

Original Article

I EAT AN APPLE. ON THEORIZING SUBJECTIVITIES

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Abstract

In this contribution to the first issue of the journal Subjectivity, I propose that we draw upon exemplary situations to do with eating as we engage in philosophy. That we play with our food, that is, explore the possibilities of models to do with growing, cooking, tasting and digesting. And that, finally, we move metabolic metaphors from one site/sentence to another. Many things would change if we were to engage in such experiments. Subjectivity among them.

Keywords

situated philosophy; relational materiality; models; metaphors; food

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This is the starting point. *I eat an apple*. In what follows, I would like to explore an I who eats an apple as a contribution to theorizing subjectivities.¹ Doing so (or so I hope to demonstrate) may help us to remodel the subject and play with what it is to theorize. Not in general, of course, but somewhere quite specific.

Situated

To say “I eat an apple” evokes a particular situation. But which situation exactly? Where does eating apples happen, where does this sentence situate this text? Perhaps in the biblical tradition. Eve eats an apple from the forbidden tree and she shares it with a man. In an earlier version this was a



fig, more likely, but even so, to say “I eat an apple” is a way to admit to wanting both knowledge and Adam – even if this means that paradise will be lost.

It is.

Philosophers used to dream of universality. To talk about apples was, by contrast, a way to situate oneself geographically. Apples grow in cool climates. As did English. But these days places are no longer local. Situating does not only have to do with where you are, but includes where you come from and where you may go. The question is what travels where and against which costs. The language of this text, for instance, spreads to places where apples do not grow, while my native tongue, Dutch, does not reach out very far. Even apples, picked and packed, travel further.²

And what about historical situatedness? Apples of many kinds were growing in the Netherlands long before English was widely understood and spoken here. They used to be harvested in autumn. In houses with a cellar, apples were laid out on wooden racks to save them for the months to come. What remains of that practice is a linguistic trace, the expression: *Een appeltje voor de dorst bewaren*. To save an apple for when one is thirsty. While this expression talks about food, it evokes money. It speaks to a subject who is prepared to include the insecure future within a careful present. You may live in embarrassing richness, but don't fool yourself. This is not paradise.

I eat an apple. Bite, chew, swallow. Where has it gone?

A century ago by the month of May all apples would have either been eaten or (if you had done your very best to save them) gone off. These days it is possible to eat apples in May even if one lives in the North. They have mostly travelled from New Zealand or Chile.³ Since some apples travel more easily than others, in May Dutch supermarkets have apples such as Braeburns and Granny Smiths on offer. These are relatively robust and able to withstand being shipped. Let's leave Braeburns out of this, but, let me tell you, I don't like Granny Smiths. In the late 1970s and early 1980s we (my political friends and myself) invested a lot in *disliking* Granny Smiths. At the time they were always imported from Chile, and thus stained with the blood spilled by Pinochet and his men. Once Pinochet had gone, it turned out to be difficult to re-educate my taste.⁴ It should be possible, but so far I have not succeeded. Yes, I can eat a Granny Smith apple: bite, chew, swallow, gone. But it does not give me pleasure.

Decentred

Eating apples is variously situated. Start out from any of these situations. They all interfere with traditional models of the Western subject. In his beautiful comparison of Greek and Chinese medicine, Kuriyama explains where these traditional models came from. He describes how (in contrast to the Chinese) the

Greek became preoccupied with *muscles*. When they saw a body, they saw arms, legs and a torso able to move (run, wrestle, throw a spear). A true Greek man had to train his voluntary muscles to make them strong while bringing them under the control of his centred will. This brings a specific subjectivity along. Says Kuriyama: “In tracing the crystallization of the concept of muscle, we are also, and not coincidentally, tracing the crystallization of the sense of an autonomous will. Interest in the muscularity of the body was inseparable from a preoccupation with the agency of the self”.⁵

The eating self is not an agent in even a remotely similar way. It does not control “its” body at all. Take: *I eat an apple*. Is the agency in the *I* or in the *apple*? I eat, for sure, but without apples before long there would be no “I” left. And it is even more complicated. For how to separate us out to begin with, the apple and me? One moment this may be possible: here is the apple, there am I. But a little later (bite, chew, swallow) I have become (made out of) apple; while the apple is (a part of) me. *Transubstantiation*. What about that for a model to think with?

A person cannot train the internal linings of her bowels in a way that begins to resemble the training of her muscles. I may eat many apples, but I will never master which of their sugars, minerals, vitamins, fibres are absorbed; and which others I discard. How to give words to this mode of being a subject?

There is a lot of activity going on here, but no control. Thus we leave the model of the muscular body and its particular centred masculinity behind – as well as its “other”: the actor controlled from elsewhere (be it a boss, a ruling class, a structure). The eating “I” is no longer eager to stay a free man lest he becomes a slave, but an altogether different kind of being.⁶ Her actorship is distributed and her boundaries are neither firm nor fixed. This is an “I” that does not painstakingly keep its enemies at a distance, but eagerly searches for food. It hopes to absorb parts of what used to be outside it. Before it excludes, it includes. But it will not eat just anything. It only bites into what it trusts. It only chews on what tastes good. Before something is swallowed it must pass muster. And the absorption of particles into its bloodstream is selective too. Neither tightly closed off, nor completely open, an eater has *semi-permeable* boundaries.⁷

Relations

Does my apple only start to have subjectivity once it has become a part of me, after I have digested it, or should we be widening the category of potential subjects in such a way that it comes to include apples, too? In other words: is the subjectivity of my apple a matter of finding a good way of drawing boundaries around *me* – boundaries that include the apples I have eaten or may eat – or is it a matter of reframing the category of the *subject* in such a way that an apple may be recognized as yet another me, a subject in its own right?⁸

But wait a minute. What kind of questions are these? They suggest that subjectivity is an actual or a potential characteristic of a bounded entity – a human being, an apple. What about the relationality of the world?

When I was 10 years old my father told me the grain joke. Do you know it? This extra-terrestrial reports on her travels through space. She has studied the earth. “An interesting planet”, she says, “it is inhabited by grasses of various sizes. Some live in shallow water and others on dry land. They all have two legged creatures working for them. These creatures eliminate other plants so that the grasses may grow without being disturbed too much. They also keep hungry beasts away. At the end of a season, the creatures carefully assemble the grains of the grasses, so as to sow them again on the next possible occasion and set a new cycle in motion. The creatures keep a few grains for themselves to feed on, but overall they expand the grasses’ living space a bit more every year. It is very impressive”.⁹

Among those who seek to theorize connectedness, companionship as Donna Haraway calls it, this has become the privileged way of thinking, not yet about grasses maybe, but certainly about animals and their humans.¹⁰ Instead of passivity in one place (on the side of the animals) and activity in another (on the side of the human beings), there is shared activity all round. Inter-activity. For example, as people built granaries for their grain, mice came to live with them to enjoy the feast. These mice, in their turn, were attractive to cats, who decided to join the village, too. Human beings, who liked grain, preferred cats over mice, and began to look after the cats.¹¹ And so on.

In the orchard, the apples. The trees carefully grafted. The colours and textures and tastes and cellar life attended to and the best fruit selected. And again. Without the work of ever so many generations of cultivators my apple would not have been. The cultivators, meanwhile, owed their lives to their apples. When and where in all these flows does subjectivity emerge? Where to stop the flow and point at it?

Theorizing

But it is a lie. Of course I am not eating an apple, not right now. I write. I am sitting behind a computer and my hands, rather than transporting fruit to my mouth, are moving over the qwerty letters of my keyboard. Writing and eating do not go easily together. With talking it is even worse. The practices implied in doing theory and the practices of eating clash. A body can only do so many things at the same time. But how many and which? In some place that without technical aids nobody can see, hear or smell, the apple that I had with my lunch is right now being digested.¹² Is that still eating?

Let me shift from practices to theory.¹³ What kind of phrase is “I eat an apple”? What might it be here, in the present text?

Maybe it states a fact. Then the issue of whether it is true or false is a relevant question.

Maybe it is a confession. I tell you about myself. An “I” is being staged who reveals something intimate about herself. Something usually not meant for public scrutiny. To write about it is to shift what is private (eating, done in the kitchen) to a public place (an academic journal, located in the *agora*). Or does it make the other move, does it turn “writing” from a public matter into something that is private? Does it downgrade the academy to a place where one may babble self-indulgently?¹⁴ Confession has a bad name in theory.

Maybe it is an example. Nowadays philosophers do not build laboratories and neither do they set out on long-distance journeys or leave their studies in some other way in order to investigate the realities beyond it. They dislike engaging in serious empirical research.¹⁵ Instead, they prefer to mobilize examples. These are events and configurations that they expect their readers to know about already. The *surprise* of a philosophical text is not supposed to reside in the stories it tells, but in what these are meant to illustrate: theory.

Maybe it is a boast. Reader: do not think that I spoil myself with sticky sweets or intoxicating drinks. I am not a sinner; I do not eat unhealthy food. Oh, no. I eat something all food advisory committees would wholeheartedly approve of.¹⁶ Solid. Simple. Recommendable. An apple.

Maybe it is a case. A case is something to explore, to learn from. It is specific and surprising. Attending to it carefully may make you reconsider what you thought was clear and distinct. It may interfere with your very language. And while a case cannot be generalized, neither is it local. Instead, its specificities are made to travel. When you move a case around, new things start to happen.¹⁷ That is why I take along an I who eats an apple, from one site/situation (the bible, the Netherlands, the kitchen, gastroenterology) to another: a journal theorizing subjectivities.¹⁸

Texts may tell about an object, but they come from somewhere, too. They incorporate an author.¹⁹ The Western philosophical tradition favours the fantasy that this author, the subject of theory, is located outside the object of reflection. This is a voyeuristic tradition. Only from a distance may we hope to tell the truth. Only from a distance may we hope to pass a balanced judgement. Disentangled. Hands behind your back, do not get involved physically with whatever it is that you are theorizing about. Don’t touch the white woman. Don’t walk on the grass. The body of the subject of theory is not to get involved in the theorizing.

But what if the “I” incorporated in theory were not an elderly Greek man, who, no longer capable of fighting ferociously, calmly strolls in the shade of the *stoa*, trying to impress the youngsters with a sharp mind rather than an attractive body? What if we shift scenes: what if the author were an eater?

This is disturbing for the dominant philosophical tradition of the West. That people get physically mixed up with apples is bad enough as it is. But thinking and eating should be kept apart. For if an eater gets to *know* her apple, it disappears. And so it does when she *evaluates* it. Bite, chew, swallow. Gone. The thinking of an eater is destructive. Worse: as an eater I cannot even separate knowing my apple from enjoying or disliking it. Knowing and evaluating are intertwined and this is no disinterested evaluation either. Look at my face while I eat. It shows pleasure. Or distaste.

The appreciation of apples is a physical matter. But for that it is no less historical and social. It is because I live in a cool climate that my taste got attuned to the taste of apples early on. It is because of the political history of Chile and its reception in the Netherlands, that (to me, to us) Granny Smith apples came to taste of violence. Taste circulates and is shared in many ways. And yet taste is far from universal, nor do we need to craft a global consensus about it. We may yet live together even if our tastes are different. You eat a pear. A fig, a mango.

If you can harvest one from a good tree, that is. Or if you can walk to the market and pay for your fruit.²⁰

Conclusion

Philosophical theories incorporate *exemplary situations*. If you look at them carefully, they appear to be situated somewhere. They may talk about “being” and “nothingness” but at the same time reflect on strangers in Paris sidewalk cafés. Lolle Nauta (a philosopher who was widely known in the Netherlands, but, as he rarely published in English, hardly beyond it) showed how the work of Sartre can be understood much better once we trace the ways in which the particular type of “meeting between strangers” that occurred in Paris sidewalk cafés, is inscribed in it. For this is the puzzling situation Sartre (always also) thought about.²¹

But once you learn that there are exemplary situations hidden in every text, writing new texts changes. For it now becomes a question: which exemplary situations to *chew upon* while thinking? Sidewalk cafés? That is a possibility. Eating apples is another. But what *is* it to eat an apple? Sharing food and flesh with Adam; depleting supplies that one might better save; linking up with distant places where one’s food has grown; tasting, chewing and digesting. Eating an apple is not just a single situation. Instead it presents ever so many exemplars to explore.

Philosophical theories incorporate *models*. Like the model of the Greek soldier with his well-trained muscles, eager to fight off any enemy, that informed notions of what it is to act for centuries.

The question poses itself once more. If our theoretical modelling transports empirical content, then what kinds of content to favour? Which models to move

about, turn *upside down* or *inside out*?²² We may start to talk apples. Or, take that other model to do with eating, that of the parasite, the organism living in and on its host. Someone who gives stories in return for food. A noisy third. A messy intruder who interferes with whatever it is that seemed clear, distinct and clarified.²³

Philosophical theories incorporate *metaphors*.²⁴ If I write that we may “chew upon” a situation and thus make it exemplary, I mobilize a metaphor that has to do with eating. “Upside down” is an old dialectical trick: it positions the head where the feet were – and vice versa. “Inside out” is not so easy. One might imagine the lining of the bowels suddenly becoming visible. Is that inside out? If so, where is my apple?

No, I won’t argue that we have to *mind* our words. I propose that we carefully *cultivate* them.

I propose that we draw upon exemplary situations to do with eating as we engage in philosophy.²⁵ That we play with our food, that is, explore the possibilities of models to do with growing, cooking, tasting and digesting. And that, finally, we infuse our theorizing with food metaphors. Many things will change as we engage in such experiments. Subjectivity among them. Above I gave some suggestions of how it might change. But unexpected things are bound to happen. Like eating, experimenting offers no control.

QED? I eat an apple.

About the author

Annemarie Mol is a part-time Socrates Professor of Political Philosophy at the University of Twente as well as a part-time senior researcher, currently working on the project “Good Food, Good Information” financed by the Ethics, Research and Policy section of The Dutch Organization for Scientific Research. Her publications include *The Body Multiple. Ontology in Medical Practice* (Duke University Press, 2002) and *The Logic of Care. Health and the Problem of Patient Choice* (Routledge, 2008).

Notes

- 1 Do I write this text? Yes I do, but not as a separate subject. I would like to thank the authors of all the books I read as well as every scholar I listened to or talked with. For more immediate support and inspiration I thank Jeannette Pols, Mieke Aerts, Amâde M’charek, Nick Bingham and John Law.
- 2 This frustrating situation has led a Dutch sociologist to write a book about it: Abram de Swaan (2001).
- 3 The travelling of food (of cultivation practices as well as food products) has been the topic of a lot of fascinating historical studies. See for example the contributions to David Goodman and Michael Watts (eds) (1997); or Jack Goody (1998). My personal favourite remains: Sidney Mintz (1985).
- 4 On taste as something that one may only gradually acquire in practice and that needs to be *done* over and over again, see Geneviève Teil and Antoine Hennion (2004).

- 5 Shigehisa Kuriyama (1999). The quote is on page 144.
- 6 For a beautiful analysis of (various parts of various kinds of) Greek philosophy as inspired by the fear of becoming a slave, and a celebration of the situation of the “free man”, see Tsjalling Swierstra (1998).
- 7 For a more extensive exploration of the subject with semi-permeable boundaries, see Annemarie Mol and John Law (2004).
- 8 There are now many authors who want to include (some species of) animals into the category of subjects with rights, but thus far plants do not seem to have been invited on liberal terms. That is a great good for it helps the exploration of other terms for attending to them. For an interesting example, mobilizing the term “friendship”, see Nick Bingham (2006).
- 9 There are many versions of this joke. For instance, there is a car version, too, in which the earth is inhabited by cars that meet every day in huge parking spaces while their slaves work so as to earn money for the gasoline they need. Thanks to Sebastiaan Soeters for telling it in a meeting just the other week.
- 10 See for example Donna Haraway (2003); Vinciane Despret (2007).
- 11 The example comes from the admirably daring attempt of a biologist to write a history of humanity that gives plants and animals a prominent place: Jared Diamond (1997).
- 12 When bowels are actually made visible from the inside, they do not contain apples. Visualization techniques like endoscopes depend on research subjects who have abstained from food for many hours. The colon even gets emptied out with laxatives before it is visually inspected and some people are embarrassed if the remains of food become visible on the screen during an endoscopic examination. See, for the fascinating details, Maud Radstake (2007).
- 13 One of the great inventions of the social studies of science was its persistent shift from “theory” to “practice”. As Bruno Latour put it, when someone contradicted Pasteur, the answer would not be about “theory” but about Petri dishes. However, we currently seem to be collectively experimenting with shifting back and forth and back and forth again, in different modalities, between theories, practices, theoretical practices and practical theories. But it is still worthwhile to move (back?) to Bruno Latour (1988). The second part of that book, *Irréductions*, is an exemplary example of a practice loving theory. It also beautifully undermines all illusions that there might be such a thing as effort free “universality”.
- 14 The reproach is easily and frequently made. At the same time there are many attempts to seriously theorize the “I” and to mobilize “experiences” as ethnographic material. See for instance John Law (2000); and the contributions to Anne Meneley and Donna Young (eds) (2005).
- 15 Of course there are many exceptions, that come in variations. From Walter Benjamin’s monumental *Passagenwerken* (Edition Suhrkamp, 1982) to the far more modest, but spirited, Peter Steeves (2006).
- 16 The moralizing of eating and drinking is an old tradition, which is currently being revitalized with astounding vigour. For a good analysis, see John Coveney (2006).
- 17 The case such as I cast it here is a format for knowledge that – a century or so ago – used to thrive in medicine. Over the last decades other knowledge formats, notably those of epidemiology, have tended to displace it. For an attempt to revitalize the “case” as a respectable knowledge format in health care, see (a book that itself is framed as a philosophical case study) Annemarie Mol (2008).
- 18 However, as this text is a proposal rather than a result, a draft rather than an outcome, my “I eat an apple” still has some traits of an example. I would wish to develop it into a true case, for when examined in more detail, “I eat an apple” will offer us yet more surprises. And so will other food realities, when seriously engaged with empirically and moved around experimentally. Which is just what in the present text I propose we do – see below.
- 19 Yes, in theory the author has been undone a long time ago; see Michel Foucault (1971). But there are still many ways in which this figure is among us, notably as the (often hidden) subject of (philosophical) theory.
- 20 In talk about food this fact should not be forgotten: that it is not shared equally. For hunger and other food inequalities, see Tim Lang and Michael Heasman (2004).
- 21 In introducing this term, Nauta was inspired by Kuhn’s explanations of the ways in which “exemplars” matter to the natural sciences. So, he said, do they in philosophy – with the difference that this usually happens in a far less overt manner. See (yes, in English to make it travel) Lolle Nauta (1990).

- 22 As we have learned that modern medicine does not know a single coherent body, “the” “real” body, so to speak, but stages (performs, enacts) “a body multiple” (many versions of the body with ever so many complex relations between them), we may wonder which of these “bodies” is mobilized in which sites and situations – not just in but far beyond the hospital. In theory, for instance. For medical practice, see Annemarie Mol (2002).
- 23 A reference to Michel Serres (1980). This is one of the rare philosophical books that takes *eating* extremely seriously. The social event in which a host feeds guests while getting stories in return is the central *scene* of the analysis. It is the book’s explicitly explored exemplary situation. Readers of Serres will recognize the traces of his work throughout the above.
- 24 For an impressive range of ways in which bodily metaphors inform the Western philosophical tradition, see George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1999). Lakoff and Johnson, however, have very little to say about metaphors to do with eating, drinking, digesting and excreting. Work remains to be done.
- 25 For an earlier, slightly different version of these propositions, see Annemarie Mol (2005).

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