Food, Habit, and the Consumption of Animals as Educational Encounter

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At the 2007 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society (PES), Susan Laird delivered a provocative presidential address entitled "Food for Co-Educational Thought." Laird turned the society's attention to the philosophical and educational meaning of food — not an easy task considering most philosophers deem food a highly corporeal subject, holding at best a trace of theoretical significance. However, food is not a novel theme of philosophic inquiry. As Laird points out, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke, among others, took up food as part of their respective projects. Exposing the plentiful possibilities of "foodways" through a variety of texts, Laird calls on philosophers of education to reclaim food for "philosophical-educational study and for thus rethinking coeducation."[1]

Unfortunately, Laird's timely invitation remains unanswered. One likely reason stems from deep roots embedded in Western thought. The often acknowledged, yet ostensibly stubborn binary between the mind and the body relegates food — through the bodily act of eating — to the "wrong" side of the divide. The abundance of research addressing food may be of little interest to educational philosophers because it centers predominantly or solely on issues of nutrition and diet, and thus areas of the body. Laird's full-bodied essay, however, joins the intellect with the senses, dissolving the mind/body dichotomy and generating a more substantive discussion of food through contemplative eating and bodily movement. I now want to build on the conversation she initiated and also to reflect beyond food's archetypal issues of obesity and caloric intake.

The main purpose of this essay is to explore the consumption of animals as an educational act. In the next section, I will expand Jane Roland Martin's theory of educational encounter involving nonhuman beings to include the consumption of dead animals as meat. Then, I shift to John Dewey's conception of habit to destabilize the docile, routine habit of meat eating. Dewey brings to light the social complexities of this deeply entrenched human habit. I conclude by offering an educational project of making visible the process of animals-becoming-meat — that is, the agricultural and slaughtering practices through which living creatures are dominated, maimed, and killed in order to become fragmented, edible pieces of meat. Why should anyone learn about such a repugnant story? In my view, the truth behind the façade of "meat" is so gripping and disturbing that, when seen, it can change the way we think and act in the world.

This essay serves an additional purpose. I also make a case for extending scholarly inquiry addressing consumerism to (re)encompass production and labor. Animals-becoming-meat is a particular form of production and labor — specifically, the work of rearing, dismembering, and killing — that illustrates and exposes

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the broader problems of distance, ignorance, and alienation in contemporary life. Seeing a living, bellowing steer turn into succulent steak — from creature to ubiquitous commodity — demonstrates, in a very palpable way, all that remains hidden, far removed from the consumer's field of vision. The foundational role of production is largely concealed and thus taken for granted in consumer society.

Before I move on, I have two points to make. The first is that humans all over the globe have something insightful to teach us about food and meat eating — there is a plethora of cultural perspectives on the subject. But when I use "we" and "us," I am referring to those of us in highly commercialized, consumerist societies who live, work, and play far removed from the animals we consume. This includes the vast majority of Americans. The second point is that killing animals for food is clearly an ethical act, but that does not mean we are bound only to ethics or to presenting a moral argument for or against vegetarianism. In analyzing the consumption of animals as an educational encounter, my critique, at times, teems with abhorrence, yet I am unwilling to universalize vegetarianism as a moral prescription. My aims are more open-ended and, I think, realistic. I offer an intentional and careful way to think about consuming animals to encourage a more conscientious relationship with those who die so we can eat their flesh. As a grandson of animal farmers, I am very much inspired by those humans who, though small in number, actually kill the animals they eat and do so with great intentionality, respect, and mindfulness — and who, to the best of their abilities, attempt to reduce the amount of pain and suffering the animals experience. But for the vast majority of us who remain physically distant from the farm and kill-floor, at the very least, we ought to learn more about the lives — which is to say, the deprivation, torment, and death — of the animals we eat.

Consuming Animals as Educational Encounter

During the 2011 session of PES, "Philosophy of Education Thirty Years after Martin's Radical Presidential Challenge," several scholars recognized the pioneering contributions of Jane Roland Martin in the areas of gender and educational theory. In her response, Martin highlighted the ways the field has improved since her time serving as President in 1981, particularly from the rich contributions of women. Yet her broader point was that diversity enriches all areas of scholastic inquiry, not just philosophy of education. In elaborating on the centrality of diverse perspectives, Martin proceeded to take the audience to a place no one anticipated.

When asked by an audience member about what she envisions our field will look like thirty years from now, Martin started talking about animals. Judging by the silence and the conspicuous facial expressions in the crowd, many seemed bewildered, failing to see the direct relationship between animals and philosophy of education. The audience was confused as to why Martin, who for decades has theorized about the education of human beings, began to talk about the learning accomplishments of the great ape, Nim Chimpsky. Martin's view of diversity moved us from the human to the nonhuman realm, and she managed, just as she did thirty years prior, to challenge philosophers of education to consider a radical direction — a point of view "hitherto alien," to use Dewey's phrase.[2]

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In her most recent book, *Education Reconfigured: Culture, Encounter, and Change*, Martin questions the dominant view that excludes animals "from education's domain," arguing that nonhumans are worthy of becoming the "educatees" of more meaningful learning — not mere training of automatons — similar to the sort of learning humans typically deem applicable to only *Homo sapiens*.[3] Her argument for animals assuming a more active role in education is part of her broader theory of "education as encounter." Martin argues, if an individual (human or nonhuman) possesses the capacity to change or be changed through an event, and that event, on some level, brings about a change to culture, then an educational encounter occurs — as in the case of Nim, for example. Educational encounters require that "the capacities of an individual and the stock of a culture become yoked together," resulting in both "individual learning" and "cultural transmission."[4] I agree with Martin that humans ought to move beyond the narrow anthropocentric view that we are the only actors in education or transmitters of culture. Even so, I will focus on what we have to learn about ourselves, as humans, in the world.

So what is the relationship between Laird's call to reclaim food as philosophical-educational study and Martin's focus on nonhuman encounter? The answer I offer is this: The most fundamental way we encounter animals is by eating their flesh. If food is philosophical, as Laird urges, and if encounters with animals are educative, as Martin suggests, then we have good reason to believe that consuming animals holds much promise as a philosophical-educational encounter.

It is important to point out that eating meat is not the sort of animal encounter Martin has in mind. Nevertheless, I believe there is room to include the consumption of dead animals as educational encounter for two reasons. First, food is inextricably linked to culture. In encountering edible animal bodies, the individual eater connects not only with an artifact of agri*culture* but also with an abundance of cultural phenomena. Eating habits are not individual; they are derivatives of institutions, practices, and beliefs that sustain social conditions and norms, for better or worse. While the animals we eat are dead, the cultural encounter is very much alive. Secondly, food consumption involves an individual's physical and mental capacities — taste, imagination, reasoning, empathy, to name a few — at a fundamental level. Thus, consuming animal flesh furnishes the sort of educational encounter Martin desires.

I want to discuss briefly the ontological reality of eating food, as the physical constitution of bodies, to prompt a more embodied view of consumption. Consumption is so fundamental and pervasive in contemporary life that it has traversed from the functional to the constitutional, to the domain of being. Consuming is much more than purchasing products; it is meaningful interaction, communication, and construction. It is important to think of eating animals as both a unique and routine form of consumption. Of course, we know that meat is a type of food, and food is not special since we eat every day. In this sense, meat as food is routine for most of us. At the same time, food, and thus meat, is an exceptional form of consumption because, we physically *become* through assimilation of what is edible. "Food stands

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in an ontological relationship to the self," writes food scholar Glen Kuehn, because "I know that what I eat will be incorporated into my being."[5] The same cannot be said for other goods or images we consume. For example, students consume messages and advertisements of Channel One in schools, but the television program does not literally become part of their physicality because students do not literally eat the program (though they may consume the food advertised on the program).

Carol Adams, author of *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, argues that meat eating is a uniquely horrific form of consumption because it requires the complete annihilation of the animal body.[6] I disagree. In order to consume animal flesh, a living animal must be killed, not annihilated. Killing a pig for ham puts an end to her life, but we do not completely annihilate her because pork consumption constitutes the integration of dead pig flesh into our living bodies. Through taste — the "most physically intimate of the five senses" — we ingest and absorb the dead. "Taste," Kuehn expresses, "cannot be experienced without our taking a bit of the world and putting it into our body.… The objects we taste are assimilated, processed, and transformed through the body."[7] Through the taste-sense encounter the dead, inanimate other, as objectified meat, does not vanish but becomes one with our living self. Most of us *are* meat eaters: it is who we are, part of our identity, not just what we do. Nevertheless, we have trouble grasping the significance of consuming animals. Here we find potential in Dewey who, by linking individual habits with culture, may help us transform indifference into thoughtful action.

John Dewey and Habit

The philosophical profundity of consumption is revealed in the habit of eating of animals. Meat eating is the primary way that most humans in industrial-consumerist societies encounter animals — even if they are dead and dismembered by the time we eat them — and it is also the human habit that is the leading cause of animal exploitation and death. But the repetitiveness of the habit, the daily and enduring consumption of animals and their by-products, has desensitized us to all that lies behind the immediate behavior. To reiterate, I do not want to formulate a normative argument for vegetarianism, but I do want to rethink the status quo in order to facilitate habits of conscientious consumption. What interests me are the socially complex ways we have learned the habit of meat eating, the ways we have come to legitimize it, and the dispositions we hold prior to and during action. Are these dispositions passive, rote, and dull? Or are they flexible and intentional? I attempt to address these questions by analyzing Dewey's conception of habit.

While he did not articulate a cogent philosophy of food, Dewey held firm that education should transform the habits of mind and body. For Dewey, habits of the right kind are vibrant means for human growth. Encompassing a broad range of human thought and action, there are different kinds of habits. What makes a habit "bad" for Dewey is "enslavement to old ruts."[8] Bad habits arise from unexamined habituation, the impulse and fixed routine of social custom that reinforce stagnation as "opposed to the conclusions of conscious deliberation" (*DE*, 49). Bad habits are inimical to human growth because they preserve "carelessness"

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and "absentmindedness" (*HNC,* 163–164). They lack human will and largely go unquestioned due to the lethargy of habituation that has been reinforced through a variety of taken-for-granted social conditions.

Fixed, unthinking habits have been formed — or, more precisely, imposed — from outside ourselves, stamped onto us and inculcated through social mechanisms and conventions. Meat eating amounts to a bad habit in the way the habit has developed over time as the product of unreflective custom rather than our own deliberation and will. Robert Westbrook writes, "The customs of any society were its prevailing habits, and Dewey argues strenuously that individual minds were the product of custom."[9] We do not, as mere individuals, consciously choose to become meat eaters as we grow up. The process of becoming during our most impressionable years — for most individuals at least — was inadvertent and built on presumed social conduct. Due to the inertia of habituation, we have become perfunctory meat eaters. Of course, many of our consumption habits have developed this way, which is not altogether a bad thing. What, then, makes meat eating such a problematic habit? For starters, the meat industry is the world's largest institution of killing. No other human habit demands the systemic killing of so many sentient life forms — literally, billions upon billions every year. Americans have ravenous appetites for meat but miniscule is the attention we devote to thinking carefully about this killing, how it systemic it is, and whether it is even necessary.

But there is something transformational going on here. The "traits of a bad habit," Dewey posits, "are precisely the things which are most instructive about all habits and about ourselves" (*HNC*, 26). Behavior rooted in rigidity is to be transformed into vibrant modes of being or intelligent habits that summon a more intentional way of life. As opposed to lackluster mechanistic behavior, intelligent habits blossom into purposeful and inventive action that has a reciprocal relationship with conscious thinking. As Dewey explains, "Our conscious thoughts, observations, wishes, aversions are important, because they represent inchoate, nascent activities … our sole escape from the dominion of routine habits and blind impulses" (*DE*, 348). One potential way to transform meat eating from a "motor skill without accompanying thought" to an intelligent habit is to focus on the social complexity of human action (*DE*, 49).

Habits are not forms of isolated individualistic behavior but are social in nature. Like all food, meat requires linkages reaching far beyond the dining table, though the table provides the locale for reflection. The individual act of eating is an illusion. I am never alone when I eat. As I eat steak, I am implicated in an intricate web of interconnections — with the flora and fauna, and with economies and governments, for example. Walden Bello, Director of the Institute for Food and Development Policy, who remarks on the sociality of beef production and consumption, makes Dewey's assertion strikingly germane, that "our individual habits are links in forming the endless chain of humanity" (*HNC*, 23). Bello observes:

> Every time you eat a hamburger you are having a relationship with thousands of people you never met.… [T]ragically, much of the world's food and land resources are tied up in producing beef and other livestock — food for the well-off — while millions of children and

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> adults suffer from malnutrition and starvation.… In Central America, staple crop production has been replaced by cattle ranching, which now occupies two-thirds of the arable land. The World Bank encouraged this switch-over with an eye toward expanding U.S. fast food and frozen-dinner markets. The resulting expansion of cattle ranching has deprived peasants of access to land they depend on for growing food.… What does all this have to do with our hamburgers? The American fast-food diet and the meat-eating *habits* of the wealthy around the world support a world food system that diverts food resources from the hungry.[10]

Consumerism does not appeal to these unsettling facts but to our most selfish, crass interests. We are particularly good at individualizing food habits, so much so that we lose sympathy for and lose touch with not only the land and animals but the flesh-and-blood humans who labor and die so we can eat. Let us now be more concrete about educational scenarios that might disrupt the Standard American Diet.

From Consumption to Production: Dead Commodity to Living Animal

The commercialization of education is on the rise through school-business partnerships that manifest in food services and products, vending machines, sponsorships, curriculum materials, computers, and other technologies. Deron Boyles finds that school-business partnerships usurp meaningful thinking and inquiry, and ultimately churn out uncritical consumers rather than engaged citizens. Boyles offers a potentially transformative suggestion for schools inundated with commercialism. He recommends "a form of reverse exploitation" designed to engage students "in critically transitive investigations of the partnerships themselves: as object lessons."[11] Given that our present moment is saturated with market logic, and since food is a chief way that corporations encroach on schools, I appreciate Boyles's criticisms of corporate food programs. But I want to add a solidifying ingredient to the recipe for criticality. What is also needed, in my view, is a concrete analysis of the objects of consumption: the centerpiece commodities that food businesses *must* market and sell to make the partnerships possible.

We can start with school lunches as a fundamental means of instilling or changing bad habits. The typical cafeteria-style lunch is an instrumental part of the school day, merely a means to fill up stomachs so minds can continue on with the "real" learning in classrooms. But school food itself can either encumber or foster intelligent habits. Schools could structure lunch as candid, intentional eating, for this is the time and space when students encounter animal flesh. Concrete meat lessons disrupt the mind/body binary and encourage deliberation through bodily engagement, engendering a more mindful relationship with food and animals. As students consume meat with their mouths, they could ruminate over questions of the animal bodies becoming one with their bodies. However, school lunches, as critical lessons, ultimately will not suffice. We need an education that is more comprehensive and robust, one that pushes our analysis beyond the point of consumption.

In his book, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics*, Trevor Norris correctly writes of the "productivist bias" of scholars who have historically focused mainly on the role production at the expense of consumption.[12] But a review of the present literature leads me to ask: Is the postmodern turn now overshadowing production and labor? When educationists study commercialism and food consumption there seems to be a consumerist bias — a main concern for

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what happens after production, when food commodities are being, or have been, consumed. Consumption begins with production, and there is still a bountiful landscape in the indispensable production and labor practices that make consumption possible. Without production, we are left with too thin of a story. Our understanding of food lacks substance. We fail to appreciate the nuance of consuming animals. We lose sight, on a broader level, of the system of the industrial economy.

We are heading into unsettling, and yet enthralling, terrain. In order to take the production of meat seriously, we must take animal farming and slaughtering seriously — for it would be impossible to consume meat if producers did not make animals consumable. Meat is an artifice, a deceptive symbol disguising a very long and rich story of living, suffering, and dying. The vast majority of consumers remain distant, alienated, and largely ignorant of this story, even its prologue. In a calculated way, food marketers and advertisers pervert the story by manipulating us to think of meat as merely cellophane-wrapped patties, and not the outcome of complex processes involving the industrial feeding operation, the cruel confinement stall, and the killing and disassembling. We do not object to this manipulation. We have become highly proficient in distancing ourselves from farm animals through both physical distance that keeps the bodily presence of animals remote from our bodies and also through metaphorical and linguistic means. For example, instead of using more precise, descriptive language, such as "cuts of pig stomach" or "carcass remains of baby cows," we use safe, inaccurate terms, such as "bacon" and "veal." We want to avoid emotional complication and evade deeper thought about this story. As long as we only see the final product (the meat) and not the agricultural practices or slaughter (the animal-becoming-meat), the façade of meat will prevail and so will distance and ignorance. What, if anything, can be done?

A Disturbing Conclusion

Earlier I stated that the truth behind animals-becoming-meat can change the way we think and act. This transformation involves a disturbing effort: to see for ourselves how whole animal bodies become meat. For example, in a recent public awareness campaign, Paul McCartney asserts that everyone would become vegetarian if slaughterhouses were made of glass walls. Perhaps "everyone" overstates the effect, but the general point — that we would be so repulsed at the sight of animals being slaughtered that we would denounce eating them — holds much force in our industrial age of veiled and secretive slaughtering practices. It is one thing to hear or read about animals-becoming-meat, it is quite another to watch the cold, mechanized process unfold with our own eyes.

Upton Sinclair offers a firsthand account of the Chicago stockyards in the early 1900s in his infamous *The Jungle*. With its gruesomely accurate depictions of the meat-packing industry, the book sparked an immediate outcry from a disgusted and shocked public, ultimately leading to real societal change through legislation such as the Federal Meat Inspection Act of 1906. Sinclair's original intent was not to reform specific industry practices, but to undermine industrial capitalism and wage

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slavery by divulging the inhumane conditions of human laborers. However, Sinclair quickly found that human exploitation in the meat industry is built on animal exploitation. After witnessing the methodical brutality of industrial pig slaughtering, Sinclair wrote the following:

> It was all so very businesslike that one watched fascinated. It was pork-making by machinery; pork-making by applied mathematics. And yet somehow the most matter-of-fact person could not help thinking of the hogs; they were so innocent, they came so very trustingly; and they were so very human in their protests.… They had done nothing to deserve it.… It was like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, *all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory. One could not stand and watch very long without becoming philosophical, without beginning to deal in symbols and similes, and to hear the hog-squeal of the universe*.[13]

To see the throat cut open of a kicking, struggling pig, to hear the "hog-squeal of the universe," is disturbing, perhaps even traumatizing, for many. Still, I am convinced that Sinclair is right. Watching humans slaughter innocent, utterly powerless animals is philosophical. It certainly is educational.

Consumerism does not encourage us to watch, witness, or imagine the horrific fates our daily consumption habits transfer onto others, human and nonhuman. On the contrary, complex systems of power, involving huge sums of capital and resources, work diligently to keep us in line by keeping the whole process of animals-becoming-meat deliberately concealed from view, preventing us from ever seeing and touching the bloodshed. Since not all of us can walk into the stockyards the way Sinclair did, I believe we must be unnerved by graphic accounts and disturbing visuals of the killing to bring about a more mindful relationship with the animals we consume. This involves engaging both "the language of visuality" as well as the "actual images" of undercover investigations of animal cruelty and slaughtering from which we normally avert our eyes because they make us cringe.[14] When unveiled, the ugly squeamish detail of the confinement and killing is the stuff I find the most educational about consuming animals. But what I judge the most transformative is (for many) the unbearable sight of the kill-floor. And what sort of person wants to see that? The educated person does.

In seeing the disgust, we no longer take this fundamental habit for granted. Instead, as animal death moves from the shadows into the light, from the unseen to the seen, intelligent habits come alive. By complicating the sign of "meat," visibility restores the tangible animal, the literal killing, and all the repugnant stuff — the cow's innards, hide, fat, bits of brain, tongue, lips, liver, bone, cartilage — that comprise the commodities we routinely wear as cosmetics and clothes and eat as food. To consume animals with gratitude, slowly and attentively — or perhaps to give up this habit altogether — we must have the courage to be disturbed by educational encounters previously brushed aside. The animals we eat deserve more than a passing glance. They deserve our serious gaze. Only then will we sense what Sinclair called that precious "hog-personality."[15]

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1. Susan Laird, "Food for Coeducational Thought," *Philosophy of Education 2007*, ed. Barbara S. Stengel (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2008), 1.

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2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 175. This work will be cited in the text as *DE* for all subsequent references.

3. Jane Roland Martin, *Education Reconfigured: Culture, Encounter, and Change* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 57.

4. Ibid., 7 and 14.

5. Glenn Kuehn, "Dining on Fido: Death, Identity, and the Aesthetic Dilemma of Eating Animals," in *Animal Pragmatism: Rethinking Human-Nonhuman Relationships*, eds. Erin McKenna and Andrew Light (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 236–239.

6. Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 81.

7. Kuehn, "Dining on Fido," 235.

8. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (New York: The Modern Library, 1922), 63. This work will be cited in the text as *HNC* for all subsequent references.

9. Robert B. Westbrook, *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 288.

10. As cited in John Robbins, *The Food Revolution*: *How Your Diet Can Help Save Your Life and Our World* (San Francisco: Conari Press, 2001), 289–290, emphasis added.

11. Deron Boyles, "Considering the Roles for AESA: An Argument against Commercialism, Reductionism, and the Quest for Certainty," *Educational Studies* 47, no. 3 (2011): 232.

12. Trevor Norris, *Consuming Schools: Commercialism and the End of Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011).

13. Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Signet, 1960), 39–40, emphasis added.

14. Philip Armstrong, "Farming Images: Animal Rights and Agribusiness in the Field of Vision," in *Knowing Animals*, eds. Laurence Simmons and Philip Armstrong (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007), 106.

15. Sinclair, *The Jungle*, 40.

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