

Food Ethics

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Citation Information:

Garcia, R. (2015). "Food Ethics", *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 3rd Edition, R. Audi (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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food ethics, the subfield of applied ethics addressing the moral questions concerning the production, distribution, marketing, consumption, and sociocultural significance of food. Food production is the subject of longstanding disputes. One concerns whether and under what conditions the use of animals is wrongful treatment. This has been extensively explored from both animal rights and animal welfare perspectives. Another dispute, bearing on both individual and environmental health, concerns organic agriculture and the appropriate use of pesticides and herbicides. Much current controversy concerns "GM foods" produced from genetically modified organisms (typically crops). The promised benefits of GM foods are morally significant: improved yield, increased food security, more efficient use of natural resources, and improved resistance to disease and herbicides. Critics, however, argue that GM crops and foods pose significant known and unknown risks for humans and the environment. Additionally, given the proprietary nature of biotechnology, widespread production of GM crops raises concerns about intellectual property rights and the dependence of developing countries on the agricultural biotech industry. Lastly, as food demand increases with global population, ethical issues arise concerning appropriate use in food production of relatively scarce natural resources such as arable land and fresh water. Some argue that the copious water required for raising feedlot cattle should be more efficiently used to produce crops.

Food distribution raises traditional questions concerning justice--the extent of our obligations to the poor and hungry. In addition, the typically significant distance from farm to plate poses a number of moral issues concerning the environmental, economic, and cultural impact of so-called "food miles." With respect to food marketing, an important dispute concerns packaging and the extent to which food-marketers are obligated to provide information about a food's origin (e.g., whether a chicken was humanely raised), nature (e.g., whether a tomato was derived from a GM crop), or preparation (e.g., whether a strawberry was irradiated). Questions also concern the appropriateness of child-targeted advertisements for typically unhealthy food--questions made urgent by rising childhood obesity.

Food consumption also raises ethical issues. Central to the ethics of eating are disputes concerning whether one has an obligation--to oneself, others, future generations, animals, or the environment--to eat (or not eat) certain foods or to eat them in a certain manner. Some argue that certain foods should be avoided on pain of supporting an unethical agricultural practice. Indeed, some contend that eating is an inherently political statement--that you "vote with your fork." More general, perhaps, are questions concerning the role of eating, feasting, and perhaps even fasting in the good life.

Finally, sociocultural issues in food ethics concern the interplay between food culture and gender, race, and class. Some issues arise in connection with the gender-specific roles and expectations that often attend the acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food. Other issues concern alleged affinities between feminism and vegetarianism, on the one hand, and patriarchy and animal exploitation, on the other.