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What are the Ethics of Eating? (Leader's Guide)


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Leader's Guide to

What are the Ethics of Eating?

A Study of Food Ethics: The Basics

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Summer 2017

How to Use This Material?

This study of the ethics involved in what we choose to eat using Ronald Sandler's *Food Ethics: The Basics* consists of 5 modules. Each module contains two sections. The first section presents a set of Reading and Reflection questions that are to be completed before each meeting and are meant to help the participant wrestle with the concepts introduced in that week's chapters. The second section consists of two (or more) Discussion questions, which will be written by the participants and the leader as they read. Both sets of questions are meant to foster discussion, but your group should by no means limit itself to the questions contained in these sections.

This study is intended for **informal, small group** discussion, such as that of a Bible study or small group. The themes presented in each submodule may be unpacked on its own, but it is the hope of the authors that the entire study may be useful to the interested reader (leader and participant alike). The study is also aimed toward **high school students, college students, and post-college adults** with an interest in how science and the Christian faith interact.

As you read, it is our hope that you will come across (and come up with) questions which challenge you, both in understanding your personal faith and in understanding science. In these questions, you will have the opportunity to grow through asking and answering these questions: Why has the church historically believed in *this* answer or *that* answer? How might you be challenged to defend your answer?

Planning and Preparing for a Session

The material assumes that each session will last for about 30-45minutes. It also assumes that each participant will have read the assigned chapter(s) and considered the Reading and Reflection questions ahead of time.

It must also be noted that the provided discussion questions are intended as a guide for your discussion, but you should by no means restrict your discussion to these questions. Try to keep your group's discussion relevant to the general themes addressed in the module, but be flexible.

Equipped for Service

This "Leader's Guide" is meant to **equip leaders** of these small group discussions, and thus the following pages are far more detailed and expansive than the average participant may judge necessary for complex discussion. We offer information from other references and suggested answers to questions posed in the text. This has been done in the hope that you, as the leader, may more easily facilitate and moderate discussion amongst your peers in the small group. Your small group may be made up of the generation that initiates change in how the common Christian comes to understand these questions and answer – in the service of your peers, do not underestimate your own significance as a leader or co-leader.

Who is the author of *Food Ethics: The Basics*?

Ronald Sandler, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, professor of philosophy, a researcher in the Nanotechnology and Society Research Group, and a research associate in the Environmental Justice Research Collaborative at Northeastern University. He also directs the Ethics Institute at Northeastern University in Boston, MA. His primary areas of research are environmental ethics, ethics and technology, ethical theory, and Spinoza. Sandler has taught courses on subjects ranging from philosophy of religion to ethics after Darwin and from contemporary moral issues to history of philosophy. He has received Northeastern University's Excellence in Teaching Award.

Find out more about Prof. Sandler at <https://www.northeastern.edu/cssh/faculty/ronald-sandler>.

Table of Contents

How to Use This Material?.....	2
Planning and Preparing for a Session.....	3
Equipped for Service.....	3
Who is the author of <i>Food Ethics: The Basics?</i>	4
Module 1: Intro to Food Systems.....	6
Reading and Reflection	6
<i>How Then Shall We Eat?</i>	6
<i>“Introduction”</i>	6
<i>“Food Systems”</i>	7
Discussion.....	8
Module 2: Food and Social Justice	9
Reading and Reflection	9
<i>“Food Security and the Ethics of Assistance”</i>	9
Discussion.....	10
Digging Deeper	10
Module 3: Eating Animals.....	11
Reading and Reflection	11
<i>“Should We Eat Animals?”</i>	11
Discussion.....	12
Digging Deeper	13
Module 4: GMOs and Other Bits of Bioengineering.....	14
Reading and Reflection	14
<i>“Bioengineering”</i>	14
Discussion.....	14
Module 5: Food, Health, and Culture.....	15
Reading and Reflection	15
<i>“Food and Health”</i>	15
<i>“Food and Culture”</i>	15
Discussion.....	16
Bibliography.....	17

Module 1: Intro to Food Systems

Resources and chapters covered: “How Then Shall We Eat?” by Tanya De Roo, and “Introduction” and “Food Systems” from *Food Ethics*

Reading and Reflection

How Then Shall We Eat?”

1. How do you most often prioritize the five dimensions De Roo lists? Why? Which order of these dimensions would you consider to be “most Christian” when it comes to food ethics?

Suggested Answer: Answers will vary. For college students, price is probably often the primary motivator. For people with a larger disposable income, aesthetics and social influences may play larger roles. The ethical aspect is probably the most obviously important one for a Christian to consider because it easily reflects God’s command to love our neighbours. However, the biotic dimension also plays a role in the wellbeing of our neighbour (and God’s Creation). There is no single “right” answer to this last question, and it is important for participants to ponder the value of all the components involved in ethical eating.

2. Do you make any of the six food ethics-related choices De Roo describes? If so, why? If not, do any of the six sound especially attractive to you? Do you think that these six choices are good choices? Do they reflect a Christian approach to eating?

“Introduction”

1. How often do you consider the ethics of what and how you eat? How do you decide what foods to buy? What “food movements” are you aware of?
2. Does God care what and how you eat? What does it look like to eat Christianly? What components must you take into consideration?

“Food Systems”

3. What “processes, infrastructures, and actors” are involved in the production of a fast food cheeseburger (or any other processes food item you enjoy)?

Suggested Answer: These systems are massive, so here is a truncated list of the “processes, infrastructures, and actors” involved in the production of the burger itself. The farmer who owns the cattle, the farmers who produce the food and straw used to care for the cattle, the trucker who transports the cattle from the farm to the slaughterhouse, the slaughterhouse itself, the truckers who transport the butchered cattle to processing facilities, the facility that creates the hamburgers, the trucker that transports the hamburgers to the fast food restaurant, the restaurant workers who prepare the burger.

4. What are some of the benefits of a commodity monoculture? Of a polyculture?

Suggested Answer: A commodity monoculture seems to be a more efficient way of reliably producing a large quantity of food for a growing population. It allows for intense cropping systems that yield lots of calories from a limited amount of field space. A polyculture, on the other hand, provides diversity. Diversity in biological systems improves the system’s health and resilience because, if one crop fails because of a disease or insect, there is a chance that the other crops will be unaffected or less affected. Plus, a polyculture supplies people with a range of nutrients, whereas a commodity monoculture provides a large amount of a few nutrients.

5. Do you support a global industrial food system? (Do you support the idea? Do you support the system itself with the way you choose to buy groceries?)

Suggested Answer: Most participants, unless they are totally self-sufficient when it comes to producing food, will support the global industrial food system in some way. After reading about the injustices perpetrated by the global food system, people may have qualms about supporting the idea of a global food system.

6. What do you think about the concepts of “distributive injustice,” “environmental injustice,” “climate injustice,” “economic injustice,” “food injustice,” etc.? Do you agree

with Sandler's descriptions of "justice" (i.e. those who benefit also shoulder an appropriate amount of the associated burden)? What would justice look like in these situations?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

1.

2.

Module 2: Food and Social Justice

Chapter covered: "Food Security and the Ethics of Assistance"

Reading and Reflection

"Food Security and the Ethics of Assistance"

1. About how much food waste do you produce each day? Would you estimate that it is more or less than 40%?

2. Do you think that the governmental subsidization of corn a good idea? Why do you think the United States government chose to subsidize corn? Would it be worthwhile to subsidize other crops as well (e.g. potatoes, carrots, apples)?

Suggested Answer: Subsidizing corn helps protect farmers from disaster in the case of crop failure, protects against food shortages, and keeps prices lower. It is useful, but it also means that there is a lot of corn in the United States; subsidizing corn discourages farmers to diversify their crops.

3. Do you agree with what Sandler says in his discussion of "moral luck"? What is our responsibility in light of "moral luck"? What sort of aid do you think would be most effective?

Suggested Answer: Sandler's suggestion that we have a moral responsibility to help those born into poverty obtain adequate nutrition seems reasonable. His way of framing our responsibility to pursue justice for the helpless may be different from how participants are accustomed to hearing it, though. Is it a wealthy nation's responsibility to help other, poorer nations?

4. What is the Church's responsibility in the face of food injustice? What does it look like for an individual to act justly in the face of food injustice?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

1.

2.

Digging Deeper

For another perspective on the subsidizing of crops, read [“Farm bill: Why don’t taxpayers subsidize the foods that are better for us?”](#) by Tamar Haspel from “the Washington Post.” Is subsidizing speciality crops (e.g. fruits and vegetables) a good idea? What do the vegetable and fruit farmers think? Is the farm bill a good thing?

Module 3: Eating Animals

Chapter covered: "Should We Eat Animals?"

Reading and Reflection

"Should We Eat Animals?"

1. How concerned should we be with "nonhuman others"? Should we be more concerned about humans or nonhumans? Is it valid to rank the value of living things?

Suggested Answer: Many participants will be more comfortable valuing human life more than nonhuman life. God initiated a special relationship with humans, after all, and we are set apart from "nonhuman animals." Nonhuman lives are worth something, though, and God does love the *world* (see John 3:16, and recall God's pronouncement that His Creation was good). Our ranking usually places humans first, followed by charismatic mammals (dogs, cats, horses, primates, bears), then amphibians, reptiles, birds, and fish, with plants, invertebrates, and microbes coming in last. Why do we rank living things the way we do?

2. What do you think of the idea that "nonhuman animals" are sentient? What rights do animals possess? Would engineering less sentient animals be ethical?

Suggested Answer: As stewards of nonhuman animals (which God has created), we should be concerned with their wellbeing, to a degree. We should not cause animals undue pain or harm. Engineering less sentient animals may make it easier to justify raising and eating them as we do, but justifying the actual engineering would be tricky.

3. What do you think of the "sexual politics of meat" argument? Does it make sense?

Suggested Answer: At first glance, this argument may strike some participants as exceedingly strange. Points of the argument, however, may be helpful and accurate (e.g. women have been treated as animals in the past, or at least given no more rights or respect than animals).

4. Do you think that there was animal death in the Garden of Eden? Are carnivores a product of the Fall? If they are, should Christians refrain from eating meat in an effort to emulate God's original created order?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

- 1.

- 2.

Digging Deeper

Read “What if the Whole World Went Vegan” by Sarah De Weerd,

www.conservationmagazine.org/2016/03/can-vegans-really-save-planet/

1. Is it plausible to suggest that the whole world go vegan? What barriers would prevent the world’s population from adopting a diet of veganism or vegetarianism?

Suggested Answer: Many people are too fond of meat or other animal products to adopt a vegan diet. In addition, animal product-related industries play massive roles in many countries’ economies. (And, in some poorer countries, animal product-related industries are the only viable options given the area’s natural resources.) Western farmers would likely not be in favor of abolishing the consumption of meat or dairy or eggs.

2. God has given humankind dominion over the earth (Genesis 1:28). How should this impact the way we eat? To what lengths should we go to improve the wellbeing of the created world by changing what we eat?
3. What are some alternatives to global veganism that still benefit the natural world?
4. How do the five aspects of ethical eating De Roo outlined (from the first module) play out in your decision to eat vegan or not to eat vegan?

Module 4: GMOs and Other Bits of Bioengineering

Chapter covered: "Bioengineering"

Reading and Reflection

"Bioengineering"

1. Do you agree that we are "technological animals" (131)? How does this fit with our responsibility to the created world?

2. Is directly altering an organism's genetics using genetic engineering (rather than selective breeding) "playing God"? Do you agree with Sandler's interpretation of what playing God means (132)? Is playing God necessarily a bad thing?

Suggested Answer: Altering genetics can be considered playing God because it is a way of "co-creating" with the Creator. God created the genetic code, and now we are using our God-given abilities to create new permutations of creatures and crops by altering that genetic code. Arguably, humans are *called* to play God in that they are called to be co-creators. (Not all participants will agree with this interpretation of the Cultural Mandate.)

3. Would you prefer all food items containing GMOs be labeled as such? Would GMO labels impact the way you chose which foods to buy?

4. Are you more comfortable with either genetically engineering crops or creatures? Why or why not?

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

- 1.

- 2.

Module 5: Food, Health, and Culture

Chapters covered: “Food and Health” and “Food and Culture”

Reading and Reflection

“Food and Health”

1. How comfortable are you with taking risks with your food? How is the way you perceive food safety impacted by the culture you were raised in?
2. Do food labels impact what foods you choose to buy? If so, how? Would more thorough labels about food’s nutrition or origin (e.g. these chemicals were used as pesticides on the wheat which was used to make this bread) change the way you chose which foods to buy? Why or why not?
3. What would ethical advertising for the fast food industry look like? Do you believe the current fast food advertisement campaigns that are aimed at children to be unethical?

“Food and Culture”

1. How does the culture you grew up in impact the way you view and consume food? Are any aspects of your culture’s approach to food potentially problematic (e.g. the Makah whale hunt has ecological consequences, though it is culturally important)?

Suggested Answer: Perhaps some participants have been raised to expect to eat meat at least twice a day. As discussed in the “Should We Eat Animals?” chapter, overlarge meat industries can negatively impact the environment. Or perhaps participants eat fast food regularly, which has consequences for their cardiovascular health (and their overall health).

2. In light of the things you have learned from *Food Ethics*, what does it look like for you to eat Christianly? Does this picture of eating Christianly look different from how you currently eat? Have you been inspired to make any dietary changes? (Or, do you feel as

though you should make dietary changes but are unsure whether you are motivated enough to actually implement them?)

Discussion

In addition to thinking about the above reading questions, please write two questions of your own regarding the chapters you read for today.

1.

2.

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DeRoo, Tanya. (2016, February 2). How Then Shall We Eat? *In All Things*.

DeWeerd, S. (2016, March 22). What if the Whole World Went Vegan?
Conservation Magazine.

Sandler, Robert L. *Food Ethics: The Basics*. New York: Routledge, 2015. Print.