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**Meals and Meaning**

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**Abstract**

This paper takes meals, rather than food itself, as its focus. Meals are a way of incorporating the project of nutrition into human life, but it is a contingent matter that we nourish ourselves in this way. Consider the products offered as meal replacements, providing daily nutrition in a single beverage; we could indeed 'reformat' our food-intake practices. This paper defends the importance of meals as meaning-makers, but also contrasts them with art in that regard. Meals and art represent two interestingly different extremes, where each extreme helps us meet a need for meaning. An artwork, usually with the help of entrenched expectations and conventions, isolates something for our attention and response. The appreciator aims to experience and thereby understand whatever meaning may be offered in a work of art. Meanwhile, in a meal there is no element, not even the necessary element of food, that needs to be the centre of attention and object of knowledge. Meals help us to have recognizable lives, with various kinds of identity and meaning, but not because our participation in meals gives us good access to their meaning (e.g., see Douglas 1982 on British cocoa and biscuits; Strong 2003 on meals under the Benedictine Rule; Finkelstein 1989 on 1980's urban restaurant meals; Abarca 2006 on memories of childhood meals in Mexico). The meaning of art is to be experienced, while the meaning of meals is to be enacted and collectively accumulated. I take this to be not a negative feature of meals, something that diminishes their value, but rather a reflection of the importantly different kind of meaning and value meals have evolved to have. While we need opportunities for experience-based questioning and reflective assignment of meaning (Wollheim 1984), we also need ways to realise a collectively shareable and recognizable human context (Margolis 2009). Meals are an amazingly effective way of enacting many features of a culture's historical, spiritual, material, ethical and political life, making a multiply meaningful event out of the satisfaction of a biological need.

**Selected sources**

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