

Food Ethics

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ABSTRACT

Current food practices affect humans, animals, and the environment in ways that some regard as morally troubling. In this entry, I will explain the most important of these worries and what has been said in response to them. I will conclude with a brief discussion of one of the most interesting recent topics in food ethics, lab-grown meat, which has been proposed as a silver bullet solution to these worries.

Animals

A common criticism of our current food practices is that they harm animals (*see* VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM). How might they do so? The most common suggestion is that they do so in virtue of the conditions in which animals are kept and killed in factory farms (Singer 1975). These conditions are often cramped and almost exclusively indoors. The animals are often force-fed, with poor-quality, tasteless feed. They are variously injected with hormones, debeaked, dehorned, castrated, artificially inseminated, and so on. Many of them are killed without anaesthesia. Male chicks, for whom there is no profitable purpose, are disposed of (usually by being ground up in machinery). Not only are these treatments often painful, they prevent these animals from experiencing many of the pleasures they are capable of. Moreover, they interfere with the natural functioning of these animals, preventing from them exercising or realising their distinctive natures (*see* WELL-BEING; EUDAIMONISM.)

Are animals harmed also in free-range or humane animal farming, which reduce these painful treatments and provide animals with green space to roam in, better quality feed, and more contact with each? Some have pointed out that even the best of these farms still kill these animals prematurely, shortening their lives and so depriving them of pleasant experiences or functioning that they might otherwise have had (Bradley 2015). Others deny that animals can be benefited by extra years, since they cannot have future-directed desires (Belshaw 2015; Velleman 1993). (*See* ANIMAL COGNITION; ANIMALS, MORAL STATUS OF.)

Some have claimed that animal farming is actually *good* for the animals in question, since without it, these animals would have no lives at all (Stephen 1896). Against this, it is often said that many of these animals have lives that are worse than no life at all. Others have objected that existence cannot be better for one than non-existence, since

the non-existent have no level of well-being to draw a comparison with (*see* POPULATION). This last claim raises a problem for animal advocates. If animals cannot be *benefited* by being conceived and raised for us to eat, then how can they be *harmed* by such processes? In response, it has been suggested that what is harmful for such animals is not being conceived, but the ways they are treated after conception (Bramble 2015).

For some philosophers, the moral problem with animal farming lies not (or not only) in its harming animals, but in its *wronging* them in some (other) way—say, by exploiting or disrespecting them, or by breaching rights that they have (*see* ANIMAL RIGHTS; CONTRACTUALISM; EXPLOITATION).

Suppose that animal farming harms or wrongs animals. Might it nonetheless be morally acceptable? According to some, these harms or wrongs might be outweighed by the benefits to humans of eating meat. How does eating meat benefit humans? Some point to nutritional benefits. However, the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics concludes that “appropriately planned vegetarian, including vegan, diets are healthful, nutritionally adequate, and may provide health benefits in the prevention and treatment of certain diseases. These diets are appropriate for all stages of the life cycle, including pregnancy, lactation, infancy, childhood, adolescence, older adulthood, and for athletes” (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics 2016). Others have argued that the pleasures of meat are greatly enriching for humans (Lomasky 2013). Others still have noted the value of carrying on family, cultural, or religious traditions, many of which centrally involve the consumption of animal products. There would be huge costs here, they say, in severing these links with the past. Another possible response is one framed not in terms of benefits to humans, but in terms of rights we humans have to, for example, carry on our cultural traditions.

If animal farming is morally problematic, what follows about our obligations as consumers? One obvious suggestion is that we should refrain from eating meat. However, a number of philosophers have claimed that this does not follow, since we are powerless as individuals to affect the conditions of animals on farms, or the numbers of animals raised to be killed, through our individual purchasing decisions. On no occasion when you buy a burger will your decision to do so make life worse for any animal. Food production is simply insensitive to such small differences in demand. (*See* TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS.) These considerations suggest that it might actually be morally worse to buy from small free-range farms, since only these are small enough for one’s purchasing decisions to have a meaningful impact on demand. Others have objected that, while it is very unlikely, of any given purchase of factory-farmed meat, that this purchase will worsen the lives of animals, there is a small chance it will be the purchase that prompts a retailer to order *a lot* more meat, and so a small chance that it will make a very great difference (Kagan 2011). A final possible response is that it isn’t necessary, for our individual meat purchases to be morally wrong, that they make a difference. It is enough that we act with a certain intention, or that we are participating in a larger practice that is morally wrong (*see*

COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY; COMPLICITY; DEONTOLOGY; VIRTUE ETHICS).

Humans

Current food practices, many have claimed, are harmful to humans. Many animal products, for example, are high in cholesterol and saturated fat, and reliance on them has been linked with heart disease and other injurious conditions. Overconsumption of animal products is also a major cause of obesity, one of the central health crises of many Western countries (Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics 2016). It is not only the consumption of animal products that might be harmful here. Excessive sugars and fats elsewhere in our diets appears to be responsible for much illness and disease in contemporary society. There are also worries about chemicals in our foods (including pesticides, additives, and contaminants), as well as genetically modified foods (that is, foods derived from organisms whose DNA has been modified in a way that does not occur naturally—for example, through the introduction of a gene from a different organism), whose full effects on our health are not currently known (see GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS).

It might be suggested that the issue here is not a moral one, but a prudential one. If eating these foods harms one's health, this provides one with a self-interested reason to refrain from them, but one isn't *morally* required to refrain. However, these harms do appear to raise moral issues. These relate to the responsibilities of food producers and retailers, and also of governments. If one's products harm people, does one have responsibilities to inform the public of the risks involved? What sort of information is required? Should one discontinue these products altogether? As for governments, to what extent should they regulate industries that produce or sell harmful foods? On a conservative view, governments should require companies to be upfront about the risks their foods pose to the public. Governments might also be required to better inform the public about various risks involved. On a more demanding view, governments should ban certain fatty or sugary foods, or at least significantly restrict access to them, in the same way that certain drugs or poisons are regulated.

Many, however, consider these proposals paternalistic (see PATERNALISM). It is the individual's own responsibility, they say, to seek out relevant information about foods on offer. Certainly, the government should not be banning foods or interfering with advertising. This paternalism worry, it is worth noting, has markedly less force in countries with free health care, since individuals with unhealthy diets often end up needing medical treatment, which is paid for by the taxpayer.

An alternative to governments banning unhealthy foods, or restricting our access to them, is for them to subsidise healthy food industries, or at least improve consumers' access to healthy foods (Sunstein 2014; Conly 2018). If healthcare and education should be free and available to all, why not also good quality fruit and vegetables? Quite aside from the ethical reasons to engage in this, there are powerful economic reasons to do so. A healthy population is a more productive one.

Current food practices, it is claimed, not only harm consumers, but also workers in certain sectors of the food industry. Slaughterhouse work, for example, has been linked to mental illness, PTSD, and drug and alcohol abuse (Pachirat 2011). This again raises the question of the responsibilities of food corporations and governments. If such work can be so harmful, should people be allowed to do it? If we support health and safety regulations for workplaces at all, how can we consistently permit people to work in an industry that is so injurious to their health? Such claims are again sometimes labelled paternalistic. But is such work ever freely or autonomously chosen, or only taken up as a result of unacceptable economic or social pressures? An added complication is that much of the hardest and most unpleasant work done in the food industry—especially farm work—is performed by new migrants or “guest workers”, and is often very poorly compensated. Is this fair or just (see WORK, ETHICS OF)?

There is an additional international dimension here. Much food consumed in wealthy Western countries is produced by people in poorer countries for very little money or in bad working conditions (see WORLD HUNGER; GLOBAL POVERTY; AID, ETHICS OF). Some argue that this is morally acceptable, given the even worse alternatives for these foreign workers. But others claim that the alternatives are worse only if Western governments allow them to be. It is within our power to lobby foreign governments to ensure their workers are paid a fair income, or that working conditions are improved.

One proposed corrective for some of these problems is *food sovereignty*—a shift away from corporate, profit-driven control of the food system toward a more democratic system, where local populations own and control their own food systems (see FAIR TRADE; GLOBAL DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE). A key question concerns whether such sovereignty is valuable merely as a means to better conditions, or has some kind of intrinsic value itself. Some have suggested that it would have no value at all in circumstances where it would result only in, say, famine for local populations.

In light of the apparent harmfulness of certain food industries on both consumers and workers, what are our obligations as individual consumers? Even if some individual (say, Sally) does not buy unhealthy food in quantities large enough to harm her, is it morally wrong for her to buy *any* such food, given the financial support this lends to corporations that produce such food, not to mention the impact Sally’s participation in such food practices has on the cultural normalisation of unhealthy eating?

The environment

Current food practices, it has been claimed, are imperiling the natural environment (see AGRICULTURAL ETHICS). Fertilizers and pesticides are damaging soil and water. Losses in crop biodiversity risk new waves of pests and diseases that might devastate global harvests. Massive amounts of land and water are used to grow the grain that feeds livestock. Certain fish populations are collapsing, threatening

irreversible changes to oceans and ecosystems (for discussion, see Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations 2018). Methane emissions from cattle are one of the leading causes of climate change (see CLIMATE CHANGE).

Some philosophers believe that damage of this kind to the natural environment is bad in itself (see ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS; WILDERNESS, VALUE OF; ANTHROPOCENTRISM; DEEP ECOLOGY; CONSERVATION BIOLOGY). Ecosystems and species, they argue, have intrinsic value. Others emphasise instead the possible harms here for humans and animals. Many note that the worst of these harms is likely to befall, not contemporary beings, but those who will exist in the future. If this is so, we need to consider our obligations to future beings (see INTERGENERATIONAL ETHICS). An important complication here is that action we take now for the sake of future beings (say, cutting down on our meat consumption in order to halt or reverse climate change) might be self-defeating, for it will change our daily lives in ways that affect the times at which we conceive our children, thereby altering the *identities* of future people. Such action, then, might not benefit future people, but merely change who they will be (see NON-IDENTITY PROBLEM).

Lab-grown meat

One of the most interesting recent topics in food ethics is lab-grown meat—i.e., meat cultured in a lab from biopsied cells. The production of such meat needn't harm any animals (aside, perhaps, from the few animals whose cells are biopsied); it can be engineered to be healthier than meat grown from whole animals; and it is likely to be able to be produced with far less impact on the environment, since it will not require the sort of vast agriculture mentioned above. Consequently, if lab-grown meat is widely adopted, it might allow us to sidestep many of the moral problems raised by current food practices. According to many leading ethicists, the lab-grown meat programme “gets the ethical two thumbs up” (Savulesu and Schaefer 2013).

But are there any downsides to lab-grown meat? Some consumers find the idea of it unnatural and for this reason repulsive. Others, on the opposite side of the spectrum, are concerned that it will perpetuate a place in our society for meat, when we should be using new technologies to step away from this part of our past.

One moral worry concerning lab-grown meat has to do with the reasons for which we are likely to take it up (Bramble 2017). If lab-grown meat is widely taken up, it is likely to be mostly for self-interested reasons—i.e., because it is cheaper, tastier, and healthier than regular meat. Ethical reasons, in other words, will not be a big factor in our choice. What is the upshot of this? That the morally troubling traits in us that led us to take no action on factory farming will be, not addressed by us, but preserved or entrenched in us. Why is this concerning? Because such traits—for example, self-centredness, a foolish deference to those who are culturally in charge, a preparedness to silence or turn away from qualms one might have, and so on—might lead us to

ignore the urgent needs of other beings further down the track, or even fail to support sensible measures to improve our own societies in various sorts of ways.

Conclusion

Here, we have looked at the core questions of food ethics. But there are many other fascinating questions falling within food ethics. Is it okay to feed your pet meat? Is it okay (or even required) to raise your children as vegetarian? Should we intervene in nature to prevent carnivorous species preying on other species for food, if we could do so without disrupting ecosystems (McMahan 2016)?

See also: AID, ETHICS OF; AGRICULTURAL ETHICS; ANIMAL COGNITION; ANIMAL RIGHTS; ANIMALS, MORAL STATUS OF; ANTHROPOCENTRISM; CLIMATE CHANGE; COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY; COMPLICITY; CONSERVATION BIOLOGY; DEEP ECOLOGY; ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS; EUDAIMONISM; FAIR TRADE; GENETICALLY MODIFIED ORGANISMS; GLOBAL DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE; GLOBAL POVERTY; INTERGENERATIONAL ETHICS; NON-IDENTITY PROBLEM; PATERNALISM; POPULATION; TRAGEDY OF THE COMMONS; VEGETARIANISM AND VEGANISM; VIRTUE ETHICS; WILDERNESS, VALUE OF; WORK, ETHICS OF; WORLD HUNGER.

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