

# Everything is edible at least once: an ethics of eating

By

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## Introduction: Life in a Pickle

If I could choose where my passion and talents lie, I would choose to be a storyteller—one that can write prose and tell stories that have the power to change lives. But stories have their limits in what they can do, especially if there is no one to hear them. I am not a good storyteller, nor do I know how many people will read my writing. Nevertheless, I choose to write *something* to make sense of the situation I find myself in. My hope is to use philosophy to navigate my complicated relation with food, and to show readers who share similar concerns a possible ethical eating relation with food.

I write in response to the growing concern and awareness around the ethical issues in food production and consumption. Ethical eating practices like veganism and vegetarianism are often presented as the ethical alternative to meat-based diets if we are concerned for the wellbeing of animals. But being vegetarian or vegan in North America still requires us to consider the ecological impact of monocrop agriculture and the wellbeing of laborers. The conundrum in choosing between eating animals or supporting agricultural practices that pollute waterways and threaten biodiversity mean no matter what food choices we make we are still implicated in damage of some sort. Attempting to juggle between environmental considerations and consideration of animals often leads to vegans, vegetarians, and other ethical food eaters being criticized for hypocrisy. Furthermore, ethical food diets are often expensive and inaccessible for poor people and effectively reserves ethical eating for those who are wealthy. With the multiple dimensions of consideration, it is tempting to only focus on one aspect as controlling one thing in response to chaos and build up an ethical response to other dimensions from there. But if all eating involves some kind of suffering or damage to the environment, the workers, or the organisms, this approach can be paralyzing. I think it is possible to do better, and to theorize about ethical eating practices that are not overwhelming and are sensitive to oppression and its legacy along the lines of race, gender, and class.

In my thesis, I argue for an ethical eating practice based on a relational ontology of food with the hopes that it provides a good method of thinking through ethical eating practices. I do this by grounding my argument in a theoretical framework that recognizes knowledge and interpretations as situated in social contexts and acquired/developed for social goals. The theoretical framework I engage with and my starting position will be explained in detail in chapter one and exemplified in chapters two and three. Using the idea of generating interpretations of the world for the purpose of change and the goals influencing the aspects of reality to emphasize in interpretation, in chapter two I articulate a relational understanding of food. Understanding food relationally emphasizes ethical issues often disregarded as unimportant or only tangential to food ethics. In this conception of food, these issues are central and inseparable from our ethical relations with food. In chapter three, I respond to more dominant views in food ethics that argue

for strict vegan or vegetarian diets. I argue their lack of nuanced understanding of food affects their ability to respond to our differentiated access to foods due to our socio-economic positions and our varied responsibilities associated with them. Recognizing that we are not equally responsible in the ills of our current food consumption practices, I propose a method of developing ethical eating relations that prescribe dimensions of consideration for how we and what we ought to eat. As one possible way of navigating the relations embedded in foods, I suggest treating the food we eat as the body of a friend. Through that interpretation of our eating relations, I aim to show how our individual relations with food can be more ethical, and how managing our eating relations can incite responses to change the social structures that gave rise to the ethical issues in food production.

I cannot un-witness the impacts of climate change, institutional racism, the fact that we live on stolen lands, that my friends continue to fight against misogyny and sexism because they have no choice, and the racist undertones that sometimes appear in moral vegetarianism, veganism, and climate change activism. There is a need for food ethics for reasons from the connection between food production and climate change to issues of who can access food and what foods we should and should not eat. But trying to eat ethically while knowing there are other issues like poverty and water pollution is troubling because deciding which ethical issues to emphasize is and will remain a dilemma. We are in a pickle when it comes to eating ethically. Vegans and vegetarians are often criticized by non-vegans and non-vegetarians as being hypocritical because vegan diets sometimes are complicit in cultural appropriation—I used to be one among vegan denouncers. What I failed to recognize is that those who are vegans and vegetarians for moral (especially environmental) reasons are at least trying to make change for the better. If being ethically pure is not an ideal we strive toward, as I discuss more in chapter one, then recognizing the contradictions of our eating habits might not be as bad since it provides avenues for change. Living in a pickle may be good if we recognize the goal is not to separate ourselves from the vegetable and spice mix, but to put the pickles to good use. So, I start my theorizing from the problems in eating.

## Chapter One: Thought-scape

“*You never remember the beginning of your dreams, do you? You just turn up in the middle of what's going on.*”  
-Cobb to Ariadne in *Inception* (2010)

“People doing movement work usually get a lot of things wrong, which is not to be such a problem—if the purpose of work isn’t to be right. Instead, our purpose is to contingently make it be that something that *deserves a future* has one.”  
-Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity* (2016, 196)

Unlike dreams, thoughts have origins that are traceable—even if the connection between thoughts came about via some kind of free association. I doubt that we can ever experience the process of how someone’s thoughts came to be without them guiding us along the way. It would be unreasonable then, for me to believe that my thoughts come from nowhere and that they are readily accessible to anyone who encounters them. In this chapter, I attempt to sketch out the thought-scape from which my thesis emerges. I call it a thought-scape to allude to landscapes and cityscapes which can stand alone as objects of appreciation and study or the stage on which scenes come alive. The thought-scape I present here shares similar features as landscapes. It is the setting in which events happen and from which objects and bodies emerge. I aim at contextualizing the discourse of my thesis as well as the theoretical framework for thinking through my arguments in the following chapters.

This chapter has five sections. In section I, I discuss the motivations of my thesis and the concerns that motivate my writing. In section II, I explain my methodological choice of using Charles Mills’ nonideal theory approach to ethics. Moving into section III, I discuss the situated knowledge thesis to draw attention to the entanglement between descriptive and prescriptive aspects of knowledge. This complements the methodological commitment of nonideal theory to theorize from the nonideal world by highlighting the importance of theorizing from our situated positions in the social fabric. Recognizing that we are situated knowers reveals the social relations among us that shape our everyday lives. In section IV, I draw on Alexis Shotwell to demonstrate the harms of using purity as an ideal for theorizing ethics. I situate myself against purity as a way to say “no” to pursuing individual purity and “yes” to ethical pursuits that aim at ideals other than purity. I conclude in section V by exploring the kind of ideals I aim for. I consider norms that facilitate the possibility of multiple human flourishing as one’s ethics should develop. By this I mean recognizing and creating the conditions that allow for many futures that are deemed good to flourish instead of one good future to which everyone should conform. I consider this form of heterogeneity in flourishing an ideal because it acknowledges that people have preferences for what a good life is, while acknowledging that not everything deserves a future.

## I. Wishing to do good

I wonder if there is anyone who lives a life without feeling for others, and ignorant of the suffering in the world. In 2020 there is no shortage of things to worry about: the changing climate, armed conflict, the loss of biodiversity, the severe forest fires that seem to be worsening each year, big companies increasingly eroding our privacy and access to differing worldviews, and issues of poverty and systemic injustices in supposedly developed countries. I struggle to find things not to be angry about: when will Indigenous peoples in Canada have their sovereignty respected? Will gender-based violence come to an end? When will I, an ethnic Chinese Canadian, be able to genuinely expect people to not label my cultural foods as weird or disgusting? While being angry at certain things can be fun, experiencing frustration is not. I respond to these concerns by focusing on food, not because I think it is the most important issue, but because I like eating food, and encountering food multiple times a day inevitably reminds me of the problems with our current food production practices and the borderline racist things I have heard said about my food in the past. I write, in part to respond to claims about ethical food practices that espouse different diets (e.g. imperatives to become vegan, vegetarian, reduce meat consumption, eat local, organic, or non-GMO), and also to think through how ethical eating practices can be enacted when I am already emmeshed in the complex and troubling entanglement of settler-colonial violence, corporate exploitation of land and workers, and Indigenous sovereignty. Within the nexus of problems there is no place to act as if nothing is wrong, nor as if nothing can be done—in the face of overwhelming damage and suffering, how do I live for a better future?

Though I do not know what the ideal future looks like, at least the command to do better has meaning. I wish to do good and I know I can do better than doing nothing.

## II. Non-ideal ethical theory (methodology)

Approaches to ethics can be roughly divided into ideal theory and nonideal theory. Ideal theory begins by theorizing from an idealized version of reality whereas nonideal theory begins by theorizing from the nonideal conditions of reality. However, while theorizing about the nonideal is not exclusive to nonideal theory, neither is theorizing about ideal models exclusive to ideal theory. The difference between the two approaches is the importance and emphasis of the *actual* in generating ethical theories. Although ideal models are useful for envisioning different futures, the further removed they are from the nonideal reality the more work it is to bring it into being.

John Rawls says ethics should be done by doing ideal theory first and then moving into non-ideal theory in order to theorize the application of ideal theory (Wenar 2017). Ideal theory theorizes an ideal model of society that we should strive for on the assumptions that people are law abiding and societies are

well functioning so the moral reasoning of the people is not compromised (Wenar 2017). After the completion of ideal theory, when the philosopher has set up an ideal society and social structures and laid out the blueprints for changing our non-ideal world, the work then shifts into non-ideal theory wherein the philosopher theorizes the appropriate actions, principles, and responses with reference to the ideal, to make the world more just and to improve living situations (Wenar 2017). Questions of ethics then, are about what values and principles should we adopt as guiding, and how to act in accordance with those principles.

I take issue with this approach: not with the usefulness of ideals, but with the assumptions in formulating the ideal societies, and the move to implement them. Ideal models as abstractions to describe the way societies actually work are useful tools for understanding society, but we should not confuse a model of *how* societies work for how societies *ought* to be. I am not against the use of ideals as action guiding or something to strive toward, but against the approach that theorizes ideal models on assumptions regarding how social institutions function and how people behave. In arguing against these assumptions, I am very much for the use of nonideal theory, or theory that begins theorizing from the non-ideal world and sites of oppression to generate action guiding principles.

Among the key issues with ideal theory, as Mills argues, is the reliance on idealizations concerning how things *should* be, to the exclusion of the actual (Mills 2005, 168). The problem is the lack of attention to how people and societies actually function, such that people are assumed to have unrealistic mental capacities and to be uninfluenced in their decision making. This approach also assumes that social institutions like the justice system, families, and educational institutions operate without systematically disadvantaging marginalized social groups (169). But in reality, people are influenced by their social position, disadvantaged along the lines of race, gender, class, and geographic location, and unable to devote time to thinking about the moral consequences of their actions because of poverty, fear of violence, or lack of education. It is unclear how an ideal model of society founded on the assumption that the citizens are able to abide by moral principles and are capable of setting aside their biases, can actually be useful for real people. Ideal theory that abstracts away from the failures of social institutions avoids theorizing about actual oppression (Wenar 2017; Mills 2005, 169). It is troubling to think an ethics that claims to end oppression and injustices can think that abstaining from theorizing oppression and marginalization and its consequences is the best way to end it (Mills 2005, 171). Ideal theory does not serve the interests of marginalized peoples like women, people of colour, disabled people, low-income, or queer identifying individuals who face the consequences and legacy of oppression by virtue of existing.

Moving away from ideal theory, ethics done from non-ideal theory seems not only more tangible, but possible. In contrast to ideal theory, nonideal theory begins theorizing ethics from the nonideal world

by understanding sites of oppression and harm in order to change it (Mills 2005, 182). A nonideal theory approach to ethics is better at realizing ideals by virtue of its attention to recognizing the barriers and obstacles that prevent ideals from being realized (181). Nonideal theory can still use ideal models for comparison, but unlike in ideal theory, the generation of the models are grounded in the actual and the characterizations of institutions and individuals conform to reality. Aiming at ideals is still a possibility in nonideal theory. The issue with ideal theory is not the use of ideals or principles as guiding, but with basing those principles in an idealized world before considering the nonideal world and how it works out. Striving to be good is still in pursuit of an ideal.

In theorizing ethical practices of eating, I use a nonideal theory approach in part because I do not know what *the* ideal eating practice is, nor do I believe that there is only one. Positing one ethical practice of eating as the ideal model that all practices should conform to assumes too much epistemic authority and legitimacy on my part by denying the possibility of ethical eating practices that arose out of different legitimate ethical frameworks for different contexts. Theorizing about ethical eating practices resists ideal models because eating is always related to the context of eating and people's relations to others. Abstracting away from context dissolves problems of food ethics, but we as nonideal beings can only nominally do so in the actual world. Changing what we say about the world changes how we act, and if we deny the existence of ethical issues in eating, we deny our responsibility to them. But that simply perpetuates the ongoing food production practices that are harming the environment and people.

Dreaming about ideal eating practices is nevertheless useful in imagining better futures and to remind us that the current practice is not the only practice of eating there is. Speculation reminds us that we *can* do better. Different contexts demand different ethical eating practices. There may be not one but many ethical eating practices, and therefore theorizing about the one universal ideal practice that all should strive toward is of little use. I turn to nonideal theory because theorizing from an actual context provides more for thinking through what principles or ideals should inform our eating practices. Ideals, virtues, and principles are here to stay, but determining what virtues or ideals to instantiate is no longer determined beforehand by reference to the ideal world but the context in which we are drawn to respond.

### III. Situated Knowledge

The task that I am engaged in is conceptual reimagining of the world on the grounds that previous imaginations of the world have failed to uphold the values we hold as ideals. Descriptions, as representations of the world, are rarely, if ever, neutral because descriptions are always about the features that we take to be most important for the context. Knowledge is situated in the sense that the acquisition of and access to knowledge is affected by the inquirers' spatial-temporal location as well as their interests,

values, and beliefs (Anderson 2020). Situated knowledges are, as Donna Haraway argues, about communities and not isolated individuals (Haraway 1988, 590). Within the situated knowledge thesis the acquisition of accurate knowledge of reality requires broad and multiple perspectives rather than an individual's appeal to rationality or a singular method (590). The view from nowhere, or the god's eye view detached from social interests given to us by school science is unobtainable—the “godtrick” was never an option (582). Situated knowledge is as much about knowledge as it is about the methods of generating and obtaining it. The tendencies to interpret phenomena a certain way will likely correspond to the methods of interpretation the inquirer is familiar with and can access due to her social situation (Anderson 2020). For example, a devoted Catholic will have different insights in religious practices than someone who has been atheistic their whole life; and learning Cantonese is easier for a child born to a Cantonese speaking family than a child born elsewhere. Attention to the situatedness of the inquirer and the destination of inquiry disrupts the illusion of the unbiased, disinterested, and detached observer (why is he looking anyway?) in favour of partial knowers located among and in relation to other partial knowers. Emphasis on multitudes of partial knowers relocates objectivity, as something achievable by individuals adhering to a particular orientation, to communities of knowers with their partial perspectives conjoining to present a fuller interpretation of the world (Haraway 1988, 590). Because every person stands somewhere within the social fabric, each person is influenced by their heterogenous social positions in their access and generation of knowledge—for some, by virtue of belonging to the elite wealthy and powerful, have the power to determine what knowledge others can access.

Recognizing the social influences on knowledge production brings the question of purpose to the forefront. It is not enough to state, “knowledge for knowledge's sake” as the purest form of inquiry—“because.” is rarely, if ever, a satisfying answer to the question “why?” Without origins and destinations, knowledge and methods of inquiry are abstracted from their context of use and lose meaning (Dotson 2013, 22). A view from nowhere and understanding for no reason other than itself is as useless as a word out of context. Different purposes demand different interpretations of phenomena and different tools: For an Earth based night-sky observer, a geocentric model of the solar system is better for finding constellations, whereas a heliocentric model is more useful for launching a space probe to Mercury. Different interpretations of things also guide how we act. For example, knowing that all the ingredients in a meal were homegrown might bring us to savour the meal more than we would have otherwise, and knowing that something is important to someone we care for will often make us take more care of the thing. Similarly, if I were to cook for a friend, I would aim to know her food preferences if I want her to enjoy the meal. Knowledge serves a purpose, and the methods of obtaining the knowledge are entangled with the inquirer and the aim of the inquiry.

Changing the “world” requires reinterpreting it (Shotwell 2016, 195).<sup>1</sup> Coming to know the world differently happens by altering one’s social situation such as becoming a biologist or moving to a different cultural context. Interpretation and description of the world entangles with the desires and wills of the inquirers. How can they be separated from the project of change? Living, change, and experiences of living (coming to know) go hand in hand in hand. So long as I am a situated knower, discontented with the world I inhabit, changing it necessitates interpreting it differently. The limits of the conceptual space form the limits of possible actions and thoughts. Interpretations and descriptions of the world are already enmeshed in projects of change and manipulation of the material. I join the conversation with the world not as “decoding” something everyone missed but reinterpreting for the purpose of change (Haraway 1988, 596). In my hopes of doing better by Earth and the world I was thrust into I remain accountable to the kinds of futures that reinterpreting the world opens and closes.

#### IV. Against Purity

An ethics of purity moves toward purity as an ideal.<sup>2</sup> Viewing purity as an ideal is common in many ethical views albeit implied. For example, those who can best enact Kantian or Utilitarian ethics are those who have access to pure reasoning. Treating purity as an ideal is also apparent in our evaluative judgement, which is sometimes applied to people with disastrous effects. Purity is tied with innocence and impurity with noninnocence because to be innocent is to be free from moral wrong and sin—being morally pure. This means the ethical person is closer to purity than someone who has done unethical actions. The imperative in ethics of purity is to maintain and protect purity and avoid accruing impurities. Theorizing about ethics of purity from a position of noninnocence is almost paradoxical: material purity is impossible because we are born contaminated with pesticides and antibiotics from the foods our parents ate, and moral purity is not a possibility so long as we choose to live, because we are already implicated in a history of colonialism and relations of suffering in our choice to eat food and buy clothes. Since I am committed to theorizing about this world and the nonideal messiness within, I think purity is something unachievable and an ideal that does more harm than good. However, to be against purity, as Alexis Shotwell argues, is not being for pollution (Shotwell 2016, 9).

In her book *Against Purity*, Shotwell argues that purity politics arises in part from our inability to conceptually reconcile our responsibility to our troubled past and from a failure to recognize that our

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<sup>1</sup> The “world” can be interpreted as a different game, a different paradigm, or a different worldview if you like. The point is, if I were to change my social situatedness I can only expand it, but to change means adapting to different perspectives of seeing, acting, assuming, knowing, etc. Sometimes reinterpreting things changes them, such as reinterpreting the world in the age of Newtonian mechanics or coming to understand potatoes as edible.

<sup>2</sup> Most mainstream ethics imply purity as one of the ideals even though they would not call themselves ethics of purity.

bodies were contaminated before we were born (6, 10). Being against purity is about acknowledging that we are already polluted and never were pure (4). Desiring to be pure is a response to the fear of contamination, conceptually and materially (4). Material pursuit of purity, for example, manifests in the preference for organic foods over foods grown in synthetic fertilizers, for detoxing drinks and health superfoods that promise to cleanse the body of toxins and impurities. The pursuit of purity appears in advice like, “if you can’t read the name of the ingredient, it probably shouldn’t belong in you.” But within the fruits and vegetables we regularly consume, there are plenty of chemicals that most of us are unfamiliar with. The dispute is not about whether there are chemicals that are harmful to humans (and other organisms), but about how much contact turns chemicals into poison. Though toxicity is framed as dose-dependent in toxicology, in purity discourse, “mere contact makes the poison” (11). It is no surprise that fear of contamination has spurred some people to not vaccinate their kids out of fear of the mercury in vaccines and develop preferences for “clean” foods such as non-GMO, organic, and all natural foods (Shotwell 2016, 7,11). In purity politics, the alien body is toxic/bad in its essence.

The metaphysics of purity is a fragile fiction that pretends that things are separate and unconnected (Shotwell 2016, 16). Humans are already marked with foreign signatures by existing. Around ten percent of the modern human genome is comprised of genetic material from viruses (NIH 2016). Mitochondria, the part of the cell of multicellular organisms responsible for energy production, were once independent organisms later incorporated into cells (TallBear 2013, 40). The possibility of contamination assumes the possibility of purity, but purity was never part of human history. Organisms alive today already bear traces of radioisotopes from past nuclear bomb testing and are constituted partly by the microplastics that are virtually everywhere on Earth (Shotwell 2016, 2). Material purity was and never will be an option for humans. Material boundaries are too permeable for purity to be found in nature—perhaps the only pure state is to be separate and isolated from the world. Wishing not to transcend this world when theorizing, I explore an impure metaphysics of food in chapter two.

The use and rise of purity as an ideal cannot be untangled from racialization and “biopolitical practices” of eugenics along lines of disability, poverty, ethnicity, and queerness (Shotwell 2016, 15). Discourse on pure-bred dogs and cats continues the legacy of imagining marginalized identities as pure or not pure humans. Historic debates on whether there was one human species or many both pursued purity as justification for slavery (15). With reference to miscegenation laws, and segregation along racial lines, Anna Tsing writes of white women on plantations as “responsible for maintaining the boundaries—of homes, families, and the white race” (Tsing 2010, 149). The ethos of purity enlists women to maintain the purity of the child and to continue the white race by bearing the offspring of the elite—since “blackness” was defined by the “one-drop rule” any black ancestry makes you black (Davies 1991, quoted in Mills

2005). By this definition, black purity was a contradiction of terms (Mills 2005, 176). As revealed by Kim TallBear's critique on the politics of DNA testing, the notion of original or pure racial groups or genetic signatures takes racialized populations to be static over time, which is at odds with the doctrine of evolution (TallBear 2013, 6). Concerning the use of purity as an ideal, Charles Mills writes, "the ideal of purity served to buttress white supremacy" (Mills 2005, 176). Although we move away from pursuing racial purity, the continued use of purity as an ideal while we wish to dismantle racism can be counterproductive—especially if racism is only understood as preferential treatment based on a person's race. Being "colourblind" to race might be considered an antidote to racism in this view of race, but it is really only "whiteness in disguise" (177). This is a form of purity because it essentially treats race as an impure impediment to good judgement. There are no doubt good uses of purity as an ideal, however, I suspect it is more often harmful than good.

Purity politics is one way of responding to the world despite knowing that it is impossibly complex. Pursing individual purity in the face of our complicity in pollution and global devastation is a common approach at attempting to control what you can when things feel out of control (Shotwell 2016, 8). But I doubt ethics allows us to pick and choose when to be ethical, nor is causing less suffering the same as innocence. As an ethical ideal, the imperative to be pure is paradoxical since, as Mills argues, "*ought* is supposed to imply *can*: the ideal has to be achievable by humans" and obtaining purity is not possible so long as we choose to live (Mills 2005, 171; emphasis in original). To deny individuals have anything to do with the changes and devastation occurring in the Anthropocene and have no moral responsibility to anything other than their immediate actions is hard to defend. Many people are not willing to admit the possibility that we are non-innocent by virtue of existing, and less willing to think that we are complicit in systemic injustices. But shrinking the sphere of care to oneself or immediate surrounding only manifests the privilege of choice and denies the possibility of collective change (Shotwell 2016, 9). Purity politics can no longer provide good nonparadoxical ethical guidance against the complexity of the ethically compromised present (7). To continue the pursuit of purity as an ideal requires a fictitious retelling of the history and legacy of colonial and racial violence and an ontology that supports it—much like the myth of metals in Plato's *Republic*.

I agree with Shotwell's assertion, "the world deserves better" (Shotwell 2016, 9). To be against purity is not to be for pollution, harm, or pessimism. But to be against the "rhetoric or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous" is to theorize from complexity and complicity, and to refuse purity as an ideal (15). I follow Shotwell in theorizing from interdependence and relational networks to navigate the complexity of the past and present to imagine better futures (18). Navigating an impossibly complex world is daunting, but at least living ethically despite

being already complicit in suffering is possible. By being against purity, I join the many voices screaming “No!” to the ethically compromised times and unjust world I live in and the unjust and wrongful privilege that allows me to look away from hurt. Starting from a position that is against purity and moves toward impure futures is to recognize the heterogeneous starting points not all equally implicated and responsible, and to reject homogenous futures with limited ways of flourishing (19). Again, being against purity is to act on the wish that the world were not so, and to be for the many futures that arise in our attempt to make the world better (204). Change does not always begin with a destination—sometimes change begins with a desire to be anywhere that is not here.

### V. Opening Futures

Acting for better futures is perhaps a crude way of articulating ethics. Ethical action is predicated on choice and temporal movement into the future. There is no sense of theorizing what good action is, if we cannot enact it. But if moral imperatives rely on futures as guiding, they cannot but be hypothetical—if this is the future you want, then this is how you must act (Shotwell 2016, 8). Of course, there are some futures that are more preferable than others, and general predictions of the future are possible. By focusing on the plurality of hypothetical futures that we might want and acknowledging the contingency of ethical action on those futures, our ethical actions can be evaluated in terms of how close it brings us to the kind of futures we want. This also means the futures we wish to make possible are constantly up for scrutiny and revision based on the ideals such as justice, autonomy, or diversity we wish to instantiate. Similarly, the use of ideals can be evaluated in terms of what kinds of futures it opens and what kinds of actions it prescribes. Being against the homogeneity promised by conceptual purity is to disavow a futurity that shuts down the field of possibilities for better action. The kind of futures that I wish to move toward by standing against purity are ones that promote the proliferation of heterogeneous ways of flourishing (155).

Being situated as one among many partial knowers, I cannot claim to know what is good for everyone nor can I impose what I think is good onto others. The better future we strive for cannot be known by one person or a limited group—it may be known by the creator, but we should not pretend to be her. However, collectively imagined futures are still likely to be better than ones imagined by individuals.

Thinking through our existences as dependent on other organisms, our freedom and futures are likewise contingent on relations to other creatures. We rely on our relations with others to enact our autonomy (Shotwell 2016, 131). I cannot digest food without the help of my gut microbiome, nor can I choose to have an apple if there were no one to grow, harvest, and gift me apples. If our autonomy is relational, then opening futures for others requires facilitating the conditions for others to exercise their autonomy.

But not everything deserves a future. Creating the conditions for different ways of being is, as Shotwell argues, “a collective and non-voluntarist endeavor to proliferate flourishing means that norms that flatten complexity and close down flourishing for others are rejected” (Shotwell 2012, 1004). Purity is an example of these norms. The futures that are worth opening are ones that welcome contingency, are irreducible to each other, and do not aim to decrease the possible ways of being (2012, 1004). Because knowing is entangled with acting, it is not uncommon for us to think of pioneering studies that open discursive space for further inquiry. The new knowledge makes new action possible. I think the same applies to interpreting the world as opening more ways of acting. In the following two chapters, I navigate the space opened to me by Alexis Shotwell, and draw on Lisa Heldke to reconceptualize food as relationally constructed to refigure an ethical response to eating. In doing so, my fear does not lie in what kinds of futures I open, but with what kinds of futures I close. Yet, I act because I am hopeful that the possible futures that my thesis opens are better than the present ones.

Chapter Two: “What are you eating?”: Food<sup>3</sup>

Most people already have some conception of food that helps them move through life without much trouble. The purpose of this chapter is not to introduce the reader to some new thing called “food” but to expand and rethink the ontology of food. Expanding our conceptions of food to include dimensions often considered to be tangential to food but not proper constituents of food may appear overly complicated for formulating a philosophical definition of food. I suggest that reinterpreting food is fruitful for theorizing our ethical relations with food and eating. This approach is congruent with my commitment to be against purity by seeking to expand the interpretive space for understanding food and to rethink what foods can be (and what can be food). With this in mind, I consider the interpretation of food presented here as an expansion and not a replacement for everyday understanding of food. In this chapter, I discuss two different approaches to understanding food. I offer a definition of food, and then an interpretation of food as relationally constituted to turn our attention to the relations around food. In chapter three I use the relational understanding of food to theorize good eating relations.

This chapter is divided into three sections. I begin by articulating my starting position and some criteria for conceptualizing food. This includes the ideals I am committed to, and an argument for why multiple interpretations are possible. In section two, I undertake a definitional approach to understanding food. This approach provides a unified definition of the stuff we call food that provides a demarcation between food and edible bodies while also accounting for differences across history and cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup> In section three, I present an alternate interpretation of food based in relational metaphysics. In this interpretation, foods are not interpreted as bodies with properties and external relations with other bodies, but bundles of relations that can be conceived of as bodies. This interpretation of food insists that the relations that bring food into being are constitutive of food. For example, the relations between the farm labourers who watered the plants, and the cooking relations between the chefs and the food, would all be part of food. I conclude by arguing that a relational ontology of food is useful for theorizing ethical eating practices—or for developing good eating relations.

## I. “Who am I eating with?”: Setting the table

Some people prefer to call our current geological epoch the Anthropocene to recognize that the extent that humans impact Earth rivals other geological changes (Tsing 2015, 19). I draw attention to the naming of this epoch to remind us that humans have left marks on every part of Earth from microplastic

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<sup>3</sup> In my thesis I am concerned with foods that humans eat. I do not deny the possibility that my analysis extends to non-human foods (stuff what other organisms eat), or the metaphorical use of “food” such as “food for thought.”

<sup>4</sup> I name history and cultural contexts separately not to suggest they are unrelated. It is to remind the reader of differences in food practices across cultural and social contexts in the current time period, and different food practice across time.

pollution, radionuclides from nuclear weapons testing, to the increase in carbon molecules in the atmosphere. Along a related and entangled line of thought, metaphysical thinking about stuff in our world needs to consider the presence of microplastics and radioisotopes from past nuclear bombs in the material. An impure metaphysics recognizes and does not attempt to abstract away from the entanglement of history and the material being theorized about. Conceptualizing from pure materials when the material world is already contaminated and impure might not be useful if the concepts are about this world.

I follow Charles Mills' suggestion to theorize from the nonideal world as discussed in chapter one, and begin theorizing food from our nonideal world because the ethical issues are a product of the impure and nonideal situation I find myself in. Since the focus of this chapter is to provide an ontology of food for theorizing ethics, I attempt to articulate a metaphysics of food that agrees with the foods we interacted with in everyday life and is aimed at changing how we interact with food. The commitment to the actual use of "food" parallels nonideal theory's commitment to theorizing from the nonideal world with its nonideal social structures and actors (Mills 2005, 182). Because my access to different things people have called foods is limited, I draw on a rather limited bank of food examples to formulate my interpretations of food. In response to this deficiency, I resist starting from examples of foods I take to be uncontroversial and invite the reader to expand and alter my account of food based on their experiences. Starting from the world means when the concept and reality disagree, priority goes to what is *actual* and the concept gives way.

Using purity as an ideal in theorizing food would lead us to try to "delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous" (Shotwell 2016, 15). This would include trying to obtain an objective and impartial overview of the nature of food disentangled from its external relations and to establish clear and firm boundaries that demarcate food from non-foods. Practices of categorizing in purity discourse would treat universality and uniformity across spacetime as criteria and admire the crystal-clear boundaries drawn by logic—what is changeless is pure and perfect.

Without purity as a guiding ideal, I do not think it is necessary for my conception of food to encompass exactly everything we call food—a close fit is good enough. If the material world is already impure to begin with and boundary cases of food are destined to exist, a close fit for a conception of food can also mean the conceptual boundaries are dynamic and permeable. While excluding some organisms like humans or endangered species from ever being food is tempting, conceptions of food need to recognize that all organisms *can* become food. Striving for a proliferation of food practices and interpretations means endangered species can become food but does not necessarily mean endorsing it. If the goal of interpreting the world is to change it, noticing things we do not want is necessary.

Of course, interpreting the world presupposes the existence of the world. Similarly, interpreting the ontology of food presupposes the existence of food or bodies that we eat. There are both material and discursive aspects to conceiving of foods as objects that we can make, discuss, and eat. We can change the material aspects with different food production processes and cooking methods, such as selectively breeding plants and animals for desired traits or boiling or pureeing carrots to change their textures. Interpretations of the material processes of cooking can also change. For example, putting ketchup on pasta can be interpreted as ruining the pasta or improving the pasta depending on personal preferences. Considering the interplay between our conceptions of food and the material bodies, the same processes and objects can be interpreted and analyzed through different aspects. This separation between the social and material is similar to the wave-particle duality of electromagnetic radiation or light, and how a cylinder can also be seen as a cube or a circle depending on the viewing angle (Ryden and Peterson 2009, 111). This follows from the fact that we are situated knowers with necessarily partial views. The larger and fuller interpretation of food comes from imperfectly stitched together viewpoints/knowledges that are situated, partial, always ongoing, and never complete (Haraway 1988, 586). Instead of one interpretation to rule them all, and through philosophical analysis find the master interpretation, I offer two approaches to understanding food.

## II. Defining Food

One approach to understanding food is to take a definitional approach. Defining food is difficult but useful for clarifying what I am theorizing. Searching through dictionary definitions, most suggest food is something that we eat to stay alive, or substances that carries vital nutrients for bodily functions.<sup>5</sup> But defining foods simply as things that carry nutrients that we eat leaves many foods in a strange position. For example, since human cannibalism is well documented, are my parents food? Compared to music and art, there is a surprising lack of philosophical publications on the being of food.<sup>6</sup> As such, I now attempt to provide a definition of food.

For most people, chickens are considered food whereas crows and ravens are not. But there is no clear reason for why we eat chickens but not ravens or owls if the definition of food only concerns itself with material properties of certain bodies. The fact that we do not eat every living organism on Earth

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Collins dictionary defines food as “food is what humans and animals eat” (Collinsdictionary.com), Merriam-Webster defines food as “nutrients in solid form” (Dictionary.com), and Encyclopaedia Britannica defines food as “Food, substance consisting essentially of protein, carbohydrate, fat, and other nutrients used in the body of an organism to sustain growth and vital processes and to furnish energy.”(Encyclopedia Britannica). Here I remind the reader that throughout this thesis I am discussing human foods unless otherwise specified.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on searching through Philpapers, JSTOR, and ProQuest and finding a total less than half a dozen. Andrea Borghini remarks on the lack of philosophical attention to food’s identity in “On Being the Same Wine”, but promptly moves away from discussing the metaphysics of food to discussing wine (Borghini 2012, 175–76).

indicates a social dimension of food that we should not forget. Furthermore, if we regularly ingest nondigestible foods (e.g. overly fibrous foods, or someone lactose intolerant drinks milk or eats cheese) and nutrients our bodies cannot fully absorb, the definition of food should also account for this. The definition of food should also disallow organisms we unintentionally ingest to be food.

I suggest then, that foods have the following properties and characteristics:

1. Things that people eat with the understanding that they are eating food. Their conception of food does not need to match this conception of food so long it is legitimated by use among people. Understanding that they are eating food does not need to be consciously ongoing but if there was doubt as to what they were eating, they would state that it is food. This effectively rejects the insects that we ingest while cycling as food and means not everything we eat is food.
2. Food that we eat is necessarily material and will have some nutritional value in the form of protein, carbohydrates, fats, and other nutrients necessary for human survival. This is complicated because the foods we eat often contain microplastics that are not digestible nor nutritious. Since it is not possible to separate them from our foods and there are many compounds in our food that our bodies do not need, we have to accept that not all the substances we ingest are nourishments for living. To meet this criterion, the bodies have to have more nutrients than filler material. This bars things like vitamin pills and cotton shirts from being considered foods.
3. Food is a product of its parts. By this I mean a thing being food does not automatically make its parts food. This also entails that an aggregate of ingredients (things used to make foods) is not necessarily food. Food comes into being via interactions between the parts, the eater, and the cook—bodies requires human input to become food. This includes picking an apple or moving it to one's (or another's) mouth. In this sense, one is not born, but rather becomes, food.

To be clear, there is nothing in the material that deters bodies from becoming food or eaten—other than the physical impossibility of eating some objects. Most organic things can be eaten or ingested at least once provided the eater does not die as a result. To differentiate between foods and edible bodies requires input from social relations—eating is not the only relation that transforms a body into food. The relations eaters share with other humans and philosophical commitments of the group define what counts as food and what does not. Social relations among eaters “create” concepts of food by pointing to bodies that are deemed edible and permissible for eating not simply because of the body's material make up, but also because of the ideologies and practices of their social norms. For example, in the context of Canada, animals like dogs, cats, humans, and pigeons are sometimes recognized as edible but rarely considered food. Because of particular relations to place and others around us, things like ravens, swiftlet nests, or jellyfish are not even considered edible. Aside from social relations, our relations with particular bodies

(organisms) such as trees, pets, or alien creatures mean we often consider whether they *can* be food prior to thinking whether they are permissible to eat. So, it should also be clear that social relations cannot make physically impossible to eat objects food.

Nevertheless, the social can influence the material to bring new foods into being. For example, many ingredients for cooking can be found in nature, the most recognizable organisms in grocery stores used for making food are modified by humans. Raising cattle or growing tomatoes bred to meet our eating desires show how the social influences the material. Domesticating organisms entangles the material bodies with the social interests that spearheaded domestication experiments. Agriculture is tied with social hierarchies in their co-emergent relations (Tsing 2012, 146). The efficiency of agriculture does more to support those who do not work in fields than those who do (146). Foods, as products of technological changes in agriculture and domestication, come into being at the boundary between the material and discursive world while actively resisting being reduced to either. Consider the story of corn. The origin of the corn (maize) crop traces its roots to the Balsas Valley of Southern-central Mexico around 9000 years ago (Piperno 2011). From there it spread to other regions of the Americas, and then in the 1500s after the Spanish invasions and colonization, the plant found itself spread across the world (Beadle 1980). Through domestication and millennia of refinement, modern corn is unrecognizable from its genetic ancestor—the teosinte plant. Through history, corn morphed from a wild grass into a plant that *is* and *becomes* food. Foods are not found in the wild so to speak—sadly there are no pizza trees or ramen bushes waiting to be harvested.

Although this interpretation of food might be useful for theorizing the interactions between the social and material dimensions of food and for explicating differences between food and non-foods, it is not adequate in presenting the processes that brought foods into being. A definitional approach to understanding food continues to return the focus back onto food qua bodies we eat. Thinking about the processes and origins of food is possible with this understanding of food, but the food histories appear to be sidelined and tacked onto the food and give the illusion that eating can be done away from social contexts. If the goal were to demarcate what is permissible to eat and what is not, this form of interpretation is useful by virtue of the possibility of adding additional criteria for determining what we can eat. To move the production processes and origins of food to the forefront of our attention, understanding food merely through definitions is not enough. Since I am interested in theorizing ethical eating practices and developing good eating relations with food, I think an interpretation of food that emphasizes the relations and practices around food might be more useful. In the following section, I articulate an interpretation of food as relationally constituted to bring the relations around foods into focus. In a relational understanding of food, the emphasis shifts to the relational dimensions of food. By adopting a

relational interpretation of food, thinking about food invokes the relations that we have with food (and food production) prior to the food as bodies we eat.

### III. A Mouthful of Relations

More often than not, a food embodies the relations that brought it into being. Sometimes homemade pies are pies of love and care, sometimes a bowl of noodles is a reminder of home. The social seeps into food at all levels: between the cook and the eater, the delivery person and the cook, the farmer who grew the food, and the social perception of food etc. Even the wild-game, foraged fungi, and plants are situated in histories and cultures that inform the foragers knowledge of foraging, and the huntresses the arts of hunting. To organize and emphasize the connections between food and their social and material histories, I follow Lisa Heldke in theorizing foods as relationally constituted.

Heldke argues that foods are arrays of relations that are constituted by the relations that brought the foodstuff into being, the relations that facilitated these relations between food, body, and the environment, and the eating relations between food bodies and eaters (Heldke 2012, 84). These relations also include relations with the soil in which it is grown, relations between plants or animals before being processed into food, as well as relations with the workers who were involved in the cultivation of the animals and plants, and the people who prepared meals (84). The fields that grew the corn, the seed that sprouted the corn, and the humans who harvest them all have relations to the corn, just like I have an eating relation with the corn, and relations that made this corn socially acceptable to eat. In a relational ontology of food, the material bodies are part of the relations that construct food. The relations that make a thing what it is are all part of the thing, or as Heldke writes, “to be (food) is to be with any number of beings and processes that have made it what it is” (84). Thinking of food as arrays of relations means the food is literally constructed by relations including the material and the relations that the food has with other people (85). This does not reject the possibility of thinking about organisms and bodies through biological classifications, but reinterprets them as sets of relations with characteristics and aspects rather than substances with intrinsic and extrinsic properties (84). It is similar to thinking of species not by their unique characteristics but by their occupation of distinct ecological niches. The move is to think of the relations between things and organisms rather than things isolated from their surroundings. Interestingly, thinking about the internal workings of organisms often relies on drawing functional connections between cells, organs, and the organism as a whole. If we theorize foods as material bodies derived from organisms,

it means relying on theorizing bonds (relations) between organic tissue, molecules, atoms, and quarks for material cohesion of the bodies—it is literally relations all the way down (Heldke 2018, 248).<sup>7</sup>

Organisms we eat take up non-organic material in their bodies both intentionally and unintentionally prior to us adding non-organism derivatives such as salts, water, and air, into our foods. Bioaccumulation of toxins in organisms like fish and mushrooms, pesticide residue on plants, the various other material such as dust, microplastics, and microbes in the kitchen that land in food are all part of the bodies we eat (Tsing 2012, 151). If the food we eat is the food we theorize about, then these foreign bodies should also be part of our theorizing. When we eat, our eating relations are with all of the things in food—we cannot eat an apple without eating the dead skin cells and bacteria that landed on its surface. The material bodies in food share relations of being mixed and cooked together, for example, the lettuce, arugula, and pesticides in salads, or potatoes, beef, and antibiotics in soup. To be food with the material, then, is to be with the different bodies that eventually are eaten and be part of the genesis of those bodies. We and the humans that cohabit our space are literally part of the material makeup of food. When I put a piece of cooked rabbit in my mouth, I am not just putting part of an animal into my body, but also my dead skin cells that have landed in my bowl and cultural practices that culminate into recipes and food preferences. Theorizing ontologies of food starting with the stuff we eat reveals the impossibility of separating the material from the social. Foods are “social” in the sense of being an amalgamation of many parts, and social in the sense that food and our eating relations relate directly to human others.

A relational ontology of food allows the conceptual boundaries to shift with the changes in human eating practices and food’s material makeup across spacetime and socio-economic contexts. Attention to social relations uncovers the normative aspects of food in different contexts while being sensitive to local conceptions of food. Thinking through food relations turn distinctions between permissible foods and edible bodies and evaluations of good verses bad foods into generative sites of inquiry. As neither the social nor the material are reducible to each other in theorizing food, acting on food engages us with both dimensions together. It is worth noting that although eating relations may appear most important for determining whether a thing is food, it is unlikely to be more important than other relations like the body’s relation to other organisms or our eating relations with others. Interpreting food as arrays of relations opens more dimensions of interpreting the constitutive relations of food. Since every interpretation is necessarily situated and partial, by joining and exploring alternate interpretations of food provides a larger picture and better understanding of food—after all, variety is the spice of life.

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<sup>7</sup> If the practice of science is to develop approximately true models of how the world works, then the social follows the material all the way down. This is because theories and interpretations of the world are not coincidental with the materiality of existence.

### III. Conclusion: “Let’s eat”

Eating is a relation and a moral activity. Insofar as to eat, at the very least, is to eat another body that was once alive. With this relational ontology of food, relations embedded in eating become more apparent. As Heldke suggests, understanding food as relationally constituted means that all relationships are automatically at least potentially relevant for ethical eating practices (Heldke 2012, 86). In knowing these relations, not acting or denying their existence is an act of violence. An ethical response to eating ought to respond to the totality of its being and not just some aspects of it. In the next chapter I discuss ethics based on non-relational accounts of food. And in response, I offer a method of thinking through relations of eating which doubles as an example of one possible ethics of eating. Afterall, we do not eat alone.

## Chapter Three: Eating Well

“Without stories of progress, the world has become a terrifying place. The ruin glares at us with the horror of its abandonment. It’s not easy to know how to make a life, much less avert planetary destruction. Luckily there is still company, human and not human. We can still explore the overgrown verges of our blasted landscapes—the edges of capitalist discipline, scalability, and abandoned resource plantations. We can still catch the scent of the latent commons—and the elusive autumn aroma.”

-Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the end of the world* (2015, 282)

In the previous chapter I explored the complexity of food through a relational ontology of food. Attention to the relations in eating shifts the focus of an ethics of eating and food from the question “what should(n’t) we eat?” to “how should we eat?” I focus on ethical eating practices because ethics does not end with deciding what we should and should not eat. After we decide what is permissible to eat, we are still engaged in consuming relations that we might not support. For example, if I were to become vegan out of concern for animals, I still need to consider the environmental impacts of the vegetables I eat. Starting from the kinds of eating relations that we endorse means choosing what to eat is contingent on the relations we wish to have with our foods. Conceiving of food as arrays of relations opens the possibility of forming ethical orientations that are sensitive toward issues of oppression and exploitation that intersect relations with food. From this position, decisions about what to eat are necessarily complicated by our relations with other eaters. This is not a problem because ethical eating is not about transcending morally compromised food relations or finding the “right” bodies to eat, but about developing an ethical practice of navigating eating relations. In this chapter I argue for an approach to ethical eating based on interpreting foods relationally—or more than merely the stuff we eat.

I begin this chapter by responding to mainstream discourse on food ethics that follow the footsteps of Peter Singer and Tom Regan. I show the need for a more complex ethics of eating and food by arguing that the conceptions of food, racism, sexism, and pain in the dominant discourse in food ethics are not nuanced enough to respond to the intersection of food and social injustices along the lines of race, gender, ability, and colonialism. In section II, I articulate the kind of eating practices I have in mind. I argue that good eating practices are attentive to the history of foods and are committed to reducing suffering and allowing flourishing. Then, I move into an exploration of thinking about how to enact good eating relations by theorizing from ethically messy eating situations like cannibalism for survival in section III. I use the idea of thinking about food as if it were a friend in section IV to further articulate how one might develop and enact good eating relations.

## I. Singer and my concerns with current discourse on food ethics

Using the *Routledge Handbook of Food Ethics* and its contents as a snapshot of the current state of food ethics that provides a survey of the prominent ideas in the field, food choice remains a central topic—albeit providing only limited options.<sup>8</sup> In the current landscape of food ethics, those which discuss topics of eating and farming nearly exclusively focus on arguing against any form of meat consumption less it be necessary for survival.<sup>9</sup> Although there are discussions regarding the consumption of meat as tied with identity and food sovereignty in chapters by Kyle Powys Whyte, Lisa Jean More and Kayla Del Biondo, contrary arguments are found in Francione and Charlton in which they suggest the preservation of cultures and identities which centrally figure animal flesh ought to be re-examined (Rawlinson and Ward 2017). This may be a result of the field essentially having been founded on the work of Peter Singer and Tom Regan—whose works are cited in most, if not all, chapters concerning farming and animal consumption.

The utilitarian argument against the consumption of meat is grounded in the moral imperative to reduce suffering and produce pleasure of beings that we reasonably expect to be able to experience both (McWilliams 250). The most influential voice in this line of thinking is no doubt Peter Singer. In *Animal Liberation*, Singer argues that differential moral treatment of nonhuman animals solely because they are not human is as indefensible as discrimination on the basis of sex or skin colour (Singer 1990, 9). Singer ascribes this to the lack of connection between a person's skin colour or sex and the person's mental abilities and considers the move from a biological difference to a moral prescription a fallacious move (5,8). This position can be illustrated by the fact that we do not consider figures like Isaac Newton or Albert Einstein to be morally superior because of their intellectual abilities, nor would we believe that they are deserving of more rights than others (6). For Singer, if our justification for our treatment of nonhuman animals lies solely on the categorical difference between humans and nonhuman animals, then it would be the same thinking that has been used to justify sexism and racism (9). The claim is that the biological differences carved out by conceptual categories cannot be used as justification for differential moral treatment because the move from biological facts to prescriptive claims is unjustified (9). Our differential moral treatment of animals cannot be justified by the categorical differences between humans and nonhuman animals—to do otherwise would render us hypocrites if we also object to racism and sexism. To move beyond arguments for moral consideration based on biological differences which supposes degrees of moral consideration that most people are uncomfortable with, Singer draws on Jeremy

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<sup>8</sup> I use the *Routledge Handbook of Food Ethics* and not the *Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics* because of my access and not because of content. Based on a quick survey of the *Oxford Handbook's* table of contents, the content is largely the same although it is arranged differently. The agreement between the two editing teams on what they think is important suggest both handbooks provide a rather accurate survey of the field.

<sup>9</sup> See Part IV of *Routledge*; The philosophers I have in mind are David Fraser, Josh Millburn, Gary Francione and Anna Charlton, and James McWilliams.

Bentham's principle of equal moral consideration. The principle of moral consideration asserts that we ought to consider a being's interests if that being has the ability to experience suffering and pleasure, since, Singer argues, those two underly the possibility of interests (6). Favoring the universal applicability of this principle for beings who can experience pain, Singer argues that this principle of equal consideration of interests upholds for arguments against racism and sexism. As it is not a defensible position to hold that animals do not feel pain or suffering, the principle of equal moral consideration ought to also apply to animals (15).

As animals enter the picture of moral consideration, the inconsistencies of treatment begin to show through our current treatment of animals. Most people accept that animals have the ability to feel pain and suffer. Singer goes a step beyond to argue that if we allow for animals to be treated cruelly, we ought to also allow for the same treatment of intellectually disabled people and infants—and because most people would not object to killing severely disabled people except on the grounds of them being human, we must think about moral consideration on the basis of how much suffering is had (Singer 1990, 19).<sup>10</sup> On the basis that animals feel pain like we do, Singer argues that our moral consideration ought to extend to cover the interests of all animals and not just humans lest we be inconsistent with moral values we hold regarding racism and sexism. With equal consideration of moral worth and rejection of a categorical difference between animals and humans on the basis of ability to suffer, the reasons for eating animals become logically and morally indefensible unless we are willing to allow for cannibalism—a position Singer rejects as absurd (248). Accordingly, we should all become vegetarian or vegan.

Despite Singer's insistence on an ethics that does not make arbitrary boundaries of moral consideration, using ability to feel pain and suffering as the boundary for moral consideration follows the same pattern as racism and sexism as articulated in *Animal Liberation*. Singer writes:

“the core of this book is the claim that to discriminate against beings solely on the basis of their species is a form of prejudice, immoral, and indefensible in the same way that discrimination on the basis of race is immoral and indefensible.” (Singer 1990, 243)

The claim Singer asserts is that differences between one group and another such as different species, gender, skin colour, ability, or appearance are not grounds for preferential treatment (5). Instead, Singer's ethics of equal moral consideration applies to individuals to evaluate their moral worth—moving the status of nonhuman animals from being categorically excluded from moral consideration to having their moral

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<sup>10</sup> Singer denies that he means to argue for worse treatment of disabled people in *Animal Liberation*, but he does not go deeper into the complexities of disabled people's experiences nor does he argue for better treatment of disabled people. Many philosophers, such as Licia Carlson and Eva Kittay, and disability activists such as Eli Clare and Harriet McBryde Johnson, point out that mentioning disabled people for the sake of arguing for a position often ignores the inner lives of disabled people and constitutes intellectual exploitation.

worth evaluated individually rather than by group affiliation. For Singer, ethics that deny moral consideration of individuals on the basis of categorical differences is “immoral and indefensible” because it denies moral consideration of individuals by virtue of not being in the right category (243). But predicating moral consideration on a being’s ability to suffer is the same as moral consideration based on membership to a group. This is because in Singer’s ethics the moral grouping shifts from species to those who are capable of suffering. Since humans and nonhuman animals are distinguished by biological differences such as mental capacities, the boundary between human and nonhuman animals coincided with the boundaries of mental capacities. To change the criteria to ability to suffer (experience pain), the boundary of consideration shifts to one that, for Singer, lies between animals and plants. The new grouping of beings deserving of moral consideration share the feature of being able to suffer, whereas the grouping Singer argues against shares the features of being capable of human language or rational capacity. Because of this, beings who cannot suffer are automatically excluded from consideration. What Singer argued for, was an expansion of the sphere of moral consideration to include animals, and not a rejection of predicating ethics on categorical differences. Much like the ethics Singer criticizes, moral consideration in *Animal Liberation* is predicated on ability to suffer rather than on skin colour or biological sex. The same way ethics was once only applicable to educated white men, the moral principle Singer offers only applies to beings who can suffer or feel pain while rejecting the possibility of insects, plants, or ecosystems to have moral worth (Singer 1990, 235–36). In other words, the utilitarian ethics offered by Singer does not escape the structures of a category-based ethics but expands the bounds of moral consideration to include nonhuman animals—a group previously excluded due to the perceived lack of intellect (10). Category-based ethics, i.e. ethics that makes moral decisions on the basis of categories rather than individuals, is the same one that Singer criticized as being morally indefensible. The foundation for Singer’s principle of equal moral consideration became the very thing he swore to destroy.

How Singer ended up with the same category-based ethical framework that he criticizes might be attributed to his interpretation of racism and sexism as preference for members of our own social group when there is a clash of interests (Singer 1990, 9). Were he to recognize that racism and sexism is more complex than merely preferential treatment on the basis of race and gender, his food ethics may have done more than arguing against preferential treatment of humans over nonhuman-animals.<sup>11</sup> Without a complete account of what he means by sexism and racism, Singer’s account seems to reduce sexism and racism to preference of individual actors. Singer’s position argues for the treatment of individuals independent of

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<sup>11</sup> In this paper I use gender instead of sex to indicate the social interpretation of sex and how sexism acts on people’s gender presentation and not so much on people’s biological sex. I am aware that the separation of gender and sex is controversial, so I appeal to the norms among popular feminist discourse and my peers of discussing gender as social and sex as biological.

their group-membership—what he takes issue with then, is with differential treatment on the basis of group-membership. This renders an individual's preferential treatment on the basis of sex or race sexist or racist. Limiting the concepts of sexism and racism to preferential treatment of members of one's sex or race, denies the possibility of being racist or sexist toward a member of one's own sex or racial group and internalized racism and sexism. This use of racism and sexism reduces the terms to preferential treatment or simply put, to have a preference. If in fact Singer uses these two terms in this way, then the threat of being a racist or sexist or speciesist is purely emotive without the other connotations of racism and sexism. However, I sincerely believe Singer meant sexism and racism in a more complex sense despite lacking an account for it.

Adhering to Singer's concern with ethics that is consistent with stances against racism and sexism, I interpret him to be referring to the structural injustices inflicted on nonhuman animals by virtue of them not being human rather than mere preferential treatment based on species membership. But if sexism and racism are understood as oppression experienced by individuals by virtue of membership in a social group, the ethical principle Singer provides is, and cannot be, consistent in the application from nonhuman animals to other forms of oppression. To avoid the generality of "racism" and "sexism," here I use Iris Young's definition of oppression as a structured experience of injustices and disadvantages by virtue of their membership in a social group—that is perpetuated by the everyday practices of society and not the decision of one individual (Young 1990, 41). This use appropriately preserves Singer's worries with racism and sexism without losing the negative connotations of the terms, and is consistent with him insisting on the oppression of nonhuman animals as being of equal importance as climate justice, poverty, and racism (Singer 1990, 220). For Young, social groups are not simply aggregates of individuals based on characteristics but are often sources of identity even if the group identification is oppressed (Young 1990, 47). Since racialized identities are and often do intersect with cultural identities, racialized identities are often a source of belonging and the grounds for social justice (47). Likewise, groupings based on physical characteristics that do not overlap with a cultural identity can be grounds for group identity or formed because of oppression albeit internally heterogenous (48). Because group identities are inevitably established and formed in societies, dissolving group differences as grounds for moral consideration does not address issues of oppression but perpetuates it by suppressing the possibility of group identification—which is arguably an important aspect of anyone's identity. The cause of oppression then, is not group difference, but inflicting injustices and disadvantages on individuals for their belonging in a social group, and to be against oppression based on gender or race is not to dismiss the group differences but to reject perpetuating injustices and disadvantages. These features associated with race and gender-based discrimination (sexism and racism) are limited to discussions of injustices by virtue of group belonging, but

I think it is sufficient to establish that the lack of sophistication in Singer's account of sexism and racism hinders his argument for extending moral consideration to nonhuman animals by dissolving the boundary between human and nonhumans. Racism and sexism are ongoing issues that are not solved by ignoring differences but are challenged by acknowledging the differences and appropriately responding to them. To think that racism and sexism can be solved by ignoring gender and race differences denies responsibility to the legacy of racist and sexist practices. As Shotwell argues, racism and sexism cannot be solved by no longer acting racist or sexist because their history and legacy cannot be erased (Shotwell 2016, 4). Had Singer seriously engaged with work on feminism and race, the ethical principle he wishes to be consistently applied would likely have shown itself to be questionable or non-existent. Because what is being challenged in racism and sexism is not preferential treatment, but the injustices that result from it. Singer seems to have mistaken an idealized reality in which racism and sexism have been or will soon be eradicated and used that as the model for animal ethics—this is an example of theorizing from an idealized model of reality as argued against by Charles Mills (2005) and discussed in my first chapter.

Without addressing the intersections of cultural and racialized identities with meat consumption, vegetarianism out of concern for animal suffering as proposed by Singer does not seem to address issues of cultural appropriation of ethnic foods, nor does it address colonial food practices. Since eating meat is central to Chinese culture, condemning the consumption of meat appears to me to be nothing but an imposition of a Western Eurocentric ideal of eating as a way to police identity. Similarly, considering food sovereignty in embodied knowledge systems such as Anishinabek and Mi'kmaq, rejecting hunting for whale, fish, seal, or other animals as morally impermissible, not only removes the embedded knowledge of eating and cooking and associated identities, but the embedded knowledge of procuring the food (Castellano 2000; Robinson 2014, 680; Joe and Choyce 1997, 149; Whyte 2017, 362; Hornborg 2006, 328). Although not meat, Kyle Whyte demonstrates that the removal of Anishinabek's access to wild rice not only severs the relations to the land but to the cultural identity altogether (Whyte 2017, 362). In response to Indigenous hunting practices of seals and whales, Singer might respond that it is permissible insofar that it is necessary for survival. This is likely because he claims that having access to non-meat foods means eating is not a necessity for survival, and another reason to be vegetarian (Singer 1990, 31, 229). The issue here is that he takes human survival to be an unquestionable good but does not explain why the necessity of human survival is greater than that of other animals. In speaking of Indigenous issues in Canada, I can merely skim the surface. Recalling Singer's concern for racism as the grounds for *Animal Liberation*, we should also remember the ongoing colonial and racist practices affecting indigenous peoples of North America and the factors that drove many of them to seek a better life in cities. If moving to cities dictates a rejection of traditional knowledge and practices around food that were disrupted by settler-colonialism,

then calling for a change to vegetarianism on moral grounds constitutes not only condemning traditional practices but also a call to assimilate and further marginalize a way of being. And as news stories and Indigenous discussions remind us, this is not a hypothetical situation but an everyday problem that people face, as demonstrated by a petition in 2017 demanding an Indigenous restaurant to stop serving seal meat (Mohyeddin 2017). Because ethnic identities are often tied with the consumption of meat, vegetarianism can be seen as a “bourgeois lifestyle choice” that requires one to renounce their ethnic identity in order to participate (Bailey 2007, 46). On account of not being able to consistently address issues regarding the relation between marginalized identities and eating, Singer’s ethical stance appears too simplistic for the complicated mess we are thrown into, and possibly contradicts his rejection of racism. Unless he supports a colour-blind strand of anti-racism—which is just racism in disguise and a misunderstanding of how colour-blind people experience the world.

While being concerned with animal welfare, Singer does not hesitate to make the comparison between nonhuman animals and disabled people to demonstrate both that we unjustly treat animals too poorly and keep some disabled people who experience chronic pain alive for too long (Singer 1990, 20). Singer endorses the use of the principle of equal moral consideration but remains on how a principle of equal moral consideration based on ability to suffer can improve the lives of disabled people. If the principle applies to humans as well as animals, it is curious to think that his response to the suffering of intellectually disabled people or brain trauma survivors is to suggest keeping them alive does more harm than good—rather than improving the situation that they face. In Licia Carlson’s critique of the treatment of disabled people in *Animal Liberation*, the general critique is of Singer’s approach to arguing against speciesism. Without careful consideration of terminology, the comparisons Singer draws between intellectually disabled people and animals to argue for better treatment of animals equates the status of intellectually disabled people to animals (Carlson 2010, 145). Beyond the assumptions and misrepresentations of intellectual disabilities in *Animal Liberation* that Carlson criticizes, the comparison Singer draws between intellectually disabled people and animals is unnecessary and harmful “insofar as it perpetuates certain forms of conceptual oppression while ignoring other concrete forms and obscures the distinctly human face of persons with intellectual disabilities” (Carlson 2010, 145).<sup>12</sup> Carlson’s critique of Singer demonstrates that his argument against speciesism relies on the conceptual exploitation and oppression of another marginalized group. I struggle to see how liberation founded on the oppression of others is desirable.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For a more thorough critique of Singer’s treatment of peoples with intellectual disabilities, read “The Case against Speciesism” in Licia Carlson’s *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections* (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Shotwell argues: “It is inconsistent to argue that freedom is taken from us if we are unable to oppress others” (2016, 156). I see this as connected because Singer cares about reducing the suffering of animals—more than he cares about disabled people.

Although I am sympathetic toward Singer's concern for animals, I cannot ignore the shortcomings of his ethics. I am not arguing against Singer's "logically cogent" case that he thinks "cannot be refuted" because I also think the mistreatment of animals is indefensible (Singer 1990, 244). Rather I wish to highlight the issues which I think are necessary to be addressed in an ethics of food practices and ought not be ignored. By examining Singer's argument and what he missed in detail, I show that theorizing food ethics (in his case, ethics of eating animals) in isolation from social injustices that intersect with food fail to respond to eating situations where food and race intersect. Since his arguments rely on abstracted versions of racism and sexism and assumes a near ideal society, he can be understood as engaging in ideal theory, and accordingly, an example of how ideal theory approaches to ethics can be ineffective in addressing nonideal world problems.

Responding to the concerns with environmental issues around food production, Josh Milburn argues for an approach to food ethics that is "beyond vegan"—his term for an ethics of food that considers the distribution of food to nonhuman animals, the indirect effects of our food practices on nonhuman animals, and how animal rights approaches work with non-nonhuman animal issues (Milburn 2017, 287). Attempts to address the aforementioned concerns also include Francesco Ferraro's argument to balance the interests of religious and cultural practices of meat consumption through a tax on slaughtering to help improve the situation of animals, and alternate approaches to argue against meat consumption from Francione and Charlton on the basis of "conventional wisdom" (Ferraro 2017, 312; Francione and Charlton 2017). The common thread in Ferraro and Francione and Charlton is the insistence on the immoral status of meat consumption, and the necessity for changes to cultures and religious practices that involve meat consumption on the grounds that our concerns for human rights are more central than the expression of culture and religion (Ferraro 2017, 311; Francione and Charlton 2017, 302). However, their accounts lack interpretations of the ethical systems embedded in religions and cultures that are in place to reconcile the consumption of other bodies, and implicitly assume their moral authority to determine what is right to the exclusion of other ethical frameworks. For example, in Buddhist traditions where monks and nuns begged for their food, it is permissible for monks and nuns to eat meat if they did not suspect the animals were killed for them and did not see or hear the killing (Ulrich 2007, 236). Although Buddhists practice ahimsa, or non-violence, lay-persons had more leeway in the interpretation and instantiation of ahimsa in their daily lives (239). If ordained monks and nuns reject alms from laity, it was seen as denying the lay donor from acting out generosity and denying the possibility of building good karma (239). This is but one example showing how eating meat is possible within an ethical system that condemns killing animals where meat-eating is done out of consideration of the donor as well as not wasting food. Other examples can be found in some North American indigenous practices of hunting

where the animals are viewed as the hunter's relatives and the associated ethics that make eating meat possible.<sup>14</sup>

The indiscriminate imperative found in the aforementioned philosophers to become vegan or vegetarian is not only a proposition to adopt one change in our everyday lives, but to also adopt the ethical system and associated implications that gave rise to the conclusion. Singer's core argument in *Animal Liberation* is for us to become vegetarian; following Singer, Ferraro asserts that becoming vegetarian is ethical progress that will "hopefully lead to a change in eating habits both for religious practices and for all other humans" (Ferraro 2017, 313). Francione and Charlton state that unless we believe animals have no moral value, we are committed to veganism—even if we deny that animals have rights (Francione and Charlton 2017, 303). And Milburn concludes that we must go vegan and encourage those around us to do the same because "to do anything less is to fail to respect the rights of nonhuman animals" (Milburn 2017, 291). But these arguments against the consumption of animals are nested in particular ethical systems that are not universal neither are they detached from the framework from which they arise. Without discussions on the framework in context, demanding that we see eating meat as inherently immoral appears to come from a place of assuming moral authority over adjudicating what is ethical. Condemning the practices of eating meat while ignoring how other ethical systems navigate eating relations and demanding we become vegetarian is an assertion of the particular ethical framework as the only one capable of addressing the issue of ethical eating. These raise questions of who holds epistemic authority in judging what counts as suffering, and whether we are willing to accept this ethics to guide our non-eating relations.

Basing moral consideration on an organism's ability to suffer as Singer, Francione, Charlton, Milburn, and Ferraro have done, raises questions regarding who has the authority to proclaim what can and cannot feel pain and suffer. The default is to rely on biological sciences to inform us on what can experience pain, but whether pain is merely a physiological response or requires conscious awareness is unlikely to have an answer in nature. Though the mechanics of nociception is well studied, definitions of pain often include a dimension of reflexive awareness of the experience. But without a clear understanding of consciousness or what constitutes conscious activity, the question of pain becomes arbitrated by something other than the sciences. In the not-so-distant past black people were assumed to have a higher threshold of pain leading to J. Marion Sims to perform surgeries on enslaved women without anesthesia, but the assumption regarding black people reacting more strongly to low levels of pain continues despite

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<sup>14</sup> See "When Whales and Humans Talk" by Kirsta Lee Langlois, and podcast episode 123: "A taste of Indigenous Food" of Media: Indigena (Rick Harpp 2018; Langlois 2018)

being shown to be false (Owens 2017, 108).<sup>15</sup> If we routinely fail to notice and acknowledge pain in fellow humans, would we recognize pain in organisms we already assume to be unable to experience pain? Pain is a fact of biology, but suffering is a response to pain. Through reflection on her chronic pain, Alyson Patsavas argues that although pain is the precondition of suffering, not all pain leads to suffering (Patsavas 2014, 203). For Patsavas, suffering arises from the social structures and the situated context that prevent successful pain management (216). Through theorizing the relations between pain and suffering as situated in a nexus of social interactions, Patsavas complicates the move from pain to suffering. The topic of suffering among humans is more accessible for theorizing, yet failure to manage pain is still imagined to be a failure of individuals to seek proper treatment (Patsavas 2014, 211). Although recognizing when animals are suffering may only be possible through argument-by-analogy, suffering among animals understood this way requires knowledge of suffering among humans prior to being applied. This is not to deny nonhuman animals' ability to suffer and feel pain, but to draw attention to the nuance in human experiences that complicate our ability to paint pain and suffering as unquestionably undesirable.

The theorists working in food ethics discussed here are no doubt attempting to make our food practices more ethical. But as I discussed, their approaches are not particularly well suited to address social dimensions of food. In particular, these approaches struggle to respond to the intersections of race, colonialism, and disability with food. I believe this can in part be attributed to the view of food as bodies isolated from contexts—therefore its material composition is more important for theorizing. The other part, I believe, is the lack of theorizing from the nonideal world where eating intersects with the eater's socioeconomic position and personal identity. This is apparent in the fact that imperatives to go vegan assume we have the wealth to do so. But what about those who do not? Although attention to what foods we eat is important, I think there are more aspects of ethical eating that extend beyond our choice to consume. In particular, I am concerned with having good relations with food before, during, and after eating it. Instead of deciding on what foods to eat prior to thinking about eating relations, I suggest starting with theorizing our relations with food to decide what we should eat.

## II. Feeling as resistance

In seeking a food ethics that begins with practices of developing and maintaining good eating relations, recall the relational ontology of food discussed in chapter II. Considering foods as arrays of relations means acknowledging that we are already “consuming suffering”, as Shotwell writes, from the moment we inhabit the disturbed regime of the industrialized world (2016, 114). The relations of suffering

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<sup>15</sup> An example of how black women's complaints are taken less seriously is tennis star Serena Williams' pregnancy complications in 2018. When she reported having symptoms of pulmonary embolism to the nurse, the nurse assumed she was confused by pain medication (Lockhart 2018).

that occurred in the food production are already present in our foods whether we eat it or not. And the choices we make that brings us into contact with food are not isolated from the social context. Perhaps we do better to theorize ethical eating by considering these dimensions first and foremost.

Although the problems around eating seem impossibly complex at times and we need to eat if we wish to survive, I believe there is value in turning our attention to the issues we are helpless to influence. This is because turning our attention to the problems and suffering (in the food production process, or environmental devastation) makes it possible to know and feel for those being harmed. Not turning away from the pain of seeing someone suffer makes responding to end the suffering possible. This relies on a distinction between acts of resistance and acts of liberation articulated by Barrett Emerick. An act of resistance is where we refuse to take part in how an “ideological story of the world ‘should’ play out” whereas an act of liberation not only rejects the story but changes the “ideological story” (Emerick 2014, 10). We may not always be able to incite change of unjust practices due to our social circumstances, but we still can resist them by wishing to change them and recognizing them for being unjust (16). Outrage, frustration, and sadness to unjust practices themselves might have no consequences, but at the very least, it is an act of recognizing it is something we do not want (16). To feel and acknowledge the pain in unjust practices make responding to end them possible. Because of this, our individual responses to large-scale suffering matters. It is to shout “stop!” when we know something cannot be stopped but wish it could be.

I do not ever wish to eat another human, especially someone I love. But beginning by imagining what it would take to eat a friend or loved one who sacrificed themselves for our survival might be a good place to begin thinking about what good eating relations would look like. My hope is that thinking through how I would want to be eaten or what kind of relation I would want to have with the flesh of someone who sacrificed themselves for my survival may turn our attention to how to engage with food. Because of the abundance of historical and fictional accounts of charity cannibalism, I think that is a good place to start theorizing.

### III. ...Cake with the words “EAT ME”: on being eaten

Cannibalism in modernity is often associated with “savagery” and “uncivilized behavior” and accusations of cannibalism are often associated with racist intents. Yet consumption of human flesh has a well-documented history in modernity. I turn to examples of eating humans found in survival stories such as the wreck of *Essex* and incidents of cannibalism from the Uruguayan Air Force flight 571, and hagiographical Buddhist stories of offering one’s flesh as examples of extreme generosity. I seek to articulate an ethical orientation toward bodies that we eat that respond to the generosity of other organisms. Because there is no external telos to life, claim to necessity for our survival to justify eating

other bodies is no reason to deny the possibility of living from other organisms. Insofar as we choose to live, we are also choosing to eat and rely on killing others for our survival. Asserting the importance of our survival over the beings we eat and thereby taking their existence for granted and as subservient to us is but an assertion of dominance and exploitation. Turning to cannibalism in survival situations as a last resort and offering one's flesh for the benefit of another rejects the possibility of ethical action based in simply refusing to eat. It is the conundrum of the potential to be eaten and to eat that complicates what good eating relations are.

After the dead men in a lifeboat of the *Essex* were eaten, the remaining survivors drew lots to decide on who to kill for food and who to do the killing. Though the captain offered to take the chosen sailors place to be eaten, the sailor rejected. It is not too difficult to think about what we would do in such a situation—do we choose to be eaten or do we desire survival more? Similarly, if we found ourselves crashed in the Andes, like the rugby team on UAF 571, would we choose to eat the remains of those who died in the crash in order to survive? Whether volunteered to be eaten or reluctantly accepting it because of the drawn lot, imagining that we are eaten or consuming the body of a friend or loved one shows at least some relations we would want to have and others that we would wish to avoid. Self-sacrifice excuses us from thinking through to ethical relations we have with eating the flesh of a loved one because we would be too dead to think. But if we chose to eat rather than die, reconciling our acts of eating a friend or loved one confronts us such that our *response* to the facts become the focus of ethical judgement. I temporarily suspend the issues of eating others and turn to face relations of giving and providing for others in the hopes that by thinking through how we give, we learn how to take.

Within the Buddhist tradition, offering food or alms to the bhikshu and bhikkhuni—ordained Buddhist monks and nuns—is central as a practice of generosity. In the tale of the hungry tigress, a previous incarnation of the Buddha is said to have thrown himself off a cliff to feed a hungry tigress who was about to eat her cubs (Martin 2014). Offering one's own flesh is seen as an extreme form of generosity because it shows compassion for the wellbeing of others beyond the concern for the body. As Buddhism moved into China, the emphasis of offering the body as a form of generosity maintains and is exhibited in the story of Huiqiong, a nun who told her followers to dismember her body and feed it to animals after her death (Baochang and Tsai 1994, 43–44). These two examples show of the practice of offering one's flesh to demonstrate the compassion for other animals that assume their bodies will be eaten. By dying with the intent of feeding other animals, these tales can be read as justifying the killing of animals albeit contrary to the Buddhist teaching of ahimsa. But as Buddhism rejects killing animals for food, consumption of meat is permissible if the animal did not die for the eater (recall that monks and nuns can eat meat if they did not

kill, see the killing, or have reason to suspect it was killed for them (Ulrich 2007, 236). Thinking through offering food as a form of generosity minimally demands that we do not take the giving for granted.

Turing away food given through generosity within the Western context perhaps is better theorized by thinking with experiences of going to a friend's house wherein they cook a meal for us. It is arguably rude to reject the food prepared for us or not thank the host for the meal. Even when the food is not of our palate, the relations we wish to have with the host becomes embodied in the food such that we eat it despite our body's rejection of it (Bartos 2017, 156). Because the food embodies the relations between us and the cook, rejecting the food risks rejecting or denying relations of generosity or care between eaters and cooks or providers. When we offer food to others, it is not merely an offering of a bundle of nutrients but also the embodied politics of the context. Giving a homemade pie made from ingredients grown by yourself to someone is not merely giving food, but your work and care that is lacking from a store-bought pie.

Accepting the flesh from a loved one is not just about the flesh but the relation we have (had) with the loved one. And as loving is not loving a particular part but the whole, eating the flesh of a friend cannot deny the relations of care that accompany my friend offering her flesh. Accepting eating does not mean endorsing the situation that produced the context and eating situation, however, regretting and being appalled by eating the flesh of a beloved friend when it was the intention for me to survive seemingly severs relations of care and the entrusted future. In the example of eating a friend, we do not walk away from the situation unchanged and with an appetite for human flesh nor do we wish to forget the sacrifices that kept us alive. Because the reason to live cannot be what justified our existence over the friend's, the reasons for our survival over theirs cannot be brushed aside without acknowledging the friend as themselves. Eating a beloved friend who sacrificed themselves for our survival demands our ethical response to eating address the past history of the friendship as well as directed future without forgetting the process of preparing and eating the flesh. The sailors in the lifeboat of the *Essex* did not choose to eat a colleague for no reason, nor did their lives end the moment they were rescued. They had to live the rest of their lives carrying the memories of eating a friend. Wrestling with the ethics of eating a beloved friend brings everything into question—the choice of eating and the situations do not arise out of nowhere, nor do these dissipate the moment a choice has been made, because our choices guide our actions.

#### IV. Loving food

Good relations of eating are ensnarled in our relations with food. Enacting good eating relations is intertwined with the situatedness of the eater and the food. Thinking through eating relations by considering the possibility of eating a friend sheds light here because we seem more comfortable thinking

about humans as people than anthropomorphizing animals. Arising from the discussion above, I highlight aspects of eating relations that are worth considering. Because human existence is contingent and there is no necessary reason for us to survive, if we choose to live, we must accept that we depend on the lives of organisms that become our food. We cannot live free from entangled eating relations. To engage in eating relations that assert dominance over other organisms seeks to remove us from the webs of relations. But we cannot remove our foods from the relations. No bodies that we enter into eating relationships with can be excluded from consideration in ethical eating. If we are willing to eat a thing, we must be willing to consider the relations we enter into eating relations with. We choose what not to eat by identifying food relations we do not wish to associate with.

Acknowledging the relations of eating and the relations we stand with when we eat is fruitful in developing good relations. We cannot know all the relations enmeshed in food, but total knowledge is not necessary for us to recognize at least some of the relations we do not stand with. The advantage of relational ontologies of food is that it move the relations of violence and exploitation that co-produce foods to the forefront where they are more accessible to be evaluated (Heldke 2012, 87). Relations of eating and food are not neutral with regard to suffering because of the interdependent relations among organisms and eaters. Acknowledging and knowing the relations and histories of foods means not forgetting and not taking their existence for granted and acknowledging that interactions with food are more than merely eating or preparing. Ignoring the relations in food production in factory farms, monocrop agriculture, and food transport as if our relations with food are unaffected removes us from responsibility and guilt. But the occasions that allow us to ignore the impacts of eating are manifestations of the privileges of our position—for some, turning away from hurt is not an option (Emerick 2014, 17). When we are eating meat, we can look away because of our positions of power and privilege where feeling for the animal is optional, and we can turn away from feeling because the injustices that our food (and the workers) endure do not confront us. Enjoying food while ignoring the labour and the sacrifices of food is instantiating a wrongful privilege, as Emerick writes, “when I fail to share the emotional pain of the animals in factory farms, I enjoy a form of *affective ignorance*” (Emerick 2014, 17; emphasis in original). Acknowledging the relations in food and feeling with the organism acknowledges our privilege and forms resistance against disconnecting from the violence in food production. Acknowledgement and knowing the relations we enter into is not merely about the relations we wish to stand against or to sever. Noticing and acknowledging relations in food can direct us to relations we wish to foster and develop.

Noticing the relations of transport, the relation of our food to the land that produced it, the carbon emissions from the transport of food, and the hands that cooked the food makes them relevant in thinking about how we maintain our relations with food. If your grandmother gave you a homemade pie and you

abruptly throw it on the ground and refuse to eat it, questions of relations you hold with your grandmother come to the surface—why did you do it? Restaurants that boast homemade sauces or recipes that “start from scratch” contrast with store-bought, factory processed foods like there is something magical about food prepared by a human that is lacking in foods prepared by machines. It may be a mistake to think that one is better than the other, yet both show an already existing concern for how foods came to be. My friend will fluff the flour exactly one hundred times when making Irish soda bread because it was how her mother taught her and the way her grandmother made soda bread. This is not unique to her. Mary Rawlinson writes in “Women’s Work” of the process of planning meals as embodying “intergenerational solidarities” and repertoires of knowledge and recipes passed down over generations (Rawlinson 2017, 63). Attentiveness to eating relations helps us recognize relations embedded in fixing a meal. Within the nuclear family of the Anglo-European world, the gendered roles of cooking and caring for children are held by women (65). Cooking with parents or grandparents form directional relations between the child and the cook and from the cook to the child that are not reducible to each other. The relations of the home cook to the child embody directed relations to the future via the transmission of knowledge—although some people never learn to cook. Enacting lessons we learned from cooking with our parents manifests an agreement with a particular way of being. Home cooking is a gift that can be bestowed upon later generations and friends. The origin of recipes and cooking practices are stories that imbue the experience of fixing meals meaning beyond the kitchen and dining table. It is basic etiquette to thank the cook for her labour in serving a meal. Noticing the labour that make meals possible commends gratitude toward those who contributed to the possibility of the meal. But gratitude is not the same as endorsement, nor is it absolving guilt.

As an eater situated in unceded Mi’kmaq territory, the food choices available to me embody the settler-colonial practices of Canada that displaced Mi’kmaq culture and people. No food choice I make while here can escape the entanglement of systemic injustices by virtue of my identity as a settler. Being grateful for eating recognizes my dependence and privilege of choice but does not address the settler-colonial history that made sushi rice, bell peppers, broccoli, and daikon and other non-local foods available at the expense of traditional Mi’kmaq foodways. While I buy carrots, baicai, shitake mushrooms, chicken eggs, and white flour from the grocery store to make jiaozi as an affirmation of my ethnic Han Chinese identity and my connection to my mother and grandmother, I must acknowledge that the possibility that my eating is predicated on the settler-colonial violence that “cleared” the land of its culture and people. Acknowledging troubled history is a move toward what Shotwell calls “forms of non-innocent responsibility”, or ethical practices that do not step outside the always present relations of suffering (Shotwell 2016, 121). I can leave this particular web of relations that emerge from the colonized Mi’kmaq

territory by moving to a different location but will have merely moved into a different entangled history of suffering associated with the location. Insofar as we choose to live and choose to live on Earth, we must eat, and thereby are responsible for honouring the embodied relations in eating. Recognizing suffering and the settler-colonial injustices embedded in food practices does not heal the damage. Individual action is not enough to address systemic oppression, but acknowledging the suffering identifies the injustices or eating relations we do not wish to have and makes liberation a possibility—we cannot solve a problem without identifying it as a problem first.

Eating something commits us to the bodies being eaten. There is no perfect way to eat or perfect food to eat, but we can strive to be better—but only in relation to current and past practices. Dimensions of eating enact relations of responsibility between what is eaten and the eater. If we are to believe when we eat that we are merely consuming a part of an organism independent from its history, I contend that we have mistakenly applied the term “independent” so that we can believe our eating is free from moral consideration. Interhuman relations are important in how we interact with each other and knowing someone’s relations to us informs our interactions with them. Friendship, as Lisa Guenther argues, is a relationship where we love the friend for their singularity or totality and not because we like certain parts or characteristics that make the friend interchangeable (Guenther 2007, 219). If I were to love a friend merely for their instrumental value to me like Aristotle’s friendship of utility, it is unlikely people will call it a good friendship (or a friendship at all), let alone failing to meet Kant’s categorical imperative to not treat humans as mere means to ends. We depend on eating relations more than we do on friends in enacting our autonomy yet sustain eating relations by relations we have with our gut biome and those who provide food. Just how we find ourselves in loving friendships seemingly beyond our choice, and joke about not realizing the quirks and strangeness the friendship entails, we enter eating relations with only partial knowledge. We may not know all the secrets that a friend has, but we do not take their appearance to be the totality of their being—to do so is an error, so why do we do that to food? Recall my suggestion to think of foods as friends you eat. You may have friends you do not like because of who they are, but who they are is a product of the relations they embody. In relationships we point to characteristics and actions of individuals as “red flags” indicating the potential for the relationship to be toxic and potentially harmful. In recognizing relations of suffering we do not wish to take part in, choosing what to eat embodies our commitment to working with relations we are happy to munch on. But this distinctly rejects the possibility of denying a class of bodies to be considered food because eater and what is being eaten is not a relation between the eater and the category the eaten belongs to, but to the individual organism being eaten.

## V. Desert or Dessert?

Our relation to food is comparable to our relations with friends in countably infinite ways. The history of western philosophy shows that we are more familiar with good interpersonal relations of love, care, and respect than good relations with non-human subjects. Learning to love food as a friend is not a call for us to eat each other, but to reject the narrative of dominance over food and to recognize the significance of organisms we eat. Since we embody the relations that sustain our being, our necessity for survival is as trivial as it is for any other assemblage of relations. Eating is but another relation enacted between the eaten and the eater, and insofar as we choose to live and depend on other beings for survival, we have a duty to honour those relations and allow their flourishing. An ethical practice of eating means allowing foods to express their existence in cooking, and that we recognize things for what they are while we eat them. If I wish to eat steak but do not acknowledge it as once part of a cow, it is up to question as to why I attempt to deny the connection—is it because I wish to deny my responsibility in the killing of the cow to satisfy my desires?

The purpose of thinking about good eating relations is to help us enact them. Yet overthinking is a real possibility because acting does not always require thought. If we are concerned about where to start, may I suggest thanking your food first?

## Conclusion

As I conclude my thesis amidst the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, there seem to be more and more things to be concerned with. I began writing my thesis in response to the messy entanglement of relations that entangle my ethnic Han identity with my status as new Canadian citizen on stolen Indigenous land. Now, as I eat, I think about the pandemic and how our eating selves are affected by it. Moving between my thesis, cooking, and eating, my food relations permeate into the thesis and my thesis leaks into my food. As I eat, I am reminded of the many relations articulated in my thesis and the possibility of feeling sad for the meat I eat. I think about my thesis when I eat. I wonder if I can share my relations with food with my thesis. My thesis is also relations all the way down.

Weaving from chapter one to chapter three, I demonstrated the possibility of thinking about ethics by focusing on the impure and nonideal world. In chapter one, I shared the theory that assisted me in thinking. In chapter two, I argued for a relational understanding of food that recognizes the impure materiality of the world. And in chapter three I turned to thinking about how we should approach food when it is relations all the way down. Recognizing food as complex entities with relations inspired me to think of food as a loved one. I hoped to show that by thinking about food as the flesh of a loved one who self-sacrificed for our survival, we can begin to imagine how we can develop more complex relations with food to facilitate relations of care. Although I think we should all aim to decrease the suffering and damage caused by unsustainable food production practices around the world, I recognize and know not everyone has the ability to initiate that level of change. But regardless of how effective our individual actions may be, we can at least refuse to turn away from pain to make future action possible.

Refiguring our relations with food may, and has for me, seep into other relations. Accepting a relational ontology of the world turns my attention to the constitutive relations in everything. My ability to develop good relations with everything is limited, but at least it is possible. I wish to be good, so I continue to try.

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