

Eating People Is Wrong ... or How We Decide Morally What to Eat

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Though from opposite sides of the world and of different genders, religious backgrounds, and professional disciplines (but not necessarily scholarly orientations), we both grew up being fed tales of cannibalism.

For one of us (LER), born and raised in Colorado, it was the true story of Alfred Packer,¹ the mining prospector originally from Pennsylvania who joined five other men on an expedition in 1874 into the San Juan range of the Rocky Mountains in the middle of winter. A few months later in early April, only Packer emerged—and apparently not terribly the worse for wear:

He seemed too well fed for a man who had spent the winter in the mountains and he had more money than any of them had seen him with during the trip. He eventually broke down and

revealed a horrible series of events that started ten days after their journey began (Di Stefano 2006, 181).

To this day, no one knows exactly what happened between the men. Packer, after originally stating he fell behind the others and turned back, next claimed four of his colleagues died of exposure or were killed by the fifth, whom he then killed in self-defence. When “[f]ive sets of human remains” were found in August “in a cluster near the bank” of a river, however, it “appeared that they had not only been murdered where they lay but also horribly ravaged, and one set of remains was missing its head” (Ramsland 2005, ¶1–2 under “A Grisly Find”). Packer was tried and eventually convicted (first of murder, then of manslaughter), even though he and others have argued at various times for his innocence.

Regardless, one thing is clear: The miner survived on the flesh of his compatriots and Packer’s legend lives on in both cultural and pop history.

Eighty-five years later and across the Atlantic, English author Malcolm Bradbury published his first novel, *Eating People Is Wrong* (1959). A far cry from the snow-covered mountains of the American West, Bradbury’s book relates the saga of a provincial university campus and its academicians, who are confronted with philosophical questions of “what it means to treat someone well” and “the relevance of liberal humanism in a changing world” (Reeves 2012, ¶4 and ¶2). This moral struggle is personified by guest

¹Alfred Packer, the “prospector, cannibal, and possible murderer” is “sometimes known as Alferd” (Di Stefano 2006, 181).

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lecturer Carey Willoughby, a “most overtly parasitic character” (Morace 1989, 40) whose self-centred ambitions “could be said to consume people” and who “sees in his success and fame a license and an encouragement to behave as outrageously as he pleases” (Reeves 2012, ¶6).

Of course, unlike Packer’s real-life anthropophagism, Willoughby’s cannibalism is fictional and metaphorical, but both stories have stuck in our formative moralities as well as the collective consciousness and highlight, as Bradbury himself explained in an unpublished afterword, “a portrait of the conflicts and contradictions of liberal life, as experienced by a group of intelligent people in the postwar, austere climate ... when political ideas had changed and welfare state hopes and anxieties were in the air” (n.d., ¶3).

One of us (MA), who grew up in England and lives in Australia, uses the title of this Bradbury novel—and the concept of cannibalism—to initiate a discussion among medical students on the methodology of ethics. By positing an issue that is seemingly so uncontroversial that no one will wish to argue in its favour, the pedagogical intent of this exercise is to enable the class to focus on methods of argumentation. Even with the case of cannibalism, however, it soon becomes clear that subjects we think are “cut-and-dried” are harder to argue for or against than might be first thought. In fact, it turns out that cannibalism, this apparent “no-brainer” (can anyone really argue for it?), happens to have a rich cultural and legal history,² to say nothing of anthropology.³

Clearly there is significant moral content with considerations of what we eat and how we produce it, and these are indeed substantial and profound matters of ethical controversy in 2013. Food, if we are fortunate, is a domain of everyday life and one in which people commonly exercise ethical action—by, for example, adopting vegan and vegetarian diets or insisting on free-range or organic origins of food items. Whilst these choices are strongly driven by personal health interests, they are also forms of individual political

activism based upon important ethical judgements that are largely derived from views about the place of human beings in the world. The idea of man having dominion over the earth and all animals and plants might have seemed harmless to early settlers in vast “new world” continents, but it now appears obvious that nature is finite and we are “eating up” the planet (and our survival) at an alarming rate.

The concerns around “food ethics” are many, including the distribution of this most basic necessity to everyone alive. A moral justification for modern monoculture techniques and factory farming is that these provide the only way to “feed the world,” particularly for large, urbanized centres of population where it is an enormous challenge to deliver food that has been produced in ecologically sound ways. In the symposium on “Food Ethics: Issues in Production and Consumption” in this issue of the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, however, philosopher Jan Deckers argues against this common refrain and, instead, “In Defence of the Vegan Project” (2013). Moreover, as Deckers (2011) and others have contended elsewhere, monoculture and factory farming are motivated by economics of production that are often short-sighted and narrowly beneficial.

These techniques tend to overlook externalities of harm for humans, animals, and the environment. The film *Food, Inc.* (Kenner, Pearlstein, and Roberts 2008), for example, has become a beacon in the United States regarding how the food industry’s excesses have led to health dangers and massive damage to the ecosystem, while using vast profits and powerful marketing tactics to pull the idyllic wool over consumers’ eyes. And there is little that industry leaders and policy-makers can or desire to do. To illustrate, a paper in this issue of the *JBI* by Belinda Reeve (2013) documents the lack of regulatory teeth governments have with regard to limiting unhealthy food advertisements to children.

Simultaneous pandemics of obesity and food scarcity underscore problems with both the content and allocation of the world’s food markets, and our food’s origins have been at the heart of recent public health concerns such as the “horse meat” scandal in Europe, the “pink slime” situation in the United States, and various outbreaks of *E. coli* and mad cow.

Just as important, Peter Singer, one of the world’s most recognized public philosophers, has been a leading voice in the campaign for animal welfare. His book *The Ethics of What We Eat* (2006), with co-author Jim Mason, presents a strong agenda based on a bioethical approach

² See, e.g., *R v. Dudley and Stephens* [1884] 14 QBD 273 DC; the 1846 Donner party in the Sierra Nevada Mountains; Alexander Pearce of Tasmania; the 1972 plane crash in the Andes, etc.; as well as Lon Fuller’s fictitious legal “Case of the Speluncan Explorers” (1949). Even during Alfred Packer’s time (and in the “mountain culture” of the American West), anthropophagism was not illegal (Di Stefano 2006).

³ See, e.g., Shirley Lindenbaum’s (1979) work on the South Fore and *kuru*.

for a global rethink on food and the way we live. In Australia in 2011, for instance, after the food industry's treatment of animals was graphically shown on the ABC current affairs program *Four Corners*, a public outcry led to the suspension of the live beef export trade. And in another paper in this issue of the *JBI*, Christine Parker, Carly Brunswick, and Jane Kotey demonstrate that even “free-range” farming in the egg industry “does not necessarily address all of the problematic issues with hen welfare” (2013, under “Abstract”).

Similarly, three recent instalments of the influential *Quarterly Essay* have focused on ecological issues: “Man-Made World: Choosing Between Progress and Planet” by Andrew Charlton (2011), “After the Future” (about species extinctions) by Tim Flannery (2012), and “Us and Them” by Anna Krien (2012). This last piece is a plea for us to understand the basis for our relationship with animals and to move away from anthropomorphic relativism. These essays, which represent about three-quarters of the latest output of that Australian journal, make clear that ecology is the central plank of modern progressive thought and action. This includes both climate change and issues surrounding food (which are, of course, linked).

Both food safety and food security encourage increasing governmental control and surveillance of the food industry. An imperative also exists for each of us to contemplate the sources of our nutrition and the ways in which our animal brethren are cared for and killed. As a sceptical public we should seek out more ethical, holistic, and ecologically healthy means of food production. It is perhaps a positive sign that philosopher and founder of anthroposophy Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic method of farming is increasingly being practised: This is an approach based on spiritual and cosmic ideas that blend respect for nature with a sense of ecology and connection. But more needs to be done.

While a technically driven progressivism, including with regard to food production, has undeniably brought benefits, unfortunately this also has encouraged a collective delusion that human beings can fly above and apparently increasingly detach from nature and our origins. Alfred Packer and others who have been stranded in the “wild” know the dangers of this all too well. Moreover, like Willoughby, in our “success and fame” we have assumed “a license and an encouragement to behave as outrageously” as we please. This comes at a price—some of it in the physical world and some in the moral domain, though ultimately these are one. Global

economic trends need to be tempered by ethical reflection and, as seen in this issue of the *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, the field of bioethics demonstrably has an important seat at the dining room table.

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