BOOK REVIEW


In his introduction to The Ethics of Food, Gregory Pence writes that, “the decisions we make about food define who we have been, who we are now, and who we want to become. How we make those choices says much about our values, our relationships to those who produce our food, and the kind of world we want” (p. vii). Later he adds, “Indeed, we can think about food at many different levels: the molecular and chemical, the medical, the personal, the nonmoral evaluative, the moral, the economic, the political, and the global. Each level has its own issues interwoven with those of the other levels” (p. viii). These passages suggest that the collection will cover not only the standard areas in food ethics – health, hunger, and environment – but also explore how our apparently mundane and routine decisions about food are implicated in our personal, social, and ethical ideals insofar as they express, undermine, challenge, or reinforce them.

The first two selections deliver along this theme. The first, “A Thing Shared” by M. F. K. Fisher, is a short autobiographical essay that illustrates the role that food can play in organizing our experiences and in maintaining a vivid recollection of them. Food need not be reduced to a mere source of calories and nutrients. At its best, it is something around which relationships of family, community, and culture are created, maintained, and strengthened. It can be “something beautiful to be shared with people instead of [seen] as a thrice-daily necessity” (p. 3).

In the second selection, “How We Grow Food Reflects Our Virtues and Vices,” Wendell Berry considers two contrasting attitudes one might take towards food and agriculture: nurturing and exploitive. The former accepts an ideal of agriculture as living well with a flourishing land, and an ideal of food similar to the one characterized by Fisher. The latter accepts an ideal of agriculture as wringing as much out of the land as possible, and an ideal of food as an economic and political commodity. The exploitive attitude is insidious, Berry tells us, and it can pervert character to the point that allows people to think that “food is a weapon.” Moreover, by prioritizing quantity over quality, the exploitive attitude favors mechanization, chemicalization, and intensification of agriculture. It favors large corporate farming operations to the detriment of small farmers and farming communities. It expends the agricultural resources at its disposal, disturbs natural ecosystems, and thereby threatens a dependable long-term food supply. And although it
promises a technological fill in for whatever is lost, it fails to see that our modern agricultural problems are not technological problems. First of all, they are not just problems of production. They are personal problems for farmers and a crisis for farming communities. Second, so long as we embrace false ideals about food, food production, and the role they play politically, socially, and economically, whatever technology we develop will be misused. “If we had an unlimited supply of solar or wind power, we would use that destructively, too, for the same reason” (p. 15). While many might disagree with the substantive ideals that Berry advocates, it would be difficult to deny his general point – which echoes Pence’s introductory remarks – that food and food production are implicated in our personal, social, and cultural ideals, and that a discussion of the ethics of food requires considering those non-economic values.

The contributions in the remainder of the collection do consider these values, but they do so primarily in the context of the issue of genetically modified crops (GMC). In fact, with the exception of a few selections in the beginning, a short (and inadequate) section on the ethics of meat-eating, and a few selections at the end, the collection is really an anthology on GMC. Pence is upfront about this – he says in the introduction that, “Perhaps the most important questions about food today are the various issues raised by genetically modified (GM) food” (p. viii) – and I do not intend this note about perspective as a criticism. However, the volume of selections devoted to GMC results in a collection this is not so much on the ethics of food – where the issue of GMC is among the issues discussed – but a collection on the ethics of GMC that includes selections that help place the GM debate in the context of broader issues in food ethics. Too many important issues – e.g., meat-eating and animal welfare, consumerism and consumption, intellectual property and patenting, seasonal and migratory farm labor, water use, public land use in agriculture, obesity and junk food, the politics of food, production subsidies and research funding, and fishing and aquaculture – are considered only briefly, left out altogether, or addressed only as they relate to GMC for *The Ethics of Food* to be considered a comprehensive collection on the ethics of food.

Part of what makes the above description appropriate is the disappointing section on the ethics of meat eating. It consists of only two pieces. The first is an extended selection by Peter Singer from “Animal Liberation” that provides Singer’s familiar utilitarian animal-welfare argument for vegetarianism, as well as critiques of the practice on distributive justice and ecological grounds. The second is a three page response by Stuart Patton, entitled “Meat Is Good For You,” to the claim that a vegetarian diet is healthier or safer for people than is a meat-based diet. It is odd that this statement on the issue of food safety and health benefits would be the only