

Varun Mandi

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“Ew, That’s Gross: How Disliking Food can be Racist”: Podcast Transcript

Good morning and welcome to this week’s episode of “Ew, That’s Gross”. In May of 2014, social activist Mark Dice took to Southern California beaches with a fabricated story on then Speaker of the House John Boehner, and one question:

(0:00 to 0:06 of “Not Liking Mexican Food is Racist”)

And the response was quite clear:

(0:06 to 0:17 of “Not Liking Mexican Food is Racist”)

Others vocalized similar opinions on how morally blameworthy Boehner is, based on what seems like just a preference against Mexican food:

(0:36 to 0:48 of “Not Liking Mexican Food is Racist”)

And what’s striking is that in analysis of this qualitative interview data, Dice and his team found that members of all races expressed such opinion on “problematic” views on food, with people of color furthermore contributing suggestions on how Boehner ought to be reprimanded. But in our modern frame of thought, what makes it problematic, let alone racist, to dislike or negatively comment on someone’s food? Even more broadly, why does what we do with food have racial implications, and is there some way we ought to behave around food so that we aren’t racists? Today, especially in cosmopolitan and globalized societies, there’s an increased presence of multiracial communities that in one sense are characterized by a diversity in people, but also by a diversity in the cuisines these people bring from their ancestral backgrounds. Yet it’s not just people from different races offering their respective foods that attributes some racial identity to

food, but it's ultimately how inextricably...racialized food has grown...to be functionally representative of racial kinds. Think: noodles and pho equal East Asian, curries equal South Asian, salsa and tamales equal Latino. Jenny Yang, known for her recent activism in the food scene, argues that these conceptualizations of food lead to "essentializing people" and races altogether (Ep:11 "Pho is the New Pho (with Jenny Yang)" Racist Sandwich Podcast). Philosopher Edouard Machery provides some psychological explanation for this, arguing that observing others' ethnic artifacts or ethnic markers – in our case food – leads to forming and preserving racial views of otherness (Faucher, Machery: "Social Construction and the Concept of Race," p. 1210-1211). The implication here is that insulting someone's food and traditions then just doesn't present as innocuous or at worst hurtful remarks on their ethnicity, but very much as racialized pejorative, aka, racism. And it's admittedly complex, how an ethnic or racial marker like food can drive how we socially construct race divisions like on Machery's view, but also how these markers can function to bear the brunt of racist insult. And to better understand the many relations at play here, we can construct an ontology, or a sort of framework of being that can better map out the relations and causes and effects between ethnicity, race, food, and racism.

(Start playing in background: "The Golden Age of the Xylophone")

And at the center of this map, imagine, is food. It's also relatively uncontroversial to understand things like food, language, and dress as representations and parts of ethnic identity. So we then draw a line from food to ethnicity in our map. Now on the other side of our map, keep imagining, we have race, and linked to that, is racism. But here's where we stop relying on the obvious, and need to make a leap or find some solid connection...between ethnicity and race.

(Stop playing in background: "The Golden Age of the Xylophone")

The point to be made here – in demonstrating how pejorative and microaggressions toward food can be racist – is that food, which we recognize as a racial marker, effectively serves as a proxy, or stand-in, for race members themselves. And this, is probably the most fundamental relation in our ontological “map”; understanding that food can stand in for a racial kind, and in light of this, serve as a conduit for racism. Indian-American Tuscon chef Kusuma Rao, who runs a Mexican-Indian fusion food truck shares a similar account:

(9:26 to 9:46 of “Pop-ups, Dudebros, and Mexican-Indian Fusion (With Kusuma Rao)”)

We’re also informed from Kusuma’s story that when people began to crack down on those making such overtly-racist comments, these aggressors turned to criticizing and mocking her food, motivated by the same malicious, racist intent, but through a less overtly-malicious channel. It’s to be noted that in this case, no one was really attacking the food because it “smells” or “looks weird,” but that these were racially-motivated attacks on Kusuma the Asian. And an argument can be made here by critics of the view that criticism of food is racist. One may argue that, yes, criticism of food *can* be used to channel racist attitudes, but that it needn’t always have some sort of racist implication. But on the more holistic and evidenced view that food is a proxy or substitution for a race member, we’re compelled to understand insulting in a sort of transitive way: insulting food is insulting a race because of the proxy-hood we discuss. But even beyond this more obvious defense, we can place this understanding – this piece of the puzzle, if you will – into our ontological map to better complete it, and understand why we’re actually compelled to perceive pejorative around food as racist. Back to our map: we start with an insult to food (or an insult to really any ethnic marker) “Oh my god that smells gross,” “why would you put that animal meat in there...that’s so like primitive”. And then we realize that this constitutes insult to

the ethnicity itself. And because ethnicity is inextricably tied to race (based on the psychological theories of essentialization and racialization that Jenny Yang and Edouard Machery inform us of), we now are dealing with pejorative insult to a race, better understood as racism. Thus far we've explored the individual relations between the components of our ontology; so this really comes with the final argument that if we are to accept the ontology as a whole, we are bound by an ontological commitment based on the relations of our model, to accept that insult of food is insult of race. And in a relevant way, this commitment and model shows us how intentionality -whether one meant to use food as a racist channel or not- doesn't play a role, given the transfer of insult laid out. Yet our ontology isn't by creation meant to serve just one agenda; it, just as well, helps us to understand how progress against racism can be facilitated by – you guessed it – food. Cosmopolitan philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that in multiracial societies, sharing ethnic markers like food can result in better ethnic understanding, and as an end result, better understanding and respect for races (Julian Brookes "Cosmopolitanism: How to Be a Citizen of the World," *Mother Jones*). Furthermore, there's a claim at play here that "cosmopolitanism [this sort of respectful global living and achievable via food] represents a deeper sense of political community and moral responsibility [of not being racist]." Other modern philosophers also partake in this view that supports this podcast's ontology. Daniel Kelly, Luc Faucher, and Edouard Machery all argue for a similar "Contact Hypothesis" that urges contact between races as the solution to racism, but on our and Appiah's view, also a contact with ethnic representations such as food (Kelly, Faucher, Machery, "Getting Rid of Racism: Assessing Three Proposals in Light of Psychological Evidence," p. 302-304). In our explorations through this podcast, we've also come to develop a more holistic conception of race

and what can be racialized, but also understood the concept of race and racism within a more precise ontological structure. And in many ways, this map we've developed based on various narratives and theories has solvency – or ability – to better identify and work against racism, but also help sociologists or philosophers of race adopt a broader frame of analysis when considering what is “racialized,” and what exactly can bear the brunt of racial insult. In philosophy, there's room for further projects to survey the causal relations between essentialization and racialization and the concept of race. Basically, how reciprocal the links in our ontology are. There's also a very present and even dominant view that comments on food can bear significance on ethnicity but not necessarily on race. And this not only violates the ontological commitment we've discovered, but risks defending problematic and racist tendencies. Now, responses to this podcast's project can really be varied: whether one chooses to actively re-identify comments and positions on food as racist, or less actively, chooses to stop defending criticisms of food as “just criticisms of food.” In any situation however, it's safe to say think twice before saying “ew, that's gross.”