Food as Thought: Resisting the Moralization of Eating

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HOW DO FRENCH PEOPLE eat so unhealthily—famously indulging in cheese, cream, and wine—but stay, on average, healthier than Americans? Journalist Michael Pollan offers readers a simple solution: quit obsessing over this French paradox and start obsessing over the french fry. Pointing to what he considers the American paradox—"a notably unhealthy population preoccupied with . . . the idea of eating healthy" (9)—Pollan contends that our definition of healthy eating is driven by a well-funded corporate machine. According to Pollan, the food industry, along with nutrition science and journalism, is capitalizing on our confusion over how to eat.

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While Pollan implicates his own profession in this critique, he simultaneously contributes to our cultural anxiety over food. The same critic who argues that "any and all theories of nutrition [serve] not the eater [but] the food industry," nevertheless proposes his own theory: the elimination of processed foods (141). Likewise, even after noting that the connections between diet and health that we take as gospel apparently *aren't*, Pollan nevertheless adheres to contemporary commonsense science, making assumptions about diet, health, and weight that underpin the very food industry he critiques.

Thus as he attempts to dismantle one paradox, Pollan embodies another: he's a critic of nutrition and food science who nevertheless bolsters the American investment in those industries. After publishing *In Defense of Food* (and its equally successful predecessor, *The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Pollan released *Food Rules*, a pocket-sized manual for better eating. Of course, Pollan contends that *his* guidelines function differently than the prescriptions (and proscriptions) of food scientists, because his rules function as "eating algorithms" that "produce many different dinners" (144) rather than specifying a concrete menu. Yet no matter how many meals fit Pollan's formula—"Eat food, not too much, mostly plants" (1)—it remains a dictate provided by an expert to those who apparently can't properly nourish themselves.

Pollan and other like-minded nutrition hawks consistently back up their claims with concerns over American health. Although acknowledging that eating primarily for health represents a departure from the historical purpose of food—fuel for our bodies—these gastronomical philosophers nevertheless position themselves as protectors of health. Americans need this protection, we are told, because we're a nation stricken by

heart disease, diabetes, and cancer. According to this line of thought, each of these maladies is tied to our diet and essentially to our weight. As a culture, we no longer discuss healthy eating without also discussing unhealthy weights. Linking nutrition and body type, voices like Pollan's warn us against eating too much—often without any parallel warnings against eating too little. Pollan himself insists that overeating constitutes "the greatest threat" to our survival (7), and our government concurs, pouring resources into a fight against the obesity epidemic, that plague of fatness that supposedly threatens our national health.

The problem is that our understanding of health is as based in culture as it is in fact. Despite some doubt in academic circles over connections between diet, health, and weight, common-sense reportage continues to presume that they are directly connected. Pollan, for example, twice notes that our diet of processed foods makes us "sick and fat" (10), and then—without evidence to support that claim—conflates health with weight and condemns fatness out of hand. Later, he refers to obesity as a Western disease (11)—again presuming a correlation between weight and health—and even cites statistics on eating habits from a study entitled "Why Have Americans Become More Obese?" (145).

A growing group of academics who have examined the research on obesity at length have discovered fundamental flaws behind perceptions of fatness, diet, and health. Law professor and journalist Paul Campos notes that "lies about fat, fitness, and health . . . not coincidentally serve the interests of America's $50-billion-per-year diet industry," and fat-acceptance activist Kate Harding elaborates on this point, observing that "if you scratch an article on the obesity crisis, you will almost always find a press release from a company

that's developing a weight loss drug—or from a 'research group' . . . funded by such companies" ("Don't You Realize"). Harding and Campos both belong to a school that has repeatedly challenged the validity of the body mass index (BMI), a tool that uses height and weight measurements to calculate body fat. Originally developed by a mathematician as a purely statistical tool, the BMI has become medicine's go-to means for predicting heart disease and other maladies, despite research that suggests a low BMI presents a greater mortality risk than a high one and that, in general, BMI cannot accurately predict one's health (Campos).

Culturally, however, we resist these scientific findings in favor of a perspective that considers fatness fatal and thinness immortal. Our skewed views of fatness then facilitate skewed views of food. We continue to believe in a "right" or "healthy" way of eating that involves eating less and eating differently than we instinctively would, despite evidence to the contrary provided both by scholars like Harding and Campos, and by Health at Every Size (HAES) nutritionists like Michelle Allison. HAES advocates challenge our cultural misconceptions, suggesting that—outside of specific medical conditions like celiac disease and anorexia—"what a person eats [rarely] takes primacy over how they eat it" (Allison, "Eating"). In essence, we can eat as we always have—which includes eating for emotional and social reasons—and still survive or even thrive.

Few of us, however, manage to think about eating this way. As Allison notes, "there are a lot of pressures and barriers in this world that get in our way, that confuse us, that distract us and attempt to control us in counterproductive ways" ("Rules vs. Trust"). In this context, "health" functions moralistically. It results from making decisions like choosing fresh mozzarella over spray cheese, the "right" foods over the "wrong" ones.

Experts offer science to substantiate those designations, yet science—as Campos, Harding, and Allison show—does not actually support these systems. Instead, as even Pollan notes, there remains "a lot [of] religion in science" (140).

That "religion" presents itself in the moralizing of food, the attempt—in how we eat—to rise above our beastly natures. As a culture, when we imagine eating like animals, we visualize a feeding frenzy. Allison observes that when she says "Adult human beings are allowed to eat whatever and however much they want," what people actually hear is: "Go out and cram your face with Twinkies!" ("Eat Food"). (Indeed, for Pollan, the total elimination of American anxiety about food translates to a laissez-faire policy of "let them eat Twinkies" [9].) Yet Allison and other HAES nutritionists suggest that adult humans will eat in a way that is good for them, given the opportunity ("Eat Food"). When we attempt to rise above our animal nature through the moralization of food, we unnecessarily complicate the practice of eating. Food—be it french fry or granola bar, Twinkie or brown rice—isn't moral or immoral. Inherently, food is ethically neutral; notions of good and bad, healthy and unhealthy are projected onto it by culture. Staying mindful of that culture (and critical of the hidden interests that help guide it) can free us each to follow a formula we have long known but recently forgotten: Trust yourself. Trust your body. Meet your needs.

Do we agree?

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Joining the Conversation

1. In what ways does Mary Maxfield disagree with Michael Pollan (pp. 434–41) and other critics of the Western diet? What is her "they say," and what does she say?
2. What supporting evidence does Maxfield offer to counter the views of Michael Pollan and other critics?
3. Read Wil Haygood's article (pp. 406–15), and compare what he says with what Maxfield says. Which is more convincing and why?
4. Mayfield concludes by offering a formula for eating: "Trust yourself. Trust your body. Meet your needs." This formula contrasts with Michael Pollan's "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." Write an essay responding to these arguments and presenting your own formula for eating.