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Ronald C. Sandler, 2015, *Food Ethics: The Basics*, London and New York, Routledge, xiii + 200 p

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Sandler provides a sharp and concise introductory overview of recent controversies over the structure, management, and consequences of the global food system, including perspectives that challenge the very idea of a global food system. On the one hand, the term “food ethics” refers to Sandler’s focus on goals and rationales for methods and technologies of food production and their systematic organization through global exchange relations. On the other hand, food ethics is an idea promoted by activists who advocate dietary change and moral rationales for food consumption decisions. In this latter sense, food ethics challenges the dominant systems of food production and distribution. “As the term is used in this book,” Sandler writes, “a *food issue* is any contested aspect of the life cycle of food: agriculture and capture, processing, manufacture, distribution, transportation, preparation, consumption and disposal.” Food ethics is a review of the various arguments that are put forward to advocate for alternative approaches to food issues. Sandler’s approach takes due notice of the arguments made by critics of the *status quo*, but also recognizes arguments made by scientists and others who support it.

Sandler covers topics such as food security, the diet-health relationship, vegetarianism, the debate over genetically engineered agricultural crops and livestock, and more general questions concerning the relationship between food and culture. The book is organized with separate chapters on each of these subjects. Sandler suggests that readers will find it helpful to think these topics as embedded within a more comprehen-

sive debate over the structure of the global food system. The book thus begins with a thorough discussion of food systems: networks and processes that produce, process, and distribute the food we eat. Sandler notes that while a few regions remain isolated, we now have a *global* food system characterized by economic integration, large and powerful actors, mechanization and continuous innovation, highly capitalized infrastructure, and commodification: goods are highly fungible within the global system and valued in terms of monetized exchange. Sandler goes on to note that many of the food issues that spark protest and disagreement emphasize practices that have their origins in the global scope of our current food system, and in the way that costs and harms associated with it are externalized or imposed upon economically weak actors who do not have the power or wealth to resist.

Sandler notes that arguments supporting the current structure stress the need for continuously increasing the amount of food produced on a global basis in order to compete with population growth. These arguments also recognize imperatives to conserve water and energy and to maintain uncultivated ecosystems for biodiversity conservation and often stress that such goals only make it more important to use resources dedicated to food production as efficiently as possible. In opposition, critics stress the way that putative efficiencies achieved by technological innovation neglect costs that are born by people who do not have the wealth to command adequate supplies of nutritious and culturally appropriate food, or by farmworkers and other food system employees whose wages consign them to poverty. Critics also argue that the global food system emphasizes short run efficiencies that do not fully account for environmental impacts, especially when the full cost of these impacts will not be felt until sometime in the future. He then describes proposed alternatives to the global food system such as emphasizing local or organic production, as well as urban consumer movements such as

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“slow food.” In each case, Sandler’s treatment includes both the strengths and weaknesses of the respective arguments.

The arguments over food issues discussed in the remaining chapters are, in Sandler’s view, shaped by this overarching debate on the justifiability of the current global food system. For example, critics argue that food insecurity is caused by inequities in the distribution of food and that continued emphasis on industrial monoculture can be expected to have harmful impacts on biodiversity and environmental quality. This chapter goes on to discuss the ethical dimensions of food security in terms of whether comparatively better off people have an ethical obligation to offer aid in the form of food or development assistance to those who suffer from lack of secure access to a reliable supply of food. Other chapters also follow this pattern. Important arguments for vegetarianism, for example, are couched in terms of the need to shift human diets away from meat and milk to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the fact that producing feed and then converting it to animal protein is an environmentally inefficient use of land and water resources. In both cases, the current global food system is seen as spawning a set of problems for which reducing consumption of animal products—or abstaining from them altogether—would be an ethically indicated response.

I have myself argued that many of the arguments discussed and analyzed by Sandler in each of the topical chapters adopt simplistic assumptions about food production, distribution networks, and the potential for ameliorating environmental impact through market channels (see Thompson 2015). As such, I think that it is both possible and important to say more about each of these food issues than readers will discover in these 185 pages. The ethics of food security, for example, only really come into focus when one recognizes important differences between the vulnerability of poor smallholding farmers as compared to the urban poor. A second example where more might be said concerns the ethics of food animal production. While Sandler dutifully reviews the case for vegetarianism, his treatment does not get into the details of how industrial animal production might be reformed to improve animal welfare.

However, I would agree that Sandler provides a very clear and accurate synopsis of “the basics:” He gives a fair and truthful rendering of the perspectives and opinions that are

currently being put forward by people with opposing views on how or whether current methods for production and distribution of food can be justified in ethical terms. His text is ideal for readers who want a quick and comprehensive overview of criticisms that are being leveled against the global food system, as well as the main arguments that scientists and industry spokespersons are using to rebut the critiques. If the book can be faulted, it would be that Sandler’s highly readable summaries of arguments do not do a very good job of attributing the arguments to individuals or organizations that are actually making them. The text is not supported by references to the original sources for arguments and opinions, though factual claims are well referenced to citations in the book’s *Bibliography*. Each chapter does include a list of “further readings” where some of the debate over food issues can be found in its primary context, and the book also includes a serviceable index. However, readers of *Food Ethics: The Basics* are left largely to their own devices for tracing the respective points of view back to their original sources.

In addition, Sandler does not discuss how those holding a given point of view might be viewed as advancing their own economic or political interests. Should we discount the argument of someone who stresses the ethical imperative of “feeding the world” if we learn that they are promoting the use of a specific technology that might enhance yields? What about advocates of mandatory GMO labeling who have investments in the organic food industry and can be expected to profit from a policy that might tarnish the reputation of their competition? Such questions require a more informative discussion of sources. Perhaps they truly do take food ethics beyond “the basics”. Nevertheless, as a *compendium* of current day controversies over food, the book is unsurpassed. It will certainly be useful as a supporting text for many undergraduate courses, and even many specialists will find Sandler’s overview of the field to be a valuable resource.

References

- Thompson PB (2015) *From field to fork: food ethics for everyone*. Oxford University Press, New York, 346 p