

Not at the Dinner Table! Considering Shared Meals as “No Food Judgment” Zones

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Intro

The interpersonal ethics of eating: How should we eat together? How should we treat each other when eating? How should we interact with others about eating?

Most of my work: common judgments about others' eating are often misinformed, misguided, misplaced, and can be harmful → stop judging others' eating!

My worry: some judgments about eating are legitimate and can be valuable in our moral development → If so, where/when/how to judge others' eating?

...Not at shared meals!





Outline

1. Why *not* judge others' eating?
2. Why judge others' eating?
3. Where/when/how to judge others' eating?
 - *Not at the dinner table!*
 - Other considerations
4. Discussion

Why *not* judge others' eating?

Common judgments are misinformed, misguided, misplaced

Eating is morally and practically complex and involves many different considerations (Heldke, Hall, Shotwell, Barnhill and Bonotti)

Ex. Health, safety, cost, convenience, fitness goals, comfort, responsibilities to others, taste, cultural and religious value, ethical commitments, etc.

There are multiple morally legitimate ways of ranking these considerations and the relevant considerations may not be apparent to others

Many judgments about good/bad eating are healthist, ableist, fatphobic, racist, classist, etc. (Hall, Barnhill and Bonotti, Wilkerson, Dryden, Kukla)

They presume particular goals/values that may not be shared or may be based on prejudice and misinformation

Ex. good eating makes people thin; healthy eating should be top priority for everyone; “picky” eating is bad eating, etc.

Why *not* judge others' eating?

Judgments of individuals' eating may be inappropriate

Individual food choices can be significantly constrained, unfree

Unjustifiable paternalism

Ex. Catherine Kudlick's (2007) frozen burrito saga

Focus on individual food choice reflects a "neoliberal anti-politics" (Guthman 264)

Morally and/or practically the focus should be on food industry/systems/policy, not individual choices

Judgments can be harmful

Negative judgments of others' eating (or presumed eating) can undermine agency (Dryden, Dean) and stigmatize, which is associated with various social and material harms (Nath)

Stop judging others' eating!

Why judge others' eating?

OK but...

Eating does matter morally

Even if individual food practices are minimally impactful relative to food systems/policies/industries, individual eating matters morally in multiple respects

- Eating shapes the self (agency, capacities, investments, etc.)

- Eating as a means of care for self and others

- Eating as identity work

There are morally-justifiable critiques of many common ways of eating

Eating can harm the self in various ways; it can disempower and undermine agency; it can reinforce fatphobia, healthism, ableism, classism, racism, toxic masculinity; it can meaningfully support destructive and harmful industries/working conditions, etc.

Why judge others' eating?

We are inter-relational moral beings

As members of a moral community, we need to be held accountable and responsible and to hold others accountable and responsible too

We need others to support us in our moral development, particularly those whom we love and who love us (Emerick)

Other sorts of relationships may also demand support for moral development (ex. health care providers, teachers, mentors)

- *Eating is a morally important activity over which many people have some agency;*
- *Eating well is complex: it involves consideration and negotiation of multiple goals, values, and responsibilities; it requires knowledge of various kinds; it requires significant material and social scaffolding (Kukla);*
 - *It is easily undermined by misinformation, common ideologies, ignorance, lack of reflection, inadequate scaffolding;*
 - *Others can help us with these things;*
- *We should make some room for judging others' eating and having our eating judged by others as a tool for moral development and for harnessing social/material support for eating well*

**Where/when/how
to judge others'
eating?**



...Not at the dinner table



The value of shared meals

Shared meals are occasions structured by etiquette conventions that enable us to do important moral work (Stohr)

They have “specific aims and goods to be achieved” (Stohr 703)

Opportunities to connect, care, celebrate, commemorate, share traditions and culture, create or reinforce community, etc.

Ex. a welcome party; birthday celebration; memorial service; religious holiday feast, etc.

There are other ways to achieve these goods but shared meals are a common and generally accessible way to do it

...Not at the dinner table



The value of shared meals

Stohr: hosting a shared meal or accepting an invitation to a meal entails responsibilities to contribute to the success of the occasion

Food judgments (even justifiable ones) can compromise participants' ability to participate in shared meals and the overall success of the occasion

Food judgments can exclude, stigmatize; they often imply/entail character judgments, moral evaluation; these can produce shame, embarrassment, defensiveness, etc.

...Not at the dinner table



The value of shared meals

If you value the aims/goods of the shared meal and accept the invitation to attend, *then*
→ no judging others' eating at shared meals

Possible exceptions:

Positive aesthetic judgments of the food? Etiquette conventions demand complimenting the chef even if the food is awful

How do food judgments relate to judgments of eating?

Shared meals with basic aims (just getting nutrition in during a work break?) or aims that would be aided by judgment of others' eating (?)

Other considerations for judging others' eating



The content of the judgment matters

Significant humility and care needed to avoid common issues with judgments of eating

Little and Lyerly's work on conscientious refusal as a model? "Medicine [Eating(?)] by its very nature intersects with some of the deepest matters in life about which good and reasonable people disagree" (257).

Relationships matter

Who has a responsibility to support our moral growth? To whom do we have this responsibility? Whose input do we accept/value in this respect? Whose input can we legitimately disregard?

Practical considerations

Effectiveness/influence of judgments, impacts on relationships, etc.

Sum-up

Many common judgments about others' eating are deeply flawed and can be harmful.

However, judgment about others' eating can also be morally valuable; we should not rule out all forms of judgment about eating.

Where/when/how should we judge others' eating, then?

Not at shared meals.



Discussion

Thank you!

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