



Food Ethics: Consuming with Compassion

By Julie Hanlon Rubio

On a hot June evening in St. Louis, I am making homemade pesto for a vegetarian pasta dish. My niece stands in the kitchen telling me about arguments with friends who are vegetarian.

While she eats a healthy, mostly plant-based, diet herself, she thinks people should be able to eat whatever they want as long as they can afford it; top-down efforts to shape people's eating habits by asking them to limit their consumption of meat and processed foods suggest a "nanny-state" that is overstepping its proper role.¹ Though aware of arguments about the distasteful details of meat production and the health risks of certain foods, she is skeptical about the sources disseminating this information. Furthermore, most people around her are eating the very foods alarmists insist are full of harmful chemicals, and yet they seem perfectly healthy. Is all of this concern about food really warranted?

Most public discussion of what might be called “food ethics” focuses on health and the “ick factor”—the dirty details of how meat is processed, the risk chemicals pose to personal health, and, sometimes, the reality of animal cruelty. These are valid concerns, but they are just the beginning. There are many ethical questions we need to ask about food: How much energy was used to make it? What is its “carbon footprint” (i.e., the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere in producing, packaging, shipping, and distributing the food, thus contributing to climate change)? How much fossil fuel did it take to grow the food, keep it fresh, and move it? Were the workers who grew and picked it paid a living wage and treated with dignity? Is it sustainably grown (i.e., can we keep growing it this way in the future)? How much water and land did it take to grow the food? How much water pollution and air pollution can be traced to it? If animals are involved, did they suffer? If we keep eating it, will we suffer?

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The way we eat has a huge impact on our bodies, animals, and the environment. Eating affects health, shapes the lives of farm animals, accounts for a large percentage of our carbon footprint, and uses more fossil fuels than any sector of the economy except transportation.² The food system that sustains the way we eat—one dominated by industrial agriculture, factory farming, and processed foods—is unhealthy for us, unjust to animals, and unfair to future generations who deserve to inherit an earth just as rich in resources and beauty as the one we now enjoy. Changing the way we eat has great potential to reduce harm to ourselves, other living creatures, and the earth itself.



The changes recommended by ardent environmentalists, however, can be unrealistic and contradictory. Some advocate eating as much organic food as possible to support more sustainable farming methods.³ In contrast, advocates of a local diet argue that buying from local farmers to avoid transporting and storing foods (when food travels an average of more than 1,000 miles to our stores) is more important. Peter Singer and Jim Mason, on the other hand, advocate striking a blow to factory farming by switching to an all-vegan diet, or avoiding all animals and animal products. Food journalist Michael Pollan opines, “Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants,” emphasizing a diet with less meat and more whole foods raised by farmers who care about how their practices affect the long-term

health of the planet. *New York Times* journalist Mark Bittman tries to inspire readers to avoid processed foods and animal products and provides instructions for cooking from scratch, but declares buying local-organic foods optional. A new wave of glamorous vegan diet advocates promise that avoiding chemicals and conventional animal product will guarantee weight loss and a healthy glow. **With so many differing opinions, it is easy to be confused and overwhelmed.**⁴

In the meantime, organic products still account for only 2 percent of all US food sales.⁵ Meat consumption remains high in the United States and is growing elsewhere in the world.⁶ Most produce is far from local.⁷



One trip to Whole Foods or a local farmers market (where organic produce can cost two or three times as much as conventionally grown produce) is enough to convince most people they cannot afford to eat differently. Food ethics debates are a concern of an elite minority. The vast majority of Americans continue to buy most of their food from conventional grocery stores and discount chains, supporting the very systems most environmental analysts agree are responsible for the worst environmental damage. **Clearly, most people are not convinced that their behavior is unethical, and even those who want to be “green” are unable to imagine a more just way of eating that will work for them.**

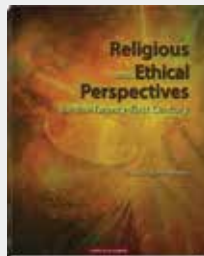
Consider a day in the life of the average college student. If she eats breakfast, she may grab coffee and a granola bar or muffin

from a campus bakery on the way to her first class. Lunch might be a submarine sandwich, chips, and a bottle of water from the campus food court. Dinner out with friends is often a meat-laden pizza or a burger, fries, and soda from a chain fast-food restaurant or the dining hall. The ethical questions above can certainly be raised about her set of food choices. Yet realistically, what other options does she have? Without facilities to cook or transportation to stores that stock alternative foods, and with limited time, knowledge, and money, it seems all but impossible to act differently. And perhaps most important, it may not be clear that the serious effort required to change would be worth it. Even if she did manage to eat differently, would anything really change? Would it really matter?

I argue that daily food choices are morally significant. They impact laborers, animals, the environment, and personal well-being. Every day, the way we eat affects our bodies, other bodies, and earth's future inhabitants. As human beings, we have ethical responsibilities not just to ourselves, but to other creatures, including those that will come after us. As a Christian, I believe that I am a part of the body of Christ, which includes not just fellow believers, but all people now living and to come. For the sake of that body, I believe, we have to begin eating in a different way.⁸

1. See www.choosemyplate.gov/ for the current national campaign, which tosses out the food pyramid in favor of a plate filled with large amounts of fruits and vegetables, and smaller amounts of protein and grains.
2. Michael Pollan, "Farmer in Chief," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 12, 2008, <http://michaelpollan.com/articles-archiv/farmer-in-chief/>.
3. See <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/Consumers/brochure.html>.
4. Recent books addressing the ethical dimensions of food include the following: Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2007); Nina Planck, *Real Food: What to Eat and Why* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Marion Nestle, *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Peter Singer and Jim Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat: Why Our Food Choices Matter* (Emmaus, PA: Rodale, 2006); Mark Bittman, *Food Matters: A Conscious Guide to Eating with More than 75 Recipes* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008); Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin, *Skinny Bitch* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005).
5. Singer and Mason, *The Ethics of What We Eat*, 198.
6. Mark Bittman, "Rethinking the Meat Guzzler," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/weekinreview/27bittman.html?pagewanted=all.
7. Joanna Blythman, "Food Miles: The True Cost of Putting Imported Food on Your Plate," *The Independent*, May 31, 2007, www.independent.co.uk/environment/green-living/food-miles-the-true-cost-of-putting-imported-food-on-your-plate-451139.html.
8. As a Christian ethicist, I write from the context of my own tradition of Roman Catholicism, which values both philosophical and theological arguments. It is my hope that all people of goodwill can come to ethical debates with their own unique perspectives, respect the unique perspectives of others, and seek common ground.

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