

BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of
The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics

Eds. Anne Barnhill, Tyler Doggett, and Mark Budolfson, Oxford University Press, 2018.

JOSH MILBURN
University of Sheffield

Volume 23, Issue 1

Winter 2019

<http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/>

ANGUS TAYLOR

Food ethics is on the rise, and this is thanks, in no small part, to animal ethicists. Unlike some commentators, Anne Barnhill, Mark Budolfson, and Tyler Doggett situate questions about animals close to the core of the subdiscipline in their introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*. Animal ethicists should applaud this, and be quick to criticise those food ethicists who overlook (questions about) our duties to other animals. After all, animal ethics has long placed food close to the centre of *its* concern. But, in turn, animal ethicists should expect fair critique from philosophers of food if they fail to take food seriously, just as Regan criticised Singer for assuming away the value of food (*The Case*, §6.4). The ethical and philosophical significance of food does not begin and end with harm to animals, and to talk about harm to animals in food production without thinking seriously about food itself is to risk the development of intellectually impoverished positions.

If one wants to think seriously about food ethics, especially concerning the relationship it has to animal ethics, I would struggle to think of a better starting place than *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics*. Animals are rarely far from the minds of the contributors, and any philosopher interested in the ethics of veganism will find a great deal that is of interest in the book's pages.

The book contains eight sections: "Conventional Agriculture and Alternatives"; "Animals"; "Consumption"; "Food Justice and Social Justice"; "Ethics and Politics of Food Policy"; "Gender, Body Image, and 'Healthy' Eating"; "Food and Social Identities, Cultural Practices, and Values"; and "History of Philosophy and Food Ethics." The amount of animal ethics in the volume is belied by the fact that the "Animals" section con-

ANGUS TAYLOR

tains only three essays. Two will not raise eyebrows for readers of *BTS*: Gary Comstock reviews cattle cognition to argue that those in developed nations should not eat beef, while Eliot Michaelson and Andrew Reisner offer a range of arguments to conclude that we should not be eating fish or supporting the fishing industry.

Charles List authors the other chapter in the section. He addresses the “new hunter”—the informed individual who hunts out of a concern for animal welfare, food systems, and other social issues. He argues that new-hunter-ism does not obviously do better than locavorism on animal-welfare or transparency grounds. And he critically examines the new hunter’s concern for feeling the “right” emotions when killing an animal, and with engaging in “natural” processes. But List certainly does not think that those who care about animal welfare, food systems, and relationships with animals should be vegan. He is rightfully critical of some bad arguments in favour of hunting—“new” or “old”—but he firmly believes that hunting has a cluster of merits. As well as providing “good healthy food” (184), it can develop skills leading to virtues of ecological awareness, emotional sensitivity to animals/habitats/the “wonders” (186) of nature, and the capacity to be good biotic citizens. List implores new hunters to exercise this final capacity, and become “activists in defence of their biotic community” (187). As far as I can tell, this activism is mostly geared around ensuring that people can continue to hunt. There is little concern for animals, here. List thus diverges from the new hunters, who—misguidedly or otherwise—do have a concern for humaneness. Indeed, in List’s conclusion, he talks of advocacy not for *humaneness*, but for *humanness* (187). I assume this is an error, but it is telling: List’s contribution feels like the most “anti-animal” in the book.

ANGUS TAYLOR

Real highlights for me are the three initial chapters in the “Consumption” section. Tristram McPherson, Bob Fischer, and Julia Nesky provide masterful and up-to-date reviews of, respectively, arguments for veganism, arguments for consuming animal products, and the causal impotence of consumers. All three are very strong essays; they would be stellar places to begin a research project, or would make excellent additions to reading lists.

McPherson focuses in on the wrongness of the killing and suffering inherent in animal agriculture, but identifies the real difficulty in extrapolating from this wrong to an individual moral obligation to be vegan. There is, he says, a premise that needs to be filled in: what is the relationship between one’s own non-veganism and these wrongful harms? Possible answers include the following: we are (potentially or actually) individually responsible; we are collectively responsible; we benefit; we are complicit. Even if this gap can be filled in, however, there are a range of other challenges that vegan philosophers need to resolve: McPherson hopes to “encourage others to rigorously address these topics” (236).

Given the very low chance that any individual consumer impacts unethical production practices, why should we be vegan? Nefsky rejects standard arguments about expected utility (“My non-purchase might be the one that closes a farm!”) or indirectly making a difference (“I’ll make all my friends and family vegan!”) with compelling arguments, and so non-instrumental reasons in favour of veganism are canvassed. Meat-eaters (often) benefit from wrongdoing, but Nefsky is not convinced that this a good reason to condemn them. Refusing meat may have symbolic significance in a variety of ways, but these raise a host of tricky puzzles. Ultimately, Nefsky argues that the best

ANGUS TAYLOR

answer is the “naïve” one: refusing meat “makes real progress toward preventing grave harms or injustices”. The tricky—even mysterious—part is “seeing how this could be true when one’s [refusal] will not make a difference” (285).

Fischer, too, addresses causal inefficacy, among a range of other issues. He helpfully identifies several key takeaways from his wide review of arguments in defence of meat-eating: the significance of animal deaths in arable agriculture; the significance of non-traditional sources of animal products (invertebrates, *in vitro* meat, freeganism, etc.); the environmental costs of animal agriculture; the relationship between abstract rights and concrete practice; the potential virtue of embracing one’s involvement with harm to animals (think, again, of List and feeling the “right” thing); and the (in principle) distinction between innocuous *use* and problematic *exploitation*. Attention to these issues will provide the most compelling possible defences of the consumption of animal products, Fischer claims. Indeed, he finishes by attempting just such a defence, and forwards the imperative that we “eat unusually”: “there appear to be good reasons to eat roadkill, bugs, bivalves, *in vitro* meat, animal products that will be wasted, and the bodies and byproducts of animals that live full, pleasant lives” (263). Whether he is right or not, it is hard to argue with this conclusion.

McPherson, Nefsky, and Fischer’s contributions share a few themes. One is the puzzle about how our individual dietary choices are not likely to affect the food system. Another chapter that focuses on this is Andrew Chignell’s engaging paper—ostensibly on religion and food—about how a hope (or faith) that we can make a difference could allow us to overcome the psychological barrier that our awareness of our own impotence

ANGUS TAYLOR

can introduce. Paul B. Thompson's reflections on agrarianism, meanwhile, offer some tantalising tidbits about how to bypass causal-impotence arguments altogether.

Another commonality between the chapters of McPherson, Nefsky, and Fischer is that all provide powerful-but-sympathetic challenges to vegans. Mark Budolfson's characteristically strong chapter does the same. He criticises the standard idea that we should be promoting some given food system (e.g., a vegan system) because that would be the least harmful that provides us with enough food. This, he thinks, is morally and empirically dubious—*morally* because the food system of ideal theory need not have a clear relationship with the food system we should promote in non-ideal circumstances, and *empirically* because, even assuming “vegan values” (91), lots of vegan foods are far less harmful, overall, than some non-vegan foods. Budolfson's example is mussels: they are (he says) non-sentient, and mussel-farming practices require little land or water, and produce little by way of pollution, greenhouse-gas emissions, or harm to human workers. A tick for Fischer's unusual eating, it seems.

There are plenty of other chapters that contain material directly relevant to animal ethicists: Jeff Sebo's consideration of “multi-issue” food activism contains much on animal activism; Christina Van Dyke offers a useful reflection on the relationship between veganism and eating disorders; and readers would be foolish to skip the final two chapters. The book closes with Henrik Lagerlund on medieval food ethics and John Grey and Aaron Garrett on “modern philosophical dietetics.” Both pieces contain fascinating historical resources for thinking seriously about the normative status of animals and the ethics of veganism. How many readers could call to mind Augustine's

ANGUS TAYLOR

rejection of vegetarianism, Maimonides's justification for the Jewish proscription on pork, Anne Conway's comments on the status of animals, or the vegetarian politics of John Oswald? Even for the most ahistorical of animal ethicists, these arguments will be interesting.

All this said, I implore animal ethicists interested in food-related matters to take seriously even those chapters that are not, at first glance, relevant to animal ethics. To borrow the words of Susan Wolf, compared to the "weighty issues" relating to animals, some topics of food ethics are "undeniably frivolous" (722). But if we want to take food ethics seriously—and, if we want to talk about food, we should—we must be aware of these questions. As I've said, animal ethicists' arguments about food are impoverished if they do not take seriously the wider issues of food ethics, which will, in any case, often reveal themselves to be *highly* relevant for animal ethicists when explored in earnest.

Wolf addresses the ethics of being a foodie—and the encounter with the foodie will be one familiar to many vegans. Shen-Yi Liao and Aaron Meskin's excellent contribution on the relationship between food ethics and food aesthetics is also relevant, here. The authors draw frequently on wrongs to animals, and ultimately defend a position of "food immoralism," according to which the morality of a food practice does have an impact upon its aesthetics, but that this need not always be a direct relationship: the immorality of a food practice, depending on the circumstances, can increase *or* decrease its aesthetic values, for instance. Foodies and aesthetes may often be defenders of ethically dubious practices, but there's no reason they should *inherently* be so, and it is clear from these chapters that Wolf, Liao, and Meskin treat issues relating to harm-to-animals with

ANGUS TAYLOR

the scholarly seriousness they warrant. Even Thompson, in his chapter on agrarian philosophy—another position we might assume to be opposed to veganism—could not be accused of ignoring or dismissing either animals or vegetarianism.

Karen Stohr and Sarah Conly address etiquette and paternalism respectively; neither mention animals, but both offer engaging papers on core questions of food ethics, and precisely the sort of thing animal ethicists serious about food should be thinking about. I do not mean to criticise them for not mentioning animals, incidentally. As will—by now—be clear, the book is replete with sympathetic, informed, and careful consideration of animals. Only in a few places did I find myself frustrated by such consideration's absence. Jaclyn Hatala Matthes and Erich Hatala Matthes, it seemed, only reluctantly acknowledged the wastefulness of animal agriculture in their chapter on food waste. Kyle Powys Whyte, meanwhile, has an unfortunately anthropocentric approach to food justice. It occurs, he tells us, “when at least one human group systematically dominates one or more other human groups through their connections to and interactions with one another in local and global food systems” (345). Whether this is the *only* time food injustice occurs in Whyte's eyes is unclear (cf. 12-3), but that the sentence twice includes the word *human* gives an indication, I think, of where Whyte's sympathies lie. And the contribution on food labour ethics, by Tyler Doggett and Seth M. Holmes, might frustrate some readers with its references to how people are treated as (or like) animals. It was an engaging read, though, and covers a topic of undeniable importance.

The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics contains some 35 chapters across over 800 pages. There is thus a lot that I have missed out of this review, though perhaps some of the other

ANGUS TAYLOR

chapters will be of less interest to readers of *BTS*. My not mentioning a given chapter should not be taken as an indication that it was not worth including, or is not worth reading. Indeed, in contrast to other handbooks, I found few of the contributions to be weak links—though, of course, any book of this length is going to have some chapters weaker than others. And while, perhaps, there are other topics that could have been included, given the already impressive length of the book, I am not going to criticise it on that account. Recall that this is a handbook, not an encyclopedia.

In short, I thoroughly recommend *The Oxford Handbook of Food Ethics* to all animal ethicists interested in addressing food-related questions in their research or teaching. I have already made ample use of it in both my own teaching and my own research. I have no doubt that I will continue to do so.