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Taboo the Taboos: The Ethics of Food Waste

Abstract

The following research examines the origins of food waste. A large number of foods is lost in the field, within the factory, and at the supermarket, with consumers most greatly contributing to this number. While middle and high class Americans habitually trash food, millions of low-income families still live in food-insufficient homes. The cause of food waste is long-existing food taboos. A prominent topic that the paper discusses is the ethics of dumpster diving—scavenging through trash to find edible, good quality food. However, dumpster diving requires people to withdraw taboos of disgust and contradicts Pinker’s code of Purity. Cosmetic blemishes on packages and produce also promote wasteful behavior, shown through Appiah’s Framing Effect, as people prefer “pretty” food as opposed to similar yet damaged ones. Our history shows an acceptance for things once rejected through Pinker’s Law of Conservation of Moralization. The same hope can be seen for food taboos. With support from research and backing from ethical theories, the paper explores food taboos and why they should be removed to reduce food waste.

More than once have we heard, “Eat your food! There are starving children in the world!” either directed towards us or someone with us. When the word “food waste” is brought up, the former scenario is one of the most common ones to come into mind—not finishing what is on our plate. However, the process of food waste is an intricate system starting from food’s harvest through its journey to multiple processing factories and finally to local supermarkets where it is made available to the consumer. And, unfortunately, food is lost in every step. Its arrival at the supermarket is not the end of food waste. When food does reach supermarket shelves, the rate of waste spirals up. While people have taken the initiative to reduce America’s food waste, the majority of Americans cannot come to terms with the unorthodox nature of dumpster diving, scouring trash for food, or overcome their fear for eating food past its expiration date. These long-lived food taboos seem ingrained into our mind and taste buds. It is a large ethical dilemma. The topic involves several of Steven Pinker’s ideas from his “The Moral Instinct” such as the Moral Codes, Moral Rationalization, and Conservation of Moralization. Also applicable is Kwame Appiah’s “The Case Against Intuition” that addresses the Framing Effect. Other pertinent theories

are the Tragedy of the Commons and Utilitarianism. With these ethical concerns taken into account, Americans should eliminate present day food taboos in order to reduce food waste.

In order to formally address food waste, we must pause at the food presented at the supermarket and rewind to its cultivation and harvest at the farm. Even at the start of food harvesting, there is a tremendous amount of food wasted. Linda S. Kantor, an agricultural economist for the USDA, writes, “Minimum quality standards for fresh produce...and consumer demand for blemish-free produce often result in the removal of safe and edible produce from the food marketing system...fruit and vegetable producers often harvest selectively, leaving small, misshapen, or otherwise blemished produce in the field” (4). Because consumers have such high standards for produce, farmers must meet these demands by removing “imperfect” fruits or vegetables. Here, we reach our first ethical dilemma: is this fair? For the middle-to-upper class consumer, it is a matter of “desert”: people must work for their money and should, therefore, have the right to choose how to spend their earnings. On the opposite end of fairness, we must consider “need”. Jonathan Bloom, author of American Wasteland, reports that long-term projects from 2008 comparing the number of acres planted to those harvested estimate, “that 9 percent of the commodity crops planted in the United States aren’t even harvested” (95). Is it fair for those with money to promote wasteful standards and demand to be presented with only “the best” produce while their fellow American goes hungry?

This “selective harvesting,” is shown in Parker Farms’ production of cucumbers. Parker, owner of the farm, explains to Bloom, “Cucumbers can be too curved, which hinders box packing and supermarket stacking” (93). Shape appears to be one standard that influences whether a fruit will make it out of the farm. Farmers choose uniformly shaped fruits and vegetables for packaging benefits. In this case, a farmer can lay more cucumbers if they are linearly shaped

rather than if all had different curves and twists. Using uniformly shaped produce makes for more efficient packaging. More efficient packaging means more produce per box. More produce means more money.

But, do oddly shaped vegetables mean lower quality produce? Not quite. Bloom goes on to say, “The majority of these sorting culls happen for purely superficial reasons. ‘I’d say 75 percent are edible. They’re fine cukes to eat and have the same nutrition, but there’s not much eye appeal to them,’ Parker told me” (93). Sadly, the produce considered inadequate for processing is still nutritionally sound. An apple with a brown spot will still provide the same vitamins, nutrients, and calories as a more marketable one. It is a sad, but all too real “Beauty and the Beast” case. Too quickly we judge the fruit by its peel before even biting into the apple. This also brings us to another ethical dilemma—the framing effect. Kwame Appiah explains, “People’s choices often depend on exactly how the options are framed, even when the descriptions are, rationally speaking, equivalent” (83). How something is presented makes a large impact on our decision. For example, with the cucumbers, although the rejected ones have the same nutritional value as those sold at supermarkets, their appearance is not up to par; the frame of an attractive looking vegetable is more likable, and therefore profitable, than a deficient one. What happens to aesthetically unappealing crops? Bloom provides a detailed explanation:

“Secondary and tertiary markets exist for many crops... As with apples, pears are among the lucky fruits, with four possible destinations, based on appearance: fresh market, cannery, baby food, and juice... With blemishes, they try to imagine gathering all of the blemishes into one spot. If that spot is smaller than a dime, it will go to the market. If not, the pear is headed to the cannery, on one condition: It has to split in half perfectly. If there isn’t symmetry...it’s off to the baby food or juice factory” (99).

As demonstrated, not all blemished fruit is wasted. However, it should be considered that produce used for baby food and juice often means wasted peels full of fiber and nutrients. Also, Bloom does not mention the number of crops that pass this test, so we have no base for how strict these examinations are. While there are second chances for apples and pears, some crops are not as lucky considering most supermarkets do not carry radish juice or avocado baby food. For the cucumbers previously mentioned, Bloom informs us that they are taken back to the field, dumped into the ground, and plowed back into the soil (94). During the sorting day (every four of five days during harvest), 15 to 20 tons of cucumbers are sorted. All the rejected cucumbers are collected at the “cull tower” ready to be dumped. Once again we turn to the question of Fairness and Framing Effect. Is it fair for the majority of grocery shoppers to dictate the produce market? Looking at the number of cucumbers wasted that could feed a large population, is it fair to be picky about the condition of produce we eat when a uniformly shaped apple contains the same nutritional value as a peculiarly shaped one?

Also worth mentioning is the role of machinery and the farmer. Equipment malfunction also contribute to food waste, as some machines are unable to differentiate unripe products from ripe ones (Kantor et al). Bloom adds, “Farmers’ decisions can also cause waste. The majority of on-farm squandering comes when crops simply aren’t harvested. This tends to happen when the price for that crop would be less than the cost of harvesting, processing, and transporting it” (109). These “walk-bys” promote wasteful behavior. By believing they are losing money instead of gaining, farmers will simply leave their crops, good and nutritious food, in the field. Fortunately, many farmers welcome gleaners to come pick unharvested crops from their field. Unfortunately, even with these gleaners, numerous crops will still go to waste.

The crops that do leave the farm make their way to the processing facilities. Food

handling, shipment, distribution, and processing, is done several times before the product reaches its final destination. Kantor acknowledges, “A typical food product is handled an average of 33 times before it is ever touched by a consumer in the supermarket” (4). Because many different people and machines handle the foods, they are susceptible to contamination very easily. The more food is handled, the more likely the food will be lost. Food must be stored and shipped at proper temperatures to avoid bacterial and microbial growth, deterioration, and mold formation. Whatever does not maintain its quality is thrown out as soon as it reaches the supermarket.

Food presented at supermarkets must be up to par as they are in direct contact with the consumer. In her case study of food waste in one New York county, Mary Griffin writes, “The availability of cheap food, particularly in industrialized nations, encourages overbuying and hoarding behaviors that result in waste” (69). Her statement relates to the Tragedy of the Commons—people will always take or, in this case, buy more than they need. Consequently, this leads to excess waste. By purchasing more than is actually needed, this leads to the downfall of all: consumers will create a demand for a product, the companies will meet these demands by producing more, and the unsold product at supermarkets will be thrown out, creating more waste. In response, supermarkets will decrease their level of waste with promotions such as “Buy 3, Get 1 Free!” The other day, I was at a “Super” Stop & Shop in North Brunswick. The first aisle, consisting of promotional items and sales, had large tomato sauce sold in jars, ten jars for ten dollars. While it seems like a bargain to the consumer, considering that most tomato sauces like Prego can cost up to five dollars for one jar, chances are that unless you use tomato sauce religiously or have a family resembling the Brady bunch, you will not need 10 jars of tomato sauce. These promotions further encourage hoarding behavior by tempting consumers to buy more than they need. The consumer mind prioritizes bargains, “getting the bang for your buck”,

over a frugal mindset. Several of the jars may go untouched straight from the shelf to the trash. (The tomato sauce I observed had a shelf life of approximately 12 months.)

Ferne Edwards, a researcher in consumption and waste, writes, “Much of the food the supermarkets discard is still edible, having been removed from shelves due to cosmetic blemishes, the finishing of product lines or due to it having reached its expiry date” (17). Although foods on supermarket shelves are still edible, they are removed because of appearance. Ironically, the packaging is what is thrown out after the product is consumed—it should not matter how a cookie box looks because the consumer ultimately wants the cookies. This is the same scenario as the dumping of the unattractive but still nutritious looking cucumber.

Cosmetic blemishes such as a small tear in the outer layer of a box or dent in a can does not necessarily mean the product inside is damaged or contaminated. My second year food science professor, who earned her Ph. D from M.I.T., once told us how she used to purchase dented cans while she attended college. The dented cans each cost several cents, very friendly on a college student’s wallet. I am happy to state that she is alive and well years later. People immediately associate dented cans with botulism. The bacteria that cause botulism, *Clostridium botulinum*, generate toxin-producing spores. If a can is contaminated, it will appear bloated because these spores will produce gas. Cans like these should be avoided and thrown out. While people should be wary about dented cans, if the can is not punctured or opened, the product is most likely fine and may have been dented because a person carelessly dropped it during transporting or shopping.

While food is lost at each step to its final arrival to the supermarket, studies show that the consumer and foodservice are the largest source of food loss. The food trashed by consumer and foodservice accounts for 91 billion pounds of food and 26% of the edible food available in 1995 (Kantor et al, 6). They go on to say that sadly a quarter of edible food thrown out comes from our

own refrigerators. Foodservice accounts for food loss by, “overpreparation of menu items, expanded menu choices, unexpected fluctuations in food sales due to sudden changes in the weather or other factors beyond the control of foodservice operators.” (Kantor et al, 7). While consumers enjoy that restaurant menus include a variety of choices, having too many different ingredients can be a direct source of food waste. The specific ingredients in unpopular items may go to waste if only few people are eating them. America’s portion sizes exceed those of Europe and Asia displayed in both the increase in obesity and food waste. The change in weather can also create a large demand or fall in sales of a certain food product. For example, hot weather may increase the demand for ice cream, explaining why many ice cream stores like Rita’s take a seasonal break and return in the spring, reducing the waste of cream, milk, and other ingredients. Some all-you-can-eat buffet style restaurants have imposed a “pay for what you don’t eat” penalty fee that can help control food waste especially in buffet-style restaurants where consumers will always take more than they can eat.

Similar food losses are present in American households: overpreparation, plate waste, and spoilage. According to Kantor et al., “...household waste is generally lower for frequently purchased staple items like bread, milk, and cereal, than for less frequently used specialty products such as sour cream, hot dog buns, or items bought on impulse...large quantities of single food items...account for the largest share of household food loss” (8). This is plausible because more frequently purchased items are those that are less likely to be wasted since they are common and can be eaten daily. Items purchased on occasion, however, are not used as often. When they are purchased, their use is limited. If consumers do not use them before the expiration, the food is likely to be thrown out. However, the more purchased items are also at risk of becoming food waste at retail shops: because there is such a high demand for common food like bread, overproducing bread and not selling it can cause food loss.

Expiration dates account for a sizeable majority of food loss by both supermarkets and consumers. The largely held belief that food past its expiration date is no longer good to eat is a common misunderstanding. According to a study held by the University of Oregon recorded by Kantor, “all households had difficulty interpreting package dating information, such as ‘sell-by’ dates or expiration codes” (8). Pinker mentions Authority, “following rules,” as a moral rule. However, the authority given to expiration codes has spiraled. Going against expiration dates has become a prominent American taboo. People have the false notion that the government makes strict guidelines for food dates for the welfare of the people. In actuality, their attitudes could not be more lax. An article from *Business Week* mentions that the Food & Drug Administration only requires an expiration date on infant formula, while the Agriculture Department only requires labeling of dates when poultry is packed at the farm. According to the USDA, products such as eggs are not federally required to carry expiration dates but may be state required.

Even if food has past its expiration, it is still edible and safe. The USDA’s website says, “‘Use-by dates’ usually refer to best quality and are not safety dates. But even if the date expires during home storage, a product should be safe, whole, and of good quality if handled properly and kept at 40°F or below.” For a more personal account, Bloom gives a description of his first day working at a supermarket: “I couldn’t ignore the obvious: These items were perfectly edible... I tossed 24 pounds of packaged watermelon, pineapple, and cantaloupe chunks that first morning. Most items would last about another week, and the veggie trays actually had a printed ‘enjoy-by’ date of four days past the ‘sell-by’ date, but store policy went by the latter (148). Bloom later mentions that they were not only edible but also delicious, as he later chose to eat the discarded items.

Many times, the package will not even be opened which is an important factor as to why something will go bad quickly. Exposing food to oxygen increases the rate at which it will decay. In describing bags containing pre-cut and pre-washed produce, Bloom writes, “So long as the bag is sealed, the decay is slowed by ‘Modified Atmosphere Packaging’ (MAP)—the bag is either vacuum sealed or mixed with oxygen, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, and/or nitrogen so that the ‘high-value produce’ inside will last longer than normally would.” (148). In order to combat the food waste caused by expiration dates and packaging failures, people have adapted a new style of finding food: dumpster diving.

One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. The phrase perfectly iterates the perspective of dumpster divers. Dumpster diving is the activity of recovering food and supplies from unwanted trash. Prior to their recognition, dumpster divers were most commonly those living on the street resorting to garbage because they had nothing to eat. Seen this way, divers would be stereotyped as lazy parasites, feeding off the secondhand goods of the working class. However, dumpster dining is not a savage or classless style for the parsimonious, but a clever and intricate system that challenges the ethics of large food production companies and people’s incessant habit to waste food. As mentioned, a majority of food is unopened and thrown out because it has passed its expiration date. Appiah’s Framing Effect applies here. When presented with an unopened box of crackers from my hunt at the garbage yesterday and the same box of crackers from my cabinet that expired a day ago, which would you be more likely to eat? Most people are likely to choose the second scenario. The framing or presentation of something greatly influences people’s perception. The first box of crackers was retrieved from supermarket garbage and thrown out because it had passed its expiration date. Although the box was unopened, simply “being” in the garbage creates the feeling that it is no longer pure. In reality, the quality of the two products are the same—both are past their expiration date so should taste the same.

Dumpster divers are able to look past the former illusion. By being insusceptible to the Framing Effect, they take full advantage of the supermarkets' wasteful behavior. Dumpster diving is done not only to reduce waste by companies but also to decrease demand for industrial practice. Targeting large supermarkets that carry more industrialized products, dumpster diving is a form of protest. By refusing to buy their products, companies lose money as unsold food is sent straight to the trash where divers can obtain them for free and avoid creating a demand for them. While some see dumpster diving as efficient and useful in decreasing food waste, others cannot look past its violation of the Pinker's moral code, Purity.

Pinker says "People everywhere...exalt purity, cleanliness, and sanctity while loathing defilement, contamination and carnality." Intuition leads people to reject the idea of eating garbage. Garbage is seen as unwanted and unusable. Reopening to eat what others intend to eliminate is taboo. Food thrown out is viewed as unclean and putrid and thought to cause illness. According to Haley Walker, a dumpster diver, divers have "the potential to acquire skin infections and full-body bacterial infection known as Sepsis...Tetanus...and Hepatitis A and C." While there are risks associated with dumpster diving, Walker mentions that none of her dumpster diving partners or mentors, who have been diving for several years, have ever gotten sick, showing that careful maneuvering and planning can prevent sickness.

Returning to the framing effect, it can be further implemented to determine whether people are repelled by dumpster diving for logical reasons or because they are lead by intuition. Appiah writes, "when our intuitions are guided by irrelevant factors, they can't be reliable guides" (85). Human intuition is greatly affected by stereotypes and taboos. If lead by intuition and moral rationalization, consumers are not making logical decisions that truly acknowledge the amount of edible food retrieved from garbage. Research by the USDA claims, "On average, each American

consumes about 3 pounds of food each day. If even 5 percent of the 96 billion pounds were recovered, that quantity would represent the equivalent of a day's food for each of 4 million people" (Kantor et al, 3). Because most people will still hesitate to eat food from the garbage, even though they are reassured that they are unlikely to become sick if they follow guidelines and that much of the food is nutritionally sound, it shows that people are guilty of moral rationalization. Moral rationalization, similar to intuition, is as Pinker writes, "They [people] begin with the conclusion, coughed up by an unconscious emotion, and then work backward to a plausible justification."

While people may see dumpster diving as unethical, we should consider another statement made by Pinker: "Our habit of moralizing problems, merging with intuitions of purity and contamination...can get in the way of doing the right thing." Pinker says that our intuition of purity often stops us from thinking logically, and therefore by implication doing good as dumpster divers' findings supply food for organizations such as "Food Not Bombs" (Edwards). By overcoming the instinctual disgust people have towards garbage, food wasted by consumers could feed approximately 49 million hungry people according to the USDA. This ties to the theory of Utilitarianism—the most good is done for the most number of people. By recycling food waste to provide for the hungry, America could feed millions of people. According to a study by Eikenberry and Smith, 11.5 million households were food insecure at some time during 2001 (187). Still, food is being wasted while millions go hungry.

Other people may worry about the legal implications associated with dumpster diving. The Fourth Amendment claims, "The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated..." (Archives). Garbage within the curtilage, the area surrounding the house, is under protection by the Fourth

Amendment, but garbage outside of it is fair game. Ronald B. Standler, a lawyer in Massachusetts, argues that people are required to place trash on the curb, outside the curtilage, for trash collection. He mentions the current law for trash is “(1) A person has no reasonable expectation of privacy for contents of garbage, and (2) a person has relinquished any property interest in garbage” (Standler). Because the US federal law implements this rule, dumpster divers have consent of authorities to search dumpsters for food. Some companies choose to lock their garbage, while others are more open and friendly, pointing out which bags will have food. As shown, dumpster diving breaks no legal law. But, all dumpster divers are expected to follow appropriate conduct such as cleaning after whatever mess they make and leaving premises at the store owner’s or police’s requests (Beiler). In order to better understand people’s disapproval for dumpster diving, we must evaluate taboos and the nature of disgust.

Still, it is evident that not all people embrace dumpster diving. Eating garbage is still seen as taboo. What is responsible for this and many existing taboos? According to Paul Rozin, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, disgust is guilty. Rozin writes “For the generalist species, who eat a wide variety of foods, the problem of finding potential food is often less demanding because there are so many sources. However, the identification of food is much more difficult because there are so many sources” (19). The statement relates to Michael Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, which says, “The blessing of the omnivore is that he can eat a great many different things in nature. The curse of the omnivore is that when it comes to figuring out which of those things are safe to eat, he’s pretty much on his own” (287). Forming taboos allows humans to draw boundaries on a previously unlimited range.

Rozin suggests that taboos rise from disgust, “the rejection-withdrawal response to bad tastes” (21). Disgust is an evolved feature meant to protect the human body from harm. Rozin’s four

forms of disgust, core, animal-origin, interpersonal contamination, and moral, all violate Pinker's moral code of Purity. Core disgust is "rejection based on the idea of what the food is and on its nature...revulsion of the prospect of incorporation of an offensive substance" (Rozin, 22). The saying "You are what you eat" acts as a motto of core disgust. Igor de Garine says, "Human beings have a tendency to believe that they symbolically become what they eat" (487). By consuming something impure, one becomes impure. For dumpster divers, eating garbage makes one garbage—physically because it may cause sickness and mentally because it can be seen as degrading. Core disgust is also directly linked to moral rationalization. People immediately reject eating placenta, the organ created to pass nutrients from mother's blood to the fetus. The placenta is known to be rich in chemicals that help balance hormones that cause postpartum depression (Freiss). Freiss, a journalist for *USA Today*, mentions that every mammal, except camels and seafaring mammals, ingests its placenta. However, most people cannot look past eating a human organ, especially something as intimate as one that links mother to child despite the placenta's advantageous nutritional value. Interpersonal disgust is elicited by contact with strangers and undesirables—a leading factor to why people are repelled by dumpster diving. When people picture dumpster diving, they may imagine it as eating the leftover half of someone's sandwich (someone who they do not know and can have multiple illnesses) or food bitten by someone else. This is a direct offense against Pinker's code of Purity. Rozin's last is moral disgust. Religious reasons for avoiding food can be put under the category of moral disgust since it is a social and community violation. As written, "Food is often central in religious systems...In Hindu religion, ritual purity is maintained by food offerings to the deities and the avoidance of foods that are polluted by virtue of their nature or their previous human contact" (Rozin, 20). Ethnicity, often linked to religion, also plays a role in determining what people eat. The *Anthropology of Food* acknowledges food avoidances. One is, "the size of the human group they encompass: a particular

individual, a kinship group, social groups according to various criteria, whole populations...” (de Garine, 488). Immigrant groups will retain part of their ethnic identity through food although they have been assimilated into a new culture. It could be questioned whether consuming only one’s ethnic food is falling into cultural taboo. For example having the mentality, “My ethnicity’s food is safe. I have been eating this kind of food ever since I was a child.” Pollan demonstrates this: “[C]uisines embody some of a culture’s accumulated wisdom about food.’ Often when one culture imports another’s food species without importing the associated cuisine, and its embodied wisdom, they make themselves sick” (296). The wariness towards other ethnicities’ foods can be a personal taboo based on fear rather than disgust because people are unwilling to eat something they do not know.

Is America improving in terms of eliminating food taboos? Yes and no. While first generation Americans still continue to eat their own ethnic cuisine, younger generations are increasingly exposed to a variety of different ethnic foods compared to their parent’s generation. Walking down a main street in New York, one can find Mexican, Ethiopian, Chinese, Italian, and more different ethnic foods. The popularity of these foods by different kinds of people shows that Americans have indeed decreased their suspicion in other culture’s food. We are more willing, and nonchalant about, eating what our parents may not have dared to put into their mouths. The slow disappearance of one taboo can give rise to another through an exchange system known as the Law of Conservation of Moralization. Going back to dented cans, most chain supermarkets in America no longer have this cheaper option of purchasing canned foods. The disappearance of this practice shows that the taboo of buying dented cans is fairly recent. The entrance of this new taboo shows the functioning of the Pinker’s Law of Conservation of Moralization—old behaviors must be removed from the moral column so new ones may be added. Pinker writes “In fact there

seems to be a Law of Conservation of Moralization, so that as old behaviors are taken out of the moralized column, new ones are added to it. Dozens of things that past generations treated as practical matters are now ethical battlegrounds.” Perhaps, it is time for dumpster diving to enter the list.

The research supports that food taboos should be eliminated to reduce food waste. While dumpster diving contradicts Pinker’s code of Purity, it is supported by Pinker’s moral rationalization as most people have a natural disgust response to eating garbage and will work backwards to justify their reaction: when committing moral rationalization, people allow their feelings and intuitions rather than logical concerns to determine their decisions. Ultimately, this can prevent people from helping those who need it most. Studies show that many items thrown out are done so because of expiration dates, packaging flaws, or discontinuation of lines, but are still nutritionally sound. Appiah’s Framing Effect also justifies dumpster diving as many packaged items found in garbage bins are still edible and good quality. Supported by Pinker’s Conservation of Moralization, the research also presents how previous taboos, like doggy-bags, are widely accepted and encouraged today, which gives hope for the unorthodox dumpster diving practice and the removal of other food taboos.

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