FROM FIELD TO FORK
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Food Ethics for Everyone

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Dedicated to Eudora Vasquez
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Chapter 7 is a substantially revised and expanded version of “Ethics, Hunger and the Case for Genetically Modified (GM) Crops,” in Ethics, Hunger and Globalization: In Search of Appropriate Policies (Pinstrup-Andersen and Peter Sandøe, eds., Dordrecht, NL: Springer, 2007, pp. 215–235). All the other material in this book is appearing here for the first time.

The germ for this book began in earnest during my sabbatical at Portland State University (PSU) where I spent a year as a visiting fellow at the Institute for Sustainable Solutions (ISS). I would like to thank Jennifer Allen, ISS director, and my sponsor, David Ervin, as well as ISS’s founding director Robert Costanza, all of whom made my stay there possible. Kim Heavener at PSU made it easy, including putting up with a suitcase in her office when I was away. I must also acknowledge the W. K. Kellogg Foundation for their gift to Michigan State University that supports my chair. I have learned too much from many friends and colleagues over the years to begin thanking all the people who have influenced the thinking that went into this book, but I will mention one who passed away more than a decade ago: Glenn L. Johnson was a professor of agricultural economics at Michigan State University when I first started to work in agricultural and food ethics as an assistant professor at Texas A&M University in 1980. Looking back, I am humbled and amazed at the amount of time Glenn invested in making sure that I did not
make an idiot of myself too frequently to survive in the world of farmers and faculty of various colleges of agriculture. Glenn was adamant about two things. First, people working professionally in agricultural science and food production had already thought a lot about ethics. Second, despite this, they needed people trained in philosophy to work through the challenges ahead. Glenn was not about to let me forget the first point, even as he spent many hours laying a foundation for me to help with the second.

I did not start life with a deep interest in food and farming, much less food ethics. Like many in my generation I went into philosophy as an environmentalist committed to the idea that reformulating our values was crucial for the survival of our planet. After completing a dissertation on risk assessment and nuclear energy, I found myself at Texas A&M University, where John J. McDermott, former head of the Department of Philosophy, and H. O. Kunkel, dean of agriculture, were attempting to find someone who would teach a new course on ethics and agriculture. I recall sitting in John’s backyard with flames from his barbecue blazing ten feet in the air as he regaled me with stories about how food ethics would be the wave of the future. I was (justifiably) skeptical. This was 1981 and there was a robust ethical literature emerging on what was then called “world hunger” and on the use of animals for food. It would be relatively easy to build a course on those topics, but I did not think of myself as having much to contribute from a research and publication standpoint.

As I have recounted in The Agrarian Vision, I was lured more deeply into the field by reorienting some risk-related work that came out of my dissertation. Many of the philosophical questions I had investigated in connection to nuclear power seemed to be relevant to the then-nascent techniques for gene transfer in agricultural plants and animals. I eventually became more deeply interested in sustainability and the cultural significance of the European farming tradition. Within a few years I had become friends with Richard Haynes. The W. K. Kellogg Foundation helped launch a series of conferences that evolved into the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society (I served as the second president),
and things were on their way. Not “the wave of the future” perhaps, but there were interesting questions to ponder and plenty of opportunities to squeeze ideas from ethics and the philosophy of science and technology into agricultural science disciplines. My important work was more likely to show up in Plant Physiology or the Journal of Animal Science than in Mind or Synthese. I was very happy with that.

With each passing year, I have come to appreciate more and more Glenn’s effort to educate me in the ways of food and farming. Food began to become a subject with wider appeal after massively popular books by Eric Schlosser, Marion Nestle, and Michael Pollan. I started thinking less about taking ethics into the work of food system professionals and began to wonder how I could transfer some of the things I had learned about agriculture to a new generation of people who were interested in food but had no professional stake in food production. Some were motivated by the aesthetics of local food and romantic visions of small farms, while others saw food and farming strictly in environmental terms. Like both of my children, many had become vegetarians at a very early age and were now exploring that interest more deeply. Still others were motivated by the turn toward food issues that was taken by people who started in civil rights, women’s issues, or environmental justice. Like me, most of these people had no farm background and had come to their interest in food topics later in life. And increasing numbers of these people were taking a philosophical bent. Philosophers everywhere were starting to use Pollan’s books in courses called “food ethics.” The time was ripe to write for a philosophy audience for a change.

Initially I envisioned this book less as an intervention into the world of food and agriculture than as a summary of some things that farmers, business people, and food or agricultural might take to be incredibly obvious, but that would not be apparent to people who are new to thinking ethically about food. It has not turned out exactly like that. I doubt that very many of my friends in food and agriculture have ever taken the trouble to read what Aquinas said about gluttony in his Summa Theologica, for example. In hybridizing some basic philosophy with some
basic food and agricultural science I hope that I have come up with something that everyone will find thought provoking and informative.

As usual, there are many people to thank, and no one but myself to blame. A few colleagues read partial drafts or summaries, or reacted to oral presentations of drafts for chapters, sometimes offering extensive critique but sometimes only a brief comment. Both have been very useful. They include Michiel Korthals, Fred Gifford, Stephen Esquith, Sandra Batie, Patricia Norris, Rebecca Grumet, David Schmidt, Erin McKenna, Darryl Macer, Lawrence Busch, John Stone, Clark Wolf, Elizabeth Graffy, Raymond Anthony, Joy Mench, Ruth Newberry, Janice Swanson, and Kyle Whyte. I am sure that I am forgetting too many. Micaela Fischer, Kaitlin Koch, Zachary Herrnstedt, Nagwan Zahry, Huaike Xu, Zachary Piso, and Ian Werkheiser all read the penultimate draft of the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions. Marion Nestle, Holmes Rolston III, Bryan Norton, and Peter Sandøe offered words of encouragement and a some important last-minute corrections after reading the final draft. I would like to thank Erin Anderson for her work on the figures. Julie Eckinger at MSU has provided constant help with various technical aspects of producing the manuscript, and Lucy Randall at OUP has been a constant source of guidance and support. I must acknowledge my indebtedness to Heather Hambleton, the copy editor from OUP who caught errors and made many suggestions to improve readability, and Molly Morrison, project manager from Newgen Knowledge Works. My appreciation also goes to Ken Marable, who helped in preparing the index. And finally I thank my readers. Giving one’s time to someone else’s ideas is among the greatest gifts that one human being can bestow upon another.
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Dory lives on five acres near a major metropolitan area. She derives most of her income from substitute teaching in several nearby school districts. She likes that work because it allows her to taper off her teaching in the springtime so that she can farm her land. She sells fruits and vegetables to local chefs and to the public at farmers’ markets throughout the summer. Dory is especially known for her strawberries, grown without any synthetic pesticides or chemical fertilizers. She has a neighbor who also grows organic strawberries, so occasionally they team up by pooling their berries. One or the other of them will take a turn selling them at the downtown farmers’ market. Whether it’s Dory or her neighbor Pat behind the market stand, people seek out these berries both for their wonderful flavor and because they like to buy from people they know.

Is Dory doing anything unethical? Many people will be surprised by such a question because the description just given hardly suggests any basis for suspecting unethical behavior. But by selling her neighbor’s strawberries Dory is violating the rules for many urban farmers’ markets. Although these rules are far from universal, many urban markets limit farmers to selling only the things they grow themselves. Such rules were put in place to give farmers an economic opportunity, but also because people who shop in farmers’ markets want to know that they are buying food directly from the person who grew it. Although it might seem unreasonable to apply such a rule so strictly in a case like Dory’s, a very similar type of horse-trading among local farmers led to a scandal in 2011.
when people in Oregon were sickened by E. coli-contaminated strawberries. The source of the contamination was eventually traced to deer that had been on the farm of a single grower who was supplying numerous roadside stands as well as farmers selling in farmers’ markets. The scandal was less the result of the contamination itself than the difficulty authorities had in tracing the contaminated berries through the chain of trades being made by farmers whose customers thought that they were buying direct from the field.

Consider Walker, a student who purchases the meal plan at a college located in an urban area. Walker is a health-conscious vegetarian who eschews most of what is available at lunch and dinner in the campus dining hall, but his meal plan includes a budget for items that can be purchased anytime at the campus snack bar. Walker is not much for snacks, but he can also use this part of his plan to buy a few nonperishable food items: candy, chips, processed meat sticks, and packaged bakery items. One of his similarly health conscious friends has started a campaign for like-minded students to spend their snack budget on these nonperishable goods and then donate them to the local food bank. The director of the food bank says he would love to have them. His clients like candy and chips and especially those peppered sticks of jerky and sausage! But Walker is not so sure. He is all in favor of lending a helping hand to people who are short on food—and after all, he’s already paid for the plan, whether he spends the money or not. Yet how can it be ethical to give needy people food that he is not willing to eat himself?

I learned about Walker’s quandary by speaking with students at the university where I work, but questions very much like the one he is asking are faced by the managers of local food banks and charitable assistance programs everywhere. Similar questions apply to public policies offering supplemental nutrition assistance programs (SNAP) or what many still call “food stamps.” No one thinks that a diet consisting entirely of chips, candy, and soft drinks is healthy. Not even the manufacturers of these foods would suggest that. Still, snack foods consumed in moderation can be part
of a healthy diet. Denying access to them seems like telling the client of a food bank that they cannot be trusted to make their own choices simply because they are poor or have fallen on hard times. It looks rather like a paternalistic form of disrespect. Yet as the old adage has it, “Beggars can’t be choosers.” Don’t people who contribute to food assistance programs have every right to insist that the churches, government agencies, and charitable organizations who run them shape the program according the donor’s values?

And finally, take Camille, a local legislator from a part of the country that is heavily dependent on pork production for employment and tax revenue. Camille has just met one of her constituents, a pig farmer demanding that she support a new piece of legislation. It seems that one of his neighbors hired a college kid to work on his swine farm over the summer, but the kid turned out to be an animal-rights activist. The kid smuggled in some high-priced vodka to drink with a few of the farm’s regular employees and then cajoled them into play-acting some scenes inspired by the horrible Abu Ghraib photographs of tortured Iraqi prisoners—only this time with pigs playing the role of the torture victims. The neighbor was furious when he found out. He fired the college kid and docked the pay of his regulars, warning them never to let something like that happen again. But now the video that the kid took of these fake abuse scenes has gone viral on YouTube. The news stations are starting to pick it up and are playing the story as if this is what happens all the time on area pig farms! Camille’s constituent wants her to support a law that would make distribution and reproduction of photographs or video recordings obtained without the farmer’s permission a crime.

Camille is not so sure. They call these “ag-gag” laws, and versions of them have been passed by state legislatures throughout the Midwestern farm belt of the United States. Although it’s easy to sympathize with the plight of her constituent’s neighbor (assuming he is telling the truth), such photographs and films are viewed as political speech by the animal protection organizations that circulate them. Camille suspects that her politically conservative farming constituents would not be very sympathetic to government
interference in their own speech. And how can she (or anyone) be sure this neighbor was telling the truth when he accused the college kid of filming a set-up? Maybe those pigs were actually being abused. At the same time, she’s troubled because—having campaigned on plenty of pig farms herself—she’s satisfied that even if this kind of abuse happens from time to time it is rare. But the whole industry suffers when pictures like this are made public, and where is the justice in that?

Dory, Walker, and Camille are struggling with tough questions in food ethics, but many issues in food ethics are not tough at all. In 2009, Chinese officials revealed a conspiracy in which infant formula had been deliberately adulterated through the substitution of melamine, an ingredient in industrial glues and plastics, for milk powder. At least three infants died as a result, and some estimates indicated that 300,000 were sickened and may experience long-term health consequences. The perpetrators of the conspiracy are believed to have gained millions of dollars, but at an intolerable cost in human misery and loss of life. Unlike the questions being posed for Dory, Walker, or Camille, there is no mystery here about what should be done. Yet as much as we might like to think that the matter of what we eat or how it is produced and distributed will always be simple and clear-cut, the preparation and consumption of foods we eat everyday are replete with opportunities for ambiguity, confusion, and disagreement. Some of the most enduring and deep disagreements occur when one person thinks the ethical choices are easy and unambiguous, but the next person is not so sure.

The Rise of Food Ethics

Dory, Walker, and Camille are philosophical thought experiments—stories cooked up to give us insight into an ethical problem—rather than real people. Their situations are typical of problems that will be discussed throughout this book. To many people, food ethics means making better dietary choices. Choices could be better in terms of health or they could have better
environmental and social consequences for others. Food choices become ethical when they intersect with complex economic supply chains in ways that cause better or worse outcomes for other people, for nonhuman animals, or for the environment. It is worth reminding ourselves that this is a relatively new idea. Enthusiasm for farmers’ markets; humanely produced animal products; and fairly traded coffee, tea, and cocoa has grown markedly over the last decade. Over the same time period, we have also gained greater recognition of links between diet and the alarming growth in diabetes, heart disease, and other degenerative conditions. Thus food ethics might include not only making better choices yourself but also designing menus, public policies, or even cities to encourage better food choices by everyone. The examples of Dory, Walker, and Camille illustrate further problems in food ethics that do not even involve dietary choice in any simple or straightforward way.

The growing number of ways that food becomes embroiled in ethical quandaries coincides with key industrial and commercial developments in the production and distribution of food. As food historians have demonstrated, the early decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of food manufacturing firms and chain grocery stores. During this period, many factors conspired to create a food system in which consumers were quite ignorant of where their food came from and hence could not make choices on ethical grounds. On the one hand, urban populations simply lacked a kind of personal experience with food production that had been virtually ubiquitous a century earlier. On the other hand, technological changes in rail transport and food processing were creating longer supply chains and smoothing out seasonal variation in food availability. Branded products arose in response to consumer demands for some reasonable certainty as to the quality of processed foods, and with branding came food advertising. Home economists promoted the use of canned and packaged food as “progressive,” and as more women entered the workforce, it became necessary to economize on the time invested in procurement and preparation of meals at home. By the 1960s, these trends were being augmented by rapid growth in meals eaten outside the home.