

Stoicism and Food Ethics

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Abstract: The norms of simplicity, convenience, unfussiness, and self-control guide Diogenes the Cynic, Zeno of Citium, Chrysippus, Seneca, Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius in approaching food. These norms generate the precept that meat and dainties are luxuries, so Stoics should eschew them. Considerations of justice, environmental harm, anthropogenic global climate change, sustainability, food security, feminism, harm to animals, personal health, and public health lead contemporary Stoics to condemn the meat industrial complex, debunk carnism, and select low input, plant-based foods.

Keywords: food, meat, nature, Stoic, vegetarian, virtue.

Introduction

A simple way to distinguish two basic outlooks on food is to consider whether you live to eat or eat to live. This distinction traces back to an ancient source reporting that “Diogenes [the Cynic] said that other people lived to eat, but he ate to live.” (Stobaeus 3.6.41; G182; Diogenes the Cynic 2012, 14) People who live to eat are gourmands, foodies, who pursue maximal gustatory pleasures believing that the good life is the pleasurable life. Foodies are hedonists. Stoics deny that the good is pleasure and so reject hedonism. Stoics define the good as living in agreement with nature. They believe that, for all animals, eating agrees with nature. But they believe that for human beings, eating in agreement with nature especially means eating in agreement with reason. Eating to survive is, for Stoics, a necessary but not a sufficient condition for living well. Stoics believe that perfected reason is virtue, so living in agreement with nature requires living virtuously. Consequently, eating in agreement with reason requires doing one’s best to eat virtuously. Eating virtuously requires becoming wise about food and eating temperately and justly. For example, considerations of justice pertain to the availability and affordability of foods, known as food security. How food is produced and distributed is another matter of justice. The comparative nutritional values of various foods and health effects of different diets matter. Wise eaters are knowledgeable about these many factors and circumspect in deliberating about food. They make informed, thoughtful decisions in specific situations about which foods to obtain and when, what, with whom, and how to eat. I will argue that the guidance of wisdom, temperance, restraint, and justice is supplemented by what Seneca calls precepts

(*praecepta*).¹ Understanding food's purpose, its place in a good life, and how precepts help one avoid vicious eating constitute the Stoics' philosophy of food.

I will begin by reflecting on the ways in which Diogenes the Cynic's food ethics informed the ancient Stoics. Next, I will outline the philosophy of food of the Stoics of the Roman empire. Since antiquity, however, changes to how food is produced, distributed, and wasted, human population growth, and environmental impacts have been staggering. In light of this, I will argue that ancient Stoic food ethics must be refined by contemporary stoics² to target their local circumstances and global realities. For the sake of environmental sustainability, food security, public health, and global justice, wisdom prescribes more stringent food ethics to today's stoics.

1. Dog Food

The first Stoic, Zeno of Citium, was a student of the Cynic Crates. So it seems apt to examine some pertinent remarks attributed to the first Cynic, the original 'dog,' Diogenes of Sinope. Diogenes was unwaveringly committed to what today we call minimalism. He abhorred all luxury and decadence. He is said to have declared the love of money to be the mother-city (μητρόπολις) of all evils (D.L. vi. 50). He taught the sons of his master Xenias that at home they should wait upon themselves rather than rely on servants and be content with plain fare and water to drink (vi. 31). We read that "He often thundered that the gods had made it possible for men to live easily, but this had been lost sight of, because we demand honeyed cakes, perfumes, and the like." (vi. 44; Laertius 2018, 280) Thus, it seems clear that he rejected greed and insisted on habitual self-sufficiency and simple food and drink. Diogenes deplores the vice of demanding treats like honeyed cakes. He links dietary depravity to political injustice when he says, "it is not among men who live on barley [τῶν μαζοφάγων] that you will find tyrants, but among those who dine on expensive delicacies." (Julian, *Orations* 6.198d; trans. mine). Is meat a decadent luxury?³ Some texts may suggest so. When asked why athletes are stupid, he said, "Because they are built up of mutton and beef." (vi. 49; Laertius 2018, 283) This response could imply that eating *too much* mutton and beef makes athletes stupid. Or it could be construed to mean that sheep and bovines are stupid and athletes absorb that stupidity by eating them. On either interpretation, it seems clear that Diogenes judges it stupid to eat a lot of these kinds of meat.

¹ Seneca discusses *praecepta* (precepts, prescriptions) and *decreta* (doctrines, principles) in *Letters* 94 and 95. Examples of the former he gives are 'weighty expressions' like "Nothing in excess," "A greedy mind is never satisfied," and "Expect others to treat you as you treat them." (*Letter* 94.43; Seneca 2015, 360) I propose "Meat and dainties are luxuries" as another such precept.

² I will refer to contemporary stoics as *neostoics* or, following Becker (2017), *stoics* with a lower-case s to distinguish them from ancient Stoics with a capital S.

³ I understand *meat* to refer to any bodily part taken from an animal, whether terrestrial or aquatic. This excludes the edible part of fruits or nuts.

On the other hand we also read that Diogenes once tried to eat raw meat but couldn't manage to digest it (vi. 34). Why would Diogenes try to eat raw meat if he believed, as I suggest, that food is necessary but meat is not? When asked what time one should eat lunch, the dog-philosopher said, "If you're rich, whenever you like; if poor, whenever you can." (vi. 40; Laertius 2018, 279) The wealthy have the means to eat not only whenever, but also mostly whatever they want. When hungry the poor must eat whatever they can get their hands on. Diogenes, who was several times bought and sold as a slave, often begged for food and had to scrounge for whatever he could find. We can imagine that on one occasion what he scrounged was a scrap of raw meat. Why didn't he cook it? Perhaps because he was very hungry and had no way to cook it. Or perhaps because he chose to test the limit of utmost need by seeing whether, like an actual dog, he could eat and digest raw meat. If cooking meat turned out to be dispensable, then such a lesson would allow him to bypass this nuisance, thereby increasing his self-sufficiency and 'easy living.' But the physiological lesson he learned was that though raw meat is fit food for dogs, it is unfit for Cynics. Cynics see the wisdom of emulating certain behaviors of canines, mice, and other animals that live in agreement with nature, calmly adapting to their circumstances better than most people do. But raw meat is dog food, not human food. Fortunately and conveniently, many plants can be eaten raw and digested. So, pragmatism about food dictated that when meat is a luxury, Diogenes disdained it. He recognized that *food* is a necessity, not meat. Plants, in contrast, are generally easier to acquire and require less or no cooking, thus making meatless meals usually simpler and easier.⁴ After seeing a boy drinking with his hands, Diogenes threw away the only bowl he used to eat and drink from, saying "A child has outdone me in frugality." (vi. 37; Laertius 2018, 276)

It is worth noting that the frugal habits of Diogenes the Cynic in certain respects resemble those of today's freegans.⁵ Freegans are vegans who reject consumerism and capitalist ideology and strive to avoid buying anything. Instead of using a large ceramic jar (*pithos*) for shelter as Diogenes did, freegans endorse squatting in abandoned buildings. Freegans practice guerrilla gardening in unoccupied city parks, wild foraging, and scrounging for discarded food. This includes dumpster diving into the wealth of food waste in the U.S. and other Western countries (Barnard 2016).

For the ancient Cynics, however, considerations of self-sufficiency, frugality, simplicity, practicality, and convenience guided eating. Their dietary austerity inspired Zeno of Citium, who "used to eat small loaves and honey, and drink a little fragrant wine." (vii.13; Laertius 2018, 318) His admiration for Cynic frugality made Zeno vegetarian. Chrysippus reportedly praised Euripides' verses that

⁴ It is said of Zeno of Citium that "His powers of endurance and the austerity of his way of life were unequalled; the food he ate was uncooked, and the cloak he wore was thin." (vii. 26; Laertius 2018, 323)

⁵ 'Freegan' is a portmanteau of 'free' and 'vegan.'

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mortals need only Demeter's grain and draughts of clear water (*SVF* iii 706; Plutarch 1976, 501).

2. Seneca Scorns Fussy Feasting

Simple dietary habits are also endorsed by Seneca the Younger. For him the purpose of food is to relieve, not arouse, hunger (*Letter* 95.15–18). He argues that a human being's chief part (*prima pars*) is virtue itself, whereas the unserviceable and unstable flesh attached to it is a mere repository for food (*Letter* 92.10).⁶ He believes that virtue limits our wants to our needs. Nature establishes our needs, and nature desires nothing except a meal. Hunger, he infers, is not ambitious. Hunger is satisfied to stop, and it does not much care what makes it stop. Once hunger is stopped, only the torments of a wretched self-indulgence look for ways to stimulate hunger after it is sated. Thus, only the vice of self-indulgence drives someone to keep stuffing his filled stomach (*Letter* 119.13–14).⁷

Since humans are smaller than larger animals, Seneca believes we can and should feed ourselves more easily than they do. "Has nature given us such an insatiable maw that although the bodies we are given are of modest size, we yet surpass the largest, most ravenous eaters of the animal world? That is not the case, for how small are our natural requirements! It takes only a little to satisfy nature's demands. It is not bodily hunger that runs up the bill but ambition. ... those who ... 'heed the belly' [belong] to the race of animals rather than of humans." (*Letter* 60.3–4)⁸ Ambition drives vicious eating, and to eat viciously is to degenerate from a human being into a beast. Thus, Seneca advises indulging the body only to the extent that suffices for health. One must deal sternly with one's body, lest it fail to obey one's mind. "Let food be for appeasing hunger, drink for satisfying thirst." (*Letter* 8.5)

Food is more welcome to one who is hungry (*Letter* 78.22). Thus, it is wise to know when to stop eating and drinking, as nonhuman animals do (*Letter* 59.13). We ought to eat moderately (*Letter* 114.26–27), not greedily (*Letter* 94.22). Seneca believes that meals ought to be eaten during the customary times of the day (*Letter* 122.9–10) and in the company of others. He recommends reflecting carefully beforehand with whom you are to eat and drink, rather than what you are to eat and drink, for feeding without a friend is the life of a lion or a wolf (*Letter* 19.10).

Seneca cautions that luxurious eating causes many complicated diseases and disorders. He criticizes gourmandizing and fancy foods like mushrooms,⁹ delicately prepared oysters, mussels, sea urchins, garum (fermented fish sauce),

⁶ Seneca rejects Chrysippus' view of a unitary soul in favor of Posidonius' dualist conception of the soul with rational and irrational parts.

⁷ Note the Epicurean flair here.

⁸ Quotations of the *Letters* are from Seneca (2015).

⁹ It is difficult to know how easy it was to forage for mushrooms in Seneca's Italy, but he clearly rejects mushrooms as the dainties of mycophiles.

and filleted, deboned mullets (*Letter* 95.25–29). Seneca reports that he abstains from eating oysters and mushrooms because “These are not food; they are only tidbits meant to entice those who are full to eat some more (which is what the glutton wants, to stuff himself beyond capacity), for they go down easily, and come back up easily too.” (*Letter* 108.15)

For Seneca the most shameful scourge that assails fortunes is the kitchen (*Ben.* 1.10.2). He deplores expensive delicacies. He tells the story of two men bidding against each other to buy a four and a half pound mullet. The winner paid the extravagant sum of 5,000 sesterces for the fish (*Letter* 95.42). Even worse, the emperor Gaius Caesar demonstrated supreme vice combined with supreme power when he dined one day at the astronomical cost of ten million sesterces (*Helv.* 10.4).

How wretched are the people whose appetite is stimulated only by costly foods! But what makes them costly is not their exquisite flavor or some pleasant sensation in the throat but their rarity and the difficulty of obtaining them. Otherwise, if these people would willingly return to sanity, what need of so many professional skills that serve the belly? What need of imports, or of devastating forests, or of scourging the sea? All about us lie the foods which nature has made available in every place; but these people pass them by as if blind, and they roam through every country, they cross the seas, and though they could allay their hunger at a trifling cost, they excite it at great expense. (*Helv.* 10.5)¹⁰

Exotic seafoods, garum, and mushrooms take great time, labor, and resources to obtain. Seneca condemns all such dainties as decadent luxuries. In contrast, he praises Gaius Fabricius Luscinus for happily dining on the very roots and grasses he plucked from his fields. “Would he have been happier if he had crammed into his belly fish from distant shores, and exotic birds? If he had roused his slow and sickened stomach with shellfish from the Adriatic and Tyrrhenian seas? If he had arrayed a huge pile of fruits around highly sought-after beasts caught at great loss of hunters’ lives?” (*Prov.* 3.6)¹¹ The availability of local crops makes importing foods from afar unnecessary and makes hunting dangerous animals unnecessary and reckless. Thus, only wasteful, dissipated fools demand exotic, imported foods.

Seneca believes that the needs of the body greatly outnumber the needs of the mind. “For the body needs many things in order to thrive, but the mind grows by itself, feeds itself, trains itself. Athletes require a great deal of food and drink, much oil, and lengthy exercises; but virtue will be yours without any supplies or expenses. Anything that can make you a good person is already in your possession.” (*Letter* 80.3) The Stoics highly valued self-sufficiency. Seneca commends the mind’s pursuit of virtue because it costs no money and requires no equipment. To build an athletic body requires much food, drink, and time-consuming exercises. He thinks that bodybuilding and the heavy diet that goes with it burden the mind

¹⁰ As translated by Gareth D. Williams in Seneca (2014).

¹¹ As translated by James Ker in Seneca (2014).

and make it less agile (*Letter* 15.2–3).¹² Instead, he instructs his friend to set himself a period of days in which he will be content with very small amounts of food, and the cheapest kinds, to dispel his fear of frugality (*Letter* 18.5). Seneca contends that fearless, frugal eating makes you a better person than a muscular physique does.

Seneca writes: “I like food that is neither prepared nor watched by troops of servants, not something ordered many days ahead and proffered by many hands, but available and easily so, with no exotic or precious ingredients. This will not run out on any occasion, or be a burden to my budget or my body, or be brought up in vomiting.” (*Tranq.* 1.6)¹³ On a trip with a friend the frugal Seneca lunched on dried figs, sometimes with bread (*Letter* 87.3).

Ultimately, Seneca’s filial piety trumped his commitment to vegetarianism. In his youth he was taken with the philosophy of Pythagoras. Seneca’s teacher Sotion explained both Pythagoras’ and Sextius’ reasons for abstaining from animal food. “Sextius held that a person could get enough to eat without resorting to butchery; and that when bloodshed is adapted to the purposes of pleasure, one develops a habit of cruelty. He also used to say that one should pare away the resources of self-indulgence, and he offered reasoning to show that variety in food is alien to our bodies and detrimental to health.” (*Letter* 108.17–18) Pythagoras believed in the kinship of all living things and held that upon death souls transmigrate from one animal’s body into the next, whether it be that of a human or a nonhuman. “Pythagoras instilled in humankind a fear of wrongdoing—more specifically, of parricide. For if some spirit related to them happened to be dwelling in a given body, they might, without realizing it, assault the soul of their parent with the knife or with their teeth.” (*Letter* 108.19) Sotion reasoned that if these beliefs are true, then abstaining from animal foods means not harming anyone. If they are false, then vegetarianism is economical. Seneca, persuaded by Sotion of the savagery of eating flesh as lions and vultures do, adopted a vegetarian diet. He says this diet became easy and pleasant for him and made his mind livelier. Later, however, a vegetarian diet was seen as adherence to religions of foreign origin banned by the emperor. So, when his father asked him to give up that diet, Seneca complied. He returned to being a temperate kreophagist.

What should we make of a Seneca deferring to his father’s uneasiness about his son’s vegetarianism? A neostoic would take seriously fulfilling her role as a daughter or son to her father (see Johnson 2013). But I don’t see her giving up her principled vegetarianism simply to appease her parent if the warrant for rejecting that diet is the appearance – to some – of affinity with a newfangled religion. If Seneca the Elder was made uncomfortable by his son’s vegetarian diet because it offended his Romanocentric, religious conservatism, this would not be a good enough reason for a neostoic to return to eating flesh. Neostoics have no duty to

¹² This resonates with Diogenes the Cynic’s remark about meat-heavy diets making athletes stupid.

¹³ As translated by Elaine Fantham in Seneca (2014).

cater to their parent's parochialism. Being a good daughter does not require her to wear a particular style of clothing to appease her parent's sartorial strictures. Neither would be complying with her parent's food preferences. After all, the inferences other people draw about a neostoic's religious beliefs simply by observing what she eats are certainly not up to her. Seneca the Younger was persuaded by Sextius' arguments. If they were good arguments, then, out of respect for her parent and in defense of truth, a neostoic ought to try to persuade her parent accordingly. Failing that, a neostoic can agree to disagree with her parent about the diet that is right for her.

This episode related in *Letter* 108 raises a question about the philosophical justification of Seneca's diet. Was it Stoicism or Pythagoreanism that led him to abstain from meat? Transmigration of souls, after all, is a doctrine of Pythagoreanism, not Stoicism. While this is true, a Stoic need not accept metempsychosis to agree with Sextius that when bloodshed in eating is adapted to the purposes of pleasure, the habit of cruelty can result. Sotion reasoned that even if it is false that the soul of a deceased relative sometimes occupies the body of a nonhuman animal, and so killing and eating that animal would not commit the crime of parricide, vegetarianism remains 'economical.' This rationale fits nicely with the other reasons Seneca gives for dietary restraint: that (a) virtue limits our wants to our needs; (b) nature establishes our needs; (c) what we need is simply to remove hunger; (d) hunger is not ambitious; (e) ambition and greed trigger vicious eating. Seneca insists on eating moderately, not indulging in luxuries and delicacies. This means choosing foods that are easy to get, easy to prepare, inexpensive, and locally sourced. That Seneca reasons his way to these food ethics from the premise of the Stoic *telos* formula is plain: "Our aim is to live in accordance with nature, is it not? This is contrary to nature: tormenting one's body, swearing off simple matters of grooming, affecting a squalid appearance, partaking of foods that are not merely inexpensive but rancid and coarse. A hankering after delicacies is a sign of self-indulgence; by the same token, avoidance of those comforts that are quite ordinary and easy to obtain is an indication of insanity. Philosophy demands self-restraint, not self-abnegation." (*Letter* 5.4-5; cf. *Letter* 78.22-24) Seneca concludes that restrained, moderate, unfussy eating requires neither self-deprivation nor fasting. In rejecting rancid, coarse food, Seneca's comment suggests that, as long as one avoids extravagance, obsessive attention to preparation, and harmful attitudes toward food, reason accords with nature by recommending simple, wholesome, and *tasty* meals. Tasty foods would thus count as preferred indifferents, just as rancid, coarse foods would be dispreferred indifferents. Virtue requires not that we sacrifice taste, only that we always avoid greed, gluttony, finickiness, and self-indulgence in luxuries. That Pythagoreans would also decry these gustatory vices in no way undermines the authentically Stoic basis of Seneca's food ethics. Given the breadth of his treatment, Seneca serves as a fair representative of the Stoic philosophy of food. I

suggest that the textual evidence warrants ascribing to his food ethics the precept *Avoid luxuries like meat and dainties*.¹⁴

3. Musonius Rufus on Mastering Appetites

Musonius Rufus was born into the Roman social order of equestrians (*equitēs*). This socio-economic status implied an ample food budget. Musonius opposed the gustatory self-indulgence and lavish eating typical of Roman banquets (*convivia*).¹⁵ Emphasizing the importance of daily practices, Musonius insisted that mastering one's appetites for food and drink is the basis for temperance, a vital virtue.¹⁶ He agrees with Seneca that the purpose of food is to nourish and strengthen the body and to sustain life, not to provide pleasure.¹⁷ Digesting our food gives us no pleasure, and the time spent digesting food far exceeds the time spent consuming it. It is not consumption but digestion that nourishes the body. Therefore, he reasons that the food we eat serves its purpose when we're digesting it, not when we're tasting it.

Musonius advocates lacto-vegetarian foods that are least expensive and most readily available: raw fruits in season, certain raw vegetables, milk, cheese, and honeycombs. Cooked grains and some cooked vegetables are also suitable for humans, whereas meat is too crude for human beings and is more suitable for wild beasts.¹⁸ Musonius concurs with Diogenes that those who eat lots of meat seem slow-witted.

¹⁴ Meats include fish, oysters, and seafood in general. Dainties include mushrooms, condiments like garum and liquamen, and any comestibles that are expensive, laborious, or time-consuming to obtain, prepare, or serve. When a piece of meat or a dainty is the only thing one can eat, then it is not a luxury.

¹⁵ Oswyn Murray writes: "The Roman *convivium* was modelled on the Etruscan version of the Greek symposium. These Italian feasts differed from their Greek prototypes in four important respects: citizen women were present; equality was replaced by a hierarchy of honour; the emphasis was on eating and the *cena* [main meal], rather than on the *comissatio*, or later drinking session; the entertainment was often given by one man for his inferior *amici* [friends] and *clientes* [free men who entrusted themselves to others and received protection in return]. The Roman *convivium* was therefore embedded in social and family structures, rather than largely independent of them." (2003, 387)

¹⁶ The following remarks attributed to Musonius are from *Discourse 18A* and *18B: On Food*.

¹⁷ Musonius attributes to Socrates the wise saying that "the majority of people live to eat but that he ate to live. Certainly no reasonable being, whose ambition is to be a human being, will think it desirable to be like the majority who live to eat, and like them, spend his life chasing after pleasure derived from food." (Rufus 2020, 92; tr. modified)

¹⁸ The Greek text reads: τὴν μέντοι κρεώδη τροφήν θηριωδεστέραν ἀπέφηνε καὶ τοῖς ἀγρίοις ζώοις προσφορωτέραν. "On the other hand he proved that meat was a more savage [or 'bestial'] kind of food and more fitting for wild animals." (tr. mine) An objection could be raised that although animal flesh may indeed be 'more savage,' circumstances may not universally rule it out. For instance, sailors whose food stocks run low could fish. When the rations of soldiers on campaign run out, they could eat deer. Neither Musonius nor Seneca discuss circumstances where meat is the only alternative to starving to death. Such scenarios were as rare in antiquity

We are worse than nonhuman animals when it comes to food, Musonius believes, because we obsessively embellish our food's presentation and fuss over what we eat and how we prepare it merely to amuse our palates. Moreover, too much rich food harms the body. So, he infers that gastronomic pleasure is undoubtedly the most difficult pleasure to combat. Consequently, like Seneca, Musonius rejects gourmet cuisine and delicacies as dangerous luxuries. Craving gourmet food he considers most shameful and intemperate. Musonius thinks that those who eat inexpensive food can work harder, are the least fatigued by working, become sick less often, tolerate cold, heat, and lack of sleep better, and are stronger, than those who eat expensive food. He concludes that responsible people favor what is easy to obtain over what is difficult, what involves no trouble over what does, and what is available over what isn't. Habituating oneself in these preferences promotes self-control and goodness.

4. Epictetus on Fear of Hunger and Food Insecurity

Years of slavery shaped Epictetus' philosophy of food. Real slavery, he contends, is living in fear. So, he urges his students to get rid of all fears about eating. In one vignette, Epictetus considers the plight of a slave who is ordered to hold a chamber pot for his master. The slave must choose between obeying this command to hold the pot as his master evacuates his bowels and bladder or disobeying the command. If the slave disobeys, his master promises to beat him and not feed him dinner. Epictetus observes that earning a living is better than starving to death (*Disc.* 1.2.10), other things being equal. But the slave may decide that things are not equal. He may opt to preserve his dignity by disobeying, refusing to hold the pot, getting a beating, and going hungry.

When a student frets about being too poor to be able to eat, Epictetus scolds him for lacking the confidence to fend for himself as successfully as slaves and runaways do. A worrywart who fears starving must believe he is stupider and less resourceful than irrational beasts, all of whom are self-sufficient and provided with food and a mode of survival adapted to and in harmony with their nature (*Disc.* 1.9.8-9).¹⁹ Epictetus notes that neither runaway slaves nor old beggars starve, so we have no good reason to worry that our food will run out. Instead, we

as they are today. But when eating to live actually necessitates eating an animal, it seems plausible that Stoics permit it *so long as it does not compromise virtue*. For Epictetus' discussion of facing hunger virtuously, see below.

¹⁹ This way of confronting those suffering from anxiety looks dangerously close to heartless victim-blaming. A more charitable interpretation suggests that Epictetus seeks to encourage the food-fretter by reminding him that he has succeeded in feeding himself in the past, so inductive reasoning warrants confidence that he can muster the resources to sustain himself in the future. Epictetus implies that giving in to worry about going hungry distracts you from figuring out how to find food. Diogenes the Dog and other animals do not let self-pity impede their foraging. Resilient optimism energizes problem-solving, thereby increasing the odds of getting your hands on food.

should concern ourselves with becoming good. “Does any good man fear that he may run out of food? The blind don’t run out of food, nor do the crippled; so will a good man run out of it?” (*Disc.* 3.26.27)²⁰ For Epictetus “dishonor, in truth, consists not in not having anything to eat, but in not having reason enough to preserve you from fear and distress.” (*Disc.* 3.24.116) A good person uses reason to overcome fear and sorrow.

Epictetus believes that Zeus/God/nature both provides and takes away all our material possessions. “Another provides you with nourishment and possessions, and he can take them away again likewise, along with your body too. For your part, you should accept the material and work on it.” (*Disc.* 2.5.22) And if God no longer provides food, then this means that, like a good general, God has given the signal to withdraw, God is sounding the recall,²¹ opening the door, and saying to ‘Come.’ (*Disc.* 3.13.13-14) Epictetus says he will obey while speaking well of his commander and praising his works (*Disc.* 3.26.29). If starvation ever becomes inevitable, the Stoic accepts it calmly. In contrast, the non-Stoic who weeps about going hungry foolishly makes himself a slave to his fear. “As soon as you’ve eaten your fill today, you sit and moan about what tomorrow may bring, worrying about how you’ll be able to feed yourself. If you manage to get any food, slave, you’ll have it, and if you don’t, you’ll leave this world; the door stands open. Why grieve? What place is left for tears?;” (*Disc.* 1.9.19-20) for an account of Epictetus’ Open Door policy on suicide, see Stephens (2014). Thus, Epictetus sees no reason to fear starving to death. God will either provide food or not. If so, then there’s nothing to fear. If not, then there’s no dishonor in exiting life when God decides it’s our time. After all, only mortals need food and death is not to be feared anyway.

Today neostoics inhabit a world of billions of people with limited or uncertain access to food. This condition is known as *food insecurity*. Globally one in four people – 1.9 billion – are moderately or severely food insecure (Roser and Ritchie 2019). Nine percent of the world population – around 697 million – are severely food insecure. Eleven percent of the world’s population are undernourished, meaning that their daily caloric intake falls below minimum energy requirements. Globally 820 million people are undernourished. Children suffer disproportionately. Twenty-two percent of kids under the age of five are ‘stunted.’ They are significantly shorter than the average for their age due to poor nutrition or repeated infection (Roser and Ritchie 2019). In 2019 in the United States 35 million struggled with hunger (Feeding America 2022). In 2018, before Covid-19, 14.3 million American households were food insecure.

Would Epictetus scold a hungry, undernourished child for shedding a tear? Certainly not. Epictetus scolds an *adult* who has ‘eaten his fill’ and then immediately frets about going hungry tomorrow. The Open Door Policy is for

²⁰ Quotations of the *Discourses* are from Epictetus (2014).

²¹ That is, calling for suicide.

adults, not food-insecure children. Nonetheless, neostoics strive to become just *and* to push for just practices, policies, and institutions. Why? Because the Stoic concepts of social *oikeiōsis* and cosmopolitanism support an argument for communitarian and political activism.²² Food insecurity is unjust. Epictetus is right that food insecurity, undernourishment, and hunger ought not to be *feared*, yet stoics will *oppose* them. Neostoics would regard these as urgent problems that governments and philanthropic organizations ought to ameliorate. In short, food insecurity results from inequitable, inefficient systems of food production and distribution. Such unjust systems should be reformed. Therefore, neostoics will do all they can to promote food security locally and globally.

What about those who can always access sufficient food? For the food secure, Epictetus agrees with Seneca and Musonius that the purpose of eating is not to feel pleasure (*Disc.* 3.24.37–38). We should take only what the body strictly needs in food, drink, clothing, and shelter and eliminate luxury and ostentation altogether (*Handbook* 33.7). Each gift in life is only loaned to us for a limited time, neither irrevocably nor forever, “like a fig or bunch of grapes, for a particular season of the year; so that if you long for it in the winter, you’re a fool.” (*Disc.* 3.24.86) We must adapt our desires to what is available, when it is available. Also, Epictetus denies that the conflicting opinions concerning food of Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, and Romans could all be right (*Disc.* 1.11.12–13). Whatever is done in accordance with nature, he states, is rightly done (*Disc.* 1.115). Criteria allow us to distinguish between what accords with nature and what conflicts with it. The criterion distinguishing colors is vision. The criterion distinguishing hot, cold, hard, and soft is touch. Epictetus grants that it is perhaps no great harm for a person not to know the criterion of odors and flavors. But serious harm results from ignorance of the criterion of good and evil, of what accords with nature and what is contrary to it (*Disc.* 1.11.9–11). As noted above, Epictetus rejects eating whatever tastes good. When asked how to eat so as to please the gods, he said by eating “as one ought and politely, and indeed with temperance and restraint.” (*Disc.* 1.13.1) The proper scruples for eating are politeness, temperance, and restraint. We must understand these scruples so we can apply them correctly at every meal.²³ Over time, with experience and persistence, the Stoic assimilates this understanding through a process of digestion (see Tremblay 2019). Those who have digested their philosophical principles show it by eating, drinking, dressing, marrying, having children, and being citizens as a human being should (*Disc.* 3.21.1–5).

Epictetus advocates not vegetarianism but rather anthropocentrism: “God has constituted each [animal] according to its intended purpose, one to be eaten,

²² For Stoic communitarianism see Long (2007). A few of the many studies of the Stoic theory of *oikeiōsis* are Engberg-Pedersen (1990), Reydams-Schils (2002), and Klein (2016). On Stoic cosmopolitanism see Stanton (1968), Brown (1997), Sellars (2007), and Hill (2015).

²³ For competing views on how doctrines (*decreta*) and precepts (*praecepta*) operate in Stoicism, see Mitsis (1993), Inwood (1999), and Brittain (2001).

another to be used in fields, another to produce cheese, and another for some comparable use.” (*Disc.* 1.6.18)²⁴ Several of Epictetus’ texts about domesticated animals defend this objectionable anthropocentrism. This raises a problem. How are we to reconcile Musonius’ strict lacto-vegetarianism with Epictetus’ anthropocentric defense of using and eating domesticated animals? We cannot. Given our best empirical scientific understanding of biology, evolution, and astronomy, we now know that Earth is at the center of neither this solar system, nor the Milky Way galaxy, which itself is not at the center of countless other galaxies (Becker 2017, xiii, 11-12). We now know that *Homo sapiens* is only one of four primate species with considerable intelligence, sociability, and communicative skills. Ethology teaches us today what Porphyry and Plutarch²⁵ knew in antiquity, that the *logos*, intelligence, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities that so many have, for so long, fancied to be the monopoly of our species are certainly shared in varying degrees by thousands of other species of cetaceans, octopi, terrestrial mammals, birds, reptiles, fish, and insects. So, neostoics should follow Becker and accept that science refutes anthropocentrism.

Epictetus follows Seneca in prescribing abstinence. Abstinence is required to discipline one’s desires so as to follow nature in accordance with the ethical principles of Stoicism. “You should practice at one time to live like one who is ill, so as to be able, one day, to live like one who is healthy. Take no food, drink water alone; abstain from every desire at one time so as to be able, one day, to exercise your desire in a reasonable way.” (*Disc.* 3.13.21) Ignorance (about how to eat agreeably with nature) is an illness requiring therapy (abstinence). Convalescence is achieved by eating and drinking only what is strictly necessary, eliminating all luxuries, and vanquishing all worries about food.

5. Marcus Aurelius Denies Dead Meat is Delectable

In his *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius often reminds himself to strip away the illusions that beguile people into craving fame, riches, luxuries, and carnal pleasures. For example, when beholding a fancy plate of meat or a pricey glass of wine, some see fabulous delicacies and swoon. Instead, Marcus cautions himself to perceive what they really are.

Like seeing roasted meat and other dishes in front of you and suddenly realizing: This is a dead fish. A dead bird. A dead pig. Or that this noble vintage is grape juice... Perceptions like that – latching onto things and piercing through them, so we see what they really are. That’s what we need to do all the time – all through our lives when things lay claim to our trust – to lay them bare and see how pointless they are, to strip away the legend that encrusts them. Pride is a master

²⁴ Epictetus admonishes dinner guests to take only their polite share of the roast (*Disc.* 2.4.8).

²⁵ Newmyer (1999) treats Plutarch’s dispute with the Stoics on the rationality of animals.

of deception: when you think you're occupied in the weightiest business, that's when he has you in his spell. (*Med.* vi.13)²⁶

I do not construe this text as an *argument* against meat. Rather, this 'stripping away' is an important psychological strategy for Marcus. He uses it to keep from attaching his desire to widely coveted externals. Here he reflects that to gourmandize meat is to prettify a cadaver. To glorify meat and alcohol is to bewitch oneself into cherishing calories. For Marcus, calories are garbage compared to a sound, insightful mind. His clear-sighted, sober perception about the corpses people unthinkingly gobble up extends to disdain toward living human bodies. He urges himself to despise his flesh, which is "a mess of blood, pieces of bone, a woven tangle of nerves, veins, arteries." (*Med.* ii.2) Marcus is revolted by his own body: "The stench of decay. Rotting meat in a bag. Look at it clearly. If you can." (*Med.* viii.38) Innards are grotesque to Marcus. The body's relentless craving for food, drink, and sex, coupled with its incessant aches, pains, nausea, fatigue, insomnia, injuries, and illness, lead him to see death as the end of enslavement to the body (*Med.* vi.28). If death is nothingness, then he will no longer have to put up with pain and pleasure and attending to the 'battered crate' that is his body, which is 'earth and garbage' compared to the mind and spirit it serves (*Med.* iii.3).²⁷ Neostoics certainly need not share Marcus' disgust for the human body to glean instruction from the Roman Stoics' philosophy of food.

The Roman Stoics decry luxurious eating and eating for pleasure. Seneca and Musonius Rufus regard meat as a luxury to eliminate. Nourishing grains, legumes, vegetables, fruits, nuts, and seeds sustain physical health. We need wholesome vegetarian foods in order to live well and cultivate virtues. Wisdom knows the difference between eating what we *need* for healthy activities (including the intellectual activities of reflection, contemplation, and deliberation) and eating what we *want* for pleasure. Meat is ordinarily prepared to taste pleasant, and we want it as a luxury. Meat is typically not chosen as a vital need. Luxurious habits manifest the vices of self-indulgence, gluttony, and wastefulness, vices of hedonism. Austerity, in contrast, is commended by wisdom as a habit for a sound, healthy character.

6. Meat is Complex

When thinking about their role as *eaters*, contemporary stoics not only practice politeness, restraint, and temperance but are also mindful of their roles as *consumers*. Food requires water and energy to produce. Per capita, citizens of developed countries consume far more energy, water, and natural resources than citizens of developing countries while generating far greater volumes of greenhouse gases. Consequently, temperance is not the only virtue operative in

²⁶ Quotations of the *Meditations* are from Aurelius (2003).

²⁷ Nussbaum (2002, 45-49) projects this theme in Marcus to the view of externals in Stoic cosmopolitanism.

stoic food ethics. Food justice will also matter. But since food justice pertains to food industries, and food industries involve institutions, the following objection arises. Julia Annas observes that “the [ancient] Stoics have no systematic answer to the question, how justice as a virtue of the individual agent relates to justice as a virtue of institutions.” (1993, 311) For precisely this reason contemporary stoics must step in to fill this void by identifying the injustices of today’s food systems and articulating practical ethical norms to oppose them. So, justice as a virtue of the individual agent dictates actively working to reform or abolish unjust institutions, systems, and practices. This activism may well require the virtues of courage and persistence. Another virtue of stoic consumers is wisdom. Wisdom dictates debunking the misguided, destructive belief system of carnism. Carnism is the prevailing, violent ideology, supported by mostly unchallenged assumptions, that eating meat is natural, normal, necessary, and nice (Joy 2010). I suggest that wisdom, courage, justice, and temperance, as virtues of the individual consumer, dictate buying and eating food products that are as little implicated as possible in harms to human health, food industry workers, nonhuman animals, and the environment.

These considerations led Stephens (1994) to reconstruct five arguments for a veg*n²⁸ diet as a virtuous goal for people who are not food insecure. The *Argument from Distributive Justice* is that the Meat and Dairy Industrial Complex (MADIC) steers agricultural resources away from the poor to supply meat and dairy products to the affluent, thereby exacerbating food insecurity for the vulnerable and disempowered while catering to the preferences of the wealthy and powerful. Therefore, MADIC violates the principle of distributive justice.

The *Argument from Environmental Harm* is that MADIC causes serious, manifold, widespread damages to the environment. These include depleting fresh water and aquifers, water pollution, soil compaction, soil erosion, depleting soil fertility, deforestation, desertification, destruction of wildlife, reducing biodiversity, consumption of nonrenewable energies, and production of greenhouse gases that severely worsen global climate change (see also Shogry 2020 and Whiting et al. 2020).

The *Feminist Argument from Sexual Politics* is that meat-eating and patriarchy are intimately connected, as are vegetarianism and feminism. Meat symbolizes oppression and violence perpetrated against both nonhuman animals and women, so vegetarianism signally rejects our ‘meat is king’ patriarchal culture. The Cynics championed gender equality. Engel (2000) shows that, with some inconsistency, Musonius Rufus did too. Hill (2020) convincingly argues that neostoics embrace feminism (see also Aikin and McGill-Rutherford 2014).

The *Argument from Moral Consideration for Animals* is that exploiting nonhuman animals by breeding them into existence only to rapidly fatten them up in miserable, disease-infested conditions (in CAFOs) and, at a very young age,

²⁸ A term designating both vegetarian and vegan.

slaughter them as cheaply as possible, is wrong. Since anthropocentrism is untenable and veg*n alternatives abound, we can and ought to boycott MADIC products and abolish CAFOs.

Finally, the *Prudential Argument from Health* is that meat, dairy, and egg consumption is implicated in high cholesterol, obesity, atherosclerosis, heart disease, stroke, breast cancer, uterine cancer, cervical cancer, prostate cancer, lung cancer, kidney disease, and osteoporosis.²⁹ Heavy meat consumption shortens life expectancy. People with diabetes, hypertension, rheumatoid arthritis, kidney stones, diverticulitis, gall bladder disease, peptic ulcers, and asthma benefit by switching to veg*n diets. So, the virtue of prudence recommends balanced veg*n diets over diets in which animal products dominate.

Unsurprisingly, the values motivating these five arguments are more popular among political liberals. Western vegetarians tend to be liberals who value environmental protection, equality, and social justice while opposing hierarchy, authoritarianism, capital punishment, and violence (Nezlek and Forestell 2019, 549). Vegetarians are also more altruistic than omnivores and more likely to work in charitable organizations, local governments, or education (Nezlek and Forestell 2019, 549). In this vein, occupational injuries, psychological traumas, and abuses suffered by CAFO workers call for replacing MADIC with systems that protect agricultural laborers from harm and exploitation. (This includes farmers and workers in the avocado industry, who are often beaten, tortured, kidnapped, raped, or murdered.) As the world population approaches eight billion, water-related violence surges globally while meat and dairy consumption escalates in China and India (see Safi 2019).³⁰ Thus, the MADIC with its ballooning demands for fresh water and fossil fuels promises to contribute to greater geopolitical destabilization.

7. Wet Markets and Pandemics

One place humans come into contact with animals is at wet markets. Wet markets are typically large groups of open-air stalls selling fresh seafood, meat, fruits, and vegetables. At some wet markets live chickens, fish, shellfish, and other animals are slaughtered and sold. One explanation for the name is that live fish splash in tubs of water, melting ice keeps meat cold, and the blood and innards of slaughtered animals all make these markets wet places. In China, for many, wet markets are a staple of daily life. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan, China is believed by some to be the source of COVID-19 (Maron 2020). Some wet markets also sell wild animal meat, colloquially known as bushmeat. The Huanan market sold live wild animals and the bushmeat of snakes, beavers, porcupines, baby crocodiles, and other animals. Close interactions with wild animals have caused numerous disease outbreaks in humans, including Ebola and HIV. Buying,

²⁹ Though shellfish is high in cholesterol, fish is not generally implicated in these diseases.

³⁰ Meat more than milk in China and the reverse in India.

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selling, and slaughtering wild animals for food is one way an animal-borne disease may infect people. Viruses can spread more easily when animals are confined in dirty, cramped conditions, such as in stacked cages, and get sick (see Foer 2009, Stephens 2019). When animals are under duress, viral pathogens can intermingle, swap bits of genetic code, and perhaps mutate to become more transmissible between species. Respiratory diseases like COVID-19 can infect food handlers or customers through exposure to an animal's bodily fluids (Maron 2020). "Some of the most common and deadliest human diseases are caused by bacteria or viruses of animal origin. In recent decades this trend has only increased, with an estimated 70 percent of emerging and re-emerging pathogens coming from animals. This includes avian flu, Ebola virus disease, influenza, leprosy, lassa fever, MERS-CoV, rabies, SARS, smallpox, tuberculosis, Zika fever, and other well-known diseases." (WHO 2020) The prevalence of zoonotic diseases results from our relationship with nonhuman animals. That relationship is complex, often unhealthy, and on the whole suspect.

Health is regarded by Stoics as 'a preferred indifferent.' So, Stoics select healthy foods except in bizarre circumstances in which selecting healthier foods would conflict with virtue. Wet markets endanger public health, just as CAFOs do. So why are wet markets and CAFOs so popular worldwide? Partly because Big Ag corporations are permitted to externalize much of their costs; partly due to the broader forces of capitalist industrialization; and partly because consumers have been habituated, through tradition, religious indoctrination, and aggressive marketing, to eat animals. The violent ideology according to which eating animals is normal, natural, necessary, and nice is termed carnism (Joy 2010). But there is nothing nice about the toll on human lives, human health, economies, and the education of students imposed by Covid-19. Pathogens are natural in a sense. Yet I argue that it is contrary to reason and virtue for stoics today to support food systems likely to spawn new pathogens. Justice, wisdom, simplicity, and self-interest obligate neostoics to prefer low-input plants and plant-based foods.

Should stoics favor locally produced food? First, importing food from afar is deplorable decadence, Seneca insists, whenever adequate fare is nearby (*Prov.* 3.6). Second, Seneca (*Otio* 4.1) and Marcus Aurelius (*Med.* vi.44) adduce twin commonwealths to which every citizen (*politēs*) belongs: the world (*cosmos*) and the city of one's birth (e.g. Rome, Chicago, Tokyo). Thus, this dual citizenship includes both local responsibilities, e.g. supporting local farmers, and global concerns, e.g. ameliorating global climate change and ocean pollution. Yet the most effective way for most Americans, for example, to reduce their diet's carbon footprint is not by buying local, but by eliminating or reducing their consumption of animal products (Leaves 2017). Stoic consumers have a duty to act individually and collectively to oppose carnism. Stoic citizens must promote more efficient, more sustainable, fairer, safer, non-violent food systems locally, regionally, nationally, and globally.

Which rules govern stoicism and food? “As Seneca emphasizes in *Letter 71.1*, advice is adjusted to situations, and situations are in flux. If one needs advice, one is not asking to be told the correct rule to cover the situation; one is asking how to balance various considerations.” (Vogt 2020)

8. Conclusion

Diogenes the Cynic, the Roman Stoics, Pythagoras, Epicurus, and Porphyry all endorsed frugal diets and rejected ambitious eating, luxuries, and gustatory decadence. All the Roman Stoics advocated limiting eating and drinking to strict bodily need and quelling anxieties about food. The lessons for stoics are clear enough. Concerns about food insecurity and food sovereignty, the resource demands and manifold environmental harms of the MADIC, the costs to human health of diets based on animal products, the ongoing pandemic sprung from a wet market, past outbreaks of zoonotic diseases unleashed from CAFOs, and the violent ideology of carnism, prescribe veg*n precepts to stoics for whom meatless foods are available and affordable. Intensively produced animal products³¹ are luxuries that extract too great a cost on the animals, the CAFO workers, the food-insecure, small farms, women, the environment, the climate, and public health. Contemporary stoics see no wisdom, justice, or temperance in eating animal parts whenever plants will do.³²

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³¹ This might exclude sustainably raised insects.

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