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**Ronald L. Sandler: *Food Ethics: The Basics*.
Routledge, 2015, ISBN 978-0-415-83644-9**

Reviewed by **Josh Milburn**

Ronald Sandler's *Food Ethics: The Basics* draws upon his experience teaching courses called Food in Contemporary Context and Food Ethics. I do not know, but I suspect that a lot of non-philosophers take these courses. In *Food Ethics*, Sandler avoids lengthy explorations of philosophical controversies and concepts, and limits engagement with canonical ethicists or ethical theories. Instead, he focuses on the empirical realities of our food system, and then presents admirably clear arguments drawing upon these empirical realities, borrowing from live debates in the ethics of food. This is practical philosophy at its most accessible and readable.

Sandler's focus on the food *system* is clear from the outset. The first substantial chapter (which is over a fifth of the book's total length) is about the global food system and the "alternative food movement", which encompasses advocates of organic food, local food, slow food, and "food justice". This debate about the global food system forms the backdrop of much of the discussion in other chapters. Sandler next explores food insecurity and the ethics of assistance, moving on to the ethics of eating meat, and then the ethics of bioengineering (primarily focussed on genetic modification, but also featuring a very nice – if now slightly outdated – introduction to the ethics of *in vitro* meat). The final two chapters are on health and culture respectively. These latter chapters are perhaps a little less developed than the others; the two chapters combined are the same length as the opening chapter, and they do not so much address a single question (e.g., "Should we eat meat?") as they explore a series of interlocking, albeit important, issues. For example, a short section on eating disorders was a welcome addition, but it does not really answer or even explore the questions it asks – it simply raises them. This, perhaps, is the inevitable result of trying to have a concise introduction to an area of scholarship containing such diverse questions and theorists.

This book is undoubtedly at its best when Sandler is pushing deep into an ethical puzzle and clearly demarcating different arguments for a proposition, different responses to these different arguments, and different rebuttals of these responses. This is all expertly done, and will be a valuable resource. For example, the back-and-forth on the ethics of genetically modified crops will no doubt help plenty of students starting their reading around the question. Sandler is generally very good at offering concise and clear definitions for technical terms, and I was particularly pleased to see him include some careful explanation of different informal fallacies, which he introduces (by name) over many chapters. Naturally enough, this means that some of the arguments explored in the book are not the sort of thing I would expect to hear from a professional philosopher, but they *are* the sorts of things that one might hear from an undergraduate – especially one new to philosophy (examples include some of the reasons given for the claim that we are *obliged* to eat meat). Sandler unapologetically but clearly explains where these arguments go wrong. I would expect a newcomer to philosophy reading this book from cover to cover to thus come out of it with a much clearer idea of what does and does not constitute a good argument – and I take this to be high praise.

So, the book is readable, well-arranged, covers key topics, and takes advantage of a lot of valuable "teaching moments" to explain certain key fallacies. Nonetheless, it has a few limitations worth highlighting.

First, it sets off on the wrong foot with a rather clumsy characterisation of the personal nature of food choices. On page 2, Sandler writes that "Food choices are ultimately personal – everyone decides for themselves what they eat, where they shop, and what their politics are." If this claim is empirical, it is false. Lots of people (and non-people) have very, very little choice over what they eat and where they shop, and have little access to politics. But the claim is also false if it is intended to have normative clout. We should not defend food choices as "ultimately personal" if

they require the torture of animals, slave labour, or environmentally destructive practices, for example. Sandler seems to agree that food choices are not wholly personal in this moral sense – his exploration of cultural relativism seems decidedly and reasonably in favour of there being better and worse positions – and he fairly clearly takes sides on some of the issues he explores. For example, he is critical of typical locavore claims, and, though against concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs, or “factory farms”), he seems to be in favour of eating meat from “humane” farms, and meat from hunted animals. My point is not that he is wrong about these things. His case against the locavore is compelling, and his claims about animals are not wholly unreasonable *if* we take for granted that animals do not have rights. (Animal rights and veganism are mentioned, though little discussed – Sandler’s discussion of the ethics of eating meat does not touch on the egg or dairy industry, and veganism is not presented as a part of the “alternative food movement”.) My point is that this taking of sides seems contrary to the opening comments. In many ways, I wish Sandler’s very clear and compelling discussion of the role of ethical critique (which appears in response to the cultural relativist) had appeared at the start of the book, rather than at the end.

Second, Sandler does not do much to identify the *distinctiveness* (if any!) of food as an object of philosophical or ethical enquiry. In some of the bibliographies included with each chapter, he points towards texts that do this kind of work – texts in “the philosophy of food” – but he does not really engage with them. I suspect this comes from his apparent hope to keep the book very accessible to a non-philosophical audience. So, for example, we get no discussion of what food is, only passing reference to the sense of taste, and minimal reflection on the “culinary arts”.

Third, despite the inclusion of bibliographies, I think Sandler could have done a lot more to identify *who* makes the particular arguments he offers. Often, arguments are completely unreferenced, and/or introduced with vague claims about what “some” or “many” argue or believe. Not only would this style be a poor one for undergraduates to imitate, but it means that students wanting to find more details about a particular argument – recall that this book is very much only, as its title suggests, *the basics* – will have to search them out themselves. I do worry that this final concern, more so than the others, has the potential to limit this book’s utility as an introductory text for students, and do hope that this will be remedied if a second edition is produced.