
Food Ethics



Rebecca Hawkins

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‘One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well.’

Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own

Food is often described as one of life’s simple pleasures. But scratch the surface and it becomes clear that food is far from simple and that the production, preparation, processing and service of food is far from pleasurable for many thousands of people globally. It is because of the intrinsic relationship between people and food that consideration of food ethics is so critical. Ethical dilemmas are evident in almost every aspect of the food production and processing cycle.

The food industry is characterised by its scale. According to Euromonitor, it is the world’s largest industry (although figures on the economic contribution of the industry vary according to what is included within the classification of ‘food’), (Euromonitor, 2013). It established the first globally integrated

markets, it permeates every civilisation and it makes a sizeable contribution towards emissions of carbon dioxide (the key gas implicated in climate change) (FCRN, 2010). Some food brands are universally recognised. Few, in even the most remote societies, will be unfamiliar with the bright red logo of the Coca Cola company or the yellow and red banner of the McDonalds hamburger chain. Others are defined by their localism and use their local credentials as a badge of pride and distinctiveness.

We produce more food at lower prices than at any point in history. It is a perverse fact, therefore, that millions of people live in hunger. In fact perversity permeates throughout any study of food and ethics. Science and technology, for example, have rendered once unproductive land fertile and yet thousands of acres become barren each year from poor agricultural practices. Global distribution systems have combined with refrigeration to facilitate widespread access to fresh produce in all corners of the earth, yet one third of the food that is produced perishes before it gets to market. Developments in genetics have produced super-resistant crops, but consumers are afraid to eat them. Millions go hungry and the health of thousands is threatened by obesity caused by excess. We value freshness, but consume more processed foods than ever before. International trade in food thrives and yet governments covet food security. Genetic biodiversity is considered fundamental to food security and yet monocultures dominate.

These issues are complex and all have ethical dimensions. Food prices, for example, are kept low by regional and international trade agreements, government subsidies, mass production, low wage costs and the dominance of a small number of global companies who are able to utilise supply chains for competitive advantage. The fruits of scientific endeavour are often available only to those who can (or are willing to) pay, even when the roots of that endeavour may originate from developing countries which receive no financial reward. Efficient distribution systems are accessible only to those who can produce at sufficient scale to service the global food supply chain, leaving smaller or poorer farmers with limited access to global and regional markets.