Book review


BEN MEPHAM
Centre for Applied Bioethics, University of Nottingham, UK

Ben Mepham is Director of the Centre for Applied Bioethics at the University of Nottingham. His latest book, Bioethics: An Introduction for the Biosciences, was published by Oxford University Press in 2005.

A book with such a title raises certain expectations. Rapidly gathering momentum since the term “food ethics” was first used in a book I edited in 1996, the discipline (if that is what it is) is certainly now attracting much attention. (For example, in the UK, the Food Ethics Council was established in 1998 and was soon followed by the European Society for Agricultural and Food Ethics.) At the very least, one might anticipate that this publication would provide reasoned and balanced deliberation underpinned by ethical theory. Unfortunately, the book largely falls short of realizing that expectation. Readers looking for novel ethical insights might well feel disappointed.

The book is described as a “reader,” and all its 20 chapters have been previously published elsewhere. Most of them first appeared over the last few years, but two chapters date from the 1970s, and two unfortunately are undated. It is clear that it was an important aim of the editor, Gregory Pence, to balance polarized viewpoints in an even-handed way, and a “page count” of “pro” and “anti” contributions (e.g., in relation to GM food) suggests that this has largely been achieved. There are also specific cases where this strategy seems to work well. For example, the two chapters addressing ethical implications of the globalization of trade in food by Runge and Sennauer and by Norberg-Hodge et al., respectively, provide well-reasoned and nicely balanced contributions.

But deeper analysis suggests that this “pro-anti formula” can be simplistic and often fails to provide balance in any real sense. This is largely because of the diverse backgrounds of the contributors, the disparate sources of the contributions sometimes resulting in rather facile and manufactured “debates.” An example is the issue of vegetarianism versus meat eating. Peter Singer’s chapter on vegetarianism, running to 25 pages, is pitched against an article by food scientist, Stuart Patton, of less than three pages. In such a circumstance, it would be reasonable to declare “no-contest.” For some issues, alternative viewpoints are given no airing at all, as in the case of Garrett Hardin’s well-known article on “lifeboat ethics” (subtitled “the case against helping the poor”); a balancing “pro-poor” chapter is conspicuous by its absence. And if the book is to serve, as the editor suggests, as a course text, then the lack of uniformity in the length of the contributions (the longest at 57 pages and the shortest at 2 pages) must be counted a significant limitation.

It is almost inevitable that all books dealing with controversial issues, including those aiming to be even-handed, betray something of the author’s or editor’s ideological stance. This book is no exception. At least, this bias is flagged early on to help the discriminating reader evaluate the selections made. For example, in his introduction, Pence suggests that perhaps the most important questions about food today are the various issues raised by genetically modified (GM) food. He goes on to argue that GM food “is feared to cause cancer in the same way that human genes can cause cancer, while food is (also) ‘environmental’ in being something that is ingested and that acts on one’s existing body. So GM food is feared on both counts.” All these assertions (figuratively speaking “straw men”), of course, are questionable. Arguably, the existence of hundreds of millions of malnourished people (who could be adequately fed with existing food supplies) constitutes a more important issue in food ethics than GM food. The alleged carcinogenic potential of GM food and the conflation of “environmental” and food safety concerns are hardly its most critical aspects. Certainly, from a European perspective, it is the potential domination of the global food supply by a few very powerful multinational biotechnology companies and the genuine environmental impacts (such as those affecting biodiversity and sustainability) that are usually considered to raise more critical, ethical questions.

The Ethics of Food provides some challenging essays, which at best epitomize the sorts of “pro” and “anti” argument often deployed on a range of food issues. In that sense, the title “the rhetorics of food” might have been more appropriate. But as an introduction to ethical reasoning it has some important limitations.