

# Gut reaction: Morality in food choice

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

We've all heard the saying, "you are what you eat." It turns out the old adage might be true on more than just a physical level. The food you choose may also reflect your personal ethics.

Whether we like it or not, buying food has [moral implications](#) ranging from [environmental sustainability](#) to social justice to [animal welfare](#). Was the apple you ate at lunch grown in your state, or even your

country? How much land and water did it take to produce? Was the farmer who picked it making a fair wage?

Several researchers at Arizona State University are examining the ethical aspects of food production and consumption. They are helping consumers navigate the maze of moral choices involved in filling their plates and their bellies. And they are finding that being morally mindful can lead to better nutrition, as well.

## Ethical eats

Where does a chicken or an [avocado](#) start its life before making its way to the grocery store? Joan McGregor studies food production and the [ethical concerns](#) it raises. One of these, of course, is environmental sustainability.

"We all talk about water, we talk about energy, but we sort of forget that food is a huge consumer of resources," says McGregor, who teaches philosophy in ASU's School of Philosophical, Historical, and [Religious Studies](#), a unit of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS).

Sustainability can be tricky to measure, however. For example, most people think shopping locally reduces their [carbon footprint](#). But depending on the type of food, that might not be the case at all. Some foods are more resource intensive than others and generate more carbon during production, even if they don't get transported very far.

Social issues come into play, as well. Buying locally means supporting a local farmer. You might think that's an ethical no-brainer, but consider this: Before the [local food](#) movement was all the rage, socially conscious consumers chose fair-trade products (often produced in other countries) because they guaranteed the farmer decent working conditions and a living wage.

"If you're just thinking about welfare or doing good in the world, you might be doing better by buying from some Guatemalan farmer than buying from some Queen Creek farmer," McGregor says. This is just one of many ethical conundrums in the business of food production.

The meat industry presents another set of issues, such as poor treatment of animals on factory farms, a negative impact on the environment and health concerns over hormone and antibiotic use.

"It's more than just 'should I eat meat or not?' It's a question of the way we produce meat. Right now it is incredibly inhumane, but it's also incredibly unsustainable," McGregor says. The major byproducts of meat production are waste and toxins that can be hazardous to human health and to the health of the environment.

Some people substitute seafood for meat. But is fish really more healthy and sustainable? It depends on the type you choose, says Leah Gerber, a conservation biologist in ASU's School of Life Sciences, also part of CLAS.

## **Fishing for answers**

Gerber recently co-authored a study examining the healthfulness and sustainability of more than 300 different species of fish. To measure healthfulness, she looked at omega-3 fatty acids. Research has shown that these fats can improve cardiovascular health and boost mood.

Gerber also determined which species had the highest mercury levels, since too much mercury can damage the human nervous system. To gauge sustainability, Gerber considered factors like exploitation of the species population and carrying capacity of the ocean environment.

Her analysis found that very large, long-lived fish like the bluefin tuna

are typically high in mercury, low in omega-3's and unsustainable. Mercury is a pollutant that gets into lakes, rivers and oceans. Fish and other marine life unwittingly eat it up. As larger animals eat the smaller ones, the mercury "bioaccumulates," or collects in increasing quantities. Large fish high on the food chain contain the highest levels.

Large fish also take longer to sexually mature. As a result, it is difficult to recover their populations when they are overexploited. In general, the least healthful species are also the least sustainable. In addition to bluefin, these include Atlantic cod, swordfish and Spanish mackerel.

Fortunately, fish that are better for your health are also the most sustainable. These include Pacific cod, Alaskan pollock and black rockfish.

Why worry about sustainable fishing? "We need to take care of the ocean and effectively manage fisheries if we want to eat fish in the future," Gerber says, adding that most fish stocks in the world are over-harvested. Global climate change has also added to the problem. As greenhouse gases in the atmosphere increase, oceans absorb more carbon dioxide, making them acidic and less hospitable to many fish species.

"There's this perception that the ocean is inexhaustible – we can just dump stuff in it and exploit it – but it's not," Gerber says.

## **Follow your gut**

Gerber believes we have an ethical obligation to take care of the environment. By approaching food ethically, we may also benefit our own health. That's because our moral views affect us on an emotional, "gut" level that may have a stronger influence on our behavior than facts.

Consider, for example, a practicing Muslim who doesn't eat pork. She

has avoided pork products all her life, and as an adult, doesn't think twice about passing up bacon and pork chops. A gut reaction to the food makes it undesirable to her. It's the same feeling an Orthodox Jew who follows dietary kosher laws might have about eating meat and cheese together.

"These violations of ethical mores are felt to be dirty, disgusting or not sacred in some way," says Eric Hekler, an assistant professor in the School of Nutrition and Health Promotion at ASU.

These kinds of reactions aren't always religious in nature. Some vegetarians, for example, say they became disgusted by meat after reading about conditions in meat packing plants in Upton Sinclair's "The Jungle," or watching documentaries about how animals are treated on factory farms.

Hekler is interested in tapping into human morals to produce healthier eating habits. In a study published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, he and his colleagues Tom Robinson and Christopher Gardner found that students at Stanford who took a class examining the ethics of food production made more healthy food choices by the end of the class than students who took courses on human health.

"We got people to eat better by focusing more on the environmental and sustainability aspects, rather than focusing just on a message of health," Hekler says. Surveys of the students revealed that those who took his food and society class ate more vegetables and less fatty meat and dairy by the end of the class than students enrolled in the human health courses.

These results suggest that appealing to a person's morals, rather than just giving them facts, could be an effective way to change behavior. In ongoing research, Hekler and his ASU colleagues Punam Ohri-

Vachaspathi and Christopher Wharton have gathered survey data from about 600 ASU students to explore ways of linking healthful eating with morality.

Why tap into morals and emotion to change eating habits and behavior? If someone wants to lose weight or improve their health, there is an abundance of information online about the benefits of physical activity and a diet rich in fruits and vegetables. But as obesity rates rise, it's clear that facts alone aren't enough.

That could be because ultimately, our gut reactions are stronger than our rational thoughts. Hekler explains this concept with a metaphor first developed by Jonathan Haidt, whose Moral Foundations Theory is a core inspiration for Hekler's research. Haidt says your intuitive, emotional response is like an elephant, while rational thought is the rider.

"There's this intuitive part of you, which is the elephant underneath, and if he really wants those peanuts, the rider can stop him for a short time but will eventually get overwhelmed and tired," Hekler says. He hopes with further research to develop an intervention package that will effectively target the elephant.

## **Technical support**

Even if your gut craves humanely and sustainably produced food, the choices are rarely black and white. There are always tradeoffs, like in McGregor's example of buying food locally.

"It's very difficult to just say, 'this is the right thing.' I think that presupposes a model of morality that's too simplistic," McGregor says. But the more information we have available, the better off we are making choices that reflect our values. That's why McGregor wants to create a smartphone application or online tool to help consumers sort

through the moral factors associated with the food they eat.

"I like to believe that people want to do the right thing, but don't always know which option is the right thing," McGregor says. For example, many people would pay a little more for a product if they could check with an app and find out that the alternative was manufactured by a child in unsafe working conditions.

Hekler also wants to use technology to promote healthier behavior. He is analyzing a series of smartphone apps that encourage users to stay active. The apps were first developed at Stanford University with his former mentor and co-director for the project, Abby King.

One app is numbers-based. It records and displays the amount of time users spend being active versus sedentary each day. But the other two apps are focused more on emotions and social relationships. One of them uses a live wallpaper with an animated bird that flies and becomes more lively as the smartphone owner moves around throughout the day. The app employs operant conditioning principles, Hekler explains, rewarding the user with a happy bird as he or she performs the desired behavior – physical activity.

"As I walk faster, this bird flies faster, is happier and more playful, and sings me songs. Every time I open the phone, I get a subtle nudge about how active I'm being," Heckler says.

The goal is to provoke an emotional reaction in users, motivating them to walk and move more throughout the day. Preliminary results reported at a recent conference of the Society of Behavioral Medicine found that the emotion-based and social-based apps produced favorable results relative to a control group, but the number-based one did not.

Researchers hope that targeting people's morals rather than their rational

thoughts will be an effective way to promote healthy and ethical choices.

"We need to connect people's values to their food choices," McGregor says. "That means people need to have access to certain kinds of information that ties food decisions to values about the environment, animals and social justice."

Provided by Arizona State University

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