

Thought for Food: *Mindless Eating* and its Lessons

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There are articles and television programs everywhere on what to eat, what not to eat, why salt is bad, why sugar is worse, how to exercise, why to buy organic. We have become obsessed with our food, and really, we should be. There is really no dimension of our lives un-affected by our food; it influences our mood, our health, our energy, and our longevity. In turn, these factors influence our interaction with those around us, our productivity,¹ our contribution and participation at work, at home and in society at large. To treat what we eat as a secondary detail of our day is a mistake, and a costly one at that, as we are starting to see in the United States.² When a government and a society neglect their nutrition standards, the free market model apparently leads to sugary, carb-heavy, delicious but decadent food choices.

Many people have offered warnings of what the future American looks like should we not make any change,³ large scale methods of improving the situation through regulation,⁴ and suggestions of healthy food habits and choices.⁵ One voice among the many is that of Brian Wansink, a prolific food researcher and professor at the Cornell University Food and Brand

¹ Helena W. Rodbard et al., *Impact of Obesity on Work Productivity and Role Disability in Individuals with and at Risk for Diabetes Mellitus*, 23 AMERICAN JOURNAL OF HEALTH PROMOTION 353, 358 (2009).

² *Id.* at 354.

³ Robert Lustig, *Fat Chance: Fructose 2.0 – Eating for Health (and Pleasure): The UCSF Guide to Good Nutrition*, <http://www.uctv.tv/shows/Fat-Chance-Fructose-2-0-25641> ; BROWNELL, KELLY D., *FOOD FIGHT: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE FOOD INDUSTRY: AMERICA'S OBESITY CRISIS AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT*. (McGraw-Hill Companies, 2004).

⁴ Telephone Interview by Bonnie Liebman, Nutrition Action, with Kelly Brownell (July/August 1998), https://www.cspinet.org/nah/7_98eat.htm.

⁵ POLLAN, MICHAEL, *FOOD RULES* (Penguin Books 2009).

Lab,⁶ as well as Executive Director of the USDA's Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion from 2007-2009.⁷ Wansink increased the public's awareness of food and nutrition by demystifying the nutritional information provided by the USDA and making it more user-friendly.⁸ Wansink's genius is in his ability to keep the fun in food. He presents his findings in amusing and approachable ways, keeping the tone light and engaging. He has marketing experience, after all. And because he knows how to keep an audience, it is our good fortune that he has chosen to apply his skills to healthy eating.

1. MINDLESS EATING

Brian Wansink's book, Mindless Eating – Why We Eat More Than We Think,⁹ takes on the overwhelming issue of why Americans are increasingly overweight and how seemingly insignificant details in our daily environment play a far more active role than we realize. With this framework in mind, Wansink goes through a host of small but meaningful changes we can make in our daily approach to food which, even if taken individually, can create a substantial difference in our health and weight over a year's time. Wansink's book is not a "quick fix" solution to being overweight; it is an exploration of the psychology of eating and the situational factors at play in our society in particular. Wansink analyzes and offers suggestions without passing judgment or chiding our lack of self-control. If anything, this book in effect takes self-control out of the equation, relying rather on the establishment of habits and routines which turn healthy eating into mindless eating, not a perpetual self-regulatory process.

⁶ Cornell University Food and Brand Lab, <http://foodpsychology.cornell.edu/>

⁷ <http://mindlesseating.org/about.php>

⁸ While Wansink was Director, web hits to USDA Dietary Guidelines increased 44% to 5.4 million/day.

⁹ WANSINK, BRIAN (Bantam Books, 2010).

To begin, Wansink explains how his research has shown that there are signals and cues around us that tell us to eat. It is evolutionarily programmed into us to respond to those cues, causing us to overeat when the situation sets us up to do so. For example, in one study, Wansink and his colleagues gave movie-goers free buckets of popcorn at a local theatre.¹⁰ Movie patrons were given a medium or large bucket, both far larger portions than the average person's popcorn consumption. Not only was there surplus popcorn, it was stale. It had been popped five days before the study. But it was free.

When exiting the movie, patrons returned their buckets and their leftovers (if any) were weighed. They were also informed of the generous portions and how people who had been given large buckets tended to eat much more than those given medium ones. All patrons with large-buckets smugly claimed this had not been the case for them, and that they were not susceptible to that kind of trickery.¹¹ In fact, the results showed differently; they had actually eaten an average of 53% more than people who had been given medium sized buckets. It didn't matter that the popcorn was stale or that the patrons ended up eating more than they were accustomed to; the popcorn was in front of them and they kept eating.

Another study about influential situational cues was one in which participants were presented with a soup bowl that could never be emptied.¹² Unbeknownst to them, the bowl was attached to the table it was sitting on and had a rubber tube coming out from underneath it which allowed the experimenters to gradually pump in more tomato soup as the participants ate. All participants kept eating and ate 73% more than participants in the next room who had a normally emptying bowl of soup.¹³ There was one participant who had eaten a whole quart of soup, three

¹⁰ *Id.* at 16.

¹¹ *Id.* at 17.

¹² *Id.* at 47.

¹³ *Id.*

times more than the man next to him. He commented that the soup was pretty filling. All other participants, when asked, thought they had eaten no more than usual, about half a cup of soup, when again, they had eaten about double that amount.

Wansink goes on to examine how the perfunctory details of glass shape and size hugely influence our perception of portion size and quantity. Seasoned bartenders were asked to pour a shot in a short, wide glass.¹⁴ Without exception, the bartenders all over-poured but were confident they had poured an accurate shot. The size of the receptacle threw off professionals who are used to pouring the same amount night after night. Wansink's point is that the plates, dishes, cups and glasses we use are no small matter; the bigger our "tablescape", the more we eat. And although the common reaction is "Oh, but I don't fall for that kind of thing", that simply isn't true. Not only are we all biologically programmed to miss these kinds of tricks of perception, for some reason we are also programmed to think we are uniquely resistant to that kind of overt manipulation.

The chapter "Mindless Eating Scripts"¹⁵ calls attention to ways in which we set up routines and habits which actually reinforce the power of situational factors in terms of how much we eat. Eating dinner in front of the television, breakfast while driving and even having food out in plain sight at work all set us up for failure in terms of staying aware of what is influencing our food choices and what our body is really asking for. We eat until our plate is empty, we eat until we see the bottom of the bowl or bucket. We even keep eating just to be social and stay at the table longer. According to Wansink, the solution lies in reconnecting to our internal physiological cues and deprogramming our dependency on external ones. For example, the danger in mindless eating scripts is that we aren't focused on how our body is responding to

¹⁴ *Id.* at 64.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 94.

the food we are eating; are we full? Close to full? Actually not hungry at all? Although scheduled meals and routines are important, Wansink is pointing out that we need to make a habit of monitoring our physical state before funneling in more food.

Despite his deconstruction of America's eating habits and hang-ups, Wansink maintains a hopeful, humorous and consequently very helpful tone in terms of talking about a subject matter that can become so personally insulting and make everyone uncomfortable.

2. BANNING UNHEALTHY CHOICES?

What Wansink will not be advocating for is any kind of limitation of consumer choice. Mayor Bloomberg's foray into food policy was met with great criticism on many fronts, including Wansink himself. In May 2012, Mayor Bloomberg proposed New York City's Sugary Drinks Portion Cap Rule which prohibited food-services establishments subject to the city's health department from selling sodas and other sugary drinks¹⁶ in containers larger than sixteen ounces. Not too surprisingly, the Ban was struck down.

Interestingly, Wansink was among the Ban's strongest critics. In an article in the Atlantic¹⁷, Wansink made clear that whatever studies of his Mayor Bloomberg's people purported to have read and used as inspiration, they had very much missed the mark. Wansink explained that while his lab studies gave subjects controlled portions, it did so without making them aware of the portion size. This was expressly made "mindless", meaning the subjects did

¹⁶ "A carbonated or non-carbonated beverage that is non-alcoholic; is sweetened by the manufacturer or establishment with sugar or another caloric sweetener; has greater than 25 calories per 8 fluid ounces of beverage; and does not contain more than 50 percent of milk of milk substitute by volume as an ingredient." Rules of the City of New York, tit.24, § 81.53(a) (proposed).

¹⁷Brian Wansink and David Just, *How Bloomberg's Soft Drink Ban Will Backfire on NYC Public Health* (Jan. 12, 2012, 2:35 PM ET), <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2012/06/how-bloombergs-soft-drink-ban-will-backfire-on-nyc-public-health/258501/>

not have their attention drawn to it, thereby producing as un-doctored research results as possible. Banning choices, Wansink argued, simply serves to render people rebellious,¹⁸ in a childish but instinctive “you can’t make me” sort of way. Banning a particular choice will in fact serve to make people think of that choice all the more, ironically increasing rather than decreasing its market presence. Instead of bans, Wansink suggested working with the beverage companies directly and approaching the issue with positive “mindless” tactics: a coupon for diet sodas instead of regular, or a loyalty discount card for drinking water, juice, or other soda alternatives. After all, often the same company selling one sugary drink is selling another slightly less sugary drink. Maintaining market choice but gently steering consumer behavior through promotion instead of proscription is what Wansink is all about: marketing tries to make you, the consumer, feel good about the choices you make, not guilty. And while it is tempting to simply change the “tablescape” for someone, Wansink very much believes that meaningful change can only occur when generated internally.

It seems ironic that Wansink is so against the food environment trying to better itself, so to speak. Didn’t we the people choose the legislators and politicians to make decisions for us? How does that wind up being in such polarized opposition to an individual’s right to choice?

Wansink himself sees both sides of the issue quite clearly, but in the end pragmatism wins out over philosophizing: “I love these ideas of good, healthy social norms. But I think...if we tell people...you are just hopeless, we've got to do things to protect you from yourself...it's

¹⁸ *Id.* at paragraph 4.

probably the worst public health message we could give people, because we're saying... you can't do it yourself, don't even try.”¹⁹

3. CONCLUSION

Brian Wansink’s microcosm-level approach hits the food dilemma at many more pressure points in one gulp than it seems governmental action can swallow in one sitting. Perhaps pointing the finger at the food industry will help more people start to realize their freedom fries aren’t actually freely chosen, but until consumer behavior changes, those fries will continue to tempt our primitive taste buds and enable us to make food decisions ill-suited to our modern physiological and social reality.

Wansink’s brilliance is that he essentially avoids sweeping politicizing and focuses on the daily reality of food choice. So what if we can’t figure out if it’s the food companies or ourselves creating this mess? Let’s just clean it up. And with (only) a spoon full of sugar, Wansink subtly leads us on to our healthier selves, promising that we won’t even notice the nutrition.

¹⁹ Ira Flatow, NPR Science Friday, interview with Brian Wansink and Marion Nestle, *Can Government Bans Tackle Obesity?*, <http://www.npr.org/2012/09/21/161551770/can-government-bans-tackle-obesity>.