Food as art: *poiēsis* and the importance of soft impacts

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Abstract

Working towards a general philosophy of food production, this paper discusses food production as a dialectic between technology and art, understood within a loose Heideggerian framework. Technology in this context means the scalable and efficient production of a commodity, while art means the production of meaning and the unveiling of a world. Focusing our understanding of food production under the rubric of '*poiēsis*' (or art) gives us a framework for understanding food and food technology within which the goodness of food and its production can be assessed in terms of its fittingness (*convenientia*) instead of its efficiency (mere convenience) alone. For, considering food as art, we are not exclusively concerned with its technological production, but with its creation and meaning. But no given thing can mean everything; every given thing limits the possible meanings that can be projected upon it. Thus not everything is fitting despite its technological possibility. We ought to seek fittingness, which is uncovered in such soft impacts as those of lifestyle, culture, religion, aesthetics, and human dignity, and summed up in the notion of food as an art disclosing these and unveiling a world.

Keywords: convenience, fittingness, Martin Heidegger, food preference, technology, craft

Introduction: hard versus soft impacts

When we talk about food production and security, we are really talking about a large and complicated puzzle. In choosing to highlight soft impacts, I am admittedly only dealing with a small piece, but it must be situated within the whole. Soft impacts – those impacts that resist measurement – are important within a discussion of the philosophy of food production because when food becomes a merely technical or technological issue then hard impacts tend to obscure the non-technological. These don't blind us to the issues to which technology gives rise; indeed, we have become obsessed with them, counting food miles, reusing bags, and buying local. Yet, the danger remains that we see the world only in terms of hard impacts, leading in turn to a bad infinity of technological solutions, each with their own hard impacts requiring solutions. And yet it is the soft impacts that indicate how fitting food is for a person, rather than how available or convenient. The soft impacts indicate what food *means*.

Indeed, the hallmark of our age is to think that food production and security are merely technical issues – issues to be solved through a marriage of technology, economics, and policy. We need look no further than the FAO's definition of food security: 'when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO, 2008). The FAO quickly interprets the definition in a purely technological manner, identifying 'the four main dimensions of food security':

1. physical availability of food: level of food production, food stocks levels, and net trade;
2. economic and physical access to food: policy focus on income, expenditure and markets;
3. food utilization: safety and diversity of food – the nutritional status of individuals;
4. stability of the other three dimensions over time (FAO, 2008).

As a good Aristotelian concerned with a well-functioning polity (or world community, as the case may be), I agree that these dimensions are indeed both essential and necessary; stability is but a dream without healthy and reasonably-fed individuals. However necessary these dimensions may be, I would also argue

that they are not sufficient, which even the FAO's own definition of food security itself fleetingly points out. For, missing from the list of dimensions is any mention of the definition's 'food preferences,' which I take to be a non-technological soft impact. These four dimensions are presented solely as hard impacts – questions of production and distribution answerable through technological and economic fixes arranged through political will. The venture capitalist Vinod Khosla calls such solutions 'black swan' ideas, which he takes to be elusive, achievable, and – most importantly – highly profitable technologies capable of delivering us from disaster (Economist, 2011). In short, Kholsa and the FAO are not alone in holding that the dimensions remain technocratic – technical solutions to technical problems. And in this sense food becomes nothing more than 'edible technology' (David M. Kaplan, unpublished paper).

How are we to understand soft impacts? Let me quote the Dutch philosopher D. Swierstra at length: 'The hard impacts of techniques *techniek* are certainly important. But our everyday life is not usually determined by exploding, poisonous, or world-conquering technology *technologie*. Instead, it is determined by techniques that in a scarcely visible way give form to the way we act, to our relations, to our norms, values, rights, duties, expectations, and desires. Think about how the pill has changed our sexual relations, how the computer has changed work, how the mobile telephone has changed social relations. These sorts of consequences of technology I call soft impacts.' (Swierstra, 2011: 5). Soft impacts are the effects that technology has upon the way we view the world, and thus ultimately soft impacts are the effects technology has upon culture or society. And this is important because, as Bradley points out, culture is the framework of all our experience (Bradley, 1876: 150).

Food preference is but one example of a soft impact. Yet, it is very important; as Pollan points out, the last bastion of an immigrant's cultural assimilation is the pantry (Pollan, 2007: 1). And there is one image of food preference I cannot shake: today a malnourished Somali child in Dabaab, Kenya, will line up to eat a bowl of porridge or rice made possible by the Green Revolution. What does this situation owe to our own preferences for cheap, resource-hungry, highly processed food? Does our petroleum-soaked framework of technique-induced convenience play some role in this misery? After all, consumers in Europe and North America waste an estimated 95-115 kg/year per capita, compared to 6-11 kg/year in Sub-Saharan Africa and South/Southeast Asia (Gustavsson *et al.*, 2011). When we think about such a situation outside of its hard impacts (calorie and carbohydrate count, number of lives saved, etc.), such soft impacts can track, or perhaps illustrate, the way we experience and understand the world. These impacts are part of the way a world is uncovered, or made explicit, as Martin Heidegger would say (although the language of impacts is not his). And this is why a discussion of Heidegger is appropriate in this forum: Heidegger gives us a cogent view of the essence of technology without focusing on techniques themselves.

Martin Heidegger and *poiēsis*

Now, I grant that Heidegger was not overly interested in culture or society. And in a sense, Heidegger is the last person one would normally want to drag into a conversation about food. Alexandre Koyré was the first to note that Dasein (which, to oversimplify, is Heidegger's characteristic name for the human being) does not eat: '*M. Heidegger semble vouloir éviter le biologisme à tout prix: son Dasein parle et agit, en revanche il ne mange pas*' (Koyré, 1981: 229). Koyré holds that Heidegger, in his attempt to develop his fundamental ontology, strove to leave any biological determinations behind. Fernando Belo draws a telling lesson here: '*Le Dasein ne mange pas, c'est le propre des animaux, sans doute. En pourtant, là n'est pas la racine de tout souci*?' (Belo, 2007: 462). In excluding eating, Heidegger paradoxically removes the ground of care [*Sorge*] that *Being and Time* took as its centerpiece. Moreover, that great critic of Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, instituted the concept of *jouissance*, construed precisely as the enjoyment of food and drink, because he understood that the subject needs to be satiated in order to be ethically responsible (Levinas, 1991:136), a lesson Aristotle taught over 2000 years earlier.

Moreover, there is the little matter of Heidegger's controversial foray into our current topic in his Bremen lectures of 1949 on technology: 'Agriculture is now a motorized food industry, the same thing in its essence as the production of corpses in the gas chambers and the extermination camps, the same thing as blockades and the reduction of countries to famine, the same thing as the manufacture of hydrogen bombs' (Safranski, 1998: 414). Not surprisingly, these words have led to a whole spectrum of response, from outright condemnation to abject apologies. Leaving aside the extremes, Safranski argues that Heidegger saw Auschwitz as the culmination of 20th century technology; Lacoue-Labarthe agrees with Safranski that Heidegger is aghast that such a crime has become mechanized, but argues that his words are 'scandalously insufficient' (Lyotard, 1990 85). Unsurprisingly, Heidegger's enemies have seized on them to hound him for his political decisions in the mid 1930s, and his now infamous post-war anti-Humanistic stance. After all, this is a man who once praised the Nazi Party for its 'inner truth and greatness' *precisely* because he saw it as the answer to 'the encounter of global technology and modern humanity' (Heidegger, 2000: 213).

So, it is with some trepidation that I bring Heidegger up. The typical view of Heidegger's critique of technology says that technology has become autonomous and therefore threatening since it dictates human actions, instead of the other way around, a process that 'has gone beyond any possible repeal' (Winner, 1989: 14). David M. Kaplan notes that 'this critique of technology was crystallized in the 1940s and 1960s, in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb' (Kaplan, 2011: 227) and numbers Jacques Ellul, Herbert Marcuse, and Jaspers along with Heidegger. In sum, technology is an out-of-control, anti-human force threatening society as we know it, and its genesis is located in the fear of what Ernst Jünger called 'total mobilization,' i.e. the complete array of politics, economy, and industry into a national war effort (Jünger, 1993). In isolation, many of Heidegger's comments on technology do bear this interpretation, especially those found in his famous interview with *Der Spiegel*, which is tellingly, and almost pathetically, entitled 'Only a God Can Save Us.' Such a dire view of technology, and of food technology, is rightly excoriated. If it were truly representational of the thoughts of Ellul, Marcuse, Jaspers, and Heidegger (*inter alia*), then these seminal minds would be but Luddites or mid-20th century non-confessional Mennonites.

Nevertheless, these are all subtle thinkers, and I maintain that Heidegger's views on technology remain instructive when restricted to the area of metaphysics. I am thinking of his view of technology as essentially revealing – for him, technology reveals or unveils or presents some reality in its own characteristic manner. When we strip away all the possible luddite interpretations of his critique of technology, Heidegger in essence argues that technology has evolved from simple unveiling akin to art to a new kind of concealment that hides its original essence and instead reduces artifacts to *partes extra partes* composed though omnipotent efficient causality. This is what Heidegger calls the 'enframing,' which he takes to be the essence of technology in which 'the actual everywhere, more or less, becomes standing-reserve' (Heidegger, 1993: 329). The enframing is simply the framework in which technology currently operates, reducing everything to resources to be used efficiently, and more importantly, blinding us to any other way of seeing the world. This is a metaphysical claim – a claim arguing for a certain structuring of reality (to put it crudely). In this view, the technological artifact is merely the composite of ready-to-hand reserves. When we talk about food as a commodity, then we are talking about food in this way. This type of talk – the commoditization of food – inscribes food within the ambit of efficiency understood as convenience, and far removes it from any idea of what Thomas Aquinas called *conveniens*, or fittingness.

For Heidegger, in its origin as unveiling, technology is connected with *poiēsis* – making, crafting: 'there was a time when the bringing forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. The *poiēsis* of the fine arts was also called *technē*' (Heidegger, 1993: 339). In this sense, as Heidegger says, technology is indistinguishable from art and artisanship – artisans bring forth meaningful artifacts. Heidegger is

thus arguing that technology is essentially nothing technological, understood as a complex of efficient techniques, but is instead essentially connected with the human as the being p

Food as *poiēsis*

Since technology can be seen as creative and purrojecting meaning in creative acts. Only when technology becomes conceived as technological – only when the enframing overtakes the disclosing capacity of *poiēsis*, does it begin to conceal. And this is precisely why we refer to – and often prefer – products such as 'craft beer' or 'artisanal cheese'; there is something beyond technique here. I'll gladly go along with considering food as *technē*, but *technē* understood as *poiēsis*, as a creative projection. Aristotle too saw *poiēsis* as goal-direct creation, in the sense of a shipbuilder crafting something that will float for some purpose standing outside of the technology used to create it; the technique is subordinate to an external end. Food fits this paradigm; it, as food, needs to escape the technique. Food is a meaningful artifact. Food structures our existence. Food is a mix of nature and craft that as a result is fitting for a person, a fittingness we can measure in the health of both the individual and the culture. Food is thus not *essentially* technological and *possibly* artistic, but is fundamentally poetic. Understanding food as a *poiēsis* – an uncovering of a world – clearly brings into relief a meaning of the food apart from the technique. Food is not just or even primarily edible technology.

Food as technology assigns no meaning to food beyond technology. But it is precisely the other senses of food that contemporary food producers often dismiss which provide such content: religious, nutrition, communal, comfort, etc. If the meaning of food is technology, then technology truly threatens to become the autonomous pursuit of efficient causality, which would require humans to adapt to it. And in countries adopting the convenient North American diet of convenience food, we are seeing specific results: an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, (Popkin, 2001; Popkin and Doak, 1998), and escalating health costs (Withrow and Alter, 2011), all greatly enhanced by the mountain of Heidegger's ready-to-hand reserves, which in turn are made possible by the technologization of food. Lacking the check that religion, tradition, and society bring to food, our comportment to it becomes significantly altered. Is it mere coincidence that America even has a profession competitive eating league – Major League Eating?

Let me put this otherwise. The other senses of food say 'why' about food; technology just says 'how' or 'what.' And of course, if 'how' is the only or most important issue about food, then philosophy will always be secondary or soft, but only in a pejorative sense. Thus, it would be hard to discuss technology without moralizing. So food would remain simply edible technology: the process identical to the result. 'Why,' meaning, always points beyond. 'What,' or how, is always imminent. And since we start with 'how' and end with technology, I do not feel any closer to having grasped the proper nature of food. The car is no different from the bagel, with the caveat that I not eat the car. But no given thing can mean everything; every given thing limits the possible meanings that can be projected upon it. Despite technology, not everything edible is food. Thus not everything is fitting even if it is technologically possible. Food demands fittingness, *conveniens,* which we tacitly understand whenever we associate certain foods with certain activities, holidays, or even health.

Families gather in order to feast. Religious traditions have always incorporated food. We call friends com***pan***ions (bread: *panis*). All these things project far beyond technology. For food sustains us – whether spiritually, somatically, communally, or at the hearth (I do not come close to exhausting the meanings here). True sustenance is sustenance precisely insofar as it institutes a difference, which is to say a meaning. For: although humans need food, we don't feed. At our best, we dine; normally, we just eat. But both of these are differences. Dining is a feast – a sacred event, cut off from the normal order as the *templum* is from the *saeculum* – to borrow from Heidegger's analysis of religious versus secular

architecture. And simple eating is always inscribed within some system of meaning which removes eating from mere feeding. What, when, how, and with whom we eat is always significant – because these indicate *why* we eat. Eating food, which is meaningful, is not feeding, which is not meaningful. Calling food edible technology does not capture this.

In short, I fail to see how, if food is simply edible technology, we avoid construing ourselves exclusively as *homo mechanicus*, or simply as machines (as Descartes sometimes seemed to think). After all, as Feuerbach famously quipped, *der Mensch ist was er isst* (Feuerbach, 1990: 27). Thus, beyond just *structuring* our existence, food *is* our existence. Food is different from a technological product because we literally *become* what we eat. And since it is what we become, or what we *fear* we will become, we develop cultural, religious, and personal food taboos. These can only make sense if we implicitly understand food as *poiēsis*, because the creative crafting of food is also the creative crafting of the human person. Food as *poiēsis* then permits us insights into *homo sacer*, or simply *homo communalis* (the *zōon politikon* of Aristotle), without denying our uniqueness as *homo faber*.

For, when something is simply considered as a product, it is only considered in its composition, something merely put together. It is a sum of its parts, which is the essence of technology and substitutability. This is how food scientists can put together a meal, largely comprising corn and soya extracts, that looks like 'real food,' and can even include actual nutrients through technological tinkering. This is how McDonalds can create the 'McRib' sandwich imitating a rack of ribs, whose 'bones' are in fact edible. Thoroughly fungible commodities are in turn composed of more and more highly processed fungible commodities, with each process adding to the profitability of the commodity.

Such technological food summons up images of *res extensa* being marshaled in the most efficient and profitable manner, giving us the illusion that we are in control of food. In his essay 'Ornament und Verbrechung,' Adolf Loos at the beginning of the 20th century praised this mass production precisely as the technological liberation from craft, on the grounds that craft focuses on ornamentation and wastes both natural and human resources (Loos, 1931: 83). Such decrying of craft sounds strange now. Again – think of craft beer and artisanal cheese: the very technology that goes into making these is not concerned alone with the efficiencies and scales that technology per se offers, but emphasizes product quality in place of quantity, and craftsmanship in place of mass production. Think about the glories of unpasteurized cheese – dangerous, an omnivore's dilemma, but trusted by many cultures in the hands of the master craftsman. Would Kraft make unpasteurized cheese?

We don't describe a painting as merely put together. Although no one would deny technique in a painting, few would reduce the painting to such – despite Warhol and his factory. We describe it as a whole, or we describe what its parts say about the whole. Our concern is not with its technological production (the making of the paints, the brushes, the stretching of the canvas, the building of the frame, etc.), but its creation: which is to say: what does it *mean*? And if it is a painstakingly clever counterfeit, once we realize this, we reject it, or simply admire in the technical skill of the counterfeiter. How would something more important like food be any different? Food like a real painting is a whole, related to our health, which is never merely somatic. Food as art or *poiēsis* brings us back to a human scale, obviating or at least themetizing the dehumanizing aspects of technology (speed, efficiency, soullessness) and emphasizing the fitting aspects of human technical creativity (ingeniousness, aesthetics, meaning). And importantly, food as *poiēsis* gets around a lacuna in technology, which does not capture that link between life and death, food and health, being and nothingness that is at the heart of food. The farmer, the chef, the butcher, and the mindful eater are all aware of their responsibility in the face of food, their connection with life and death. Expiation and ritual have long surrounded food, from slaughter to grace. Pagan priests used to butcher animals, just as various religious traditions to this day demand a religious authority at slaughter.

What I am saying is that technology only describes the 'what' of food as a 'how.' Not until we understand the 'why' of food can philosophy begin to address the hard and soft impacts. And then perhaps we might recognize that soft impacts are of equal importance as hard impacts. To see food only as an efficient product is to remain within the framework that encourages convenience food and paradoxically waste – and then to claim that technology is needed to solve world hunger. Perhaps if we did not see the continuum from the field to the plate as one of technical processing alone, but rather as processing befitting meaningfulness, then efficiency could become an issue itself. This would give us a better platform for philosophically viewing hard impacts, avoiding the easy answer of technological tinkering, which itself simply introduces another chain of technological considerations, hard impacts with a further knock-on effect upon human life. And this implies that the philosophical problems of food go well beyond what the FAO may see as the technical-political matter of food. Food may require technological processing, but it must be fitting, above all.

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