You are what you eat

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| I think the most profound statement I have ever heard was uttered by the ancient historian Herodotus (484 – 425 BC) when he remarked, “Custom is king.”  He made this remark in response to two observations. One is the response of the Greeks when they were asked how much money it would take for them to eat their fathers’ dead bodies. They responded no amount of money would make them do such a thing. Greeks cremated or buried the dead instead. | Custom is king.  —Herodotus (484 - 425 BC). *The Histories*. Circa 430 BC. |
| Then Herodotus asked the Callatiae tribe of India, who did eat their parents’ dead bodies, how much money it would take for them to cremate their fathers’ dead bodies. It is said the Indians cried aloud that one should not even speak of something so horrible.  Custom is indeed king. What you think of as right or wrong depends on one’s culture more than anything.  This fact is often given a pessimistic interpretation, as it implies that all morals are relative and thus there is no universal right or wrong. That is not exactly true, as the Golden Rule can be found in every culture I have have encountered.  Besides, this fact has an optimistic interpretation. It means that our system of morality can adjust to changes in the world. It means that water pollution which was of no concern a century ago can become a highly immoral act today, and that is indeed what has happened. It means that actions which emit a large carbon footprint can soon become unethical—almost as revolting as eating one’s dead parents.  Whatever challenges confront us in the future, our highly mobile moral system can help us overcome them. |  |
| One of the biggest changes in our food culture is our attitude towards livestock. In the 1980s animal rights activists were routinely mocked by a majority of people, but today the public has become so concerned about the animals comprising their food that big food corporations like *Nestle* are forcing the farmers it purchases meat, eggs, and dairy from, to enhance their animal welfare standards. |  |
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| The fact that “culture is king” means that our eating habits two decades ago can change in response to new information about health and nutrition. In a recent *National Geographic* article, author Ann Gibbons remarks … |  |
| “… there is no one ideal human diet. Aiello and Leonard say the real hallmark of being human isn’t our taste for meat but our ability to adapt to many habitats—and to be able to combine many different foods to create many healthy diets. Unfortunately the modern Western diet does not appear to be one of them.” | In other words, there is no one ideal human diet. Aiello and Leonard say the real hallmark of being human isn’t our taste for meat but our ability to adapt to many habitats—and to be able to combine many different foods to create many healthy diets. Unfortunately the modern Western diet does not appear to be one of them.  —Gibbons, Ann. September 2014. “The Evolution of Diet.” *National Geographic*. Page 52. |
| Now, our ability to alter what we eat may not be as fast as some would like, but information on the health consequences of our western diet does seem to have changed what we eat. |  |
| A recent article in the prestigious *American Journal of Agriculture Economics* has remarked that |  |
| “For the population as a whole, we find significant improvements across all levels of diet quality. Further, we find improvements for both low-income and higher-income individuals alike.” | “For the population as a whole, we find significant improvements across all levels of diet quality. Further, we find improvements for both low-income and higher-income individuals alike.”  —Beatty, Lin, and Smith. March 2014. “Is Diet Quality Improving? Distributional Changes in the United States, 19890-2008.” *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. 96(3):769-789. |
| This means that actions we take today to change food culture for the better may actually have a big impact. Although it is easy to depict those pushing us to change our eating habits as the “food police”, it could be that they push us into better eating habits, habits years from now you are glad you adopted. |  |
| And your eating habits are the most important factor in ensuring that your children will develop a healthy food culture. The food culture we bestow to our children actually begins before they are born. Scientists have shown that a child’s desirability to consume foods like carrots depends on whether the mother ate carrots while she was pregnant. |  |
| We have come a long way in our quest to understand modern agriculture, and we are soon at the point of departure. I have tried to help you understand the agriculture that exists today. How it got here. The controversies about it. The pros and cons of different practices. |  |
| Your job is to take this information and decide for yourself what is ethical and healthy food, and to not shy away from discussions or even arguments about food. It is your job to help make sure the food culture we adopt today is indeed good for health, animals, the environment, and human prosperity. |  |
| To emphasize the importance and flexibility of food culture, we will consider two articles titled *You are what you eat*. One considers food culture in world history and the other considers the roots of American food culture. |  |
| Hopefully, you will see that food culture can be shaped for good or for bad, and will be inspired to help ensure that the food culture existing fifty years from now is indeed healthy and ethical. |  |