

# Shaping the context and content of food choices

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## **Abstract:**

Food choices have great impact on our health and on our planet. However, while comprehensive regulation is in place to avoid direct poisoning of either ourselves or our environment, we have done little to combat more indirect and long-term harms. I propose that one good reason for our passivity in this regard is that reasonable people differ in their preferences for both environmental preservation and good health, as weighed against the taste and the symbolic value of food. From a liberal perspective, respect for reasonable preference for unhealthy and eco-destructive food provides a strong reason against frustrating those preferences by prohibition or other heavy-handed regulation. However, if preferences are our concern we must note how choices depart from preferences and we must distinguish between preferences for different sorts of things. Because of cognitive limitations and biases, our preferences are not always satisfied by our choices. Furthermore, preferences are typically in internal conflict. Preferences over foods should be distinguished from preferences over choice contexts and over choice contents in the form of available alternatives. Design of choice contexts, as well as the context of preference formation, does not necessarily frustrate our food preferences, but may rather influence what food preferences we have. People may reasonably prefer that both choice contexts and choice contents be conducive to choices that satisfy their long-term preferences for health and environmental preservation.

**Keywords:** preference, health, long-term, short-term, environment

## ***Introduction***

The impact of food production and consumption on our health and on our planet makes food an urgent political issue. However, while we have few qualms about regulating food to avoid direct poisoning of either ourselves or our environment, regulation to avoid more indirect and long-term harms is highly controversial. In the following section, I will briefly describe the practical problem. In the section after, I will argue that respect for people's reasonable preferences warrants caution in addressing the problem. In the remaining sections, I will argue that there are several preference-based reasons for nonetheless shaping the context and content of food choices and so address the problem. Throughout, I presume a liberal perspective that ascribes great importance to people's preferences for how their own lives turn out.

## ***Background – What is the problem?***

What we eat affects our health. For example, a large recent global comparative risk assessment study attributes 254 million DALYs annually, including 12,5 million deaths, to dietary risk factors and physical inactivity, with diets the more important factor (A DALY is a Disease-Adjusted Life Year, which is way of measuring loss of quality of life; the same DALY or death can be attributable to more than one risk factor). These

numbers are for 25+ year olds and so do not include childhood undernutrition. The study is one of the original outcomes of the Global Burden of Disease Study of 2010 (Lim *et al.* 2013; for an overview over the study and some controversy surrounding it, see Cohen 2012).

The two largest individual dietary risk factors cited in the study are a diet low in fruits and a diet high in sodium. These individual risk factors, as well as a diet low in nuts and seeds, a diet low in whole grains, a diet low in vegetables, and a diet low in seafood omega-3 fatty acids, all rank higher than for example drug use, occupational injury and sanitation. The trend, moreover, is towards greater importance of diets relative to other risk factors. (Lim *et al.* 2013)

While foodborne illness is an immense health problem, especially for children and especially in developing countries, the global negative health effects of poor diets are arguably greater than those of contaminated food. This relationship is naturally much stronger in developed countries. Moreover, foodborne illness is mainly transmitted by meat and poultry. In fact, 75% of all new infectious diseases start in animals and animal products, mostly during food production (World Health Organization). This makes a non-vegetarian diet a major risk factor for both dietary risks and food safety risks. This background factor is not considered in the risk assessment study just cited. The study does list as a more direct risk a diet high in processed meat, ranking it above for example sanitation and intimate partner violence.

Regarding the environmental effects of food, as of 2000 the livestock sector alone had contributed 18% of anthropogenic greenhouse gases and 63% of reactive nitrogen mobilization, and consumed 58% of directly used human-appropriated biomass. These numbers are very likely to grow. (Pelletier and Tyedmers 2010). While non-vegetarianism is the singularly greatest environmental problem, transportation, over-fertilization and waste are immense problems in their own right.

These massive health and environmental problems are largely the direct or more indirect result of consumer choice. Most people most of the time have ample opportunities to make food choices that are healthy and eco-friendly, rather than unhealthy and eco-destructive. To the extent that substantial opportunities for choice are lacking, they could in most cases be rather easily provided by improved city planning (such as to bring supermarkets to poor neighbourhoods where they are lacking).

That individual choices in the aggregate have very bad consequences seems on the face of it to call for political or other coordination. Why, then, have we not done more to address these problems? One reason, of course, is that large corporations in the food industry actively seek to prevent change towards more healthy and eco-friendly choices, because such choices are less profitable for them (Moodie *et al.* 2013). Profits are threatened also by regulation to prevent direct harms such as from food poisoning and concentrated and localized pollution. However, corporations have for the most part lost this battle and adjusted, at least in developed countries. The battle over indirect and long-term harms may have only begun. Corporations may also have had weaker reason to oppose regulation of direct and immediate harms, since people tend to respond more negatively to these obvious harms than to indirect and long-term ones, and so the former are a greater source of badwill, even when legal.

These and other historical contingencies partly explain why we regulate direct and short-term harm and not indirect and long-term. However, I propose that we also have some moral reason for not doing more about the massive harms of poor food

choices. I will explain this claim in the next section. I then go on to argue why, despite this reason, we ought to do more to shape and thereby change food choices.

### ***Why not regulate? – respecting reasonable preferences***

One obvious and important difference between food that causes food poisoning and food that causes diabetes or heart failure is that there is little demand for contaminate food, but massive demand for what I will call unhealthy food (food that tends to contribute to disease and poor health). Banning products is perhaps more acceptable when few people demand them in the first place. However, I propose that this cannot be the whole story. As liberals, we have reason to be concerned with individual liberty even when it is not much in demand. That only very few people prefer to walk backwards through the park or to honour some particular god is no reason to forbid these practices.

I propose that the reason for why we should hesitate to regulate unhealthy food more than contaminate food is that it is more reasonable to prefer unhealthy food. It is reasonable because consuming unhealthy food has valuable positive consequences. The most obvious such consequence is simply that it tastes good – that it is enjoyable or pleasant to eat. Moreover, that it tastes good is not just due to successful advertising but our bodies are hard-wired to appreciate fat and sweetness. Consumption of unhealthy food is also valuable because it has deep symbolic meaning, either in itself or as part of social and cultural practices.

In contrast, contaminate food does not taste good and only very rarely has symbolic meaning. This contrast between directly and indirectly harmful food may admittedly to some extent depend on the former not being predictably available. If contaminate food was sold in stores there would no doubt arise some new subculture somewhere where its consumption had symbolic meaning, perhaps even deep symbolic meaning. However, this does not change the fact that contaminate food now has little symbolic meaning. The status quo is morally relevant because it determines people's values and people's values are important.

Arguments for regulating the consumption of unhealthy food often compare the harms of poor diets to other harms, such as from transmittable disease. Such comparison is incomplete, however, if the benefits of unhealthy food are not considered. It is in the light of these benefits that it is reasonable to prefer the taste or the ease or the symbolic importance of consuming certain non-poisonous foods over the small gain in health or in environmental preservation of more healthy alternatives.

As for environmental destruction, even obvious and direct effects are typically diffused and so do not directly affect choosers. This makes it somewhat more reasonable to prefer the taste, ease and symbolic value of eco-destructive foods over more eco-friendly alternatives. To a large extent, this is a collective action problem. In many cases, only lack of coordination makes these preferences reasonable. It is arguably not reasonable for prawn eaters as a group to prefer king prawns, relative to for example sea shrimp, over the immediate preservation of large areas of mangrove forests. It may be reasonable, however, for a single prawn eater to prefer the relative goodness of prawns to shrimp over her own miniscule contribution to the destruction of such forests. That this is a collective action problem does not change the fact that preferences are reasonable in the current situation. It does mean that political action should be considered to solve the problem, but the situation is more complex than with products that are not even reasonably preferred.

Not all eco-destructive choices result from collective action problems. Indirect and long-term environmental effects may not obviously harm any particular person (partly because of the so called non-identity problem - people who come to exist only because of our destruction of the environment can hardly be said to be harmed by this destruction). Even when these effects do harm particular people, these people will not be identifiable at the time. It is reasonable both to hold that only effects on particular persons (and animals) are morally relevant, and that harms to identifiable people are much more important than harms to non-identifiable people (this is why we tend to spend more to save a single trapped miner by immediate action than to save one statistical future miner by improving safety generally). Because prawns are tasty and because exotic animal products are symbolic of refined taste or an adventurous spirit, these may reasonably be preferred by food consumers to the long-term preservation of biotopes or species.

This talk of reasonable and unreasonable preferences will strike some as illiberal. If actual markets interactions are the uniquely appropriate way to treat each other with respect, it would make little sense to call unreasonable some preferences revealed on markets (White 2010). Putting such reverence for markets to one side, we may consider whether distinguishing reasonable from unreasonable preferences is inappropriately perfectionist and so in violation of liberal neutrality. I propose that it is not, since the unreasonable preferences are unreasonable because they fail to properly appreciate *neutral* goods like health and environmental preservation (which is instrumental to economic development and physical safety).

Possible lingering controversy over the nature and status of allegedly unreasonable preferences should not detract from the point that some food choices, though unhealthy and eco-destructive, are reasonable and should therefore be respected. That these choices are reasonable does not mean that they are morally right or rationally required, it merely means that there is reasonable disagreement in a liberal society over the relative importance of the values advanced by these choices.

### ***Food choices and food preferences - lessons from behavioural science***

Respect for people's reasonable preference for unhealthy and eco-destructive food provides a strong reason against frustrating those preferences by prohibition or other heavy-handed regulation. However, if preferences are our concern, we must note how choices depart from preferences and we must distinguish between preferences for different sorts of things.

Behavioural science shows ever more clearly how the choices we make are heavily influenced by aspects of the choice context that are obviously irrelevant to the content of the choice (for an overview, see Kahneman 2011). Ego depletion, just to take one example, means that we are more prone to make unhealthy food choices if we have recently used self-control in some other area (Baumaister *et al.* 1998). Shopping after straining our will-power on work or exercise will typically make us shop more on impulse. Cognitive load too, to take another example, makes us more prone to choose on impulse, and so, as the authors of one study put it, when trying to remember something completely unrelated to shopping, "the consumer is more likely to choose the alternative that is superior on the affective dimension but inferior on the cognitive dimension (e.g., chocolate cake)". (Shiv and Fedorikhin 1999) It can hardly be maintained that we prefer chocolate to fruit when we try to remember a six digit number, but prefer fruit to chocolate when the number has only two digits (unless one

confuses choice and preference, on which see Hausman 2011, chapter 3). Food choices do not necessarily reveal food preferences.

Behavioural science also shows that our preferences are heavily influenced by various biases that we would not identify with on reflection. One example is the optimistic bias that makes us misjudge our relative health status:

Optimistic bias appears to be a fairly pervasive phenomenon when individuals consider their comparative chances of experiencing nutrition-related health problems and also when they assess their standing on nutrition-related risk factors (Miles and Scaife 2003, p. 5)

Because of this and other biases, our long-term preferences for avoiding health problems do not transfer into food preferences that can satisfy these long-term preferences.

Even without biases, our preference structures are quite complex, with long-term preferences for health conflicting with short-term preferences for pleasure or gratification. Oftentimes, we have both of these preferences, and none of our alternatives can satisfy both. Moreover, the long-term preference does not automatically organize the short-term preferences with which it conflicts. I may have a short-term preference to eat much chocolate every day, and a long-term preference to eat much chocolate only some days. It is not clear how these two levels of preferences should be squared. Should I eat chocolate today or not? In practice, our bias towards current pleasure and future (or past!) sacrifice makes the situation even more difficult.

### ***Preferences for choice context and choice content***

Given the discrepancy between preference and choice, we may reasonably have preferences over the choice contexts that, together with our preferences (and our beliefs), determine what we choose. Given the discrepancy between long-term and short-term preferences, we may reasonably have preferences over the contexts in which our short-term preferences are formed. Choice-determining and preference-forming contexts include public advertising, product displays in stores, and portrayal of products in mass-media (heavily influenced by public relations efforts by food producers). These are aspects of our living environment that we may prefer to have one way or another, and not for any other reason than that they affect what we prefer and what we choose.

The mentioned contexts are of course already heavily regulated and could of course be more heavily regulated, or just regulated differently. As always, good regulation must consider a host of complicated empirical factors, including compliance and unwanted side-effects. However, it is important to note that regulation need not conflict with the preferences or choices it is intended to affect. This is because these preferences are shaped in the regulated contexts and so are not prior to these contexts. A person may today prefer bottled water over tap water because of advertising, but if the advertising stops he may tomorrow prefer (inexpensive and eco-friendly) tap water over bottled.

Phenomena we most typically associate with choice context can also influence choice content. For example, seeing an ad prior to consuming food can affect the taste of that food, which is of course a central property of that alternative (Elder and Krishna 2011). If an ad causes unhealthy food to taste better, and this improvement in taste causes us to prefer the unhealthy food, we may reasonably, prior to seeing the ad, prefer

not to see it. Generally, to the extent that we can affect it, we typically prefer the content of our choices to be such that we form immediate and short-term preferences that are in harmony with our long-term preferences.

More obviously, choice content is affected by the addition or subtraction of alternatives from the alternative set. Even such more drastic shaping of our choices may not conflict with any of our preferences. Sometimes we prefer an unhealthy or eco-destructive option if it is available, but do not prefer it and do not miss it, if it is not available. Since our preferences are susceptible to changes in the alternative set in this way, we can by conscious restriction of the choice content change our choices without frustrating our preferences. Even if removing unhealthy options does frustrate our preferences at the time of choice, we may of course still prefer to have them removed, in order to satisfy our long-term preference for health and environmental preservation.

### ***Conclusion - shaping the context and content of food choice***

Preferences over foods should be distinguished from preferences over choice contexts and over choice contents in the form of available alternatives. People typically have long-term preferences for such things as good health, preserved biodiversity and limited climate change. Since these things are affected by food choices, people may prefer that both choice contexts and choice contents be conducive to choices that satisfy their long-term preferences.

A proactive approach to the design of the context and content of our food choices may help satisfy our long-term and most important preferences. Such design does not necessarily frustrate our food preferences, but may rather influence what food preferences we have and what choices we make. We can affect this design both as consumers and as citizens.

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