A Critical Conversation

On Paul B. Thompson's *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*

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Abstract

In three "Author Meets Critics" sessions over the course of 2016, food ethicists discussed Paul B. Thompson's *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*. Science magazine's review summarizes the book as follows: *In From Field to Fork*, Paul B. Thompson applies the methods of philosophy and ethics to the choices individuals and societies make about food. The book considers a variety of topics, including: hunger and food insecurity in a land of plenty; the impact of the Green Revolution and genetically modified crops on food production, famine, and the environment; the ethical, health, and environmental rationales for vegetarianism; and the human cost of cheap food. Although Thompson leaves two key players—global food companies and government—out of his analyses, reviewer Nicholas Freudenberg praises the book as a 'sensible and engaging introduction to food ethics.'" Thompson met with critics at the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE) in February, Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP) in March, and European Society for Agriculture and Food Ethics (EurSafe) in September. This article includes selections from the critiques of the book offered by Ray Boisvert, Lisa Heldke, Erin McKenna, Per Sandin, and Gretel Van Wieren at those sessions, followed by a response from Paul B. Thompson.

Ray Boisvert's "Ethics Should Preach"

Let me begin by saying that for purposes of this response I shall be known as R. Paul Thompson. You can still call me Ray, but, having read Paul's book and knowing how he loves to spar with people who share his moniker, I have decided to join, for a short while, the Thompson clan. That leaves only Anne on the panel who is not a Thompson. It's probably best to have one outlier in the group.

What can I tell you about this temporary Thompson, aka Ray?

1. I don't believe in ethics. Doing good deeds and all that is fine and dandy. But ethics as a branch of philosophy has always seemed, well, a bit hubristic, not to mention a lie. If ethics is worth anything, it should, as Aristotle insisted, shape character, make people better. But the intellectual study known as ethics does no such thing. Studies have shown that even ethics professors are actually less ethical than their colleagues. The most stolen books from libraries? You guessed it, ethics books. Now, moral psychology is fine, maybe philosophical anthropology or social and political philosophy that identify guiding ideals and substantive goods are fine too. But ethics as a stand-alone discipline? I have my doubts.

2. I am also a casuist. Though I spent many years studying medieval philosophy, it was not that experience but philosopher Stephen Toulmin who turned me in the direction of casuistry. Case-situated thinking, contextualized by experience, by guiding principles, sensitive to distinctions, attentive to standard-setting precedents, having a ready sense of model individuals and prototypical stories, this combination provides the only real procedure for working through muddles.

3. Finally, I love vagueness. The most important statement made by William James was his assertion that he wished to restore vagueness to its proper place.[1] Life is loaded with borderline situations, along with their not so borderline extremes. Absolutists favor the extremes, relativists the borderlines. Both are with us all the time.

1. William James, "The Stream of Consciousness," in *Psychology: Briefer Course* (New York: Henry Holt, 1923), 165.

Now what does this confession have to do with today's task? Since I am about to share my analysis of Paul's book, I thought it would be good to provide some sense of where it comes from.

What are the main elements of my take?

1. First, we have to recognize the importance of the book. It's a wonderfully clear exposition with a wealth of information about other individuals who have made contributions to ethical reflection both in general and dealing with food in particular. Paul has, it seems, read and watched everything.

2. Second, two areas for discussion:

(a) Paul doesn't preach enough, or at least that is a question I would like to raise. This is related to my first claim about academic ethics not being all that helpful.

(b) Paul seems to want to make the case that food ethics can occasion some serious rethinking about ethics itself (i.e., when we think seriously about food, it alters the philosophical presuppositions usually associated with ethics). I agree, but think that Paul does not go far enough. The questions I would like to open for discussion: Should "taste" become more focal? Should following the model of physiology restore the notion of "human nature" to a central place? Should analogy replace syllogism as a mode of ethical reflection?

(A) Let's start with not preaching enough. Paul makes some substantive claims. He is no friend of vegetarians, at least not when they criticize poorer folk who, having a bit of extra money, spend it on meat. In a similar vein, Paul is no friend of GMO opponents. He suggests, that if we are to feed the world's growing population, we should welcome Genetically Modified Organisms.

At the same time, Paul keeps repeating that he doesn't want to tell people what to eat: "As I said at the very beginning of this book, I am not here to tell you what you should eat. So if your answer is either give up eating meat altogether or finding meat, milk, or eggs at a co-op or market that you feel better about, more power to you."[2]

Here is one issue I would like to raise for discussion: Should a food ethics book remain so agnostic about food prescriptions?

My assessment: Paul remains too timid in this area. In various places, he takes, as prototypical cases, religious food taboos and preferences for organic goods. The main factor, according to Paul, is being well informed. Deception or misinformation is wrong. People should know, for example, if these plants or fish have been genetically modified. Beyond deception, the ethicist holds back. Paul is direct: "I am not here to tell you what you should eat."

Now, all of this sounds sensible enough. Paul wishes to avoid what Lisa Heldke calls "moral litmus tests" (e.g. "you eat meat, therefore you are a bad person").[3] Still, in the end, my question would be whether Paul leans too far in the direction of what can be an escapist assumption, ultimately, "it's up to the individual." Don't like GMOs? Well, don't eat them. Love meat? Go for it. In one sense, this kind of flexibility is fine. There are ranges of acceptable behavior. An ethics that polices down to every last detail borders on the totalitarian. Paul explicitly rejects the claim "that what seems 'only rational' to me is in fact the only rational perspective for anyone to take."[4]

How can I raise questions about so straightforward and generous-spirited a position? Well, here goes. The examples Paul gives—religious commitments trumping science, preference for organic food—work well as far as they go. But just how far do they go and are they prototypical? After all, a religious abstainer from lobster is not exactly choosing religion over science. She is not embracing an unhealthy diet by scientific or nutritional standards. Nor are the co-op shoppers who forego genetically modified foods. For discussion, I'd like to identify a few different examples question whether the claim that "food ethics is not about telling people how to eat" holds up.

It seems to me that most of what Paul says about the network of consequences that attach themselves to food choices would lead him to say, "Yes, it is permissible and ethical to proclaim that certain food choices are better

2. Paul B. Thompson, *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 147.

3. Lisa Heldke, "Ethics of Eating," On Being (blog). Accessed January 17, 2016.

4. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 42.

than others." Paul says that anyone has a right to adjust their diet according to taste and beliefs but no one has an obligation to adopt any particular dietary rules.[5] Here the phrase "obligation to adopt any particular dietary rules" can be read in various ways. In one way, it can mean that no one should be forced to follow the paleo, or the Ornish, or the Atkins diet. That is, no one should be constrained to follow, in excruciating detail, the prescriptions of a particular diet. This seems defensible. There are a variety of diets that are healthy for individuals and sustainable for the planet.

On the other hand, the "no obligation" phrase can also mean that it is always wrong for food ethics to make prescriptive claims about diet. For example, all things being equal, a religious based diet that is demonstrably unhealthy should be avoided. Or the "no obligation" phrase can mean that we remain, in some sense, obligated to seek out a diet that combines promise of good health, development of good habits, sustainability, and concern for the social costs of diseases that might result from bad diets.

B. Another area for discussion asks whether the alteration in perspective suggested by Paul should be accompanied by a real paradigm shift in moral philosophy.

Paul seems to think that reflections on food should not involve just taking pre-formed ethical perspectives and applying them to food issues. His own ethical philosophy depends on what he calls a "conversational thesis."[6] Quite apart from the more typical procedure that seeks out a logic of ethics in terms of "analytical truths and noncontradiction," he thinks a more fruitful approach is one based on "moral capacities" (with proper credit given to Amartya Sen) and on "actual discourse."[7] Using one of his favorite terms, Paul says that we must begin to "see the significance of food as an intersectional locus, as a point of contact that integrates various social and political topics to our personal lives."[8]

Paul, rightly, wants to claim that thinking about food makes a real transformational difference in the way we think about ethics in general. Typically, the arrow of impact works one way only: from pre-existing frameworks to practical applications regarding food. Paul specifically emphasizes how he wants to move away from this. Food means "intersectionality," it means interlocking and interweaving concerns. It means that the neat clear separations between, for example, self-regarding and other-regarding, can now be challenged. It means that an ethical framework which emphasizes personal health over environmental concerns or vice versa, will be a truncated one. Toward the end of his book, Paul explicitly identifies two views and contrasts them. There is the received position, one whose main concerns are: is there enough food and how do we distribute it? Its official label: the "resource sufficiency" view. Then there is the view more in line with a systems approach, the "functional integrity" perspective.

Framed in my terms, I would say he is critiquing the "expand the concentric circles approach" (a position common to Aldo Leopold and Peter Singer.) In what he calls the "common sense" view,[9] individuals can make food choices in consideration of beneficial outcomes. The "expanding concentric circles" dimension arises when "outcomes" can be extended to include considerations of animal welfare and wider social policy choices. The assumption here, and again these are my own words, is that the prototypical starting point is of an individual conscious of specific goals. The goals begin by being focused on a limited circle of care, first the individual and then family. Eventually the circles of care can be expanded.

By contrast, the "functional integrity" approach (this is Paul's label) seems to offer a quite different starting point.[10] No longer is the individual the center of things. Rather the altered framework investigates how the food/agriculture system is integral to the various ways the particular culture structures itself. In other words, how the culture determines which practices are encouraged, which discouraged, how persons understand each other, and how certain patterns of valuation and interaction come to be central while others are marginalized. An agrarian philosophy, according to Paul,

5. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 47.
6. Ibid., 104-105.
7. Ibid., 104-05.
8. Ibid., 104-05.
9. Ibid., 185.
10. Ibid., 180.

"contends that the food system, including the characteristic organization of farm production, is fundamental to the functional integrity of a civilization or way of life."[11] This integrity involves a constant back and forth. There are self-understandings and there are life forms, or wider structures in which we are imbedded, both of which end up being somewhat open and provisional. In other words, we can always wonder whether any particular instantiation of the functional integrity is optimal. Paul describes, longingly as I read it, the integrated interpenetration between ancient Greek farming practices and civic habits. The systems perspective allows us to "see how Greek farming practice contributed to the social organization of the polis and the functional significance of Greek virtues such as citizenship or patriotism, courage, and perhaps even sophrosyne."[12] This seems to be a huge point for Paul, recognizing interconnections between ways of farming/ways of life/kinds of habits encouraged.

Once we recognize this interconnection, we can begin to ask certain kinds of questions, and, as Paul notes, philosophical ethics "is supposed to be a discipline for asking better questions."[13]

My last suggestion for discussion revolves around this "asking better questions" point. When we return, not to the specific world in which the ancient Greeks lived, but to an intersectional grasp of things, how serious a revision must we undertake in asking "better questions." I would like to offer three possibilities for our discussion. They are summarized by the terms "taste," "human nature," and "analogy."

First, Taste. William James once proclaimed that the "nobler thing tastes better, that is all we can say."[14]

My question: Are we willing to claim that reflection on food encourages us to shake up the inherited framework by endorsing a taste/ethics overlap? This would involve (1) situating "taste" within a semantic field where it would no longer signal raw subjectivity and (2) recognizing its moral significance by admitting that the task of ethics is one of educating taste.

If this proposal seems too dramatic, too airy-headed, or too misguided, perhaps we can draw on the work of Jonathan Haidt, a moral psychologist who has attempted a more empirical rehabilitation of taste in books such as *The Righteous Mind*.[15]

A lingering, but often unspoken, assumption among philosophers is the need for a secure, single starting point, typically a central understanding of the good which shall guide further discussion. Haidt claims this is a mistake. We might as well look for the one fundamental taste receptor. As we know, there are five fundamental tastes. Plurality goes all the way down. In just the same way, Haidt suggests, our value system is based on five, lately he has moved to six, modules. Wherever a multiplicity is present, so is the need for organizing, for prioritizing, for, in other words, making value decisions. There is no neutral starting point in the sense of a single foundation that would match what were called "sense data" in epistemology. There is, instead, a cluster of fundamental value axes. The best we can do is make clear which hierarchy of modules we have opted for and provide reasons why our starting point will do a better job of taking us where we should be going. But the starting point, this is the important element, is itself an evaluative decision. Such an approach brings with it an element usually shunned by philosophers: the unavoidability of some circularity.

Paul's analysis seems to allow movement in this direction. I'd just like to ask whether he would be willing to embrace explicitly what we might call the gustatory turn, a turn with two prongs: (1) adopt the taste/value modules proposed by Haidt; (2) recognize that there will always be some circularity in approaching ethical questions, so that a clear-cut, definitive, knock-down position will never be attained.

Besides taste, another shift in emphasis occurs if we take seriously both the range and limitations of what it means to be an eater. Our food tastes need to be educated in line with what our physiologies allow as nutritious. Cheetos

11. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 180.
12. Ibid., 179.
13. Ibid., 147.
14. William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. NY: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1912, p. 187.
15. Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

and Doritos may taste great, but a solid diet of them is not healthy. We have learned the role of insufficient vitamin C in causing scurvy and the role of too one-sided a dependence on corn in causing pellagra. We can choose what our diets will be. What we can't choose is whether those selected diets will be nutritious or not. There is a need here to work in sync with our physiologies. Transferred to moral psychology this suggests, to me at least, that we must embrace a notion that has been kept at arm's length, if not dismissed entirely by philosophers, human nature.

The final issue I wish to raise comes straight out of casuist thinking. It's a point associated both with food and with the claim just made about human nature. Typically, moral philosophy takes place within a particular anthropology, one which identifies us as "rational animals." A philosophical ethics centered on food changes things rather drastically. We are hungry, agricultural, cooking, feasting animals. Hunger, cultivation, cooking, feasting involve the cooperation of intelligence, tradition, experience, feeling, friendship, affection. Within such a setting, we oversimplify and distort when we identify ourselves via the exclusionary label "rational." Better to say we are social, reasonable, embodied, and encultured selves.

If we make the paradigm shift, it seems to me we can address some of Paul's claims in several ways: First, there is a way in which thinking about food ethics can lead to some serious revisions in how we frame the entire concern about evaluation. Second, we can be less glib than Paul in saying that food ethics does not tell people what to eat. True, it does leave lots of leeway. But the father who says "plenty of donuts and sodas for my children," or the former French president dining on forbidden ortolan, or the busy person regularly consuming frozen prepared meals, or the young, busy Silicon Valley engineer gulping down Soylent, in those cases food ethics can tread on the territory of telling people what to eat.

Lisa Heldke's "*From Field to Fork*: A Reply"

From Field to Fork is a useful, readable introduction to a range of food ethical issues, written by one of the most important thinkers in agriculture and food ethics. The work is great for the classroom and would also be an excellent choice for general readers (busy creatures that they are) interested in getting a sense of the arguments in this emerging and important field.

General Strengths and Limitations

This is a philosophy text about food ethics! No, seriously. It is. It is not a book telling you what you should eat. It should come as no surprise to us philosophers that Paul has really written an ethics book, not a prescriptive book.

However, having made this observation, it *did* come as a surprise to me to find myself writing one of the first notes I took about the book: "Is this a book about whether there's any work for a philosopher to do here?" Indeed, Thompson starts the book skeptically, but it soon becomes clear that he believes there is very important work for philosophers to do when it comes to food ethics. I read his skepticism—and his unskeptical reply to it—as being akin to the kind of move that was necessary in feminist philosophy some years ago. Skeptics would ask why something was feminist, if it was not immediately clear on the face of it how it was about *women* in some narrow sense. I think Paul is replying to a similar kind of skepticism that leads people to ask whether there can be genuine *ethical* questions (in a philosophical sense) that are "about" food. Notably, his affirmative answer does not easily and unproblematically welcome every issue that has ever ridden under that banner.

Fork to Field definitely would work well in one of those classes that goes by the name of "applied ethics," a course label that the pragmatist in me resists with every fiber. Nevertheless, in the case of this work, it does apply, since, in fact, Thompson frequently and explicitly traces contemporary issues back to the traditional philosophical positions that undergird them. He frames issues in terms of existing philosophical categories, which means that this book would work very well with students who have had some exposure to ethical theory. At the same time, I don't think it would be impossible for students who had not yet encountered formal

ethics to be able to make their way through his arguments.

I also like the fact that, although this is an introductory book that sets out to summarize and sort through a great deal of existing literature, it's not a work of "tertiary literature" that simply reports the positions of others. It makes its own argument—an argument that emerges especially strongly at the end of the book.

I can tell it's got an argument because I'm not always sure that I agree with that argument! One of the things I have always valued about Thompson's work is the degree to which I can disagree with it fruitfully. I also value the fact that I can never dismiss it casually or thoughtlessly, because I can tell that he has always carefully taken into account the position(s) I value.

Given this description, it's probably evident that the book is also likely to be unpopular with, or challenging for, students in a food ethics course who think that they are enrolling in a class about why their opinions about food are right. For student food activists, it could well be a bitter awakening, because Paul has not written a book that confirms their most fervently held, but not-very-well-research beliefs. It will very likely piss off any students you have who, like some of my progressive students, believe they can successfully defeat arguments by making withering remarks about them. But this point does lead to the chief limitation I see with the book as an *introductory* work.

Sometimes the language is a bit too lofty, and the assumptions about what (say) an average undergraduate would know seem ambitious. This isn't the worst flaw in a book; far worse is a textbook that reduces ideas to cartoon versions of themselves in order to make them "easy to understand." And it's hardly as dense as, say, Dewey's *Democracy and Education*. I've not yet taught the book, so my judgment may well be wide of the mark.

This next isn't so much a limitation as a feature of the book that I would redesign for my own classroom purposes. In teaching, I think I might be inclined to leap into the book when the chapters turn to specific food issues with which students might be familiar, and then, when they have gotten their footing, return to try to have them sort out the overarching theoretical project he's set up for the book in the opening chapters. Once they've seen how he is arguing about particular issues, it might be more possible for them to understand the bigger claims he's making about ethics and food ethics.

Agricultural Biotechnology

I'm going to focus my attention on one particular chapter in the book from near the end. In many ways, this is my favorite section of the book—perhaps because it's one of the issues in which I've invested the most time myself recently. It's also because his method in these two chapters is one that is near and dear to the heart of those of us with a Deweyan, Addamsian spirit. The discussion is both timely and powerful; ideal for classroom teaching. (Indeed, I just sketched the entire argument for my environmental philosophy colleague, urging her to use it in her classes.) It works so well, because its entire spirit—and maybe I'm projecting my own aspirations here—is designed to help us figure out what real conversations could look like among the people differently positioned on this body of issues. It seems to me that it gives us a way to get unstuck—or at least to get more productively *stuck*.

There was really no room for Thompson's position vis-à-vis biotechnology when he began espousing it some years ago. To deeply oversimplify it, he both believes that the threat posed by such technologies is vastly overplayed, oversimplified, and deployed irresponsibly by many opponents of them; and that opponents have some very good reasons to continue to be deeply suspicious of advocates' claims as to their safety—for reasons having to do with the consolidation of corporate power, for instance. He believes, furthermore, that it is appropriate that the use of such technologies be labeled in a way that would render it visible to consumers.

He positions the discussion in this section of the book at the heart of what many advocates of agricultural biotechnology would argue is the single most important issue compelling the use of these technologies: their capacity to enable us to adequately feed everyone on

the planet. Over against this, he identifies a set of concerns voiced by critics of agricultural biotechnologies. He brings both sets of perspectives to bear on the question "when and whether such feelings about new food technology could rise to the level of an argument against allowing them to be used at all."[16]

He introduces his argument with a discussion of Norman Borlaug, the scientist who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on Green Revolution seeds and their contribution to eliminating world hunger. He posits what he calls the "Borlaug hypothesis," which "holds that even if you don't see any value in the applications of cutting-edge technology for food production and processing for yourself, you should still lend moral support to any technology that has the potential to help the poor."[17]

Thompson then helpfully sorts existing mainstream arguments against agricultural biotechnology into five traditions or approaches: 1) Risk assessment (familiar to people through the notion of the "precautionary principle"); 2) social justice (which considers the questions of how these technologies are implemented, and who has access to them); 3) naturalness (the claim that GM foods are unnatural) 4) choice (the claim that an eater ought to be able to know they are eating GM crops, so as to be able to choose not to); and 5) virtue (people and groups who support biotechnology have weak moral character).

The last of these is the most surprising member of the list, and—surprisingly—the most powerful argument, in Thompson's view. I was initially deeply skeptical of it. I have warmed up to it, partly because of Thompson's strong argument for it, but I'm still wondering whether the rise in my enthusiasm isn't because it's a clever move, more than because I think it's *right* in some deep sense.

The argument—and remember that this is an argument aimed at showing that there are reasons we might well choose not to support biotechnology, even considering its capacity to alleviate hunger—goes like this:

- The claim that GM crops will alleviate hunger amounts to insider testimony;
- This testimony has to be reliable in order to be taken seriously;
- In order to determine if the testimony is reliable, we have to consider the motives, interests, and characters of those providing the testimony;
- We have reasons to suspect the character, motives, and interests of biotech insiders.

Thompson takes this argument very seriously. And, while he does think that some outsiders' claims about insiders are unjust, he nevertheless thinks that "evidence about the lack of virtue in the research establishment provides some of the most convincing reasons to think that there are real, objective concerns about whether GM crops will actually help the poor."[18] For instance, he thinks it's nowhere near clear that "insiders [are] committed to a serious discussion and resolution of contested issues." Instead, it might be the case that they might rather "deal with them as strategic obstacles to be overcome by whatever means necessary."[19] Indeed, he states even more strongly, that his "personal anecdotal assessment is that the truly virtuous are roughly offset by the truly disreputable, leaving the field to the dismissive and busy. This tips the balance toward a less than favorable assessment of insiders' virtue when they are viewed as a group."[20]

I think this line of argumentation would be brilliant for teaching because it taps into what students are often thinking and how they are often arguing: in terms of good people and bad people. Such arguments are often rather shamefully simplistic, but Thompson does them the service of finding the legitimacy in them. He then, good pragmatist that he is, shows us how we can—and *should*—engage with this virtue ethics argument and how responsible participants—especially responsible insiders of the biotech industry—ought to behave as good and careful and respectful listeners to those on the outside.

Reading this discussion of agricultural biotechnology, I kept trying to think about analogies to other contemporary flash point topics. This is one that, frankly, attracts lots of progressives,

16. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 197.
17. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 200.
18. Ibid., 222.
19. Ibid., 221.
20. Ibid., 224.

environmentalists, and other folks who voted for Bernie Sanders, and so I was sort of tickled to realize that the analogies that I was finding were to things like creationism (a decidedly right-wing topic) and also anti-vaxxers (a more complicated group of people that is arguably more broadly distributed across the political spectrum). That is, I was tickled to think about how this tendency to be suspicious of the message because of what we see as the lack of virtue of the messenger is a rather equal-opportunity tendency in contemporary American public discourse. Paying attention to this tendency through the lens of virtue theory strikes me as a powerful way to invite students to pay attention to it and to assess it.

Thompson is playing the role of the high school debater here, aiming his argument at folks like me who shop at their local coop and who have been, often, pretty knee jerk when it comes to what they are sure are the dangers of GMOs. Thompson's argument is, in a nutshell, "I don't think much of most of these arguments against GMOs, but I *sure* don't appreciate the dismissive way in which your wariness has been treated, and I *also* know that there have been enough cases of malfeasance that one would be crazy to say that you are crazy for being wary." Well, yeah.

And that's why I think it would be interesting to think about how this line of argument could be treated as a call for what I have elsewhere called radical listening. Frankly, I don't see a lot of that kind of approach among climate scientists or evolutionists. I see them saying "these people are crazy and we have to silence them with facts. We can't let them get a word in edgewise." But I'd say we *need* to let them get words in edgewise. Listening builds trust and credibility across seemingly unbridgeable gaps.

Other Issues

I want to explore two other issues that have arisen quite frequently in discussions of Thompson's work: race and gender. Race plays a thin philosophical role in the work. In the chapter on food and identity, he concludes that there is much to value in the Western tendency toward tolerance and appreciation of diversity, in contrast to cultures that celebrate foodways as sources of identity, and that go some distance toward legislating those ways.[21] This argument, for me, runs the danger of creating too sharp an either/or. I'm not yet very concerned that we are staring in the face of a society in which our desire to valorize certain food practices becomes repressive on a cultural level, so I'm just not sure this worry is legitimate.

More significantly, he seems to be expressing skepticism that there is, at present, a philosophically relevant body of work being done on race, social justice, and food in which food plays some kind of unique role.[22] He suggests that food is not here relevantly different from, say, other industries like health care or textiles. I find this unlikely. Food, as a topic, may not be sui generis, but I would argue that humans' relations to our foodways do shape us in ways that are different from our relationships to health care or textiles, such that attending to the way in which race figures into the discussion of food, specifically, is significant. I believe that the work of Psyche Williams Forson,[23] Krishnendu Ray[24] and Doris Witt,[25] to name just three scholars working on race and food, give philosophers important material to consider.

Regarding Thompson's treatment of feminist work on food, the book includes lots of acknowledgements of the existence and role of women in food and agriculture (though, notably, there was no particular discussion of women in the chapter on obesity, where arguably the gender dimension is particularly significant). It even employs, at a crucial place in the text and for reasons crucial to the argument, some argument from feminist epistemology. This is all worth noting, because there is still enormous feminist benefit to be gained when men philosophers simply acknowledge the existence and importance of feminist philosophy, and so I want to give props to Thompson for doing that work.

21. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 51-52.
22. Ibid., 66.
23. Psyche Williams-Forson, *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* (U of North Carolina P, 2006).
24. Krishnendu Ray, *The Ethnic Restauranteur* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).
25. Doris Witt, *Black Hunger: Soul Food and America* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004).

That said, I want to complain, a bit, about the relative limitedness of the work. That is, I feel like Thompson has done this because he thinks it's the right thing to do. What I mean by this is that it doesn't seem like the feminist arguments, or the work of women itself, are what compels its inclusion. (And perhaps it is for this reason that the inclusions are rather cursory, and that he makes reference to only a tiny handful of pretty old texts that don't speak to the issues as well as some others would.) I believe he actually *needs* these feminist arguments, and needs them in their sophisticated forms, as robust supports for his own position—a position he still wants to call agrarianism, despite what he acknowledges are the off-putting resonances (and the sheer lack of resonances) that word carries in contemporary conversation.

I'll make one specific suggestion in regard to feminism vis-à-vis his work. I think that his argument about insiders and outsiders in agricultural biotechnology would have been strengthened by a robust use of feminist standpoint theory, and particularly by the work of someone like Patricia Hill Collins writing on the notion of the outsider within. Such work would enable his argument more subtly to attend to different *kinds* of insiders, and the different kinds of power and influence they wield. Consider, for instance, how such work would help him to nuance the following issue. He asks what sort of evidence is available to those outside the sphere of agricultural research. His answer is "Insider testimony" and he goes on to ask how a "rational individual evaluates this kind of evidence."[26] His discussion here is interesting and powerful—as I've already noted. But it could be much more powerful, I think, if it disaggregated the role of "insider" to think about the role of outsiders-within.

I think the work of various feminist theorists would help him to address the problem he identifies at the conclusion of his chapter on fatness. There, he notes that, "when we shift to a discussion of diet and obesity as a matter of ethics we find ourselves with a number of mutually exclusive possibilities. It's *either* individuals *or* society at large *or* our genes that get characterized as morally responsible, but adopting any one hypothesis gets everyone else off the hook!"[27] He notes in response that, "Food ethics lives in [those] relations and it is appropriate to put more connection points on the table."[28] I absolutely agree, which is why I want to advocate that he draw upon the work of someone like feminist historian of food Charlotte Biltekoff, who looks at the history of food and health movements in the United States precisely in terms of this individual/social dichotomy and whose work points toward ways to nuance this discussion. So, my concluding comment on this is, I really think the arguments Thompson makes *need* the work of feminists; they can give him some of the very tools he needs to make these arguments really stick.

What is a food ethics issue?

In a chapter entitled "You are NOT what you eat," Paul argues that food ethics should be about how the social institutions, market structures and public policies surrounding food—*not* the "literal concern with what we actually eat," which he labels variously prudential, aesthetic, cultural or religious.[29] I think in this case he reads "food ethics" more narrowly than I would. To use my opening analogy, I'm the one saying "it is too about women and therefore is a feminist issue." He draws what he calls a "wavy and broken" line between ethical concerns, and others more properly labeled aesthetic, or religious, or cultural, or something else. I note that he also concludes this chapter by writing that "sometimes drawing the line that separates the ethical from aesthetic and cultural domains actually is a task that belongs to ethics."[30]

And indeed, at other points, he draws that line in an inclusive way. For instance, he is skeptical of the idea that there are food-specific approaches to the philosophical concept of economic justice, but not because he doesn't think there are issues there. Rather it is because he suspects that "It is the way that food brings [multiple] issues together that matters for social movements."[31] That is, the problem with

26. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 220.
27. Ibid., 105.
28. Ibid., 105.
29. Ibid., 53.
30. Ibid., 53.
31. Ibid., 79.

trying to isolate food-specific forms of economic justice is that it undercuts the kind of transformative power that food can have—a power to integrate and connect large philosophical issues. At least I think that's what he's saying. He very specifically states that what it means to be a food related issue is not a reductionist move but rather a move of linking, threading, noticing commonalities among issues. So to isolate and label specific food-economic-justice issues is the wrong move altogether.

Perhaps my point is nothing other than that I think the line is in different places. But it *may* be that I don't think it makes sense to divide these things out—or to worry about whether there *is* a line. I'm not sure that it's necessarily helpful to read ethics as always having to do with other-affecting consequences, for instance. But perhaps my resistance comes from the fact that right now I'm in the midst of a project in which I'm very intentionally trying to notice how many things we have thought of as unrelated are actually deeply related.

Conclusion

I'll admit that it would have been hard for me to be deeply critical of this book if I'd hated it, because I owe a great debt to Paul Thompson for his intellectual generosity and collegiality to me over the years. It is also the case that his willingness to grant the legitimacy of positions in which he may not personally feel much investment has invited and encouraged *me* into thinking hard about those positions of his that I initially might have found just damned wrong.

I appreciate many features of this book. I appreciate the fact that Paul has written a book exploring the challenges as seen by a philosophy of ethics, not as seen by moralizers. I appreciate that his work really tries to unpack a question like "what is it about these ethical issues that makes them *food* issues/what is it about these food issues that makes them *ethical* issues?" I appreciate that he emphasizes that ethical options increase through conversation. I appreciate the pragmatist sensibility that runs through this entire book.

Erin McKenna's "Why is Eating Meat an Economic Choice and Eating Local is an Existential Choice? Comments on Thompson's *From Field to Fork*"

Thompson's *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everybody* is an important book for a number of reasons. One is that he discusses and uses a pragmatist approach of Deweyan inspired critical inquiry. Related to that is the fact that he troubles issues taken by many in the field to be settled. Whether it is eating locally, being a vegetarian, or opposing GMOs, Thompson complicates the issue, challenges positions, and asks for more thinking about the "why" of the various positions. He also manages to argue that those who use the method of critical intelligence have the "moral high ground" over those who do not—developing thinking to rationally judge particular cases in a uniform manner.[32] He notes that insights from the benefits/harms analysis of utilitarianism, the rights and duties following from deontological approaches, the questions of character from virtue ethics and tries to bring these all to bear on the issues in a Deweyan inspired pluralistic discourse ethics. On this model, the ethicist is to engage in inquiry, with active and engaged intelligence, recognizing the potential for error, and emphasizing inclusion and listening.[33] This results in a middle ground between strict rules and mushy thinking[34] informed by pragmatist, feminist, and postcolonial epistemology. It also means that one need not trust the judgments of those who do not engage in such intelligent inquiry. Not surprisingly many who call for a specific way of eating (or not eating) fail to do this—some vegetarians and local food advocates. More surprisingly, Thompson includes many biotech scientists as well. While he argues that GMOs are safe and environmentally beneficial, he supports the public's distrust of GMOs because many of the scientists involved have not taken concerns and fears seriously and have not engaged in open debate. Without the public's trust, though, they can't help the poor so they must deal with perception.[35]

32. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 8.
33. Ibid., 20.
34. Ibid., 15.
35. Ibid., 222.

Given the mixed record of agricultural insiders' willingness to ensure that their projects work within the side constraints of social justice, not to mention their failure to engage thoughtful and serious criticisms with equally thoughtful responses, one should not moderate one's qualms about biotechnology because [an authority] says it will help address world hunger.[36] This is just one example of an interesting complication Thompson provides as he addresses pressing issues.

He takes up many issues: food adulteration, food and health (obesity, in particular), environmental issues related to food production, social consequences for humans and for other animal beings of food production and consumption, and social justice. Throughout he repeatedly asks if food raises particular issues or if food ethics and politics are just a subset of investigating industrial systems more generally. For the most part, he finds food to be a subset of the larger industrial question, but he does think food can focus our attention in particular ways and help us see the complex interactions of care of self and social wellbeing. To do that, though, we need to move food questions beyond questions of personal virtue and vice such as temperance and gluttony.[37] In addition to prudential concerns over health, we need to see environmental and existential concerns that are also at play. Further, questions about trade and development bring us into the field of political economy and justice and the need to address poverty. Here he complicates issues of food sovereignty, food security, and food aid and connects these to the need to support farmers as uniquely able to support democratic process due to their commitment to place (something more fully developed in his book *Agrarian Vision*). In fact, he calls this "the fundamental problem in food ethics."[38]

One way Thompson pushes the move from personal to political and economic is to argue that "you are not what you eat," but "you are what you buy."[39] For him, it is the market structure that makes our personal food choices affect others and so become questions of social justice. If you eat food produced under immoral and unjust conditions (confined animals, slave labor, unfair wages, environmental damage) you are implicated in the immorality and the injustice.[40] Racism can be found in food production in taking land, using enslaved labor, immigrant labor, and sharecropping. Food deserts add an injustice of food distribution. Gender discrimination is found in not lending money to women who farm and the high percentage of women employed in low-wage food industry jobs. Pretty quickly we see that food raises issues of distributive justice, participatory justice, justice in recognition, restorative justice, environmental justice, and obligations to future generations. As such, Thompson suggests we don't need any new theories to deal with the food issues but we can appeal to work by people like Rawls, Habermas, Mill, and Marx. But, food blurs categories.

Thompson supports the complexity and "hazy thinking" that encourages resistance to the various oppressive elements of the food system. However, he also worries that this approach misses important divides such as the separation of food safety questions from issues of nutrition and environmental wellbeing and the potential divide between animal and environmental activists addressing meat production. This is where I will now focus the rest of my remarks.

Early in the book, Thompson notes that one might choose to be vegetarian (or vegan) for a number of reasons: medical vegetarianism focuses on prudential care of self[41] while ethical vegetarianism he describes as acting out of concerns for animals. Environmental vegetarians[42] act out of concern for more than the farm animals, but the land, wildlife, and ecosystems as well. Some find positions in between, such as Simon Fairlie's default meat diet[43] in which we need meat as part of the food system to not overtax the land with crops, but which argues animals should be raised in ways that benefit the environment and respect their lives.

Thompson points out that the eating of animals has concerned philosophers from the beginning and many have argued for some version of vegetarianism. Many current philosophical debates focus on questions of wheth-

36. Ibid., 225-26.
37. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 26.
38. Ibid., 129.
39. Ibid., 46.
40. Ibid., 56.
41. Ibid., 35.
42. Ibid., 37.
43. Ibid., 38.

er livestock animal beings are moral agents, or whether they are at least beings worthy of moral consideration. Thompson asks, "Do nonhumans deserve moral respect *at all*?"[44] Are we obligated to take their interests into account? Thompson notes that those who work directly with these animals rarely wonder whether these animals have mental lives that matter. He says, "Livestock producers themselves have never doubted that the animals under their care are capable of experiencing pain, fear, and other forms of mental distress. There has never really been any serious question that the animals we use to produce food deserve moral consideration," but they don't feel obligated to be vegetarian or vegan.[45] Thompson suggests that there are three questions we need to ask: Is it ethically acceptable to eat animal flesh, or it raise and slaughter animals for food? Are current farming practices acceptable? How should current practices be reformed or modified to improve animal welfare?[46] He is worried that most who say "no" to the first question stop there. Those who say "no" to the second stop there. We need to address all three since we won't move to vegetarianism any time soon (if ever).[47]

From the animal's perspective it is especially important to ask about how their lives might be improved and Thompson focuses on the Five Freedoms: freedom from hunger and thirst; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury, disease; freedom to express normal behavior; freedom from fear and distress.[48] To provide these freedoms we need to get as clear as one can about the experience of the various animal beings and recognize that there can be tension among the five freedoms. He says these freedoms should be seen as a framework rather than a set of rights and they should be adjusted for specific species.[49]

The concerns about the environment come in as well, and Thompson urges us to see farms as part of nature. Rather than thinking we need to protect ecosystems *from* agriculture we should see agriculture as a piece of the whole.[50] He sees the debates over how to value species, ecosystems, and biodiversity as important for food issues. He thinks environmental consciousness is at the heart of dissatisfaction with industrial farming and concerns about biodiversity and GMOs.[51] His question is whether or not food choices support environmental sustainability and the other than human.[52] Ultimately he says no. He says the idea that anyone's individual food choices have beneficial outcomes is a naïve view of food ethics.[53] He argues that there is more need for a food epistemology (complete with philosophy of science and factual analysis) than for a food ethic. For instance, if one eats meat and cares about the environment, Thompson argues that meat from animals raised in a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) is better. Similarly, local food is often worse for the environment.[54]

That is not the whole story, though. Thompson says that while eating locally may not address one's ethical or environmental concerns it may still be worth pursuing. "Eating local" is less about ethics than about how people see their place in the world. This brings him back to reconsider the idea that "you are what you eat" but in a less literal sense. He says it's about the kinds of systems we want to shape our children. He says this kind of critical thinking is important for our sense of who we are and how we want our world to be. We should see ourselves as more than mere consumers. However, he invites but does not require such reflection; those without "enough" need not take up the "burden of deliberative self-reflection."[55] At the same time he says we should focus on reconstructing the system rather than our place in the system.[56]

For Thompson, the way one can reconstruct the system is through economic pressure. While he doesn't think the shift of dollars to local food producers will do anything to reconstruct the larger system, he supports it as a sort of existential statement of one's values and hopes. But this is denied to the vegetarian, and I wonder why. The vegetarian is seen as someone who pretends that since they don't

44. Ibid., 133.
45. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 134.
46. Ibid., 134.
47. Ibid., 135.
48. Ibid., 131.
49. Ibid., 138-41.
50. Ibid., 161.
51. Ibid., 162.
52. Ibid., 172.
53. Ibid., 185.
54. Ibid., 188.
55. Ibid., 192.
56. Ibid., 190.

eat meat they have no moral responsibility for the lives of meat animals. He writes "vegetarianism starts to look like a retreat from a truly engaged and reflective evaluation of food."[57] He gets here by several routes. One is to argue that not buying animal products does not affect the system. Such a boycott just makes the individual feel better. If people who care about animals won't buy products from operations that treat the animals well those producers won't be able to stay in business and the system won't be challenged. He writes,

> If animal welfare is seen as the ethical responsibility of the individual producers, there is really no way out of the cost-price squeeze. Farmers have economic incentives to maintain a minimum level of welfare for livestock because unhealthy animals do not bring the best prices. But in virtually every animal industry, there are numerous ways to increase one's return by doing things that decrease farm animal welfare. Farmers have no choice about this. If they choose to go against the standard industry practice in order to provide higher welfare, they are eventually going to go broke. They are effectively choosing not to be farmers.[58]

He adds that many farmers have been opposed to state and legal action that would require changes in animal production as they distrust the government. Here, somehow, the consumer has lots of moral responsibility for moral reflection and action, but the farmer is not asked to do any. While Thompson and I both know that many farmers do quite a bit of moral reflection on just these issues I find it interesting that in the book the farmer is excused in much the same way as the poor.

Further, Thompson sees the vegetarian as ignoring facts such as that people want meat. In addition, he states that not all can give up meat as many "people find it difficult or even impossible to bring their food choices under control of the reflective mind. People who have become vegetarian after years of eating meat have been able to reinvent themselves and reform a set of behaviors that many other people could not even begin to contemplate changing."[59] He thinks not just anybody can do this. Further, as people emerge from poverty one of the first things they do is add more animal products to their diet. So Thompson worries that "the claim that everyone should consider whether it is ethical to eat meat implies that when the poor act on these newly possible dietary preferences, they are very probably doing something that is morally wrong."[60] Now, it seems to me the call to eat locally often puts a burden on the poor in terms of price and time (finding and getting the food). Thompson has said it won't really impact the industrial system. Buying locally does have the impact of supporting the local farmers and usually one buys from a farmer s/he thinks is doing something good for the land or animals. However, many amateur farmers do lots of harm to the land and animals so it is quite possible to be supporting some unethical practices. But Thompson doesn't raise any of these concerns. Instead he supports the choice despite its presumed ineffectiveness because of what it means about the person. Why not extend the same power and importance to the choice to not eat meat? I think most people who don't eat meat for some set of ethical reasons know that their individual "boycott" does not end the system or fix the problem. However, the choice is a visible decision that often sparks discussion and the very kind of critical inquiry Thompson calls all of us to do. It seems that that should be respected too.

Per Sandin's "Liberty and Our Place in the World" Response to Paul B. Thompson's *From Field to Fork*

Paul B. Thompson is an immensely productive author. Unlike some other environmentally oriented philosophers, he knows something about agriculture, and he is neither alien nor hostile to technology, including agricultural biotechnology—the ubiquitous red herring of agricultural ethics discourse. He is also a philosopher with a sense of home. Regardless of how high in the philosophical spheres he soars, always keeps a Mid-West cornfield in sight, metaphorically speaking.

57. Ibid., 157.
58. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 154.
59. Ibid., 158.
60. Ibid., 149.

For me, critically engaging with his recent book *From Field to Fork* presents two difficulties: First, I am in agreement with much of what is said in it. Second, since it is intended as an introduction to food ethics aiming at a broad readership, it is a work that necessarily treats some very difficult philosophical questions without going into much detail.

Thus, the subtitle of book is *Food Ethics for Everyone*. One question, therefore, is who is everyone? It is clear that *From Field to Fork* is considerably less US focused than some of Thompson's previous works (a notable example is *The Agrarian Vision*). Thus, the readership can be expected to be more international. However, Thompson is explicit that the book "does not tell you what to eat."[61] I have no qualms with that. But it does not tell you what to do in other respects either. That is, it provides comparatively little concrete advice. So, for someone who thinks that the food system is somehow broken—and there are indeed some very good reasons for believing so—the questions "But what should we do? What should I do?" remain unanswered. This is intentional, no doubt, but might still cause slight disappointment in a work "for everyone."

Another question has to do with what Thompson writes at the very end of chapter 6, "Perhaps the reason to advocate for sustainable agriculture is to encourage people on a journey that helps them realize their place in the world."[62] Related to this is the question of individual liberty. John Stuart Mill, the father of modern liberalism, and after Bentham, to a large degree also responsible for the development of utilitarianism, is one of Thompson's favorites. However, one would like to know a bit more about what kind of role Thompson envisages for individual liberty in his food ethics, given his strong focus on institutions and collectives.[63] As I read him, he seems to consider applying virtues and vices to collectives. This idea is indeed rooted in antiquity. Plato, with his organic theory of the state, is no stranger to regarding qualities of institutions as character traits writ large. It is more difficult to see how this is reconcilable with a Millian ideal of individual liberty. This is something one would like to hear more about from Thompson. And isn't "realizing our place in the world" a rather non-Millian idea?

That said, however, at present there isn't any better companion for the curious non-expert who wishes to explore the complex intellectual landscape of food ethics than *From Field to Fork*.

Gretel Van Wieren, "Please, tell us a little something about what to eat"

I would like to wonder around two broad, interrelated questions in engaging Thompson's *From Field to Fork* (2016). First, why, if at all, is food a good topic for doing public philosophy; and second, to what extent is Thompson doing public philosophy in this volume? Let me say from the start that I *do* think what Thompson is doing in this book represents a kind of public philosophy, and I *do* think that food is a good, perhaps even a model, topic for doing so.

So, what is public philosophy? Michigan State University philosopher Christopher Long has suggested that philosophy has traditionally tended to "go public" in two ways: "Either it seeks to articulate philosophical ideas in popular terms and through popular media…or it seeks to orient itself toward the 'practical' by engaging in a variety of 'applied' studies: business ethics, environmental philosophy, etc."[64] There is, however, a third strategy for doing public philosophy according to Long, and it is the one he favors. This kind of public philosophy seeks to practice "collaborative activity in which philosophers engage dialogically with activists, professionals, scientists, policy-makers, and affected parties whose work and lives are bound up with issues of public concern. Public philosophy is thus not limited to questions concerning the practical applicability of theoretical problems, rather it is informed by the recognition that all theoretical problems are ultimately rooted in questions of wide public interest."[65] In this way, the topic of food becomes of utmost concern for the doing of public philosophy. For there actually may not be a

61. Ibid., 6.
62. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 192.
63. See Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 53, 221ff.
64. Christopher P. Long, "What is Public Philosophy?" *The Long Road* (blog), *cplong.org*, February 20, 2013, http://cplong.org/2013/02/what_is_public_philosophy/.
65. Ibid.

topic of wider public interest, and one that necessitates the involvement of activists, professionals, scientists, policy-makers, and affected parties, namely all of us, than food, given that, as Thompson notes, *everybody has to eat*.

How does Thompson do public philosophy, or let's call it public food ethics, in *From Field to Fork*? I don't want to reduce this to a discussion around method as Thompson states from the beginning that his is an eclectic, or, in his words, "intersecting" approach (even as he states that he tends to favor a Habermasian discourse ethic).[66] Still, true to the kind of collaborative public philosophy Long favors, Thompson roots his inquiry in issues of wide public interest—represented by concrete problems that directly affect real people, animals, and the environment—and in dialogue with a transdisciplinary set of conservation partners. So, for example, he begins with a figure named Dory who farms and sells the produce she grows at a local farmers' market, though she also sometimes sells her neighbor's produce under her stand, even though it is not technically legal to sell another grower's goods under the auspices of one's own. Thompson wonders what kind of ethical dilemmas this raises.

Beyond the distinctive practical approach to agro-environmental problems Thompson develops, I would like to note a couple of points about how *From Field to Fork* is instructive for doing public food ethics, though much more could be said. First, Thompson sheds light on the public food ethics endeavor when he writes that ethics is a "discipline for asking better questions" and with multiple others. Some environmental justice philosophers have critiqued Thompson's previous work (e.g., *Agrarian Vision*) for being too old fashioned, namely, Jeffersonian, in its approach and for how it fundamentally neglects matters of gender and race and difference in general. Even as I am sympathetic to those critiques, I do not think that *From Field to Fork* is as susceptible in the same ways. For one thing, in this volume, Thompson draws on educational psychologist's David Kolb's schematic of Dewey's learning theory, writing "that it is the totality that should remain foremost in our thinking while undertaking a process of inquiry."[67] Intersecting nicely with recent efforts in postcolonial and feminist epistemology, as Thompson rightly points out, we are "not likely to get things right when we systematically exclude people who have a particular perspective from the processes of deliberation and social decision making … this kind of exclusion is not only unjust, it is spectacularly stupid in its tendency to discard or ignore what may turn out to be crucial pieces of information."[68]

The second note from *Field to Fork* that I see as important for the study of public food ethics is Thompson's attention to the significance of symbolic meanings, narrative and story, an aspect that has been neglected in the study of dominant agricultural and food ethics. Thompson admits that he got into food ethics and environmental philosophy in a roundabout way, which may be part of the reason he is open to such an interdisciplinary approach to the topic. "Like many in my generation," he writes, "I went into philosophy as an environmentalist [gasp] committed to the idea that reformulating our values was crucial for the survival of our planet."[69] Thus, even as Thompson repeatedly claims in *From Field to Fork* that he doesn't want to tell his readers what to eat, an approach that I am not sure I entirely agree with, he is committed to the topic, in some sense, as an engaged philosopher, or at least as one who, from the beginning, viewed himself as an agent of positive change. Further, Thompson does seem to have opinions about certain types of practices that are important for fostering a public food ethics in contemporary culture. These include the enactment of what Albert Borgmann has termed "focal practices" of which food practices or what Borgmann calls a "culture of the table" are one.[70] Focal food practices such as cooking, growing vegetables, cutting wood, making a fire, historically worked to keep people physically fit, communally connected, and meaningfully engaged. While Thompson does not want to say that people are "ethically obligated to cultivate a performative food ethics around cultural identity construction," he does recognize that "we should engage in these practices, while also being sensitive to the ef-

66. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 15.
67. Ibid., 19-20.
68. Ibid., 20.
69. Ibid., x.
70. Albert Borgmann, *Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for Our Country* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006), 137.

fect that our focal practices might have on others."[71]

As agreeable as Thompson's project in *From Field to Fork* is to me, there are some elements that I think could have used greater attention, particularly in the area of ethical thinking around environmental concerns. For instance, I appreciated the nod to Hobbs, Higgs, and Hall's work on novel ecosystems in the context of ecological restoration where Thompson compares novel ecosystems to farms, though I wish he would have said more about how proponents of ecological integrity and social sustainability—or what restorationists have called bio-cultural restoration—share a view of functional ecosystem integrity. Furthermore, as I have already intimated, I am not sure that I think it is a good approach in food ethics, at least all the time, to not tell readers what to eat, as Thompson favors. Particularly if we take seriously public philosophy's collaborative character, it may be that over time certain ethical principles emerge through engaging in processes of tested normativity, as they already have, say, in the case of say animal welfare priorities in livestock production. Such an approach relates to Thompson's discourse food ethic approach, yet, I would have found it helpful at various points in *Field to Fork* if he would have suggested some virtues, values, or norms for us to ponder in the spirit of "jump starting" a collaborative inquiry that over time produces positive social ecological change.

Paul B. Thompson's Responses: "Continuing the Conversation on Food Ethics"

I would, of course, like to thank all of the colleagues who have contributed comments on *From Field to Fork*. All of my commentators have made kind remarks and have also noticed topics or concerns where the project I undertook in writing the book could be further developed. Reading through all of these comments will give you a pretty good sense of what the book is about, too, and that is especially nice in the context of this forum in the *Public Philosophy Journal*. I can't take adequate note of all the points that have been raised without becoming boring. I would therefore encourage readers to regard both my commentators' remarks and my response as continuing and expanding the conversation I envisioned in writing the book.

Michael Pollan's enormously popular book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* was written from the point of view of someone trying to eat in an ethical manner. Well before his book appeared in 2005, people who believed that important ethical objectives could be furthered by choosing to eat one thing rather than another began using the phrase "food ethics." Peter Singer and Jim Mason quickly followed up with a book entitled *The Ethics of What We Eat* in 2007. As the idea of food ethics took shape in the wake of these developments, I encountered more people who think of themselves as part of "the food movement." These people already know what the right thing to do is, and the ethical question they are asking is "How can I further these objectives through my dietary choices or through political activity intended to influence the structure of our food system?"

On the one hand, I want to respect this sense of "what ethics means." It comes from people who are not trained in philosophy and it reflects their understanding of what ethics can bring to the topic of food. On the other hand, I do not think that it is consistent with the way that philosophers have understood ethics. Philosophical ethics is the activity of asking "what's the right thing to do," of undertaking an *inquiry* that is open to the possibility that we might be wrong about "what we already know." *From Field to Fork* is food ethics for everyone in this specifically philosophical sense, and I took the stance of *not* offering strategic dietary advice precisely because I wanted to highlight the difference between these two meanings that we might give to the phrase "food ethics." At the same time, I take issue with the way in which many professors of philosophy have pursued ethical inquiry of late, and several of my commentators notice this. I think of ethical inqui-

71. Thompson, *From Field to Fork*, 45. As an aside, let me say, as an ethicist trained in religious studies, I appreciate the fact that Thompson in *From Field to Fork*, as in other work, acknowledges the role that ritual, and symbolic activities play, for better or worse, in the formation and performance of our values, virtues, and norms in relation to the production and eating of food. Thompson even goes as far to say that the "give and take between symbolic projection and material performance instantiates what we mean by an ethic in the broadest and deepest sense" (43).

ry as inherently social, as public: Socrates engaging fellow citizens in the agora, *not* sitting alone and spinning out an elaborate theory in his study. Neither is ethics a cloistered dialogue among experts who have invested years of effort in developing a specialized set of concepts and methods. When any conversation goes on too long, it is no longer open to new participants or new perspectives.

One must always make a judgment about when to pursue a line of thought and when to break it off in order to provide an opening for new directions. This is a dilemma that all of us can recognize from everyday conversation, but it is particularly salient for public philosophy. Recommendations of any kind—and this is certainly true for dietary advice—must be made from a conversational space in which the speaker and his or her audience share certain meanings and value orientations. In conversations among strangers, this space is always somewhat tentative. It has to be built up through exchanges that allow us to understand where the other person is coming from. Gretel, Ray (or is it R. Paul?), and Per all wish that my book had been more prescriptive, while Bernice suggests that I was already writing from a place that was excluding those who would have wanted to enter the dialogue on different terms. But even these comments are ambiguous. Gretel, Ray, and Per may be saying, "I like this; tell me more," or alternatively, "You haven't told me *enough* to gauge where you're coming from." Bernice may be saying "Let's get down to business now on these issues; justify yourself!" or "You've already said too much for me to engage further." One of the dilemmas I face in writing this response is that with so many interlocutors, I am pulled in different directions as to where I should move to further this dialogue in a respectful manner.

And so, I'll make some choices. Lisa and Gretel make an explicit call for more engagement with feminist and postcolonial perspectives. I've read enough feminism, critical race theory, and decolonization to recognize that there are important philosophical claims being made in these academic domains and that I would be very much on board with the primary thrust of what participants in these conversations tend to agree on (and of course they disagree among themselves on many particulars). Do I *need* these philosophical ideas, as Lisa suggests? First, I'm thrown right back to the thoughts I've just expressed about entering and continuing conversations. These are conversations that have been going on for quite some time. While they have been doing some very important work in building spaces where traditionally excluded voices can be heard, they have also developed terminology and established points of agreement that are not going to be transparent or obvious for people who have not been part of the conversation before coming to food ethics. This is true not only for white males like myself, but also for many members of the traditionally marginalized groups that the discourses have been intended to empower. Surely everyone will acknowledge *that*.

Now let me be clear: Feminist and postcolonial philosophy have stressed a number of themes that not only support the philosophical importance of examining food but also help us think more deeply about the intersection of metabolism and cultural practice. As Lisa has argued in her own work, academic philosophers have not taken the production and consumption of food very seriously, and this is a presumption that feminists are obliged to question.[72] In this respect, feminism is very clearly an aid to the conversation I want to have. Furthermore, a deeper and more detailed conversation would, I agree, need to delve more deeply into the political implications of Western epistemology and technical practice. Recent work by feminists and critical race theorists will be crucial to this task. In my previous work I have relied quite heavily on the pragmatism of Peirce, James, and Dewey for developing a critical perspective, but in the second edition of my book *The Spirit of the Soil* I admit that agrarian modes of thought need to be decolonized.

But then I am thrown back on the thought that words like "decolonization" or even "feminism" presuppose conversations that, while widely shared in humanities disciplines, are less well understood in the natural sciences, much less outside the academy. One of the things I like about food is that it provides the possibility for a new opening into some of these ongoing conversations, an opening that is available to a very large group of new participants. Maybe

72. See Lisa Heldke, "Farming Made Her Stupid," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 151-65.

not *everyone,* as the title of my book insists, but lots of folk. Done well, philosophical food ethics can engage people who can't tell the difference between intersectionality and the non-identity problem (or utilitarianism and deontology, for that matter). I am especially appreciative of the way that Ann and Heather highlight this aspect of my book. But, of course, there is a real sense in which people who have been participating in ongoing conversations might well feel that I have not been properly respectful of their work, or that I am ignoring the important things that they have been saying, things that are highly relevant to food. There are plenty of white male philosophy professors who have no idea what intersectionality is about, and they should be ashamed of themselves. At the same time (and to shift the weight back to the other foot), if I expend ink on trying to prove that I've heard of this idea—and certainly displaying the limitations of my own reading and thinking in doing so—I'm creating barriers to entry into the conversation I do want to have. It's not right to say "You can't win"; I'll accept responsibility for the choices I've made, and at the same time that I'll acknowledge the importance of the points Lisa and Gretel are making.

Erin points out that the book doesn't really do much to engage farmers in reflective ethical critique of their own presuppositions. I plead guilty, and I'll add that only indirectly would it lead agricultural scientists, food industry executives and lobbyists, or farm state congressional representatives to reflective engagement as well. On this point, I'll be a little more defensive. It's not like I haven't been doing that for the last thirty plus years. The self-citations in *From Field to Fork* trace this work. But perhaps I could be a little more helpful in the context of reflecting on public philosophy. Someone with philosophical training can help people own and articulate their normative commitments. We should be willing to do this even when we do not agree with them. When I am doing "here's one way to think about it" kind of work, this is often what I am trying to accomplish. I am not necessarily endorsing that way to think about it, but I'm not a positivist who eschews any kind of normative advocacy, either. My reasons for holding back on the critique are based on my desire to promote dialogue by helping people see where they fit in. It was more difficult to accomplish this with food industry insiders forty years ago, when one would frequently encounter farmers, scientists, and other food industry professionals who would say, "Ethics? It's not relevant. There's nothing to see here." I believe (though I could not prove) that my work with insiders has helped to create more willingness to acknowledge the ethical dimensions of agriculture and food systems, though I would certainly concede that my efforts would have been much less effective if there had not been outsiders making sharply critical attacks.

This leads, I think, to one last reflection on public philosophy and the offerings of my commentators. Sometimes we have to choose between helping others own and articulate ethical commitments that we might not fully agree with and being an effective member of the loyal (or not so loyal) opposition. People who are highly vulnerable to exclusion and abuse by dominant groups are justified in expecting that philosophers and lovers of democracy will speak up for them. But I will insist that dominant parties' failure to own and articulate their ethical commitments is part of the problem, too. It is what allows them to exert the power implicit in existing social institutions while remaining blindly confident in the unassailability of their perspective. There is an important sense in which they are simply unaware that they *have* a perspective. We need philosophers who will blast away at the dominant perspective, but when we shift over *to* the dominant perspective, what we need is less blasting away and more subtle articulations that provide openings to deeper conversation. It may be hubris, but that's often how I see myself.

So circling back to questions that virtually all of my commentators have asked, I rely heavily on John Stuart Mill because I admire and endorse the tolerance of disagreement for which he argues so brilliantly. When food ethics is just a social movement among people who already know the right thing to do, we are not very likely to experience the learning and community building that a John Dewey would see philosophy being able to provide. But my heart is closer to Hegel, and not the Hegel of *The Philosophy of Right*, or even the Hegel of the master-slave dialectic. It's the Hegel of the unhappy consciousness, perched on the precipice between having recognized its own role in domination and not quite ready or willing to move confidently to an assertion of the Absolute. But now I recognize that I am appealing

to a philosophical conversation that has gone on for much too long, and one that will hardly resonate with or feel open to someone who has walked into this movie during the middle of the second reel. It's time for me to shut up and to repeat the closing sentence of my book: It's time for someone else to engage.

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