspirin pills, a food? Are chewing gums to be regarded as food, even though they are not ingested? Are beverages types of foods or is there a profound metaphysical distinction between foods and beverages?

Interrogatives like these multiply quickly. Jointly taken, they flag the existence of underlying theoretical issues that deserve investigation, as pointed out in some recent literature.¹ Metaphysics seems especially well-positioned to address them and provide a full framework of the nature of food insofar as it studies the nature of things and their mutual relations. To do so, we suggest, metaphysicians should draw on parallel attempts to study specific "regions" of reality, as for instance in the ongoing debates on race and gender (Asta 2018), species (Slater 2013), or social entities (Haslanger 2012).

¹ See especially Kaplan 2019: 19-27, and Borghini & Piras 2020.

As a way of illustration, in this introduction we shall point out two important sub-questions descending from *What is food?*:

- (1) Is *food* a natural kind term?
- (2) Which ontological category best captures the nature of food—concrete particular, sortal, predicate, process, or something else still?

We shall briefly present both questions.

(1) Generally speaking, it seems that, in order to be a food, an entity should have several natural properties apt to nourish a certain kind of being—in the case we are considering here, nourish humans. This suggests a *naturalistic conception* of food according to which being food is to be nourishment for a certain kind of living being. However, having this property is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for being food. It is not sufficient because there are plenty of things that could nourish a human being and that are, nevertheless, not regarded as foods in most contexts, such as human flesh, pets, insects, or disgusting items to eat (DeFoliart 1999). Moreover, having the property of nourishing human beings is not necessary for being food because human beings have been eating a large and assorted array of food during their history that do not seem nourishing, such as indigestible entities, e.g., many vegetal fibres (Lunn & Buttriss 2007), or chewing gums, or spices.

At this point, one may think that being nourishing for human beings is not the right sort of natural property that can prove that food is a natural kind. If so, which natural properties, if any, can fix the identity of human food *qua* natural kind? Should we rather think of food as a social or an institutional kind? This is the challenge that we wish to put on the table, leaving its analysis for another occasion.

(2) Which ontological category best captures the nature of food? To answer this question, we may begin by looking at specific food items. Going by our ordinary language, we may surmise that specific foods are concrete particulars. A rocket salad, a chocolate chip cookie, a piece of sourdough bread, a glass of Chi-anti all seem to be concoctions of edible stuff bearing specific properties (calories, nutrients, aesthetic qualities, site-specific links, etc.). Yet, one may rebut that any edible has a (not presumed, but effective) expiration date, past which it is no longer a food even though the stuff still continues to exist. This may suggest that food terms may function as some sort of predicates. Thus, for instance, “rocket salad” and “chocolate chip” may be regarded as sortal terms, while other food terms such as “salt” or “tomato” may be regarded as natural kind terms, and others still as generic predicates (e.g. “cocktail” or “carpaccio”). Alternative theoretical options may seem viable too, however. For instance, fermented foods like wine or yoghurt may be regarded as processes because they are dynamic complex systems. A process view would go well also with the complex manners in which foods are digested by our bodies, for one might argue that food lingers through the entire process, from tasting to nourishing.

Stepping back from the specificities of the dispute, we may wonder whether all food items should belong to one and the same ontological category. If they do, then food would presumably be identified with that category; if they do not, then what to do of the generic food category? These and cognate questions have been discussed (Borghini & Piras 2020), but more research still awaits to be done.

2. Three Specific Research Questions

Moving to specific food items, in this section we showcase three areas of research where analytic metaphysics contributes to food scholarship.

Hunger. Humans need to eat to survive. The first physiological and psychological state which signals this need is generically referred to as “hunger.” This state is far more shaped by psychological, social, and cultural conditions than one might think (Borghini 2014). If so, then, what kind of state is hunger? Is it a purely physiological state? Is it a mental state? Is it a feeling or an emotion? The way we address these and cognate questions has a bearing also on how we understand eating disorders and how we clinically and legally frame them (Giordano 2005). More broadly, a theory of hunger has a bearing for how we assess the politics of dieting and obesity (Borghini & Serpico 2020).

Identity of specific foods. Analytic metaphysics can help address questions of identity for specific foods. Such questions may be grouped into different clusters based on the types of food products under consideration. As a way of illustration, consider geographical indications, namely those products (foods, but not only) that bear their identity to an essential link with a geographical region. Why does Champagne hold a superb reputation? The standard refrain calls on a specific *terroir*—a mixture of soil, rainfall, climate, and human tender uniquely characterizing the grapes. Yet, as Earth’s climate is rapidly changing, it is arguably the case that *terroir* is also changing. Is the identity of Champagne wines shifting too? If climate would force a thorough rethinking of grapevine production in Champagne, is the identity of Champagne going to be compromised? A thorough metaphysical study can help point out the most sound answers to these and related questions, by investigating what makes the content of a bottle an authentic instance of a wine (Todd 2010, Smith 2016).

Besides geographical indications, analytic metaphysics can help address questions of identity for many other food items, such as recipes (Borghini Piras 2020a), genetically modified foods (Andrée 2008), or specific food categories—e.g. local food, organic food, natural food (Siipi 2015).

Food and language. Language plays a central role in human relation to food. The list of examples is too long to be exhausted here and we shall only point at a few of them. First, experimental studies in computational linguistics on food show that the descriptors of a food, including its price, can make it more or less attractive (Jurafsky 2014, Spence 2017). Second, naming enters into the identity of recipes too: are pasta and noodle the same? Third, Adams (1990) amply demonstrates that the ways in which we talk about meat—such as the use of the neutral pronoun “it”—is crucial in shaping the sexual politics of meat.

As the latter example attests, research in this area can fruitfully be conjoined with the growing scholarship on the ethics and politics of language to foster multiculturalism, inclusivity, and diversity when it comes to (medical and institutional) dietary advice, marketing, and more broadly food communication.

As we hope these notes demonstrate, much work awaits to be done by analytic metaphysicians in the study of food. This issue can be fruitful in two directions: first, it contributes to complexify metaphysical theories of identity, persistence, properties, causation, and composition. It is also a fruitful angle to study the interplay between the ontology of natural and social entities. Besides, such a work would be beneficial not only to the field, but most importantly it would serve to provide a much needed grounding to food scholarship and to debates surrounding food in the public sphere (Bonotti & Barnhill 2019). Broadly speaking an analytic perspective on food brings new insights into the relationship between language, perceptions, and reality.

3. The Current Special Issue

Finally, we shall briefly present the five articles collected in this special issue, which nicely complement the existing literature. They address a well-assorted variety of topics in metaphysics: aesthetics properties; mereology and food systems; local food; recipes and the authenticity of dishes; “normal” food *vs.* food substitutes and supplements. Papers also come from scholars at different stages of their careers and specializing in diverse camps of philosophy. In the remaining, we outline the contribution of each paper.

Sara Bernstein’s paper “Can Unmodified Food Be Culinary Art?” explores an original question regarding the aesthetic of food. Bernstein wonders whether, in some circumstances, unmodified food, that is food that has not undergone any kind of alteration or enhancement, can be considered to be culinary art. Her answer is positive. Throughout the paper she constructs parallelisms between unmodified food and visual art objects (especially, readymades) and shows that there are several similarities between the two. According to Bernstein, in order to establish whether some unmodified food can count as culinary art there has to be an interplay between the artistic intentions of a chef, the attitude of the consumer, who must have certain expectations and pay careful attention to the culinary experience (this what Bernstein calls “aesthetic trust”). Bernstein argues that aesthetic trust is neither necessary nor sufficient for culinary art, nonetheless it plays a central role. What counts most in determining whether some unmodified food can count as culinary art are culinary settings and institutions. As well as in the artistic world museums, art critics, art magazines determine whether an object can count as art, the place where such food is being served, group of food critics, culinary magazines, and social media are influential in conferring culinary artistic status. Bernstein argues that what makes something culinary art is a matter of receiving attention from the right sort of institutions, embracing an institutionalist theory of art.

Shane Epting’s paper “Unjust Food Systems and Applied Mereology” proposes to employ an applied-mereological approach to solve some of the issues that originate from the complexity of conventional food systems. Such systems are composed of a huge number of parts located all around the globe, but an overabundance of these components generates what Epting calls “globalized opacity.” This opacity does not allow us to see how all these parts interact and, as a consequence, to understand how the entire system works. Not knowing the interactions between these components makes it difficult to identify the sources of problems connected to the system, especially when it comes to social injustices. In order to reduce such issues and improve food justice, Epting argues that it is necessary to investigate the relations among the parts that compose the system by adopting an “applied-mereological” method. This method not only can help to understand how to lower the number of parts (and so to reduce globalized opacity), but also how to replace those parts that generate injustices with alternative ones. In the last section of his paper, Epting identifies some areas which deserve further research (e.g., production, distribution, and consumption) and suggests that this research should be interdisciplinary.

In her paper “Local Food as Social Change: Food Sovereignty as a Radical New Ontology,” Samantha Noll discusses the importance of ontology in the analyses of local food movements. These analyses are usually made from an ethical or social and political perspective, giving the structure and the strategies of local

food projects. Noll argues that also an ontological analysis is fundamental in order to provide a good analysis of local food: ontology could provide valuable insights into the principles that guide local food movements, and it could help to understand the “revolutionary promise” of such movements. Noll then focuses on two different kinds of local food projects: food security (guided by distributive justice) and food sovereignty (guided by a more expansive justice). She provides an overview of the justice frameworks and ontological commitments that govern these two projects. Noll concludes by claiming that food sovereignty projects are “revolutionary,” since they could change industrial food practices, but also, since they are built on a new political ontology and a “co-constitutive food-focused orientation,” these projects could lead to the construction of new social and political structures.

In his paper “Towards a Particularist Metaphysics of Recipes,” Giulio Sciacca develops a novel metaphysical account of recipes and investigates the concept of authenticity of dishes in relation to recipes. Sciacca’s paper is structured in two main parts. In the first part, he argues against a Platonist account of recipes, rejecting the thesis that recipes are universals instantiated by dishes, and claiming that there are some grounding relations between recipes and dishes that are not those of instantiation. In the second part of the paper, by developing some aspects of Borghini (2015) constructivist account of recipes, Sciacca advances his novel account according to which recipes are “abstract cultural artifacts” that are traced through their “history and recordings”. In Sciacca’s view, which takes a cue from Kaplan’s theory of words, in order to preserve the authenticity of dishes, the mental or written stages through which recipes are handed to future generations must be appropriately connected to what he calls “the introductory stage” of the recipe and the dish they encode.

Helena Siipi’s aim in her paper “Food, Food Substitutes and Food Supplements” is to understand what is food by exploring its relation with food substitutes and food supplements, and she explores such relations by focusing on their functions. She argues that food substitutes (such as almond milk instead of dairy milk) and food supplements (such as proteins or multivitamin) can fulfill some but not all the functions fulfilled by what she calls “real food.” Indeed, in her view, “real food” has social, cultural, aesthetic, culinary, nutritional and other functions that food substitutes and supplements lack. Siipi then raises an interesting issue regarding some kinds of food substitutes, such as in vitro meat, that apparently share most of real food’s functions. According to Siipi, some distinctions between real food and food substitutes are determined only by social customs and habits. Food substitutes, which could instead be seen just as alternatives, are considered to be novel and uncustomary, only because of individuals’ experiences (what comes first looks more real and authentic than what comes next).

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