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# Is Food the New Sex?

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As we have seen so far, the sexual revolution has profoundly affected the most fundamental aspects of human relationships, including the way women view and treat men; the way men view and treat women; and it has even undermined one of the deepest shared tasks of men and women, which is the protection of children from forces that would harm them. These are what might be called the empirical legacy of the revolution's impact on the ground. No less powerful, however, has been its legacy in the more rarified realms of mores and ideas.

Consider, for example, this fact: Of all the truly seismic shifts transforming daily life today—deeper than our financial fissures, wider even than our most obvious political and cultural divides—one of the most important is also among the least remarked. That is the chasm in attitude that separates almost all of us living in the West today from almost all of our ancestors, over two things without which human beings cannot exist: food and sex.

The desire for food and the desire for sex share a number of interesting similarities, as philosophers and artists from Aristotle onward have had occasion to remark here and there across the centuries. But perhaps the most important link is this: Both appetites, if pursued without regard to consequence, can prove ruinous not only to oneself, but also to other people, and even to society itself. No doubt for that reason, both appetites have historically been subject in all civilizations to rules both formal and informal.

Thus the potentially destructive forces of sex—disease, disorder, sexual aggression, sexual jealousy, and what used to be called “home-wrecking”—have been ameliorated in every recorded society by legal, social, and religious conventions, primarily stigma and punishment. Similarly, all societies have developed rules and rituals governing food in part to avoid the destructiveness of free-for-alls over scarce necessities. And while food rules may not always have been as stringent as sex rules, they have nevertheless been stringent as needed. Such is the meaning, for example, of being hanged for stealing a loaf of bread in the marketplace, or keel-hauled for plundering rations on a ship.

These disciplines imposed historically on access to food and sex now raise a question that has not come up before, probably because it was not even possible to imagine it until the lifetimes of the people reading this: What happens when, for the first time in history—at least in theory, and at least in the advanced nations—adult human beings are more or less free to have all the sex and food they want?

This question opens the door to one more paradox attributable to the sexual revolution. For given how closely connected the two appetites appear to be, it would be natural to expect that people would do the same kinds of things with both appetites—that they would pursue both with equal ardor when finally

allowed to do so, for example, or with equal abandon for consequence; or conversely, with similar degrees of discipline in the consumption of each.

In fact, though, evidence from the advanced West suggests that nearly the opposite seems to be true. The answer appears to be that when many people are faced with these possibilities for the very first time, they end up doing very different things—things we might signal by shorthand as mindful eating, and mindless sex. This essay is both an exploration of that curious dynamic, and a speculation about what is driving it.

The dramatic expansion in access to food on the one hand and to sex on the other are complicated stories; but in each case, technology has written most of it.

Up until just about now, for example, the prime brakes on sex outside of marriage have been several: fear of pregnancy, fear of social stigma and punishment, and fear of disease. The Pill and its cousins have substantially undermined the first two strictures, at least in theory, while modern medicine has largely erased the third. Even HIV/AIDS, only a decade ago a stunning exception to the brand new rule that one could apparently have any kind of sex at all without serious consequence, is now regarded as a “manageable” disease in the affluent West, even as it continues to kill millions of less fortunate patients elsewhere.

As for food, here too one technological revolution after another explains the extraordinary change in its availability: pesticides, mechanized farming, economical transportation, genetic manipulation of food stocks, and other advances. As a result, almost everyone in the Western world is now able to buy sustenance of all kinds, for very little money, and in quantities unimaginable until the lifetimes of the people reading this.

One result of this change in food fortune, of course, is the unprecedented “disease of civilization” known as obesity, with its corollary ills. Nevertheless, the commonplace fact of obesity in today’s West itself testifies to the point that access to food has expanded exponentially for just about everyone—so does the statistical fact that obesity is most prevalent in the lowest social classes and least exhibited in the highest.

And just as technology has made sex and food more accessible for a great many people, important extra-technological influences on both pursuits—particularly longstanding religious strictures—have meanwhile diminished in a way that has made both appetites even easier to indulge. The opprobrium reserved for gluttony, for example, seems to have little immediate force now, even among believers. On the rare occasions when one even sees the word, it is almost always used in a metaphorical, secular sense.

Similarly, and far more consequential, the longstanding religious prohibitions in every major creed against extramarital sex have rather famously loosed their holds over the contemporary mind. Of particular significance, perhaps, has been the movement of many Protestant denominations away from the sexual morality agreed upon by the previous millennia of Christendom. The Anglican abandonment in 1930 of the longstanding prohibition against artificial contraception is a special case in point, undermining as it subsequently did for many believers the very idea that *any* church could tell people what to do with their bodies, ever again. Whether they defended their traditional teachings or abandoned them, however, all Western Christian churches in the past century have found themselves increasingly beleaguered over issues of sex, and commensurately less influential over all but a fraction of the most traditionally minded parishioners.

Of course this waning of the traditional restraints on the pursuit of sex and food is only part of the story; any number of *nonreligious* forces today also act as contemporary brakes on both. In the case of food, for example, these would include factors like personal vanity, say, or health concerns, or preoccupation with the morality of what is consumed (about which more below). Similarly, to acknowledge that sex is more accessible than ever before is not to say that it is always and everywhere available. Many people who do not think they will go to hell for premarital sex or adultery, for example, find brakes on their desires for other reasons: fear of disease, fear of hurting children or other loved ones, fear of disrupting one's career, fear of financial setbacks in the form of divorce and child support, and so on.

Even men and women who *do* want all the food or sex they can get their hands on face obstacles of other kinds in their pursuit. Though many people really can afford to eat more or less around the clock, for example, home economics will still put the brakes on; it's not as if everyone can afford pheasant under glass day and night. The same is true of sex, which likewise imposes its own unwritten yet practical constraints. Older and less attractive people simply cannot command the sexual marketplace as the younger and more attractive can (which is why the promises of erasing time and age are such a booming business in a post-liberation age). So do time and age still circumscribe the pursuit of sex, even as churches and other conventional enforcers increasingly do not.

Still and all, the initial point stands: As consumers of both sex and food, today's people in the advanced societies are freer to pursue and consume both than almost all the human beings who came before us; and our culture has evolved in interesting ways to exhibit both those trends.

To begin to see just how recent and dramatic this change is, let us imagine some broad features of the world seen through two different sets of eyes: a thirty-year-old housewife from 1958 named Betty, and her granddaughter Jennifer, of the same age, today.

Begin with a tour of Betty's kitchen. Much of what she makes comes from jars and cans. Much of it is also heavy on substances that people of our time are told to minimize—dairy products, red meat, refined sugars and flours—because of compelling research about nutrition that occurred after Betty's time. Betty's freezer is filled with meat every four months by a visiting company that specializes in volume, and on most nights she thaws a piece of this and accompanies it with food from one or two jars. If there is anything "fresh" on the plate, it is likely a potato. Interestingly, and rudimentary to our contemporary eyes though it may be, Betty's food is served with what for us would appear to be high ceremony, i.e., at a set table with family members present.

As it happens, there is little that Betty herself, who is adventurous by the standards of her day, will not eat; the going slogan she learned as a child is about cleaning your plate, and not doing so is still considered bad form. Aside from that notion though, which is a holdover to scarcer times, Betty is much like any other American home cook in 1958. She likes making some things and not others, even as she prefers eating some things to others—and there, in personal aesthetics, does the matter end for her. It's not that Betty lacks opinions about food. It's just that the ones she has are limited to what she does and does not personally like to make and eat.

Now imagine one possible counterpart to Betty today, her thirty-year-old granddaughter Jennifer. Jennifer has almost no cans or jars in her cupboard. She has no children or husband or live-in boyfriend either, which is why her kitchen table on most nights features a laptop and goes unset. Yet interestingly enough, despite the lack of ceremony at the table, Jennifer pays far more attention to food, and feels far more strongly in her convictions about it, than anyone she knows from Betty's time.

Wavering in and out of vegetarianism, Jennifer is adamantly opposed to eating red meat or endangered fish. She is also opposed to industrialized breeding, genetically enhanced fruits and vegetables, and to pesticides and other artificial agents. She tries to minimize her dairy intake, and cooks tofu as much as possible. She also buys “organic” in the belief that it is better both for her and for the animals raised in that way, even though the products are markedly more expensive than those from the local grocery store. Her diet is heavy in all the ways that Betty’s was light: with fresh vegetables and fruits in particular. Jennifer has nothing but ice in her freezer, soymilk and various other items her grandmother wouldn’t have recognized in the refrigerator, and on the counter stands a vegetable juicer she feels she “ought” to use more.

Most important of all, however, is the difference in moral attitude separating Betty and Jennifer on the matter of food. Jennifer feels that there is a *right* and *wrong* about these options that transcends her exercise of choice as a consumer. She does not exactly condemn those who believe otherwise, but she doesn’t understand why they do, either. And she certainly thinks the world would be a better place if more people evaluated their food choices as she does. She even proselytizes on occasion when she can.

In short, with regard to food, Jennifer falls within Immanuel Kant’s definition of the Categorical Imperative: She acts according to a set of maxims that she wills at the same time to be universal law.

Betty, on the other hand, would be baffled by the idea of dragooning such moral abstractions into the service of food. This is partly because, as a child of her time, she was impressed—as Jennifer is not—about what happens when food is scarce (Betty’s parents told her often about their memories of the Great Depression; and many of the older men of her time had vivid memories of deprivation in wartime). Even without such personal links to food scarcity, though, it makes no sense to Betty that people would feel as strongly as her granddaughter does about something as simple as deciding just what goes into one’s mouth. That is because Betty feels, as Jennifer obviously does not, that opinions about food are simply *de gustibus*, a matter of individual taste—and only that.

This clear difference in opinion leads to an intriguing juxtaposition. Just as Betty and Jennifer have radically different approaches to food, so do they to matters of sex. For Betty, the ground rules of her time—which she both participates in and substantially agrees with—are clear: Just about every exercise of sex outside marriage is subject to social (if not always private) opprobrium. Wavering in and out of established religion herself, Betty nevertheless clearly adheres to a traditional Judeo-Christian sexual ethic. Thus, for example, Mr. Jones next door “ran off” with another woman, leaving his wife and children behind; Susie in the town nearby got pregnant and wasn’t allowed back in school; Uncle Bill is rumored to have contracted gonorrhea; and so on. None of these breaches of the going sexual ethic is considered by Betty to be a good thing, let alone a celebrated thing. They are not even considered to be neutral things. In fact, they are all considered by her to be wrong.

Most important of all, Betty feels that sex, unlike food, is not *de gustibus*. She believes to the contrary that there is a right and wrong about these choices that transcends any individual act. She further believes that the world would be a better place, and individual people better off, if others believed as she does. She even proselytizes such on occasion when given the chance.

In short, as Jennifer does with food, Betty in the matter of sex fulfills the requirements for Kant’s Categorical Imperative.

Jennifer’s approach to sex is just about 180 degrees different. She too disapproves of the father next door who left his wife and children for a younger woman; she does not want to be cheated on herself, or to have those she cares about cheated on either. These ground-zero stipulations, aside, however, she

is otherwise laissez-faire on just about every other aspect of nonmarital sex. She believes that living together before marriage is not only morally neutral, but actually better than not having such a “trial run.” Pregnant unwed Susie in the next town doesn’t elicit a thought one way or the other from her, and neither does Uncle Bill’s gonorrhoea, which is of course a trivial medical matter between him and his doctor.

Jennifer, unlike Betty, thinks that falling in love creates its own demands and generally trumps other considerations—unless perhaps children are involved (and sometimes, on a case-by-case basis, then too). A consistent thinker in this respect, she also accepts the consequences of her libertarian convictions about sex. She is pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage, indifferent to ethical questions about stem cell research and other technological manipulations of nature (as she is not, ironically, when it comes to food), and agnostic on the question of whether any particular parental arrangements seem best for children. She has even been known to watch pornography with her boyfriend, at his coaxing, in part to show just how very laissez-faire she is.

Most important, once again, is the difference in moral attitude between the two women on this subject of sex. Betty feels that there is a right and wrong about sexual choices that transcends any individual act, and Jennifer—exceptions noted—does not. It’s not that Jennifer lacks for opinions about sex, any more than Betty does about food. It’s just that, for the most part, they are limited to what she personally does and doesn’t like.

Thus far, what the imaginary examples of Betty and Jennifer have established is this: Their personal moral relationships toward food and toward sex are just about perfectly reversed. Betty does care about nutrition and food, but it doesn’t occur to her to extend her opinions to a moral judgment—i.e., to believe that other people *ought* to do as she does in the matter of food, and that they are wrong if they don’t. In fact, she thinks such an extension would be wrong in a different way; it would be impolite, needlessly judgmental, simply not done. Jennifer, similarly, does care to some limited degree about what other people do about sex; but it seldom occurs to her to extend her opinions to a moral judgment. In fact, she thinks such an extension would be wrong in a different way—because it would be impolite, needlessly judgmental, simply not done.

On the other hand, Jennifer is genuinely certain that her opinions about food are not only nutritionally correct, but also, in some deep, meaningful sense, *morally* correct—i.e., she feels that others ought to do something like what she does. And Betty, on the other hand, feels exactly the same way about what she calls sexual morality.

As noted, this desire to extend their personal opinions in two different areas to an “ought” that they think should be somehow binding—binding, that is, to the idea that others should do the same—is the definition of the Kantian imperative. Once again, note: Betty’s Kantian imperative concerns sex not food, and Jennifer’s concerns food not sex. In just over sixty years, in other words—not for everyone, of course, but for a great many people, and for an especially large portion of sophisticated people—the moral poles of sex and food have been reversed. Betty thinks food is a matter of taste, whereas sex is governed by universal moral law of some kind; and Jennifer thinks exactly the reverse.

What has happened here?

Betty and Jennifer may be imaginary, but the decades that separate the two women have brought related changes to the lives of many millions. In the sixty years between their two kitchens, a similar polar transformation has taken root and grown not only throughout America but also throughout Western society itself. During those years, cultural artifacts and forces in the form of articles, books,

movies, and ideas aimed at deregulating what is now quaintly called “nonmarital sex” have abounded and prospered; while the cultural artifacts and forces aimed at regulating or seeking to re-regulate sex outside of marriage have largely declined. In the matter of food, on the other hand, exactly the reverse has happened. Increasing scrutiny over the decades to the quality of what goes into people’s mouths has been accompanied by something almost wholly new under the sun: the rise of universalizable moral codes based on food choices.

Begin with the more familiar face of diets and fads—the Atkins diet, the Zone diet, the tea diet, the high-carb diet, Jenny Craig, Weight Watchers, and all the rest of the food fixes promising us new and improved versions of ourselves. Abundant though they and all their relatives are, those short-term fads and diets are nevertheless merely epiphenomena.

Digging a little deeper, the obsession with food that they reflect resonates in many other strata of the commercial marketplace. Book reading, for example, may indeed be on the way out, but until it goes, cookbooks and food books remain among the most reliable moneymakers in the industry. To scan the bestseller lists or page the major reviews in any given month is to find that books on food and food-thought are at least reliably represented, and sometimes even predominate—to list a few from the past few years alone: Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*; Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*; Gary Taubes’ *Good Calories, Bad Calories*; Bill Buford’s *Heat*, and many more titles feeding the insatiable interest in food.

Then there are the voyeur and celebrity genres, which have made some chefs the equivalent of rock stars and further feed the public curiosity with books like *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* or *Service Included: Four-Star Secrets of an Eavesdropping Waiter* or *The Devil in the Kitchen: Sex, Pain, Madness, and the Making of a Great Chef*. Anywhere you go, anywhere you look, food in one form or another is what’s on tap. The proliferation of chains like Whole Foods, the recent institution by Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of state-mandated nutritional breakdowns in restaurants in the state of California (a move that is sure to be repeated by governors in the other 49): All these and many other developments speak to the paramount place occupied by food and food choices in the modern consciousness. As the *New York Times Magazine* noted recently, in a foreword emphasizing the intended expansion of its (already sizeable) food coverage, such writing is “perhaps never a more crucial part of what we do than today—a moment when what and how we eat has emerged as a Washington issue and a global-environmental issue as well as a kitchen-table one.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Underneath the passing fads and short-term fixes and notices like these, deep down where the real seismic change lies, is a series of revolutions in how we now think about food—changes that focus not on today or tomorrow, but on eating as a way of life.

One recent influential figure in this tradition was George Ohsawa, a Japanese philosopher who codified what is known as macrobiotics. Popularized in the United States by his pupil, Michio Kushi, macrobiotics has been the object of fierce debate for several decades now, and Kushi’s book, *The Macrobiotic Path to Total Health: A Complete Guide to Naturally Preventing and Relieving More Than 200 Chronic Conditions and Disorders*, remains one of the modern bibles on food.<sup>[2]</sup> Macrobiotics makes historical as well as moral claims, including the claim that its tradition stretches back to Hippocrates and includes Jesus and the Han dynasty among other enlightened beneficiaries. These claims are also reflected in the macrobiotic system, which includes the expression of gratitude (not prayers) for food, serenity in the preparation of it, and other extranutritional ritual. And even as the macrobiotic discipline has proved too ascetic for many people (and certainly for most Americans), one can see its influence at work in other serious treatments of the food question that have trickled outward. The

current popular call to “mindful eating,” for example, echoes the macrobiotic injunction to think of nothing but food and gratitude while consuming, even to the point of chewing any given mouthful at least fifty times.

Alongside macrobiotics, the past decades have also seen tremendous growth in vegetarianism and its related offshoots, another food system that typically makes moral as well as health claims. As a movement, and depending on which part of the world one looks at, vegetarianism predates macrobiotics.[3] Vegetarian histories claim for themselves the Brahmins, Buddhists, Jainists, and Zoroastrians, as well as certain Jewish and Christian practitioners. In the modern West, Percy Bysshe Shelley was a prominent activist for the movement in the early nineteenth century; and the first Vegetarian Society was founded in England in 1847.

Around the same time in the United States, a Presbyterian minister named Sylvester Graham popularized vegetarianism in tandem with a campaign against excess of all kinds (ironically, under the circumstances, this health titan is remembered primarily for the graham cracker). Various other American religious sects have also gone in for vegetarianism, including the Seventh-Day Adventists, studies on whom make up some of the most compelling data about the possible health benefits of a diet devoid of animal flesh. [4] Uniting numerous discrete movements under one umbrella is the International Vegetarian Union, which started just a hundred years ago, in 1908.

Despite this long history, though, it is clear that vegetarianism *apart* from its role in religious movements did not really take off as a mass movement until relatively recently. Even so, its contemporary success has been remarkable. Pushed perhaps by the synergistic public interest in macrobiotics and nutritional health, and nudged also by occasional rallying books including Peter Singer’s 1975 *Animal Liberation* and Matthew Scully’s *Dominion*, vegetarianism today is one of the most successful secular moral movements in the West; whereas macrobiotics for its part, though less successful as a mass movement by name, has witnessed the vindication of some of its core ideas and stands as a kind of synergistic brother in arms.[5] <>

To be sure, macrobiotics and vegetarianism/veganism have their doctrinal differences. Macrobiotics limits animal flesh not out of moral indignation, but for reasons of health and Eastern ideas of proper “balancing” of the forces of yin and yang. Similarly, macrobiotics also allows for moderate amounts of certain types of fish—as strict vegetarians do not. On the other hand, macrobiotics also bans a number of vegetables (among them tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, and others that are said to be too “yin”), whereas vegetarianism bans none. Nonetheless, macrobiotics and vegetarianism have more in common than not, especially from the point of view of anyone eating outside either of these codes. The doctrinal differences separating one from another are about equivalent in force today to those between, say, Presbyterians and Lutherans.

And that is exactly the point. For many people, schismatic differences about food have taken the place of schismatic differences about faith. Again, the curiosity is just how recent this is. Throughout history, practically no one devoted this much time to matters of food as *ideas* (as opposed to, say, time spent gathering the stuff). Still less does it appear to have occurred to people that dietary schools could be untethered from a larger metaphysical and moral worldview. Observant Jews and Muslims, among others, have had strict dietary laws from their faiths’ inception; but that is just it—their laws told believers what to do with food when they got it, rather than inviting them to dwell on food as a thing in itself. Like the Adventists, who speak of their vegetarianism as being “harmony with the Creator,” or like the Catholics with their itinerant Lenten and other obligations, these previous dietary laws were clearly designed to enhance religion—not replace it.

Do today's influential dietary ways of life in effect replace religion? Consider that macrobiotics, vegetarianism, and veganism all make larger health claims as part of their universality—but unlike yesteryear, to repeat the point, most of them no longer do so in conjunction with organized religion. Macrobiotics, for its part, argues (with some evidence) that processed foods and too much animal flesh are toxic to the human body, whereas whole grains, vegetables, and fruits are not. The literature of vegetarianism makes a similar point, recently drawing particular attention to new research concerning the connection between the consumption of red meat and certain cancers. In both cases, however, dietary laws are not intended to be handmaidens to a higher cause, but moral causes in *themselves*.

Just as the food of today often attracts a level of metaphysical attentiveness suggestive of the sex of yesterday, so does food today seem attended by a similarly evocative—and proliferating—number of verboten signs. The opprobrium reserved for perceived “violations” of what one “ought” to do has migrated, in some cases fully, from one to the other. Many people who wouldn't be caught dead with an extra ten pounds—or eating a hamburger, or wearing real leather—tend to be laissez-faire in matters of sex. In fact, just observing the world as it is, one is tempted to say that the *more* vehement people are about the morality of their food choices, the *more* hands-off they believe the rest of the world should be about sex. What were the circumstances the last time you heard or used the word “guilt”—in conjunction with sin as traditionally conceived? Or with having eaten something verboten and not having gone to the gym?

Perhaps the most revealing example of the infusion of morality into food codes can be found in the current European passion for what the French call *terroir*—an idea that originally referred to the specific qualities conferred by geography on certain food products (notably wine) and that has now assumed a life of its own as a moral guide to buying and consuming locally. That there is no such widespread, concomitant attempt to impose a new morality on sexual pursuits in Western Europe seems something of an understatement. But as a measure of the reach of *terroir* as a moral code, consider only a sermon from Durham Cathedral in 2007. In it, the dean explained Lent as an event that “says to us, cultivate a good *terroir*, a spiritual ecology that will re-focus our passion for God, our praying, our pursuit of justice in the world, our care for our fellow human beings.”<sup>[6]</sup>

There stands an emblematic example of the reversal between food and sex in our time: in which the once-universal moral code of European Christianity is being explicated for the masses by reference to the now apparently more-universal European moral code of consumption à la *terroir*.

Moreover, this reversal between sex and food appears firmer the more passionately one clings to either pole. Thus, for instance, though much has lately been made of the “greening” of the evangelicals, no vegetarian Christian group is as nationally known as, say, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals or any number of other vegetarian/vegan organizations, most of which appear to be secular or anti-religious and none of which, so far as my research shows, extend their universalizable moral ambitions to the realm of sexuality. When *Skinny Bitch*—a hip guide to veganism that recently topped the bestseller lists for months—exhorts its readers to a life that is “clean, pure, healthy,” for example, it is emphatically *not* including sex in this moral vocabulary, and makes a point of saying so.<sup>[7]</sup>

C.S. Lewis once compared the two desires as follows, to make the point that something about sex had gotten incommensurate in his own time: “There is nothing to be ashamed of in enjoying your food: there would be everything to be ashamed of if half the world made food the main interest of their lives and spent their time looking at pictures of food and dribbling and smacking their lips.”<sup>[8]</sup> He was making a point in the genre of *reductio ad absurdum*.

But for the jibe to work as it once did, our shared sense of what is absurd about it must work too—and

that shared sense, in an age as visually, morally, and aesthetically dominated by food as is our own, is waning fast. Consider the coining of the term “gastroporn” to describe the eerily similar styles of high-definition pornography on the one hand and stylized shots of food on the other. Actually, the term is not even that new. It dates back at least three decades, to a 1977 essay by that title in the *New York Review of Books*. In it, author Andrew Cockburn observed that it cannot escape attention that there are curious parallels between manuals on sexual techniques and manuals on the preparation of food; the same studious emphasis on leisurely technique, the same apostrophes to the ultimate, heavenly delights. True gastro-porn heightens the excitement and also the sense of the unattainable by proffering colored photographs of various completed recipes.[9]

With such a transfer, the polar migrations of food and sex during the last half century would appear complete.

If it is true that food is the new sex, however, where does that leave sex? This brings us to the paradox already hinted at. As the consumption of food not only literally but also figuratively has become progressively more discriminate and thoughtful, at least in theory (if rather obviously not always in practice), the consumption of sex in various forms appears to have become the opposite for a great many people: i.e., progressively more indiscriminate and unthinking.

Several proofs could be offered for such a claim, beginning with any number of statistical studies. Both men and women are far less likely to be sexually inexperienced on their weddings now (if indeed they marry) than they were just a few decades ago. They are also more likely to be experienced in all kinds of ways, including in the use of pornography. Like the example of Jennifer, moreover, their general thoughts about sex become more laissez-faire the further down the age demographic one goes.

Consider as further proof of the dumbing down of sex the coarseness of popular entertainment, say through a popular advice column on left-leaning *Slate* magazine called “Dear Prudence” that concerns “manners and morals.” “Should I destroy the erotic video my husband and I have made?” “My boyfriend’s kinky fetish might doom our relationship.” “My husband wants me to abort, and I don’t.” “How do I tell my daughter she’s the result of a sexual assault?” “A friend confessed to a fling with my now-dead husband.” And so on. The mindful vegetarian slogan, “You are what you eat” has no counterpart in the popular culture today when it comes to sex.

This junk sex shares all the defining features of junk food. It is produced and consumed by people who do not know one another. It is disdained by those who believe they have access to more authentic experience or “healthier” options. As we saw in chapter 2, evidence is also beginning to emerge about compulsive pornography consumption—as it did slowly but surely in the case of compulsive packaged food consumption—that this laissez-faire judgment is wrong.[10]

This brings us to another similarity between junk sex and junk food: People are furtive about both, and many feel guilty about their pursuit and indulgence of each. And those who consume large amounts of both are also typically self-deceptive, too: i.e., they underestimate just how much they do it and deny its ill effects on the rest of their lives. In sum, to compare junk food to junk sex is to realize that they have become virtually interchangeable vices—even if many people who do not put “sex” in the category of vice will readily do so with food.

At this point, the impatient reader will interject that something else—something understandable and anodyne—is driving the increasing attention to food in our day: namely, the fact that we have learned much more than humans used to know about the importance of a proper diet to health and longevity. And this is surely a point borne out by the facts, too. One attraction of macrobiotics, for example, is its

promise to reduce the risks of cancer. The fall in cholesterol that attends a true vegan or vegetarian diet is another example. Manifestly, one reason that people today are so much more discriminating about food is that decades of recent research have taught us that diet has more potent effects than Betty and her friends understood, and can be bad for you or good for you in ways not enumerated before.

All that is true, but then the question is this: Why aren't more people doing the same with sex?

For here we come to the most fascinating turn of all. One cannot answer the question by arguing that there is no such empirical news about indiscriminately pursued sex and how it can be good or bad for you; to the contrary, there is, and lots of it. After all, several decades of empirical research—which also did not exist before—have demonstrated that the sexual revolution, too, has had consequences, and that many of them have redounded to the detriment of a sexually liberationist ethic.

Married, monogamous people are more likely to be happy. They live longer.<sup>[11]</sup> These effects are particularly evident for men. Divorced men, in particular and conversely, face health risks—including heightened drug use and alcoholism—that married men do not. While assistant professors across the land make tenure arguing over the causal vectors of these findings, researchers themselves connect the obvious dots often enough. As one for the Rand Corporation hypothesized about some 140 years of demographic evidence, for example,

The health benefits obtained by men who stay married or remarry stem from a variety of related factors, including care in times of illness, improved nutrition, and a home atmosphere that reduces stress and stress-related illnesses, encourages healthy behaviors, and discourages unhealthy ones such as smoking and excessive drinking. Influences of this type tend to enhance a man's immediate health status and may often improve his chances for a longer life.<sup>[12]</sup>

As Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, among other scholars, have documented, married men earn more and save more; and married households not surprisingly trump other households in income.<sup>[13]</sup> As Kay S. Hymowitz, among other scholars has shown, marriage confers benefits beyond the partners themselves and onto the children.<sup>[14]</sup> Sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, one more expert, has summarized the marriage benefit in this way: “[C]hildren who grow up in intact, married families are significantly more likely to graduate from high school, finish college, become gainfully employed, and enjoy a stable family life themselves, compared to their peers who grow up in nonintact families.”<sup>[15]</sup>

The list could go on, but it need not; the point is plain enough. Conversely and as we have also seen earlier, divorce is often a financial catastrophe for a family, particularly the women and children in it. So is illegitimacy typically a financial disaster. Children from broken homes are at risk for all kinds of behavioral, psychological, educational, and other problems that children from intact homes are not. Girls and boys, numerous sources including Elizabeth Marquardt and David Blankenhorn have also shown, are adversely affected by family breakup into adulthood, and have higher risks than children from intact homes of repeating the pattern of breakup themselves.<sup>[16]</sup>

This recital touches only the periphery of the empirical record now being assembled about the costs of laissez-faire sex to American society—a record made all the more interesting by the fact that it could not have been foreseen back when sexual liberationism seemed merely synonymous with the removal of some seemingly inexplicable old stigmas. Today, however, two generations of social science replete with studies, surveys, and regression analyses galore stand between the Moynihan Report and what we know now, and the overall weight of its findings is clear. The question raised by this record is not why some people changed their habits and ideas when faced with compelling new facts about food and quality of life. It is rather why more people have not done the same about sex.

When Friedrich Nietzsche wrote longingly of the “transvaluation of all values,” he meant the hoped-for restoration of sexuality to its proper place as a celebrated, morally neutral life force. He could not possibly have foreseen our world: one in which sex would indeed become “morally neutral” in the eyes of a great many people—even as food would come to replace it as source of moral authority.<sup>[17]</sup>

Nevertheless, events have proven Nietzsche wrong about his wider hope that men and women of the future would simply enjoy the benefits of free sex without any attendant seismic shifts. For there may in fact be no such thing as a destigmatization of sex, as the events outlined in this essay suggest. The rise of a recognizably Kantian, morally universalizable code concerning food—beginning with the international vegetarian movement of the last century and proceeding with increasing moral fervor into our own times via macrobiotics, veganism/vegetarianism, and European codes of *terroir*—has paralleled exactly the waning of a universally accepted sexual code in the Western world during these same years.

Who can doubt that the two trends are related? Unable or unwilling (or both) to impose rules on sex in the wake of the revolution, yet equally unwilling to dispense altogether with the moral code that has traditionally afforded large protections, modern man has apparently performed his own act of transubstantiation. He has taken longstanding morality about sex, and substituted it onto food. The all-you-can-eat buffet is now stigmatized; the sexual smorgasbord is not.

In the end, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the rules being drawn around food receive some force from the fact that people are uncomfortable with how far the sexual revolution has gone—and not knowing what to do about it, they turn for increasing consolation to mining morality out of what they eat.

So what does it finally mean to have a civilization puritanical about food, and licentious about sex? In this sense, Nietzsche’s fabled madman came not too late, but too early—too early to have seen the empirical library that would be amassed from the mid-twenty-first century on, testifying to the problematic social, emotional, and even financial nature of exactly the solution he sought. If there is a moral to this curious transvaluation, it would seem that the norms society imposes on itself in pursuit of its own

It is a curious coda that this transvaluation should not be applauded by the liberationist heirs of Nietzsche, even as their day in the sun seems to have come. According to them, after all, consensual sex is simply what comes naturally, and ought therefore to be judged value-free. But as the contemporary history outlined in this essay goes to show, the same can be said of overeating—and overeating is something that today’s society is manifestly embarked on re-stigmatizing. It may be doing so for very different reasons than the condemnations of gluttony outlined by the likes of Gregory the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas. But if indiscriminate sex can also have a negative impact—and not just in the obvious sense of disease, but in the other aspects of psyche and well-being now being written into the empirical record of the sexual revolution—then indiscriminate sex may be judged to need reining in, too.

So if there is a moral to this curious transvaluation, it would seem to be that the norms society imposes on itself in pursuit of its own self-protection do not wholly disappear, but rather mutate and move on, sometimes in curious guises. Far-fetched though it seems at the moment, where mindless food is today, mindless sex—in light of the growing empirical record of its own unleashing—may yet again be tomorrow.

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<sup>iii</sup> “A New Way to Look at Food Writing,” the editors, *New York Times Magazine*, January 2, 2009.

[2] Michio Kushi, *The Macrobiotic Path to Total Health: A Complete Guide to Naturally Preventing and Relieving More Than 200 Chronic Conditions and Disorders*, paperback edition (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004).

[3] As defined by the International Vegetarian Union, a vegetarian eats no animals but may eat eggs and dairy (and is then an ovo-lacto vegetarian). A pescetarian is a vegetarian who allows the consumption of fish. A vegan excludes both animals and animal products from his diet, including honey. Vegetarians and vegans can be further refined into numerous other categories—fruitarian, Halal vegetarian, and so on. The terminological complexity here only amplifies the point that food now attracts the taxonomical energies once devoted to, say, metaphysics.

[4] See, for example, Gary Fraser, *Diet, Life Expectancy, and Chronic Disease: Studies of Seventh-Day Adventists and Other Vegetarians* (England: Oxford University Press, 2003), which examines data from the 1989 Adventist Health Study of over thirty-four thousand subjects.

[5] See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: Random House, 1975), the single most influential book of the animal welfare and animal rights movements. See also Matthew Scully, *Dominion: The Power of Man, the Suffering of Animals, and the Call to Mercy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), for the single most significant appeal to animal welfare based on Christian principles.

[6] The Very Reverend Michael Sadgrove, “Terroir for Lent,” Durham Cathedral, February 25, 2007.

[7] Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, *Skinny Bitch* (Philadelphia, PA.: Running Press, 2005).

[8] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, in *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperOne, 2004), 59.

[9] Alexander Cockburn, “Gastro Porn,” *New York Review of Books*, December 8, 1977.

[10] For clinical accounts of the evidence of harm, see, for example, Ana J. Bridges, “Pornography’s Effects on Interpersonal Relationships,” and Jill C. Manning, “The Impact of Pornography on Women,” in *The Social Costs of Pornography: A Collection of Papers*, ed. James R. Stoner Jr. and Donna M. Hughes (Princeton, N.J.: Witherspoon Institute, 2010), 69–88 and 89–110, respectively. For an interesting econometric assessment of what is spent to avoid or recover from pornography addiction, see also K. Doran, “Industry Size, Measurement, and Social Costs,” in *ibid.*, 185–99.

[11] This finding has appeared consistently. See, for example, Lee A. Lillard and Constantijn W. A. Panis, “Marital Status and Mortality: The Role of Health,” *Demography* 33, no. 3 (1996): 313–27. See also R. M. Kaplan and R. G. Kronick, “Marital Status and Longevity in the United States Population,” *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60 (August 2006): 760–65.

[12] Lee A. Lillard and Constantijn (Stan) Panis, “Health, Marriage, and Longer Life for Men,” Research Brief 5018, Rand Corporation, 1998.

[13] Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 98.

[14] Kay S. Hymowitz, *Marriage and Caste in America: Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age* (Lanham, MD.: Ivan R. Dee, 2006).

[15] W. Bradford Wilcox, ed., *When Marriage Disappears: The Retreat from Marriage in Middle America* (Charlottesville, VA.: University of Virginia, National Marriage Project; New York: Institute for American Values, 2010).

[16] See David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), and Elizabeth Marquardt, *Between Two Worlds: The Inner Life of Children of Divorce* (New York: Crown Books, 2005).

[17] Interestingly, Nietzsche does appear to have foreseen the universalizability of vegetarianism, writing in the 1870s, “I believe that the vegetarians with their prescription to eat less and more simply, are of more use than all the new moral systems taken together.... There is no doubt that the future educators of mankind will also prescribe a stricter diet.” Also interesting, Adolf Hitler—whose own vegetarianism appears to have been adopted because of Wagner’s (Wagner in turn had been convinced by the sometime vegetarian Nietzsche)—reportedly remarked in 1941 that “there’s one thing I can predict to eaters of meat: the world of the future will be vegetarian.”

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