

INTRODUCTION

Food and eating are basic, central, and important to our lives. While food is a biological necessity, the place and importance of food extends far beyond physical needs. We usually eat at least a few times every day; some people are perpetual snackers. We eat for pleasure, nutrition, and to waylay stress. Individuals also have particular food patterns such as morning drinks, reward snacks, after-exercise meals, and comfort foods. Many people enjoy food preparation and sharing food; most people look forward to the next snack or meal. Food claims a notable portion of each day, from earning what we need to buy food, to shopping for what we need (or gathering foods directly from the earth), to prep and cooking, and finally, the meal itself.

Partaking of food is often a social activity—so much so that it is difficult to imagine a gathering without drinks and snacks or a shared meal. Every culture has food specialties and long-held food traditions. Families develop much-loved recipes and treasured food traditions. Sharing treasured foods or recipes is often part of friendship, and some of these foodways have traveled from faraway homes, whether an Asian veggie stir-fry, North American bagel, or European tomato pasta. Sharing food can be a way of spending time with others, of stopping the perpetual doing of life independently in order to spend time directly with our closest contacts. Food is central to our lives as individuals, families, and communities.

Prepping a meal for someone is akin to telling him or her a story about who you are, where you come from, and where you hope to go in the future. (Christopher Carter, Ph.D., *The Spirit of Soul Food*)¹

Anything as important and social as food and meals is certain to have a list of protocols. From an early age we learn table-manners, including expectations for day-to-day meals and additional manners for eating in public, eating with guests, and for eating special meals such as holiday feasts. We are taught when we may start eating, how to properly move food around the table and serve from shared dishes, how to politely put food in our mouths and chew, what to do (and not to do) while sharing time at the table, and how to properly complete and exit the eating ritual.

Because food entails many resources, is wrapped in treasured and ancient traditions, and is part of our everyday lives and daily habits, it is bound to be laden with ethical implications and religious guidelines. It is also true that anything as ubiquitous, habitual, and laden with tradition as food is likely to slide under the moral wire—*eating is almost always a matter of habit and not a matter of reflective choice*. One of the most obvious signs of this are localized foods in very globalized economies. People in south India tend to eat a lot of lentils, people in Korea tend to eat a lot of rice, people in Nigeria tend to eat a lot of casava, and not even one of these foods is a core staple across North America. Wheat is common in Iraq, corn in Columbia, and potatoes in Bolivia, and each of these foods is fairly common in North America. We eat what is available, we eat what is affordable, but most fundamentally, we eat what our families taught us to eat. And we rarely consider the ethics of what we eat.

The foods we choose to eat are likely the most important moral/ethical choice that we make, partly because we make this choice every day, several times a day. The word “choice” is critical in ethics: Those who do not have a choice are not morally culpable. That said, if you are reading this, you are almost surely among those who select what you eat.

Eating is ethics in action. The most basic moral decision that we make when we choose what we will eat is whether or not to eat animal products—flesh, dairy, or eggs. There are five weighty concerns that go with choosing to be an omnivore

(plant foods and animal products) or vegetarian (no flesh, but plants, dairy, and eggs). The acronym AMORE (“love” in Italian) reminds of five moral concerns that point to a vegan diet:

1. **A**nimals
2. **M**edical
3. **O**ppression
4. **R**eligion
5. **E**nvironment

Each of these five concerns moral concerns shapes one of the five chapters in this book.

ⁱ Carter, Christopher. *The Spirit of Soul Food: Race, Faith and Food Justice*. Urbana: U. of Illinois, 2022. 131.