



# Good Question

An  
Exploration  
in Ethics

A series presented by the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University

# Eating

EVERYONE **EATS**.  
SOME MORE  
THAN OTHERS.

**ETHICS** AND **CULTURE**  
COLLIDE AS WE DEBATE  
WHAT CAN AND OUGHT  
TO BE **CONSUMED**.

## QUESTION

What should we eat?

## ANSWER

Everyone eats. Some more than others. About 870 million people worldwide are chronically undernourished. This includes more than 100 million underweight children below age 5. In the U.S. alone, some 50.1 million Americans—one-sixth of the population—don't know where their next meal will come from. That such chronic hunger and poverty persist in a world capable of producing enough to feed everyone lingers as one of the most pressing moral dilemmas of the 21st century.

Despite the importance of food insecurity on the global agenda, it's not the top concern when most people scan restaurant menus, shop grocery aisles, or idle at the drive-thru window. In a busy, live-to-work society, fast calories at a reasonable price reigns supreme. We eat, throw away, and drive-on. Located at the tail end of a complex global food system, Americans, and other "First World" consumers, can easily become disconnected from the ethical implications of individual and collective choices. Every step of the food production process—from cultivation to disposal—imposes significant

costs on the environment and society. These costs are difficult to discern, however, when looking at the end products in the grocery store.

By the time ETHICS make its way to the dinner table, if at all, the questions pertain not to "whether" we'll eat but how to make trade-offs among an abundance of confusing and often competing choices. Ethics and culture collide as we debate what can and ought to be consumed. Local or organic vegetables? Fair trade or shade-grown coffee? Do cage-free or free-range chickens have the better life?

Paradoxically, these ethical choices seem to demarcate an amenity reserved for the privileged few. Price-premiums for certified products place ethical food options out of reach for the pocket-conscious. At the same time, one must be well-educated enough about issues of concern to evaluate competing claims and make informed decisions. Affluence and education then become pre-requisites for making ethical choices.

Even the most affluent and well-educated have their work cut out for them. The food system, which in the past was more local and self-sufficient, has been transformed by rapid growth in the international food commodity trade. Among other things, this obscures the process by which basic agricultural goods become transformed into the foods we eat. For consumers to make informed ethical choices they need credible information about what actually happens inside the "black box" of production—the farm to fork process behind the meal. Unfortunately, characteristics of

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## PROFILE

goods related to their production, like the treatment of workers, animal welfare, and environmental sustainability, are often unobservable and un-testable.

Ultimately, it seems choice itself is the essence of privilege. Poverty should not preclude ethics. Yet, in this highly moralized terrain, affluent, “First World” consumers are not merely the only ones capable of paying the comparatively higher price for ethical foods. The moral logic of food advocacy and consumerism suggests that they are the only ones worthy of this choice. The poor shall not have cake (unless it’s the only thing the food pantry, soup kitchen, or school lunch program has in stock). The same reasoning suggests that those reliant on SNAP benefits (aka food stamps) are not entitled to use these subsidies to purchase whoopee pies at a local farmers market or, more importantly, fresh fruits and vegetables free of pesticides and other contaminants. While the self-made business person is praised for earning her daily bread, the working poor mother is chastised for deserv-ing her lot. The first has earned choices, whatever criteria she decides to use, the second deserves none.

At the end of the day, most of us would like to do a better job of making our actions more consistent with the values and principles we profess to believe. But lack of access to both information and resources makes it extremely difficult for this to happen. To the extent that ethics is about choosing to be good, the political and cultural economy of food makes ethical consumption impossible for most.

### Shana Starobin

Kenan Graduate Fellow and Ph.D. candidate  
in Environmental Science and Policy

People watch what Shana Starobin eats.

Starobin, a Ph.D. candidate at the Nicholas School of the Environment, is writing her dissertation on the regulation of global food and agriculture. She avoids processed foods, eats lots of organic and local produce, and is mostly a vegetarian. She puts a lot of thought into food—where it comes from, how farmers and laborers are treated, animal welfare, environmental impacts—and seeks out the best available information.

And the people she knows watch what goes on her plate. Starobin finds this a little disconcerting.

“I don’t aspire to make my preferences prescriptive for others,” she explains. “Food choices are complicated, and we each make trade-offs drawing on our values, priorities, and the resources available to us.”

Starobin attributes her choices to meals she ate growing up in Worcester, Massachusetts. “My mother, who worked full-time, still managed to prepare daily meals from scratch. We’d go to the local fish market and she’d grill Lester about what was fresh that day and where it was caught. We purchased meat from the neighborhood butcher. We visited the local farm stand for produce in season. Growing up with in-depth knowledge of where my food came from shaped my outlook and primed me to question the more complex journey food makes from farm to fork today.”

In “The Political and Ethical Economy of Food,” the Spring 2012 class she taught as the Kenan Graduate Instructor in Ethics, Starobin asked her students to explore what went into their food choices and how

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Individual choices, in aggregate, shape market demand. In policy papers, op-eds, and class discussions, they puzzled through the economic, social, political, and moral interests involved—both for consumers and producers—and talked about the implications for policymakers.



“My goal was to create some productive cognitive discomfort for my students,” she explained, “and I succeeded. But I tried to leave them with the message that we can’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good. There’s a lot that’s wrong with the current system—particularly with default food choices. But if we can make the default options better, that’s a good start.”

Starobin’s research and teaching are informed by real-world experience with organizations tackling food insecurity internationally and in the U.S. For more than half a decade, Starobin’s work with the international development organization American Jewish World Service exposed her to the on-the-ground realities of subsistence farmers in developing countries. In her capacity as a member of the Board of Directors of AmpleHarvest.org—a nonprofit that connects farmers and backyard gardeners with food pantries, soup kitchens, and the like to eliminate food waste and amplify voluntary, local responses to hunger in the U.S.—she attended a White House event in August 2012 that brought together senior officials in the Obama administration with representatives from children’s advocacy organizations, anti-hunger groups and other nonprofit agencies to share best practices.

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