

# The New Ethics of Food

## Special Issue Introduction



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Volume 1, Number 2  
Fall 2018  
DOI: [10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.2-1](https://doi.org/10.25335/M5/PPJ.1.2-1)

### Abstract

Cultivating a new ethics of food requires the inclusion of diverse voices from well beyond the circle of professional philosophers and ethicists. Further, it requires engaging in reciprocal dialogue with members of the communities for whom these food/ethical issues are living concerns. In other words, a new food ethics must work for everyone, not just professional ethicists.

There is growing public recognition that the global food system—including production, consumption, distribution, and waste—poses complex ethical, social, and political challenges. These require critical consideration as we move further into the twenty-first century because climate change, expanded global interdependence, and shifts in the urban/rural interface for food systems create vexing questions of justice. These challenges are vexing, in part, because prevailing ethical prescriptions and theories of justice tend to originate from narrow disciplinary discourses that focus on, say, the role of individual responsibility versus collective action. Further, these discourses too rarely feature the voices of those who actually experience the injustices of environmental degradation, food scarcity, and globalized supply chains. Cultivating a new ethics of food that takes these challenges seriously requires the inclusion of diverse voices from well beyond the circle of professional philosophers and ethicists. It requires engaging in reciprocal dialogue with members of the communities for whom these food/ethical issues are living concerns. In other words, a new food ethics must work for everyone, not just professional ethicists.

Because such reconstruction requires sensitivity to place and context, this special issue on the new ethics of food attends in particular to the American Midwest. Once a leader in both the manufacturing and food sectors, dramatic downturns in key industries have exacerbated problems related to food insecurity in most Midwestern communities—urban and rural—with vulnerable and underserved populations experiencing the most nega-

tive impacts. The Midwest is also plagued with high levels of water pollution, mostly due to contaminants from agricultural run-off into ditches, creeks, and streams that flow into larger bodies of water. As the breadbasket of America, the Midwest has been a center for food production and has rich agricultural narrative traditions, such as agrarian literatures, that might be rewritten or re-told in light of today's most pressing global economic, social, and ecological issues.<sup>1</sup> Midwestern cities such as Detroit, Milwaukee, and Chicago have been leaders in innovating their food systems, from urban gardens to a rapid expansion of food hubs. The composers of this issue's articles are engaged in several such projects.<sup>2</sup>

To address these ethical issues, several Midwest land grant universities (Michigan State University, The Pennsylvania State University, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Ohio State University), each with their own legacies of engaging agriculture and food-related issues, have been collaborating since 2015 under the auspices of a Mellon Foundation-funded Humanities Without Walls/Global Midwest grant called the [New Ethics of Food](#) project. It has two overall objectives. The first is to link university and community partners in a common commitment to research and dialogue around a broadened understanding of the new ethics of food. The second is to reveal and rethink the Midwest as a major force in this century's global, regional, and local food economy and

1. On the Midwest as the breadbasket of America see: <https://www.farmland.org/our-work/where-we-work/midwest> (accessed December 11, 2018).

2. See, for example, FoodPlus Detroit: <http://foodplusdetroit.org>.

culture. As the articles in this issue show, the public humanities—which engage critical societal issues and speak to them in ways that are accessible to broad audiences—can make compelling contributions to this work.

## In This Issue

The papers in this special issue represent the inter-consortial and interdisciplinary character of the New Ethics of Food project as they bring together humanities and science scholars from these universities as well as community stakeholders. The New Ethics of Food project, funded in 2016, was initially conceived through conversations between Michigan State University's Gretel Van Wieren and Paul Thompson around Thompson's 2015 book, *From Field to Fork: Food Ethics for Everyone*. Two summer writing workshops (2016 and 2017) supported by the (also Mellon-funded) *Public Philosophy Journal* brought together scholars, extension professional, and community partners to discuss key issues to focus the projects' work. Out of these workshops, the issues of food waste and food sourcing were identified as priority topics. Alongside this more scholarly work, we developed [a visual representation food ethics research network](#). The visualization is an interactive network that connects researchers, community partners, and food ethics resources at consortial institutions and beyond. It also serves to identify potential research areas, gaps, and activities related to the New Ethics of Food work.

Just as the project emerged out of conversations around Thompson's *From Field to Fork*, we encourage readers to begin the special issue with a conversational piece about the book. In "[A Critical Conversation](#)," Ray Boisvert, Lisa Heldke, Erin McKenna, Per Sandin, and Gretel Van Wieren offer critiques of the book to which Thompson replies. The critiques were initially presented at a series of "Authors Meets Critics Sessions" at three different professional society meetings in 2016: the [Association for Practical and Professional Ethics](#), the [Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy](#), and the [European Society for Agriculture and Food Ethics](#). These sessions proved important spaces for engaging one another's work and developing more inclusive ethical posi-

tions that respond to diverse voices. Indeed, Thompson's book espouses a "conversational thesis" in dialogue with multiple disciplinary approaches and on-the-ground problems as the test of ethical justification. So that such discourse does not languish in poorly-attended conference rooms, we are excited to share the conversation in the *Public Philosophy Journal*, which celebrates the making public of ethical inquiry. Thompson's discussants call attention, among other things, to the book's treatment of race and gender, to its engagement with animal ethics, to its rootedness in a liberal politics, and to its hesitation to offer detailed prescriptions of what we should eat. Part of cultivating a new food ethics for everyone is to be able to answer these concerns.

The special issue also includes a collection of interdisciplinary essays on the topic of food waste born from collaboration at the *PPJ* writing workshops. Steve Rachman, Rob Chiles, Tiffany Tsantsoulas, Van Wieren, and Renee Wallace co-composed "[Getting Wasted: Going Beyond 'Agrarian vs. Industrial,' and Moving Towards a New Food Ethics](#)." Their article offers a deconstruction of prevailing understandings of food waste alongside a reconstruction of a new framework rooted in their emphasis on organic matter. Their piece opens with a poem from Walt Whitman and converses with a variety of figures such as Michael Pollan and bell hooks to mobilize an integrated and holistic understanding of food waste that strives for inclusivity. Building off of this new understanding, Tsantsoulas leads the same collaboration of composers in "[Constructing a New Food Ethics: Waste and Discourses of Difference](#)," an interrogation of the ways that dominant perspectives risk reinforcing racism, sexism, classism, and other structures of oppression. In response to a genealogy tracing the role that waste plays in upholding these structures, they recommend an explicitly intersectional standpoint theory to render visible these risks and harms. Closing this series, Van Wieren, Chiles, and Rachman respond to these calls for new narratives born out of intersectional standpoints in "[Taking Back the Narrative: A Dialogue with FoodPLUS Detroit's Renee Wallace about Culture Change, Consciousness, and Compost](#)." This paper presents a dialogue between academics and practitioners that generates a new understanding of food waste

that can support food justice in Detroit. These collaborations and conversations provide the background for Wallace's community engagement at [Detroit's African World Festival](#), a dialogue-based experience that hosted over one hundred community members in interactive discussion of food waste and food ethics in the city.

To close this sequence, we offer Tannya Forcone and Glennon Sweeney's "[Flavors of Meaning: Using Principled Civic Engagement Practices to Understand Food Environments](#)." Forcone and Sweeney exemplify the bridging of theory and practice in their civic engagement work with the Columbus, OH-based [Kirwin Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity](#). With this piece the issue comes full circle: If a new ethics of food must originate in "actual discourse," then new ethicists of food must learn to engage in this discourse with their local communities in ways that actually achieve inclusivity and liberation. Food presents unique challenges and opportunities for such discourse, and Forcone and Sweeney provide guidance for how to facilitate conversations about food that welcome those frequently marginalized from such conversations.

In sum, this special issue of the *PPJ* demonstrates that cross-disciplinary, collaborative research on critical public issues such as agriculture and food is not only possible but beneficial for illuminating multiple and diverse sets of values related questions that relate to a variety of audiences. Further, concrete connections with practitioners and community

groups working in the field elevate and expand such discussions in terms of the types of issues that are raised, and how they are addressed. Although the process of doing this kind of scholarship includes its own kinds of challenges, this issue shows that it can be incredibly fruitful for developing new courses of dialogue and action.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks to an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Without Walls grant (2016-2018) for helping support the research and writing of these papers.

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