

Food Technology Narratives



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How do we defend/criticize novel foods?



Natural seems better than artificial



Even safe artificial seems iffy

- Ammonium compounds
- Ascorbyl palmitate
- Calcium stearoyl lactylate
- Erythritol
- Ferrous gluconate
- Fumaric acid
- Polysorbate 60
- Sodium erythorbate
- Sorbitan monostearate



Public Opinion



- US (Harris Poll, 2012)
 - 43% oppose GM foods
 - 63% seek out natural foods
 - 35% willing to pay more
- Europe (*Eurobarometer* 354, 2010)
 - 71% oppose GM foods
 - 51% “fairly worried” food no longer natural
 - 25% “very worried” about food additives

Food industry responds



- ***Frito-Lay*** to discontinue MSG, FD&C Red 40, and 30 other additives from its chips.
- ***Nestlé*** to remove all artificial colors, flavors, and preservatives – 80 additives – from all of its candies.
- ***Kraft*** to replace Yellow 5 & 6 in its macaroni and cheese powders; remove preservatives from American cheese.
- ***General Mills*** to replace artificial colors in its baking products.

Food technologies have supporters



- Food manufacturers
- Government officials and regulatory agencies
- Scientists
- Advocacy organizations
- The public
 - Most people have no opinion
 - Trust communications messengers: farmers, FDA, friends and family, scientists and academics

Moral-political justifications



- **Consequentialist**
 - Good actions bring about the best consequences for the most people
 - Governments should promote the general welfare
- **Rights**
 - Individuals have inviolable rights (life, freedom, property)
 - Governments have the duty to protect our rights

Consequentialist justifications



- Useful
- Beneficial
- Harmless
- Traditional
- Functionally equivalent

Rights justifications



- Freedom
- Justice
- Responsibility

Moral-political arguments against



- Consequentialist
- Rights
- Harmony with nature
- Quality of life

Consequentialist arguments



- Bad for your health
- Bad for children
- Bad for animals
- Bad for the environment
- Bad for public policy
- Bad for international policy

Rights arguments



- Disrespectful
- Irresponsible
- Deceptive

Harmony with nature arguments



- Impure
- Alienating
- Disgusting

Quality of life arguments against



- Undesirable
- Inappropriate
- Unrefined
- Profane
- Taste worse
- Cheating

All arguments presuppose narratives



- Stories focus on the central actors,
- select the key events,
- create meaningful accounts of what happened,
- put events into context,
- portray characters,
- represent things with historical dimensions.

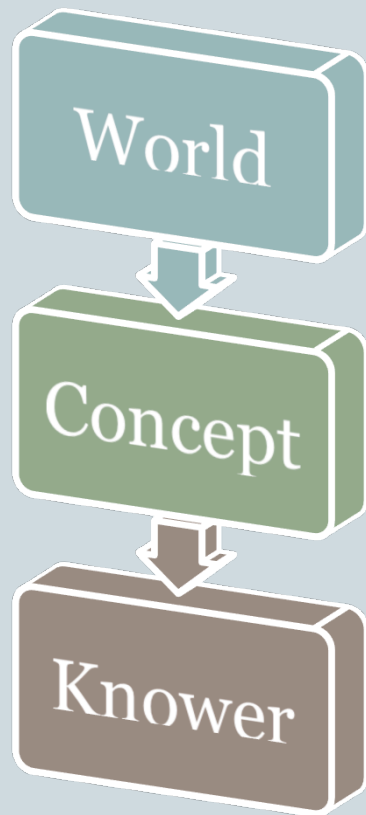
Narratives make arguments



- Raise claims of truth, moral right, and appropriateness: *present looking*
- Rest on prejudices, presuppositions, and interests: *backward looking*
- Depict scenarios: *forward looking*

Narrative theory is philosophy

- **Philosophy**



- **Narrative theory**

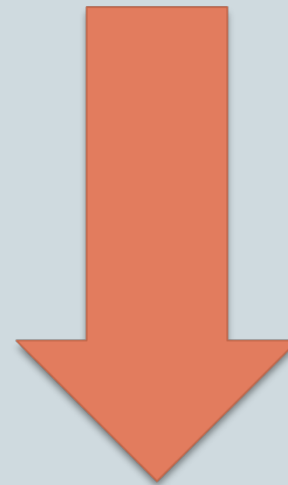


Common food technology narratives

- Modernization
- Anti-modernization
- Romantic
- Religious
- Biographical
- Historical
- Economic



worse



better

Modernization



- Science, technology and reason will lead us from ignorance and suffering to bring us freedom, security, and happiness.
- Our current problems stem from a lack of knowledge and technical know-how.
- Experimentation and empirical evidence establish acceptable risks and consequences.
- Better living through science and technology.

What's wrong with this story?



- Bad theory of value-free technology and technological determinism
- Science and technology do not necessarily improve our lives
- Supports private and pro-development interests
- Overly optimistic; quick techno-fix

Anti-modernization



- Science and technology are out of control.
- Industrialization has gone too far.
- Our powers have outstripped our wisdom.
- We have to adapt to new technologies.

What's wrong with this story?



- Bad theory of autonomous technology and technological determinism
- Overly grim and pessimistic
- Artifacts have both technical functions and social meanings
- Makes for good science fiction.

Romantic



- Science and technology are alienating forces.
- Detached, objectifying, reductivism is the problem.
- We need to reconnect with nature and each other.
- Less abstract science, more concrete relationships.

What's wrong with this story?



- Too strong a distinction between humanity and technology.
- Connection is not always good; disconnection not always bad.
- Tends toward provincialism, traditionalism, animism.
- Contradicts progressive, urban, cosmopolitanism.

Religious



- Relies on concepts of sacred, profane, redemption, deliverance, righteousness, salvation, eschatology, sin, evil, heaven and hell (on Earth)
- Other-worldly dimension to existence
- Each religion has unique core concepts.

What's wrong with this story?



- People have different religions.
- Not binding on non-believers.
- Too many metaphysical commitments needed.
- We don't all have to agree to act in common.

Biographical



- Story that follows the fate of persons.
- Memoirs, character studies, portraits, testimonials
- Journeys, quests, conflicts, transformations, revenge, sacrifice, underdog justice, etc.

What's wrong with these stories?



- Sometimes idiosyncratic, sometimes relatable.

Historical



- Connects agents and events in plausible ways.
- Locates the origins of things, traces development, puts into context, relate consequences.
- Identify key actors, patients, events, objects, circumstances.
- Attribute responsibility to decision makers.

What's wrong with this story?



- Can be either conventional or critical.
- Vital for questioning authority, challenging attitudes, explaining states of affairs.
- Exposing failures, omissions, overlooked victims
- Identifying vested interests, placing things in relation to power and authority.

Economic



- Food as commodity within a global economic system.
- Explained by profit motives, business models, expanding markets.
- Analyze production, distribution, and consumption
- In relation to regulations, desires, environments, moral norms.

What's wrong with this story?



- Conventional and critical versions.
- Potent narrative, common in journalism and advocacy literature.
- Food films (*Food Inc.*, *King Corn*, *Farmageddon*)
- Not the whole story but a crucial part of it.

Disadvantages of narratives



- Not methodological
- No certainty
- Decidedly interpretative
- Necessary but not sufficient: rely on facts and norms.

Modest conclusions



- We rely on stories to make claims about things with a historical dimension whether we realize it or not.
- Learn to recognize better and worse narratives.
- Avoid techno-optimism and techno-pessimism.
- Remember: food is for eating – that changes things!