



THE

ATKINS

DIET

AND

PHILOSOPHY

✂ **CHEWING THE FAT WITH KANT AND NIETZSCHE** ✂
EDITED BY LISA HELDKE, KERRI MOMMER, AND CYNTHIA PINEO

The Atkins Diet and Philosophy

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The Atkins Diet and Philosophy

Chewing the Fat with
Kant and Nietzsche

Edited by

LISA HELDKE, KERRI MOMMER,
and CYNTHIA PINEO



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To our sweeties and honeypies:

David and Arlo

Veronica, Reggie, and Mike

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In(tro)duction: Setting the Table

Ever since Plato proposed a diet of roasted meats for his guardians while on campaign (they're easy to prepare, you don't have to carry any cooking pots, and cleanup is a breeze!),¹ the subject of our diet—what we eat, and why—has hovered on the edges of philosophers' attention. Once in a while, it has emerged into a full-blown discussion, as in Nietzsche's book *Ecce Homo*, which includes a lengthy disquisition on his own dietary choices. But most of what philosophers have had to say about diet could be written on small Post-it Notes. (Care for an example? Did you know that it was a philosopher who first said "You are what you eat"? Ludwig Feuerbach made the observation in 1850.² By the way, the expression is a lot catchier in the original German: "Der Mensch ist was er isst.")

In point of fact, there is no shortage of philosophically relevant issues involving food—growing it, distributing it, preparing it, eating it, and then sending it on to its next task. And some philosophers have long been deeply engaged in examining some of these issues, including sociopolitical issues about hunger and justice and ethical issues about vegetarianism. The

¹ Plato, *Republic*, Book 3, translated by Benjamin Jowett, available online at Classic Reader website, <http://www.classicreader.com/read.php/sid.8/bookid.1788/sec.24/>.

² Feuerbach makes the comment in a discussion of the work of physiologist Jacob Moleschott, entitled "The Natural Sciences and the Revolution." Feuerbach goes on to observe, "Now we know, on scientific grounds, what the masses know from long experience, that eating and drinking hold together body and soul, that the searched-for bond is nutrition." Quoted in Marx Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 414.

past fifteen years have witnessed the emergence of even more philosophical interest in food, including topics ranging from environmental ethics (biotechnology, factory farming) to aesthetics (taste, disgust) to epistemology and metaphysics (cooking as theory making, food and personhood). In case the present volume whets your appetite for more, we've included a brief bibliography of historical and contemporary works in the philosophy of food.

But while philosophers do at least sometimes talk about food, and even about our diet, perhaps only one philosopher—Richard Watson—has directly taken on the topic of *dieting*—that is, a program of eating designed to lose weight. But his *Philosopher's Diet* is really interested in telling his readers *how* to lose weight—in a reflective, philosophical way, of course.³ Unlike Richard Watson, we don't really want to diet; we just want to *think* about dieting. And what better way to bring the philosophical reflection on dieting down to gut level, than a collection of ruminations on one of the most significant diet movements of our age—the Atkins Diet?

Oh, not that there haven't been a few skeptics—initially, at least. In conversations at philosophy conferences, for instance, the most common reaction we received, when we reported that Open Court was going to publish a book on the Atkins Diet and philosophy, was barking laughter. But once listeners realized we weren't kidding, they'd ponder, silently, for a few minutes, and then perform a conceptual one-eighty. “You know, that's not such a crazy idea after all. In fact, *I* can think of a few things I'd like to say about that topic—especially after the lunch I just endured/enjoyed with my colleague who isn't/is on the Atkins/South Beach/NeanderThin diet.”

This volume collects sixteen essays by contributors who chew on the diet from a number of philosophical angles and a variety of personal perspectives. Here, you can sample essays written by practitioners of the Atkins Diet or one of its low-carb cousins; by people who are not on the diet; and by people who choose to keep mum about their own current relationships to carbohydrates. (We made an editorial decision to respect their right to remain silent on the matter of whether or not sliced

³ Richard A. Watson, *The Philosopher's Diet: How to Lose Weight and Change the World* (Boston: Godine, 1999).

bread is the greatest thing since, well, since unsliced bread.) Not only do the writers collected here represent a range of personal eating practices; they also represent a considerable diversity of philosophical perspectives. Here you'll find essays using the Atkins Diet to illustrate ideas from such historically important philosophers as Kant, Hume, Nietzsche, Marx, and Dewey. But you'll also find essays that examine the diet from the perspective of contemporary environmental philosophy, feminist philosophy, critical race theory, philosophy of science, and pragmatism (to mention just a few of the philosophical approaches employed). Some of the essays use Atkins to illuminate philosophy, others use philosophy to illuminate Atkins, and some do a little of both. All of the essays invite you to think—more carefully, perhaps, than you usually do—about *why* you eat what you choose to eat. They're not here to tell you what to think—or what to eat, for that matter. But that doesn't mean they aren't going to give you plenty of ideas to digest—at least some of which might leave you feeling bit queasy. Hopefully some of them will also make you laugh—which, as we all know, is a great digestive aid.

* * * * *

Why the *Atkins* Diet and philosophy rather than some other diet? First, the Atkins Diet has shown more longevity than most diets, having first reached popularity over three decades ago. It cannot be dismissed as a fad—even though some of the more bizarre comestibles it has inspired might deserve that moniker. (Does anyone really believe cinnamon-flavored pork rinds are here to stay?) Second, the eating plan that Atkins advocates is a radical departure from both traditional “balanced diet” plans (such as Weight Watchers or Jenny Craig) and low-fat diets. In fact, because the Atkins eating plan seems so counterintuitive, and since it seems to fly in the face of much current expert opinion, this diet raises chewy philosophical questions about how to decide the best way to eat, how to decide what to believe, and how to decide who to believe about dietary matters.

* * * * *

Okay, then, why the Atkins Diet and *philosophy*? For centuries, philosophy was regarded as the “queen of the sciences.” As

such, it had a tendency—annoying or utterly warranted, depending upon your perspective—to stick its nose in everywhere, and to pronounce on everything. After all, it was the queen; it had a responsibility to make meta-pronouncements! Today, many philosophers are less likely to address the discipline as Your Highness, but we still believe that *reflective, theoretical* questions surround every form of intellectual inquiry, and that these questions can and ought to be examined, both by people within those disciplines and by philosophers.

* * * * *

Is there something Pavlovian about the fact that mentioning the topics of food and philosophy together will invariably trigger the bad pun response in people? No, we mean it; *really* bad puns. Puns far worse than the run-of-the-mill bad puns that often serve as subtitles for the Popular Culture and Philosophy series. You don't believe us, eh? (Or does that scowl on your face just mean you're too busy thinking up your own bad pun to respond?) Consider, if you will, some of the subtitles that were found littering the table after an editorial meeting (amidst the no-carb energy bar wrappers and the fragment of a bagel that someone had failed to fully conceal in a paper napkin):

Thus Steak Zarathustra
The Seamy Underbelly of Philosophy
Twilight of the Carbos
Meataphysical Ruminations
The Carbegorical Imperative
Sinking Your Teeth into the War on Carbs
Steak and Eggheads
Driving a Steak through Carbs
Meaty Issues
Fleshing Out the Dry Bones of . . .
Hamming It Up . . .

(The last two were obviously so bad that the brainstormer didn't bother to finish the thought.)

Sit back, get comfortable, and grab your favorite low-carb treat, be it chicken satay with peanut dipping sauce, sugar-free mocha ricotta crème, spicy pork rinds with guacamole, or a

modest handful of chili-roasted macadamia nuts, along with a cup of decaf coffee with heavy cream or a tall, cool glass of lemonade (made with Splenda® of course). Then you'll be ready to eat, drink (or read, think), and be merry, for tomorrow you shall diet.

Part 1

Protein

(Personal Choice
and Action)

1

Cutting the Conceptual Carbs: Dewey as Dietician, Atkins as Pragmatist

RANDALL E. AUXIER

Dr. Atkins has trimmed our waistlines, changed our way of looking at the familiar processes of the human body, and certainly taken our money. One would think this would be enough of an achievement for one lifetime. But I wonder if we might not squeeze a bit more from his “revolution” than even he imagined. Maybe, just maybe, Atkins has hit upon something that can help us with another epidemic. I think so, at least. I want to use something I learned from Dr. Atkins to explain something I think everyone ought to grasp, which is the philosophy of pragmatism.

Doubtful Beginnings

The philosophy of pragmatism has made a marked difference in the domain of human thinking, enjoying a lengthy heyday from the 1890s up through the early 1950s, and enjoying a new resurgence of attention and influence in the last two decades. Philosophical pragmatism does not tell us what we should *do*; rather, it gives us some norms and rules for our *thinking* (of course thinking is doing *something*, but let’s not quibble over details just yet). Perhaps the most important pragmatist was John Dewey (1859–1952), who managed to write exactly ten times as many books as you have time to read, and to smoke cigarettes every day of his adult life and still live to be ninety-two. A man like that commands respect. Just thinking about it makes me want a cigarette. But I bring him up here not because I want a cigarette, although I do (with the help of

Dewey's philosophy I quit smoking in 1988—and again in 1996 and 2002), but because Dewey knew something that will help us understand *why* the Atkins Diet works, which is where I want to start this story, before moving to what Atkins can teach us about pragmatism.

Dr. Atkins himself explains the physiological reasons why his diet works well enough,¹ but I am in pursuit of something a little more general than that. I'm looking for a kind of "self-knowledge," a philosophical reflection upon why the diet works, and in so doing, with your indulgence, I need to start with why it worked *for me*.

Pragmatists insist on restricting inquiry to "genuine doubt," as distinct from the over-used "hyperbolic doubt" employed by René Descartes and his followers. Hyperbolic or exaggerated doubt is a popular method in very abstract types of philosophies, doubt of sort that goes beyond what is inspired by pressing problems and ordinary curiosity. Pragmatists don't care for it. Hyperbolic doubt won't bring you any toilet paper when you're stranded. And obviously life is short and we haven't got time to doubt everything; as with friends, pick your doubts carefully. So, returning to Atkins, part of what causes this to be a "genuine doubt" for me is that I have had a personal stake in it. I don't doubt that the Atkins Diet works for a lot of people, but I did doubt that I fully understood why. Now I think I get part of the reason.

Kitchen Confessions of a Pragmatist

First, the ugly story of success: While I was not fat in 2001, I had about twenty extra pounds, and entering midlife I knew I was not healthy. Every time I quit smoking I would pick up five or seven pounds, for example, and somehow not drop them again when I started back, which seems grossly unfair. I mean, if there were a *benevolent* God or *any* justice in the universe, at the very least we should be trim from destroying our lungs. But no. I had actually tried a low-fat diet in the fall of that year—which put ten more pounds on me, thank you very

¹ Robert C. Atkins, *Dr. Atkins' New Diet Revolution*, revised edition (New York: Avon, 2002), Part 1, pp. 3–104.

much. Without realizing it or understanding it, I was making up for the loss of protein and fat in my diet by consuming more carbs, and as it turns out, I am particularly susceptible to carbs—adult-onset diabetes runs in the family. So I went on the Atkins Diet in February of 2002 and lost twenty pounds in short order during Induction. I stayed on Induction until June of that year, and then went on the OWL program (ongoing weight loss), gradually losing another fifteen pounds by August of 2004, achieving my goal weight in that month. I celebrated with a cigarette, but only one.

All of the things Dr. Atkins promised came to pass in my case. No more sugar crashes after meals (the blood sugar yo-yo), more energy; I felt better, and I was able to negotiate this diet in such a way as to make it into a sustainable lifestyle. As Atkins promised, I do take great delight in the foods I get to eat, and the only things I really miss are bread and pasta. But now I can occasionally nibble a crust, although negotiating the “maintenance” part of the diet has been a little trickier than I thought—I like wine a little too much, I think, but then, so did Jesus according to some of his ancient critics. Unlike Jesus I have to *pay* for mine, but all things considered, I wouldn’t trade places with Jesus just for the free wine. Yes, yes, good for you, Auxier, whoop-de-doo, you and Jesus are skinny. As a matter of fact, I am happier too, although I firmly suspect this has to do with having deeply internalized a bit of “junkthought” regarding how I *ought* to look, perhaps from consuming too many television images for thirty years. But there is no denying that this mindless and ironic cult of youth we live in likes to see a flat stomach, while almost 65 percent of us are overweight and over 30 percent are obese.² Countering this obsession with skeletal supermodels, I have noticed how the models in the pictures at Wal-Mart’s clothing department are almost all pretty stout these days, and the shirts that we used to call “extra-large” we now call “medium.” It’s disturbing to me when Wal-Mart becomes a more reliable barometer of reality than television. But I guess their marketing people have been to Wal-Mart, on occasion, and have noticed who is shopping there. The underwear aisle is enough to turn anyone to Atkins.

² Robert C. Atkins, *Atkins for Life* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003), p. ix.

“Habits and Habitats”

Now my conjecture is that Atkins works not only because it has a sound physiological basis, but also because it taps into our already established habits, and here is where Dewey can be our dietician. Dewey is one of only a few major Western moral philosophers, along with David Hume (1711–1776) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), who sees “habit” as the Archimedean point of the good life. Dewey says:

The difficulty in the way of attaining and maintaining practical wisdom is the urgency of immediate impulse and desire which swell and swell until they crowd out all thought of remote and comprehensive goods. The conflict is a real one and is at the heart of many of our more serious struggles and lapses. In the main, solution is found in utilizing all possible occasions, when we are not in the presence of conflicting desires, to cultivate interest in those goods which we do approve in our calm moments of reflection. . . . There are many times when the cultivation of these interests meets with no strong obstacle. The habits which are built up and reenforced under such conditions are the best bulwarks against weakness and surrender in the moments when the reflective or “true” good conflicts with that set up by temporary and intense desire.³

Dewey never won any prizes for writing, but the message is clear enough. If you want to live wisely and well, form good habits when you are *not* in the throes of desire. As Bill Clinton will eagerly testify, you don’t do your best decision-making in amorous moments, especially relative to the long-term values you embrace when she isn’t around. Those good habits rehearsed and enacted by the calm heart and sated stomach are what will best sustain you when you come to a difficult moment of choice. We could do worse than to make Dewey our dietician. Dr. Atkins supplements our choice by pointing out that you can have much of what you *want* in answer to those very foreseeable crises, a steak for the black eye of desire. Make a few good choices about *how* to gratify your desires, according to a few time-proven, long-term principles, get into the habit of making those choices, and the short-term crisis of desire can be weathered.

³ John Dewey, *The Later Works, 1925–1953, Volume 7: Ethics, 1932* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), p. 208.

Before moving to a more thorough discussion of pragmatism with Atkins as our guide, I think it should be pointed out that people (such as I) who do not have any special affinity for sugar have a far easier beast to tame than do those for whom sugar is the very *bête noire*. My special carbo-weakness was for bread and pasta, but luckily I cared little for potatoes, corn, or anything with sugar in it. The alteration of my habits led me away from Italian restaurants (a great loss) and required me to tread carefully in Mexican places, and I was obliged to throw out about twenty of my favorite recipes, since (contrary to the claims of Robert and Veronica Atkins) they never have and never will make edible pasta out of soy. I now realize I will probably never cook or order pasta again, and that I am doomed to scour Mexican menus for odd words like *ceviche* and Italian ones for *pescche*. That is a long-term sacrifice that I seem to be able (so far) to maintain. My only alternative to the sacrifice would be exercise, and I know myself better than to imagine that I will do something that resolutely refuses to become a habit. And from this moment of self-honesty a general point emerges, which is that Atkins or any other diet (or lifestyle) really has to be interpreted relative to the individual problem one faces, and then applied pragmatically to *that* problem. My unscientific guess is that people who already don't care for sugar and potatoes have the best luck with Atkins, since the habits associated with the diet are, for them, easily acquired. Also, I would suppose, again unscientifically (I have read the controversies and can form no opinion), that people who are fighting cholesterol, heart problems, and high blood pressure might do better on a low-fat, low-sodium diet than on Atkins. Meanwhile, it would seem that people whose main trouble is avoiding adult-onset diabetes will likely derive more benefit from finding their own way of doing Atkins, but in all cases, the task is one of modifying habits in ways that are maintainable both in the short and long term.

Atkins encourages us without surcease to adopt the sorts of habits that can be sustained; he tells us that we cannot seriously expect to stay on a diet under whose draconian reign we become as peasants waif and wan. But what is a habit anyway? Dewey says:

[W]e need a word to express the kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which

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