



Introduction: Understanding Hunger

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1 Hunger and the Philosophy of Food

The philosophy of food is by now a relatively well-established area of research, with ramifications in branches such as ethics (Chignell et al. 2016; Thompson 2015; Sandler 2014; Barnhill et al. 2012), aesthetics (Todd 2010; Scruton 2009; Smith 2006; Korsmeyer 1999; Telfer 1996), philosophy of mind and epistemology (Barwich 2020), science and politics (Scrinis 2013), metaphysics and ontology (Borghini and Engisch 2021; Borghini and Piras 2020; Borghini 2015); it also convenes philosophers that identify themselves with different schools and methods (for some essays of such variety, see Kaplan 2012 as well as Curtin and Heldke 1992). Nonetheless, it is a widespread prejudice to think that issues pertaining to food and philosophy regard the food itself—e.g., what food we ought or ought not to eat under given circumstances, the aesthetic properties of food, the moral and cultural values linked to food, how to improve extant food systems, and so on.

The list of topics that have so far been neglected includes the varieties of volitional states associated with the concept of hunger, broadly understood (see Borghini 2017). Hunger has come under closer scrutiny in other fields of scholarship, most notably in history (Williams 2020, Tucker 2007, Russell 2005, Vernon 2007), psychology (e.g., Rappoport 2003), studies of science and culture (e.g., Dmitriev et al. 2019). As for philosophy, there are more or less recent notable examples of studies concerned with specific aspects of hunger, such as eating disorders (e.g., Giordano 2005) or famine (Pogge 2016; O'Neill 1980); and there are some philosophical studies on the existential meaningfulness of consuming

foods (e.g., Leder 1990). Nonetheless, the bounty of issues that hunger may elicit have hitherto been only skimmed superficially: is hunger best understood as a form of pain? Is it a complex desire? Or is it a biological condition? Is there a fundamental distinction between hunger and appetite? In what ways the conceptual study of hunger impinges over our understanding of topics such as eating disorders and obesity?

This special issue was put together to start covering the scholarship gap on hunger in the philosophical arena. Its idea originated from two workshops organised by Andrea Borghini and Davide Serpico at the University of Milan in the Fall of 2018, respectively titled “The Depths of Hunger” (October 12, 2018) and “Measuring Hunger” (November 16, 2018). The goal of the workshops and, then, of the issue is to focus on conceptual aspects of hunger that are theoretical in nature and that bear significant value-laden consequences. The approach brings together different philosophical perspectives and methods as well as some scholars from another discipline (i.e., psychology, with the paper by Beaulieu and Blundell) that accepted the challenge to write for a philosophical audience.

To introduce the issue, we shall now offer an overview of the philosophical questions that pertain to hunger, to then present the papers here collected.

2 Hunger: Philosophical Questions

The papers contained in this issue bear witness to the wide array of themes that pertain to a philosophical study of hunger. Before delving into the details of the papers, however, it is worthy to take a step back and depict a broader picture of the topics that philosophers can peruse when it comes to hunger (see also Borghini 2017 on this). In this section, we suggest three areas of research where philosophers can provide meaningful contributions.

- (1) The concept of hunger is central to frame philosophical questions pertaining to the ethics and politics of malnutrition, undernutrition, and famine. The latter, in

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fact, are correlated to specific conditions where agents cannot suitably satisfy their volitional states regarding food—for instance, the agent cannot procure enough food for themselves or is surrounded by too much food; or, contrary to their preferences, the agent’s diet is lacking or is too abundant in specific nutrients. The connection between hunger and these other concepts is, nonetheless, far from being clearly established in the literature. Philosophers can offer much in this area, starting from a conceptual analysis of hunger and of its ties to the other concepts (see Borghini 2017).

- (2) Hunger can be approached, from an existential point of view, as a defining aspect of the human condition. In other words, hunger, understood in a broad sense, is a primary mode of being. We are born hungry. We have been hungry well longer than we can remember being alive and well before gaining self-consciousness of our own pleasures. Each human, *qua* human, is endowed with an array of physiological and psychological states correlated with the act of eating (as discussed by Beaulieu and Blundell in their essay included in this issue); the satisfaction of hunger is one of the most complex and important ecological relationships in which we partake. Through this lens, hunger raises little-explored philosophical difficulties: What sort of state is hunger—e.g., is it a perception, an emotion, a mood, none of these or all of these? What is the relationship between hunger, desire, and pleasure? Ombrato and Phillips as well as Kaplan, in the essays contributed to this issue, advance our understanding of these questions. Also, the essay by Dean included in this issue offers a much needed analysis of the positive values of mindless eating.
- (3) Finally, an appreciation of the complex facets of hunger is relevant in high-end gastronomy and can make a difference to the aesthetic value of a dining experience. Following Borghini (2017), we can envisage two avenues for research here. The first is related to the constitutive role of hunger in defining specific gastronomic attitudes and perspectives (see Shapin 1998 for some examples), and specific schools and movements, such as Nouvelle cuisine. The second avenue sustains those approaches to taste that purport to go beyond what merely happens in the mouth of a diner, rather insisting that hunger is a key ingredient in providing a gastronomic experience with aesthetic worth. In fact, Bacchini’s paper in this issue delves into these issues.

To these three areas of research, others may be added. For instance, as the papers by Amoretti and Giordano in this issue demonstrate, reflecting on hunger is key to enhance our understanding of eating disorders. Also, to offer another example, a more nuanced conception of hunger could be put

at use in devising appropriate strategies for tackling issues such as obesity, as suggested by Serpico and Borghini also in this issue. While we cannot peruse and develop all these suggestions for further research, we hope these remarks can convince the reader of their fruitfulness and importance.

3 The Issue

This special issue was put together with the conviction that the conceptual subtleties of hunger cannot solely be investigated by a specific category of philosophers (e.g., philosophers of emotion or philosophers of action), but rather require the concerted effort of several philosophical sub-disciplines as well as the contribution and validation of scholars that approach the topic from other disciplinary perspectives.

The eight papers that compose the issue highlight the complexity of the philosophical questions linked to hunger and may be grouped under two main clusters. The first cluster digs into the varieties of experiential states correlated with hunger and aims to uncover theoretical assumptions underpinning ethical, political, and aesthetic conceptions of hunger. We can include here the papers by Dean, Ombrato and Phillips, Kaplan, Bacchini, and Giordano. The second cluster examines different approaches to the measurement of hunger, with the goal of uncovering chief theoretical assumptions that bear important ethical and political consequences. Here we can include the papers by Amoretti, Beaulieu and Blundell, Giordano, and Serpico and Borghini.

More specifically, in “In Defense of Mindless Eating,” Megan A. Dean makes the case for mindless eating against a widespread opinion—most famously defended by Brian Wansink—according to which mindless eating is always a bad way of eating. Building upon Maureen Sie’s account of agency, Dean convincingly shows that some forms of mindless eating ought to be regarded positively because they constitute “a non-conscious but agential response to situational normative cues.” Dean’s paper opens up new avenues of interpretation and research over a form of eating that is quotidian and ultimately unavoidable for human beings.

The links between hunger and agency are investigated also by Michele Davide Ombrato and Edgar Phillips in “The Mind of the Hungry Agent: Hunger, Affect, and Appetite.” In their paper, Ombrato and Phillips discuss the fundamental conceptual framework that may be needed to properly explain the behaviour of hungry agents. To do so, they begin by asking what sort of condition hunger is, suggesting that it is a complex state bearing both hedonic and somatic aspects, with the power of affecting an agent’s attention. A key feature of hunger seems to be its likeness to the states that we label as needs: hunger triggers an aversive affective reaction, which motivates an agent to seek out ways to accommodate it by, for instance,

consuming some (possibly specific) food. At the same time, Ombrato and Phillips suggest that hunger is also linked to positive affective reactions, including interest and appetite.

In “Hunger Hermeneutics,” David M. Kaplan adopts a different methodology to inquire how hunger affects our agency, which is more rooted in the phenomenological tradition. Kaplan’s initial focus is on the lack of knowledge that typically accompanies individual agency when it comes to hunger. Such lack may be primarily attributed to the influences of our bodies, of unconscious desires, and of society over our representations of our hunger states. And yet—Kaplan suggests—hunger also displays some peculiar forms of certainty that is provided by internal influences: our internal senses suggest us when to stop eating and when to seek out more food, and taste of course guides us in the quest for food. It is thus in the dialectic between the wide range of internal sources of information versus those that are regarded as “external” that we can try to make sense of the peculiar agentive state characteristic of hunger.

With the paper by Fabio Bacchini “Hunger as a Constitutive Property of a Culinary Work” we move into a different terrain, which connects our understanding of hunger to the appreciation of the aesthetic value of certain culinary experiences. Bacchini contends that, in some instances, a certain degree of hunger is a constitutive property of a culinary work. That is, in some instances a cook poses as a necessary condition for experiencing their work that the diner possesses a certain degree of hunger. Bacchini’s piece shows in what ways specific conceptions of hunger are linked to culinary works, making an original contribution to the debate on the aesthetic value of dining experiences.

Another important essay of the link between conceptual and value-laden issues when it comes to hunger is offered by Simona Giordano’s “Secret Hunger: The Case of Anorexia Nervosa.” In her paper, Giordano studies the coercive treatment for anorexia nervosa. On the one hand, such treatment is sometimes the only way to prevent death, while on the other hand such practice stands as a concerning form of bodily intrusion, violating even those stated wishes of patients that are intelligently and uncontroversially stated. In fact—Giordano argues—the exceptional circumstances that affect agents with anorexia nervosa do call for the proposal of alternative ethical principles of decision-making, which evade those standardly adopted in other spheres of agency. In order to develop her proposal, Giordano surveys cases that appeared before the courts of England and Wales and in the US between 2012 and 2016, offering a conceptual analysis of concepts such as capacity, best interests, and futility, which are crucially employed in court setting. Giordano’s research, thus, offers a concrete precedent of how the conceptual work provided by philosophers may be of use in delicate legal settings and may also serve society at large to

adequately confront eating behaviours such as those characteristically associated to anorexia nervosa.

Giordano’s paper also serves as a link between the two clusters of papers within the issue, as it underscores the crucial role played by health sciences and health experts in forming the conceptions of hunger at play in contemporary societies. In “Do Feeding and Eating Disorders Fit the General Definition of Mental Disorder?,” Maria Cristina Amoretti faces straight up the question of whether feeding and eating disorders should be classified as mental disorders, given the extant definitions employed by health practitioners. Amoretti’s starting point is the definition of mental disorder provided in the Introduction of DSM-5. Such definition sees a disorder as a dysfunction associated with distress and disability. Hence, Amoretti suggests, in order to find out whether eating disorders are mental disorders, we should study, first, in what ways they may be accompanied by dysfunctions and, second, whether they are associated with significant harm. With respect to the latter, Amoretti unpacks the general notions of distress and disability that accompany eating disorders. With respect to whom, by whom, and how should such notions be employed? And what role does the harm requirement play in diagnoses of eating disorders?

The next paper within the issue is contributed by psychology researchers, who landed themselves to the challenge of presenting their ideas within the context of a philosophy journal. In “The Psychobiology of Hunger—A Scientific Perspective,” Kristine Beaulieu and John Blundell offer a psychobiological framework for hunger, which sees it as a ‘need state’ mediating between biological and environmental factors. Hunger—they explain—is a conscious sensation that we learn to distinguish from other conscious states such as pain, fear, and tiredness. Such sensation can be objectively measured and marks underlying, biological conditions. In fact, they use empirical studies to show that hunger is clearly associated with biological signals, in particular it is rooted in the relationship between energy expenditure and energy intake, and reflects the degree of a person’s physical activity. And yet, an explanation of the conscious state of hunger requires also the consideration of environmental influences, which modulate its intensity and periodicity, as well as cultural factors, which shape the appropriateness of its expression. Ultimately, Beaulieu and Blundell suggest that the control of the intensity of hunger may be achieved by better understanding the biological and the environmental factors that influence it.

Finally, in “From Obesity to Energy Metabolism: Ontological Perspectives on the Metrics of Human Bodies,” Davide Serpico and Andrea Borghini put forward a principled characterisation of the biological status of obesity, inspired by the comparison of obesity-related traits with other phenotypic traits such as Mendelian diseases, IQ, and human stature. The paper first discusses how the

contemporary study of the genetics and development of obesity makes use of a plurality of methodological and theoretical approaches. Methodologies can involve genome-wide association and heritability studies, widely adopted in quantitative genetics, or Mendelian methods such as the candidate-gene approach, or molecular explanations. From a theoretical perspective, instead, researchers can differently conceptualise and operationalise obesity-related traits depending on the aims of their research. By highlighting the plurality of current scientific understandings of obesity, Serpico and Borghini suggest that classifications of humans into obese and non-obese are a delicate affair. Their suggestion is to employ conceptual resources of developmental biology and epigenetics to rethink obesity in a framework that is specific to the development of individual agents and that is sensitive to the temporal potentialities of bodily transformations.

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