Cooking, Eating, Thinking

Transformative Philosophies of Food

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Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice

I. INTRODUCTION

What if Plato had regarded the preparation of food as a central source of philosophical insight? Would gardening have replaced the dialectic as the last stage in the education of the philosopher king? Would geometry have been regarded as a “mere knack,” as compared to bread baking? Would those in the cave have climbed out to discover that the sun was the source of all heat, including the heat used to cook their food? Would the divided line culminate in eating?

It’s extremely unlikely. Such impertinent speculation is based on the assumption that, had Plato considered foodmaking seriously, he simply would have inverted his philosophical system, placing those activities labeled crafts on the top, and relegating those he called arts to the basement.

Had he in fact taken foodmaking seriously (or more seriously than he did), I think it is far more likely that Plato would not have developed that particular craft/art distinction in the first place—nor would he probably have distinguished as he does between knowledge and opinion, theory and practice. Furthermore, had subsequent philosophers continued to attend to such activities as growing and cooking food, it is likely that the theory/practice dichotomy, which threads its way through much of western philosophy, would not have developed as it did.

Foodmaking, rather than drawing us to mark a sharp distinction between mental and manual labor, or between theoretical and practical work, tends to invite us to see itself as a “mentally manual” activity, a “theoretically practical” activity—a “thoughtful practice.” In this essay, I shall explore this suggestive if speculative claim.

In doing so, I first consider one formulation of the traditional theory/practice hierarchy, focusing on two of its features: (1) “knowing” retains separation between inquirer and inquired, while “doing” breaches this separation; and (2) “knowing” aims at producing timeless truths about unchanging reality, whereas “doing” is concerned with the transitory, the perishable, the changeable. How does this distinction between knowing and doing inform the way philosophers conceive of foodmaking and eating? It appears that those philosophers who have considered cooking have
Both knowing and its objects—timeless truths—are accorded value on a philosophical system which values changelessness. Thus, the philosophers of ancient Greece, who valued the timeless, believed that knowledge was timeless. The same is true of the fall of an apple, which is a timeless event, but the apple itself is not timeless. The fall of an apple is a timeless event, but the apple itself is not timeless.

In his essay, "The Theory of Knowledge," the philosopher John Dewey discusses the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired. He argues that knowledge is not simply a passive collection of facts, but is instead a process of active inquiry. Dewey argues that the process of inquiry is not only a means to an end, but is also an end in itself. Inquiry is not merely the acquisition of information, but is also the process of actively engaging with the world and understanding it.

In the essay, Dewey also discusses the role of the scientist in the process of inquiry. He argues that the scientist is not simply an observer, but is instead an active participant in the process of inquiry. The scientist is not merely a passive gatherer of information, but is instead an active builder of knowledge. The scientist is not merely a passive observer, but is instead an active participant in the process of inquiry.

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of these metaphors, found in the *Republic*, is Plato’s analogy of the cave, which charts the development of knowers as they journey from a world of darkness and illusory shadows to a world of light and objects genuinely seen. Descartes, attempting to arrive at something he can know for certain, similarly uses ocular metaphors, shining the “light of reason” upon each of the objects of his consciousness, to determine whether they can be seen/known “clearly and distinctly.” Our everyday language is filled with similar visual metaphors that testify to the degree to which our thinking about thinking has been shaped by visual models.

There is no necessary causal connection between the fact that western philosophers have conceived of inquiry (mental work) in terms of vision and the fact that they have also tended to regard the self as a discrete and independent substance, radically separated from the object of its inquiry. But neither is it mere coincidence that these two conceptions have developed alongside each other. At least, the predominance of visual metaphors has served to bolster a separation between knower and known, subject and object. At most, it has actually helped to create that separation, and to shape conceptions of inquiry that presuppose it.

Once the distancing has been effected—once mental substance has been radically separated from physical substance, subject from object—a problem arises: how can we know ever *know* anything which is *that* separate/different from us? Despite the persistence—and perniciousness—of this problem of knowledge, western epistemologists have continued to posit the necessity of maintaining a clear separation between subjects and objects, minds and bodies. As a result, the worth of an activity has tended to be judged—by philosophers and by those influenced by this philosophical distinction—in part by determining the degree to which the activity can be shown to preserve that separation, or can be described using the language of disembodied and noninvasive seeing.

In contrast to the mental activity of inquiry, traditional philosophy posits practice—practical activity in which the separation between subject and object is “violated.” Practical activities are precisely those in which the external world of objects does not remain outside (and in which the inquirer often does not remain “inside”), one kneads the dough, picks the beans, feeds the baby. In all these activities, subject and object meet and touch, and that meeting is central to their nature as activities. Kneading bread dough is not a “subservient” physical activity which “supports” bread-making “theory,” even while violating the separation between “bread theorizer” and bread dough. Rather, kneading is an essential part of the theoretical-and-practical process of making bread—a part in which subjects’ and objects’ boundaries necessarily meet, touch and overlap.

**B. Temporality**

The second feature of this conception of the theory/practice dichotomy that is significant for my account is temporality. On the schema inherited from Plato, knowledge can only be of that which does not change—and the only things which do not change are abstract, nonmaterial things. For Plato, the things most knowable are the Forms, and the highest activity is the contemplation of them. Descartes, although rejecting the notion of a separate realm of eternal Forms, retains the idea that what we know best about an object are not its transitory accidental properties, but its unchanging essential attributes.

Objects of genuine knowledge are not subject to the ravages of time; they exist today, tomorrow, and yesterday. It is precisely their imperviousness to time, in fact, which makes them knowable and valuable. And, if we are able to come to know these essences, our contemplation of them will also become atemporal in a sense: true contemplation of the Forms is an activity that is always the same.

Practical activities, on the other hand, are carried out in a world of flux and change, a world where time is “inescapable”—and where its effects are unavoidable, and seen mostly as destructive (yes, there is growth, but there is also always decay). Food gives us striking examples of this: making and eating food are processes that take minutes, hours, or days. And these same processes must be repeated every day; unlike coming to know the Form of the Good, eating lunch doesn’t produce anything that will stay with a person for good.

That which changes cannot be known; thus activities involving food can never bring us more than opinions, hunches, or good guesses. The reliability of our opinions may improve over time—next year we’ll think twice before we plant radishes in April—but they can never, in principle, assume the status of knowledge. No amount of practice can overcome the capriciousness of time to give us certainty.

Because practical activities involve us directly in the physical, temporal world in ways we cannot ignore (try to remove yourself from the physical, temporal world when you are trying to get the hay in before it rains), and because that involvement is regarded as base, dirty, and inferior, in ordinary life physical processes become things we try to “hurry through” or from which we try to remove ourselves. Influenced by philosophical prejudices, our everyday response to being caught up in a world bounded by time is often to try to get the unpleasant tasks done quickly, so we can get to the pleasant ones—or escape to the eternal through “timeless literature,” “contemplation of eternal truths,” etc. Thus does Plato explain the length of the intestine in the *Timaeus*: it prevents us from having to eat frequently, and enables us to engage in contemplation for longer stretches of time. And thus do food manufacturers seduce us into buying their products, with promises of split-second (but delicious) foods, which allow us to “get on with our active life-styles.”

In societies shaped by systems of exploitation and oppression, the most time-bound jobs—particularly those which are highly repetitive—are assigned the least value and are given to those members of the society who
are most oppressed and exploited within those systems; persons performing them are paid the least (or are not paid at all). Many of the daily chores of a domestic worker—shopping for food, cooking food, serving food, cleaning the kitchen after cooking—are virtually invisible to those who benefit from them, or are regarded by beneficiaries as beneath attention or comment. Food-factory workers are placed on assembly lines where they perform the same action hundreds of times a day. The consequence for workers is, at best, boredom; at worst, severe physical problems are caused by their work environment.

Because food is temporal, food workers’ jobs are often constructed around its “times.” Frequently it is not the temporality of food alone that dictates the structure of workers’ lives. Rather, farm owners, factory owners, husbands—those with power to dictate the actions of workers—may determine the ways in which the temporality of food will dictate workers’ lives. Thus, migrant workers live in a world governed by the fruit or vegetable that is in season; they must be there, ready to work, when the crop is ripe. And when it is ripe, they must be prepared to pick it all, no matter how long the hours or how unbearable the working conditions. A homemaker is instructed by her husband to have dinner on the table when he gets home—though that time may vary from day to day. She is responsible for juggling the exigencies of her husband’s schedule with those of the foods she will prepare, for example, to ensure that the pork chops are done but not dry by the time he gets home.

Those in a society who are privileged—by gender, class, or race—may virtually avoid involvement with activities that remind of the temporality of food. Middle- or upper-class people may buy all our foods—fresh, frozen or canned—at one supermarket, where we may be assured of finding everything we want, regardless of the season. Housewives may find dinner ready each evening as they come from work, and may retire to the living room after dinner, unmindful of the mess that must now be cleaned up. For many of us, the temporality of the physical world is mediated in various ways by maids, factory and farm workers, wives, servers, cooks; if we are privileged enough, we may virtually forget the cycle of buy-cook-serve-clean-up-put-away that governs the day of the homemaker or domestic worker.

Few of us probably realize this degree of privilege. Those of us still “trapped” by temporal aspects of our existence may thus seek to “escape” them to the greatest degree possible. Present-day attitudes toward food preparation (as displayed by advertising, by cookbooks, by conversations at the coffee table) emphasize the value of ease, speed, and efficiency. “Good” food for the two-career couple often means something which takes very little time to prepare, doesn’t use many dishes, contains the necessary nutrients, and looks like the picture on the box (never mind the taste). One assumption at work is that preparing food is not an activity that has value in and of itself. Thus, if it can be eliminated, or speeded up, it should be. Al Sicherman’s “investigative report” of the creation of a “perfect pie” (reprinted in this section) is a paradigm of one form taken by the modern obsession with speed; we wish to eat food that looks like (a computer-generated version of) what Grandma used to make, without being involved in the process of producing that food ourselves and without having to take the time such a process takes. It is the product, not the process, that matters. (Consider the term “processed food.”)

C. Plato and the Head Work/Hand Work Dichotomy

One version of the philosophical dichotomy and hierarchy of head work and hand work is vividly illustrated in Plato’s discussion of the three kinds of citizens/three parts of the soul in the Republic. Plato’s account is particularly significant for the attention it pays to foodmaking; perhaps no other work of philosophy contains as many references to food and cooking. Emerging from the Republic is Plato’s view that cooking, like all other crafts, is at best marginally relevant to the acquisition of wisdom.

In constructing his Republic, Plato divides its inhabitants into three groups: rulers, guardians, and “wage earners,” the last being the bottom rank of people who provide the city with all its goods and services (369ff.). Once we leave the city of pigs, Plato pays virtually no attention to the wage earners. Their education is not examined, and their actual roles in society are not addressed in any detail. Although these are the people who have the task of feeding everyone (and providing for all other basic needs), Plato dismisses them by observing that they are also the citizens whose souls are ruled by their appetitive parts. For him, this demonstrates the need for them to be subservient to the rulers, whose souls are governed by reason (431ff.).

Given the subject matter of the Republic—the nature of justice—Plato’s neglect of the wage earners suggests that the particular nature of tasks like growing and cooking food is of little importance to the project of creating a just state. In Plato’s just state, reason is the quality which must be developed, and reason is exhibited most fully not by those who cook, but by those who rule. If rulers are educated in the art of reason, everything else will follow. Residents’ “mere bodily” needs will be taken care of by themselves—or, more correctly, will be taken care of by the “appetitive” citizens, who will be well paid for their efforts. Their souls will be governed by their appetites—for money, food, and other pleasures—but in the just state they will also be reasonable enough to recognize the legitimacy of the rulers’ rule.

Plato establishes a sharp separation and hierarchy both between the activities of reason and those of the appetites, and between those who do the work of reason and those whose work focuses on satisfying appetites. Plato recognizes that we cannot think if we are hungry, but on his schema, this fact gets translated into the notion that the bodily appetites must be
Foodmaking as a Thoughtful Practice

also have one and only one task. By carving the soul into reason, spirit, and appetite, Plato separates reason from all other faculties. And in elevating reason above the others, he makes it alone the proper governor of the soul. He terms bodily appetites unreasonable, and regards them as things to be controlled by reason (much as cooks must be controlled by rulers). It is unlikely that reason will benefit from the insight of the appetites, just as it is not likely that a ruler will receive good advice about ruling justly from a cook. Hunger can be rational only to the degree to which it realizes it must be held in control by reason. Bodily knowledge in general, if such an expression is not simply a misnomer, can only be a lower, craft-like form of knowledge, subservient to the genuine knowledge of the rational soul.

Plato’s hierarchy of kinds of humans/parts of the soul makes its way into present-day life in the way that certain kinds of “manual” labor are ranked below certain forms of “intellectual” labor. This ordering can be seen in the way that the work of farmers, homemakers, and other such “manual workers” is subordinate to the “knowing professions” like biochemistry, genetics, and other sciences.

Domestic and farm workers’ places in the “chain of knowledge” prescribed by western philosophy, and encoded in popular thought, is that of consumers; they form the markets for the new technologies developed by “applied scientists” using the theories of the “pure scientists” (if indeed those divisions between pure and applied science can be set out so clearly). It is they who buy the new detergent, the new fertilizer, the new no-fat, high-fiber butter substitute. They are doers, not thinkers; users, not discoverers. And, like the artisans in Plato’s Republic, they are presumed to be happy so long as they have enough to satisfy their various appetites.

Likewise, modern-day research scientists are conceived as being much like the guardians in Plato’s Republic in their disconnection from the activities that “keep body and soul together.” Usually white and male, and frequently married, they tend to have wives who (whether they work outside the home or not) buy the groceries, prepare the meals, and clean up afterwards. The stereotypical absentminded professor often forgets to eat, and has to be reminded to come home from the lab. Traits such as being absentminded are considered admirable, for they show how serious the scientist is about science.

It apparently is not essential, or even important, for practitioners of the highest forms of knowing in our culture to participate in the activities that serve their day-to-day needs. Tasks like cooking and doing the dishes are necessary evils; they’re evil for everyone, and if one can avoid doing them, so much the better. There is very little sympathy—either in Plato or in contemporary life—for the idea that foodmaking activities are valuable because of, not in spite of, the fact that they ground us in the concrete, embodied present.

John Dewey notes, “The depreciation of action, of doing and making, has been cultivated by philosophers. But while philosophers have perpetu-
ated the derogation by formulating and justifying it, they did not originate it. . . . On account of the unpleasantness of practical activity, as much of it as possible has been put upon slaves and serfs. Thus the social dishonor in which this class was held was extended to the work they do” (1980, 4–5). Philosophy venerates and codifies a denigration of the practical which already exists in some form in social life.

Recently, many feminist philosophers have turned their attention to considerations of practical, embodied activities, examining both the way those activities have been ignored by Plato and other philosophers, and the philosophical significance such activities in fact have. These theorists’ projects reveal the ways in which class, gender, and race hierarchies have helped to determine what counts as a philosophically interesting activity. Not surprisingly, they have found that philosophers have tended to valorize those activities in which it is the prerogative of educated and/or ruling-class men to engage.18

Such activities have tended to be those classed as theory or “head work.” For example, contemplation—of the stars, of the Forms, of number and figure, of God—has been regarded as the philosophically most important human activity in part because it is one thing that leisure-class men did and continue to do. On the other hand, their wives, servants, slaves, and workers were more likely engaged in “hand work,” work Dorothy Smith (1979, 168) describes as being in the “bodily mode.”

The place of women, then, . . . is where the work is done to facilitate man’s occupation of the conceptual mode of action. Women keep house, bear and care for children, look after him when he is sick, and in general provide for the logistics of his bodily existence . . . They do things which give concrete form to the conceptual activities . . . At almost every point women mediate for men the relation between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms on which it depends.19

Accepting the knowing/doing model for classifying human processes leaves us with two ways to approach foodmaking, neither of which is particularly satisfactory. The first alternative—that chosen by Plato, and by the modern-day makers of the Burger King pie cutter of whom Sicherman writes—is simply to treat food preparation as hand work and give it the minimal attention and respect that such activities are “supposed” to receive.

The other, somewhat more promising, alternative is to treat foodmaking as a “knowing” activity. This is the choice of Patrick Suppes in his account (reprinted here) of recipes as “procedures” that can be “justified” the way a Euclidian geometrical construction is justified. While I do not suggest that such treatment of recipes is “wrong,” I do think that Suppes’s method cannot get at the interesting things about recipes and cooking precisely because it uses a framework—the knowing/doing framework—

which doesn’t allow for the interesting things to emerge. He may strain at the limits of this framework, but he remains within it.

Suppes’s account is a formalized analysis of the ways in which a step in a recipe can be justified. It accepts the legitimacy of a distinction between theoretical and practical activities, but shows that even an activity like cooking can be interpreted as theoretical. His explanation for using the example of cooking is that it is an activity involving “nontrivial procedures that almost everyone has some experience with” (236*). He doesn’t include any analysis of why cooking is not generally treated by philosophers. (Because of this silence, I am left wondering if we are not to interpret this passage as slightly tongue-in-cheek.)

A similar sort of move—categorizing foodmaking as a theoretical activity—may lie behind such phenomena as middle- and upper-class cooks who invest enormous amounts of money in equipment and ingredients, to produce food that is “innovative” and “artistic.” For these cooks, foodmaking is often not an everyday activity, but a special leisure activity. As such, it cannot be described as aimed at keeping body and soul together. Rather, it is often a highly intellectualized, highly theoretical enterprise. In certain respects, it seems to imitate sculpture—an activity that, although it involves the hands, certainly is not hand work.20

Jean-François Revel also can be said to move foodmaking into the realm of the theoretical, as is illustrated by his distinction between “international cuisine” and “regional cuisine,” in the selection reprinted here. International cuisine is “not a corpus of recipes, but a body of methods, of principles amenable to variations, depending on different local and financial possibilities” (245*). This international Grand Cuisine he describes as an art, and contrasts it to regional cuisine, which “does not belong to the domain of art, but rather that of ethnology or a mixture of biology and ethnology” (246*). International cuisine transcends the (sometimes charming) parochialism of regional cuisine to establish general principles, methods, and techniques of cooking. “Gastronomical art is able, when necessary and possible, to find the equivalents of certain products or of certain ingredients and use them to replace other products and other ingredients that cannot be obtained in certain places” (246*). International cuisine is a scientific art, genuinely practiced only by “professionals” (248*), while regional cuisine is a knack, a set of skills, ingredients, etc., which may not be universalized, and therefore cannot be part of a genuine art. By separating international from regional cuisine, Revel sets up a distinction between head work and hand work within the domain of foodmaking. One form of cooking (the professional, method-governed form) he treats as a theoretical activity on a par with any other. The other he regards as a craft or knack, like whistling or fly tying.

Such accounts of foodmaking that redefine it as a kind of theoretical activity can only go so far toward creating a conception of foodmaking processes that treats them with integrity. Both Suppes and Revel stuff food-
III. DEWEY AND THOUGHTFUL PRACTICE

DeWey's understanding of the traditional philosophical organization of human activities (and human "types") is illustrated in the following passage from *Experience and Nature*.

There is then an empirical truth in the common opposition between the theory/practice dichotomy and the experimental practice/ethics dichotomy. This truth is that the former is not a sharp distinction in kind between two modes of practice. One mode is the "thoughtful," the other is the "practical." The former is the more "theoretical" and includes all the activities that are characterized by the consideration of the consequences of actions. The latter includes all the activities that are characterized by the consideration of the means of achieving ends.

DeWey defines the distinction between theory and practice as a difference in kind, not in degree. He suggests that there is no sharp distinction in kind between the two. Rather, they must be regarded as two forms of practice, one of which might be called "thoughtful" or "practical" than the other.

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ful practice; and the significance of the emotional and the erotic. Each of these elements is useful for revealing the differences between activity conceived as a thoughtful practice and activity conceived of as theorizing. Whereas theorizing regarded in its "purest" form is abstract, disembodied, purely rational, and retains sharp boundaries between inquirer and the rest of the world, thoughtful practices turn out to focus on the concrete, embodied, emotional and erotic nature of activity, and to recognize the significant interconnections that exist between inquirers and their environments.

A. THE SELF-OTHER INTERCONNECTION

Considered on their own terms, foodmaking activities can challenge the sharp subject/object dichotomy that characterizes traditional inquiry, and that serves to separate such head work from hand work. Preparing food encourages us to blur the separation between ourselves and our food, even as we roll up our sleeves and stick our hands in the dough.

In "Recipes for Theory Making," reprinted here, I argue that thinking about bread-making as a kind of theorizing (or, as I would say now, as a kind of thoughtful practice) places me and bread dough in a relation with each other, a relation in which I assume neither total separateness from the ingredients I use, nor complete control over them.

Carol Adams suggests one concrete result that may emerge from rethinking the subject/object relation in terms of one aspect of food preparation, namely the creation of meat. In an excerpt from The Sexual Politics of Meat reprinted here, Adams suggests that if we start to speak clearly about the nature of our interconnections with other animals, this verbal clarity may transform our concrete relations with those others as well. Specifically, it may compel us to stop eating them. In the traditional "story of meat," the animal as a living, feeling creature is rendered invisible when it is killed for food. It becomes what she calls elsewhere in the book the "absent referent." "Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist" (1989, 40). This story "ends when the male-defined consumer eats the female-defined body. The animals' role in meat eating is parallel to the women's role in narrative: we would have neither meat nor story without them. They are objects to others who act as subjects" (268*).

If we retell the story using words like "murder" to explain the processes by which a living pig is turned into a package of "pork," Adams suggests we may be moved and challenged to give the story an "alternative ending" (268*). Alternative endings might come from one of two sorts of perspectives—perspectives that she argues ought to be in more serious conversation with other—namely, vegetarianism and feminism. Understanding the relations between the systematic objectification of women and the objectification of animals, feminists may be drawn to see the theo-
retical importance of vegetarianism, and vegetarians may be compelled to embrace feminist principles.

Crucial to both projects is the necessity of undermining the subject/object dichotomy. By supporting the objectification of women and of other animals, the traditional dichotomy serves as a powerful tool used to construct and maintain systems that dominate, oppress, and exploit women and other animals.25

Replacing the subject/object dichotomy with a conception of relations between self and other that focuses on their interconnections is one necessary element in a conception of thoughtful practice. The traditional theory/practice dichotomy presumes that theoretical work involves no interconnections—or that any existent interconnections are irrelevant to the theory—and uses this presumption as one way of distinguishing theory from practice. By rejecting the dichotomy between theory and practice and replacing it with a view of all human activities as kinds of practice, we also begin to recognize the importance of interconnections between “self” and “other” in all activity. Attention to these interconnections may also compel us to reshape the ways they have been constructed under the influence of the theory/practice dichotomy.

B. Bodily Knowledge

By seeing ourselves as connected to the things we grow and cook—by transforming the subject/object dichotomy into a relationship which recognizes the interconnections between us and those foods—we are also called upon to recognize a mode of interaction that might be called “bodily knowledge.” A conception of thoughtful practices should have as one of its foci a realization of the embodied nature of those activities.26

Theories like Descartes's conceive of my body as an external appendage to my mind, and see its role in inquiry as merely to provide a set of (fairly reliable) sensory data on which my reasoning faculty then operates to produce objects of knowledge. But growing and cooking food are important counterexamples to this view; they are activities in which bodily perceptions are more than meter readings which must be scrutinized by reason. The knowing involved in making a cake is “contained” not simply “in my head” but in my hands, my wrists, my eyes and nose as well. The phrase “bodily knowledge” is not a metaphor. It is an acknowledgment of the fact that I know things literally with my body, that I, “as” my hands, know when the bread dough is sufficiently kneaded, and I “as” my nose know when the pie is done.

In “The Demystification of Food,” excerpted in this section, Verta Mae Smart-Grosvenor describes her cooking method as “vibration”: “... I never measure or weigh anything. I cook by vibration. I can tell by the look and smell of it” (294*). What is Grosvenor “demystifying” with this assertion? One thing she suggests is that “Cartesian” cooking methods—which presume a kind of separation and hierarchy between mind and

body, which treat bodily activity as being in the service of mental activity, and which consequently require mathematical measurement and scientific technique—are inauthentic and pretentious. They attempt to make cooking a kind of science in the Cartesian sense. The results of such methods are sterile, flavorless foods—a fact which, for Grosvenor, confirms their inauthenticity.27 In contrast, the kind of cooking she does shuns such pretentious mathematical precision and produces good food “by vibration”—by using her bodily understanding of (and connection with) the foods she's cooking.

To know food—to know how to cook food well—does not require an abstracted, measurement-conscious knowledge (a kind of knowledge which imitates the allegedly disembodied nature of scientific, theoretical knowledge), but rather a knowledge in the eyes and in the hands. You have to be able to “finger” a ball of pie dough to tell if it needs a bit more ice water. You must be able to smell when the garlic is just about to burn as it sautés in the oil. Grosvenor's recipes—brief and “imprecise,” listing no measures or amounts—reflect her conception of the way cooking is done, and of the role that written instructions can play in cooking. If you don't know how you like it, what good is it for me to tell you how much rice to put in? And if you don't already know how to cook it, how is my writing it in a book going to help you learn? You need a teacher—a hands-on teacher—for that. Bodily knowledge is acquired through embodied experience.

Compare Grosvenor's recipes—and her accompanying account—to the recipes described and explained by Suppes. For Suppes, a recipe is a rational explanation, complete with justification, for how to do something. For Grosvenor, a recipe is more like a maxim, or a memory-jogger, or an inspiration. It cannot be a complete account. Nothing short of a day in the kitchen with Grosvenor could be such an account. Words can't explain what you must learn using your hands and nose and mouth.

On one level, such a claim states an obvious, seemingly trivial, fact; it is clear, after all, that one must be shown how to do all sorts of manual things. (Notably, the things about which we make this assertion are not things we call “knowledge” of the highest sort. They include pastry-making, but not mathematics.)

But on another level, this particular claim about the centrality of bodily experience in learning to cook has transformative potential. Recognizing it may press us toward an understanding of all human activities as bodily, in nontrivial, “unbracketable” ways. Even activities traditionally conceived as abstract, disembodied theorizing can be so understood. Such an understanding would transform Descartes’s assertion that my essence is to be a disembodied thinking thing, and that knowing is fundamentally a mental activity in which my body plays only a supporting role—and would also transform Plato’s assertion that manual activities are inferior to, and in the service of, theoretical activity.
Consider, for example, how Plato’s explanation for our intestine might be transformed by a recognition of the bodily nature of knowledge. Plato, in explaining our intestine’s length, acknowledges the importance of attending to bodily needs, as a means of enabling the soul to “get on” with its higher task—contemplation (1953, 72e–73a). That is, Plato (unlike Descartes) at least recognizes that our bodies cannot be ignored. However, Plato regards our embodied, appetitive nature as a rather unfortunate fact of human life; we must satisfy our base appetite for food, but beyond that, our desire for food is nothing to celebrate. Consider, on the other hand, how we might explain the relation between thinking and eating if we begin without presuming the subservience of body and bodily activity, and by acknowledging that we are indeed bodily beings. Rather than regarding time spent eating as an annoying necessity, it may come to be regarded as a resource—a source of physical strength, of enjoyment, of inspiration. Rather than something to be “gotten through,” it becomes something to be anticipated and lived fully.

In describing this conception of embodiment as a transformation, I am not suggesting anything like the replacement of Descartes’s essentialist conception of knowers and knowing with a new essentialist conception that includes bodies. I mean only to suggest that if we consider foodmaking seriously, having rejected presuppositions that label it an inferior form of interaction, we may be able to apply the understanding of it as an embodied activity to our investigation of other forms of human interaction in the world. These activities, too, may be seen as embodied, in significant, not subservient ways.

C. Community Membership

In a variety of ways, foodmaking activities are community activities. Foodmaking processes may define membership in a community, and they may depend on the existence of a community in order to be practiced, or to be passed to the next generation of practitioners.

My account of recipe exchange in “Recipes for Theory Making” (reprinted here) discusses some of the senses in which creating, exchanging, and testing recipes are community activities. I do not mean to suggest anything idyllic in describing recipe exchange this way; indeed, as I point out, people are often unscrupulous, uncooperative, and even malicious members of the community of recipe exchangers. Clearly, the fact that creating food is an activity that often goes on in a community does not automatically mean that it is a positive one. When some members of the community hold disproportionate amounts of power over others (in the form of access to goods, share of the market, ability to dictate others’ actions, etc.), they have the capacity to create an environment which exploits those others. Such a situation frequently obtains when one of the “members” of the community is a large food corporation; consumers are frequently disempowered in such relations, and consumers who are poor are particularly disempowered.

Buffalo Bird Woman, in a selection reprinted here, discusses one specific way in which food preparation is a community function when she describes guarding the corn crop in a Hidatsa village. Girls and women watched the corn from a “watchers’ stage,” built in the middle of the cornfield. The stage was a centerpiece in the field, a place where women of the community gathered for an activity that was a combination of their categories of “work” and “recreation”; resting from hoeing, scouting off birds, singing songs. Furthermore, because it was a gathering place for all women, from the very young to the old, it was also a place where young girls learned the ways of the garden, and where older women taught the younger ones the songs, the stories, and the planting, cultivating and harvesting techniques. Likewise, girls and younger women kept older women informed about goings-on in their lives and their circles of friends.

Watching the corn defined a community that was quite expressly a women’s community; men and boys were not particularly welcome at the stage, and their presence was tolerated, at best. This strengthened the women’s identification with each other and with the task of corn-growing. It explicitly was “women’s work,” though that term did not have for them the derogatory connotation it has in present American society—not did it have the correspondingly low status in the community. Growing and harvesting the crops were clearly central to the life and livelihood of the entire community. Consider the account of justice that might emerge from this community, as compared to Plato’s account of the just state.

In the excerpt from Zami reprinted here, Audre Lorde describes the entry of a young girl into adult membership in her community by giving an account of her first menstrual period, and of the preparation of her favorite food, souse. In a detailed description of the mortar and pestle she uses—explaining where it came from, how it differed from those used by people of other ethnicities—and of the method she had learned for pounding spice, we get a sense of that community, and of Lorde’s uneasy relation to it.

In this account, Lorde reveals a tension between her growing-up self and her mother, a tension that is manifested in their different attitudes toward food preparation. For Lorde, the involved process of pounding spice for souse is a delight, while for her mother it is only a chore, and “she looked upon the advent of powdered everything as a cook’s boon” (287*). As Lorde’s account makes clear, becoming a full-fledged member of a community is not always a smooth transition—particularly not when you are a girl/young woman, and when you must overcome the resistance of a mother who rules her home with absolute authority: “...I realized that my old enjoyment of the bone-jarring way I had been taught to pound spice would feel different to me from now on, and also that in my mother’s kitchen there was only one right way to do anything” (293*).
Verta Mae Smart-Grosvenor discusses another kind of food-centered tension that can arise in communities—in this case, a tension between communities—when she exposes the racism underlying white conceptions of food cultures and food traditions. "With the exception of black bottom pie and niggertoes, there is no reference to black people's contribution to the culinary arts. White folks act like they invented food" (294*). Elsewhere in her book she refers to terrapins, which "ain't nothing but swamp turtles. They used to be plentiful on the eastern seaboard. So plentiful that plantation owners gave them to their slaves. Now they are the rare discovery of so-called gore-mays. White folks are always discovering something... after we give it up" (44).

Grosvenor pointedly argues that dominant cultural attitudes toward soul food—that it's tasteless, that it's ordinary—reveal white presumptions about the "mystique" of food, about the difference between haute cuisine of the type prepared by "Julia and Jim" (294*) and the food that "brought my ancestors through four hundred years of oppression" (297*). By beginning with a racist presupposition about Blacks and Black culture, whites create a "high art/craft" distinction between "gore-may" cooking and soulfood cooking. But, as she points out, "there ain't but so many ways you can cook a sweet potato" (294*). Consider her discussion here in comparison to Revel's; his praise of "international cuisine" argues that its superiority lies precisely in the fact that it has transcended particular communities, with their specificity and idiosyncrasy. In fact, what Revel's analysis reveals is not a distinction between international cuisine and regional cooking, but a racist, Eurocentric conception of what counts as good food and knowledgeable foodmaking.

That attention to community is an important aspect of a conception of inquiry as a thoughtful practice is evidenced by the variety of ways in which communities are addressed. It might be said that attention to community is a natural consequence of the rejection of a subject/object model for human activity; once we recognize the importance of the relations between foodmaker and food, we are led to reconsider the importance of other kinds of relations as well—relations among foodmakers, and among foodmakers and eaters, etc.

D. EMOTIONAL AND EROTIC KNOWLEDGE

Growing and preparing food are activities which often require and generate emotional and erotic energy—and which see such emotion and eroticism as vital to the activity. In contrast to the received view of theory and practice, which tends to divorce reason from emotion and eroticism, a transformed conception of foodmaking practices views them as thoughtful practices in which these forms of interaction are interrelated and mutually constitutive.

Grosvenor and Lorde, in particular, describe cooking in ways that highlight its emotional and erotic elements. Dispassionate objectivity, the standard for scientific inquiry, is not the ideal in cooking; good cooking is good in part because of the emotional attachment you have to the people for whom you're cooking, to the tools you're using, and to the foods you're making.

For Grosvenor, cooking is a form of love, one of the most powerful of all forms. "So, if you cook with love and feed people, you got two forces cooled out already" (296*). Food is sustenance; for Grosvenor, this claim transcends nutrition in the narrow, scientific sense of that word: "Food changes into blood, blood into cells, cells change into energy which changes up into life and since your life style is imaginative, creative, loving, energetic, serious, food is life" (296*). For Grosvenor, the love and energy you put into your cooking come out in the form of love and energy in the person for whom you cook.

In Lorde's description of pounding spice—rich with details about the ingredients used and the mortar and pestle with which she pounded—food preparation becomes an erotic event. For Lorde, the concept of the erotic carries particular significance. In a suggestive if speculative essay entitled "Uses of the Erotic," Lorde reclaims the notion, rejecting the falsified, often misogynistic conceptions of eroticism that equate it with pornography. She defines the erotic as "an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming" (55). The erotic is a source of power that "comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person," and serves as an "open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy" (56).

In an evocative metaphor, Lorde describes the erotic as a kernel, like the kernel of food coloring one used to get with a packet of uncolored margarine: "We would leave the margarine out for a while to soften, and then we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine" (57).

Pounding spice—the rhythmic action, the fragrant spices, the feel of the mortar and pestle in her hands, the anticipation of tasting the sauce—is an erotic activity for Lorde. And on the day she begins to menstruate, this normally erotic experience assumes new dimensions: it is being performed by a body which holds within it "a tiding ocean of blood beginning to be made real and available to me for strength and information" (292*). Eroticism and information, feeling and knowing are intertwined for Lorde.

In exploring the erotic and emotional potential of foodmaking—and in expanding our conception of the erotic—these texts reveal another layer of the inadequacies of the traditional theory/practice account. They invite us to transform our own perceptions of everyday activities like cooking, washing dishes, and eating. And they encourage us to participate in those activities in ways that leave us open to their emotional, erotic potential.
V. CONCLUSION

In this essay, I’ve suggested one way in which to transform the theory/practice distinction into a framework for human activity that will enable us to understand foodmaking activities as philosophically significant. By conceiving of foodmaking as a thoughtful practice, I’ve suggested, we can begin to appreciate the deep significance of these activities. But thinking about foodmaking alone clearly will not remove (philosophical or cultural) biases against it or undermine the sharp theory/practice dichotomy on which such biases rest. Nor is thinking about food an activity uniquely valuable as an end in itself. Certainly we must also make food if we are serious about transforming conceptions of the significance of foodmaking, and of practice more generally. By becoming involved with others in making food in respectful ways, one can begin to transform philosophical ignorance of and disrespect for foodmaking into philosophical understanding of, and involvement in it.

NOTES

1. Of course Plato does talk about food preparation far more than most subsequent western philosophers; his writing is filled with references to butchers and pastry chefs, etc. But although he mentions foodmaking frequently, he also makes it clear that such activities always play at most a supporting role in the quest for genuine wisdom.

2. Of course not all of these labels would be used by all philosophers. Plato, for example, would not describe activities which involve knowledge as “head” or “mental work” (because for him the modern mind/body dichotomy does not exist), but he would call them “arts,” to distinguish them from “crafts” or “knacks.” Descartes, on the other hand, would speak of “mental” as opposed to “manual” activity, but would not refer to mental activity as “art.” However, despite the fact that there is no single, essential distinction between theoretical and practical activities, and although philosophers characterize the distinction in many different ways, it is a distinction that threads its way through much of western philosophy, and has, in its various historical forms, significantly influenced those of us who are its inheritors. Thus I refer to Plato and Descartes not as figures whose work captures some common “essence” of the theory/practice distinction, but as two central philosophical figures whose thoughts on human activity have continued profoundly to affect contemporary (philosophical and nonphilosophical) conceptions of human activity.

3. In considering the differences between theoretical and practical, mental and manual activity, it is important to keep in mind that the distinction is not a hard-and-fast distinction between activities using the hands and those involving only the mind. Rather, theoretical activities are those in which hand work is subservient to head work, the “truly theoretical” aspects of the activity. Activities defined as theoretical may have a practical component, but it plays a supporting role only.

Many, if not most, theoretical activities have such a physical component. One of the theoretical arts Plato often discusses is medicine, which clearly involves physiological activity. And Descartes emphasizes the role of scientific experimentation—hand work—in achieving metaphysical certainty. Both philosophers, however, stress the primacy of the theoretical or mental aspect of these activities, and both also emphasize that the “purest” examples of knowing are those most completely removed from practice (mathematics, the dialectic)—therefore those in which our bodies are least involved.

4. The phrase “supports and is supported by” is intended to convey the notion that causality in effect runs in both directions here. That is, I am claiming that the philosophical distinction between head work and hand work is partly responsible for social hierarchies that privilege head workers, but I am also claiming that those social hierarchies are partly responsible for the philosophical distinction. In effect, the two systems have grown up alongside each other, each one serving as a support for the other. I shall use this notion of mutual causality at various points in my account.

5. That is, those who engage in work that is defined as manual labor are also those who generally are regarded as less than fully human by a society. Thus the slave woman working in the cotton fields of antebellum Mississippi, the Chicano migrant worker family picking fruit in Washington State today, and the white homemaker canning green beans in 1950s suburbia all are, to some degree, regarded as less than fully human because of the labor in which they engage. They are relegated to these kinds of labor, however, because they are regarded as less than fully human.

6. As we mentioned in the general introduction to the book, our treatment of the western philosophical tradition might be described as viewing philosophy as culture. That is, philosophical categories such as the subject/object dichotomy have seeped into other domains of western culture, and have even become “common sense” for some people. Thus in describing the way inquiry is regarded, my account here utilizes historical philosophical figures not primarily to summarize the history of philosophy’s treatment of the nature of inquiry, but to provide a sketch of the way particular historical conceptions of the nature of inquiry function at the level of popular culture, common sense, etc.


8. Even in “emanations” theories of vision, such as the theory held by Plato, the subject and the object do not directly meet/touch each other; rather, their “emanations” meet at some intermediate point. Here, too, the separateness of substances is preserved.

9. In their essay “The Mind’s Eye,” Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine Gronkowski (1985) address this issue—and show how ocular imagery is used to explain both the separation between inquirer and inquiry that is required for objectivity, and the connection between them that is required for knowledge.

10. Evidence of the degree to which this thinking has become “common sense” for at least some westerners, I mention the kind of conversation that frequently goes on in my introductory epistemology classes. When confronted with the possibility that nothing is changing, students often willingly conclude that then nothing is knowable either. For these students—most of whom have grown up on a diet of both “scientific laws” and mainstream Protestant theology—the connection between eternity and knowability is quite unambiguous.

11. “In order then that disease might not quickly destroy us, and lest our mortal race should perish without fulfilling its end—intending to provide against this, the gods made what is called the lower belly, to be a receptacle for the superfuous meat and drink, and formed the convolution of the bowels, so that the food might
be prevented from passing quickly through and compelling the body to require more food, thus producing insatiable gluttony and making the whole race an enemy to philosophy and culture, and rebellious against the distinct element within us’ (1953, 72e–73a). Note that Plato suggests that a physiological makeup which required frequent eating would actually constitute gluttony—a moral state.

Earlier in that section, Plato also explains the location of the intestines—and of the appetite part of the soul—thus:

The part of the soul which desires meats and drinks and the other things of which it has need by reason of the bodily nature, they [the gods] placed between the midriff and the boundary of the navel. . . . They appointed this lower creature his place here in order that he might always be feeding at the manger, and have his dwelling as far as might be from the council chamber, making as little noise and disturbance as possible, and permitting the best part to advise quietly for the good of the whole and the individual. (70e)

12. Frequently, such jobs are made to be more horrible—more repetitive, boring, and often dangerous—that need be. One assumption that seems to operate is that such work is intrinsically uninteresting and therefore incapable of being made pleasant, safe, fulfilling—thus the assembly line poultry-processing plant, canneries, frozen-food factory. Such work is assigned to the most disempowered members of the society. Since those who do this work are those with the least access to legal counsel, the media, or others who might take their complaints seriously, factories often operate with little risk that their owners will be held responsible for having created monotonous, debilitating and dangerous jobs.

13. We may be entirely unmindful of the cycle of plant-cultivate-harvest-sell that governs the lives of farm workers. See “The Pleasures of Eating” in Section Four for a discussion of the ways in which American consumers are divorced from the agricultural aspects of food.

14. Of course my analysis of American eating habits here ignores the “puppie” trend of buying expensive food-preparation equipment and cooking “to relieve stress.” While I don’t condemn such practices, it seems to me that most of their practitioners have not made cooking anything like an ordinary, integral part of their lives. Rather, it is something they do as a therapy, as a special treat, or for special occasions.

15. It might be more correct to say that only certain things about the product—namely physical appearances—matter. The apples in the pie can be tasteless, so long as they can be cut easily and cleanly, and so long as the pie is before us in the time it takes a food service worker to bag it.

16. One can see the connections between this notion of hunger—potentially dangerous if not held in check by reason—and the anorexic’s conception of her hunger, as described by Bordo and Chernin in Section One.

17. Naomi Scheneman reminded me of this phrase, and suggested its appropriateness to a philosophical context.

18. There are scores of works that undertake such projects. See, for a few examples, Aptheker 1989; Harding and Hintikka 1983; Hoagland 1988; Jaggar 1983; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Smith 1979 and 1987; Young 1990. See also various issues of Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy, and the American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy.

19. In this passage, Smith speaks directly to the experiences of (some) women. Men who are servants, workers, etc., also can be said to occupy the bodily mode, and to mediate for ruling-class men, though the activities through which they do this would usually be different from those assigned to women.

20. It was for Plato. But after Renaissance Europe, it cannot be thought of as such. See the following section on Dewey for more about the transformation of certain physical activities into head work.

21. Indeed, this passage really focuses on two “personality types” or “attitudes” as much as on theoretical and practical activity per se. In point of fact, the philosophical distinction between theory and practice does reside in the common-sense attitudes we hold about human personalities. That is, although the distinction carries tremendous philosophical baggage, it is also a distinction which colors our ordinary life to a tremendous degree.

22. 314–15. See also The Quest for Certainty, p. 245, for a similar discussion.

23. The fact that the position is self-consistent does not of course make it immune to criticism. We might still ask why chance and change—and the activities connected with them—are accorded inferior ontological and epistemological status in the first place for the Greeks.

24. This might be an appropriate moment to explain the spirit in which my criticism of Dewey is raised. I see myself as extending the scope of Dewey’s project in ways that were perhaps unforeseen and unforeseeable by him. I do so in the spirit of Dewey himself, who, I believe, would approve of my questioning his unquestioned assumptions. Dewey did not regard his own philosophy as a set of inviolable tenets, and he would be suspicious of those who would treat it as such.

25. See the introductory essay to Section Four for a fuller discussion of the ways in which a subject/object dichotomy serves oppressive and exploitative social and political systems.

26. Another element of thoughtful practices that I do not investigate here, but which is also clearly important, is their temporality. I’ve already suggested that the traditional distinction between theoretical and practical activity is formed in part on the basis of a distinction between activities “caught in time,” such as foodmaking, and activities which “transcend time,” such as contemplation of eternal truths. A conception of thoughtful practice might begin with the assertion that this is a specious distinction, and go on to explore the ways in which foodmaking and eating situate us in temporal reality. Such a discussion would be particularly useful for augmenting and complementing the assertion that thoughtful practices are embodied.

27. For a hilarious account of the consequences of attempting to make cooking “scientific” see Perfection Salad, which documents the emergence of the “domestic science” movement in turn-of-the-century United States.

28. One important exception to this generalization is Plato, who in the Phaedo describes knowing using the metaphor of lover and beloved. For a full discussion of this, and other aspects of the historical relation between reason and emotions, see Jaggar 1989.

29. There are interesting connections, which cannot be explored here, between her account of cooking and the account Evelyn Fox Keller gives of the way Barbara McClintock does science; for McClintock, inquiry is a form of love. See A Feeling for the Organism.

REFERENCES


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