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FOOD SAFETY: PERSPECTIVES OF A PHILOSOPHER

— by Richard P. Haynes —

➤ Over time I have developed four major perspectives about food safety issues:

- The term “food safety” is often used in a context that is exceedingly narrow.
- We have become increasingly dependent on experts.
- The knowledge of experts and other insiders is generally not accessible by consumers.
- The system can be changed so that consumers are better informed.

The Meaning of Food Safety

“Safety” is a word that catches people’s attention. For example, many speakers and writers use the words “food safety” to stimulate people to think about how the food they eat affects their health. But it is irresponsible to suggest, as some people do, that safety is the major concern that consumers *should* have about their food unless the context, the meaning of the word, is taken to be much broader than whether food is safe to eat. For all of us, the meaning of food safety should include whether the food is produced in a manner that is safe for those involved in its production, such as field laborers; whether the production of farm inputs generates toxic contaminants that victimize people who are not directly involved in farming; and whether the production and related policy systems provide economic safety “protection” for those affected by technologies and their effects.

The list could go on because there are many consequences of the way we choose to organize our food production. They are largely ignored by most of us. When they are called to our attention, our response is frequently that they are tradeoffs that, unfortunately, we will have to accept in order to secure the benefit that we all appreciate so well—a cheap and convenient food supply. So, to start, I make the point, attention to food safety, as usually defined, only touches the tip of the proverbial iceberg of “food safety concerns” with which responsible citizens should be concerned.

Risks and Experts

There is another problem with the usual focus on food safety. Just what does it mean to say that something is safe? Who is in a position to determine whether something is safe? We are surrounded by hazards—how can we tell when we are safe from them? And how safe is “safe enough?” Clearly, “safe” is a context hungry word. Anytime that we do something—make any choice whatsoever—we are taking a chance, however slight it might seem, that we will end up worse off for having made that choice. We recognize that fact by talking about risks. We consider some risks to be more serious than other risks; some people are bolder in taking risks than are others. We can probably never eliminate

all risks. So what risks do we want to eliminate when we seek to ensure ourselves that our food is safe to eat? People want to know what risks they are taking and want to avoid situations where they are forced to take risks that they don’t choose to take. Food safety is a problem largely because consumers are at the end of a complex set of processes over which they have little direct control. We naturally want to know whether, in making food choices, we are being exposed to risks that we do not want to assume.

The consumer, then, has two basic concerns about safety related to food consumption: (1) How do I know what risks I am taking with my food consumption patterns, and (2) How do I know that the risks I am being forced to take couldn’t be traded off for a better package of risks? These questions, to a large extent, relate to the production and processing of food. These activities are often guided by experts employed on farms and in the processing plants, as well as input producing firms. University experts provide their expertise as well. Consequently, as a consumer, I want to know what the experts know.

Access to Information

Unfortunately, most of this knowledge is not accessible by consumers, either because it is “secret” or because it is unintelligible to the non-expert. For this reason, some consumer organizations have endeavored to search out information that indicates serious risk conditions. Critical questions for society include, “How good a job are these organizations doing and how might they do a better job?”

One thing stands out clearly in thinking about information related to food safety. Consumers are at the bottom of the information hierarchy and are dependent upon others to do an effective job of providing information. We know that when something does go wrong—as in the Michigan PCB contaminated feed case that put 9 million residents at serious risk—the insiders, public and private, are slow to respond and quick to cover up. In the Michigan case the contamination occurred in 1973; the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story on it in 1974. But it was not until 1977 that it was covered by Michigan newspapers (I owe this point to George E. B. Morren, “Multi-Party Responses to Environmental Problems—A Case of Contaminated Dairy Cattle” included in the Fall 1989 issue of *Agriculture and Human Values* (No. 1, pp. 30-39).

How good a job is being done is one thing. How much information is at the top is another. I stress that we all too often assume that the top has much more information about food safety and production risks than in fact exists. This notion is reinforced when representatives of the establishment complain that some communicators raise alarms that are unwarranted. They imply that their information, not known to the public, is adequate and complete. It is important to challenge this notion. Critics of the establishment, often backed by reasonably solid analyses provided by sociologists of science, give us good reasons to doubt that the top has enough research of the right sort to provide sufficient information.

I assert that at the top, information on current risks and whether better packages of risks could be developed is grossly incomplete. A major challenge for “players” in the system is to adequately communicate how little is actually known and how risky the whole process might actually be. Obviously, people are hesitant to communicate that type of information. Given the way that whistleblowers are treated, it is unlikely that “insiders” will undertake to do so. Therefore, I place little credence in the complaints from the top that outsiders are engaged in muckraking or sensationalism. Those at the bottom have such little power when

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they are complaisant that alarm sounding must have a desirable effect when it disturbs the complaisance.

Possible Improvements

The system, then could stand improvement, but who has the responsibility and how can it be done responsibly? I suggested above that insiders, including the extension service and establishment media, are unlikely to challenge the standard top-down information model unless pressured to do so. Thus, my first suggestion is for the groups at the bottom of the information system, consumers and consumer advocacy groups to press for more complete information from the experts.

Ideally, we can imagine a system where insider communicators acknowledge ignorance. In real life, however, such an acknowledgement takes power away from the established institutions they represent. Institutions and their bureaucracies are only responsive to outside pressure when they are in a crisis situation, however. This means that the practical responsibility for assuring communication about risks must lie with outsider communicators. As consumers concerned about what to believe, individuals have a responsibility to support outsider journalists and advocacy

groups who challenge the establishment to enter into dialogue with them—and with us. And if the insiders complain that the outsiders are not well enough informed, then the insiders must take on the task of educating the rest of us. There are other ways to improve communications.

- Scientists should expand their disciplinary boundaries to be better informed about alternative approaches to production, marketing and processing challenges.
- -Educators should replace their authoritarian model with a dialogic one.
- The independent media should raise their standards for investigative reporting.
- Consumers should demand to be better informed and support “outside” communicators.

As to the last point, there is a high quality alternative press attempting to relay sound information to the public. They may be biased, but so are we all.

Above all we must give up the notion that the public is being protected by a group of guardian angels—the insiders. Even the public guardian angels, as the Michigan case illustrates, are not likely to challenge the overall safety of the system that supports them.