

Illinois State University

ISU ReD: Research and eData

Faculty Publications - Philosophy

Philosophy

7-2003

Review of Designer Food: Mutant Harvest or Breadbasket of the World

Alison Bailey

Illinois State University, baileya@ilstu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpphil>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Bailey, Alison, "Review of Designer Food: Mutant Harvest or Breadbasket of the World" (2003). *Faculty Publications - Philosophy*. 2.

<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/fpphil/2>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at ISU ReD: Research and eData. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Philosophy by an authorized administrator of ISU ReD: Research and eData. For more information, please contact ISUREd@ilstu.edu.

Pence, Gregory E. *Designer Food: Mutant Harvest or Breadbasket of the World?* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Pp. xii+235. \$26.95 (cloth).

It's surprising that contemporary moral philosophers have not thought more about food. The rapidly expanding industrialized landscape of modern western agribusiness raises moral concerns about large-scale livestock production, the increased usage of genetically modified crops, and the effects these now common practices may have on long-term environmental and human health. Here Pence argues that biotechnology is more helpful than harmful, on the ground that it will abate world hunger. Positioning himself as an "impartial bioethicist" he sets about the task of sorting through the extremism he thinks drives all environmental movements' opposition to genetically modified (GM) crops. His argument is simple: the claim that GM foods are unsafe is the product of alarmism, not sound reason. Discarding what environmentalists have called the Precautionary Principle, he argues that GM foods are safe because they have not been proven unsafe. And GM foods have been tested more than many food products now on the market.

His discussions are never without historical grounding. Much of the intellectual spadework here is done to give the reader a clear background on the origins of mad cow disease, the Star-Link corn controversy, and the cultural and political reasons driving European resistance to biotech crops. With the data on the table, Pence very loosely organizes into four political lenses the perspectives most people use to make moral judgments about food. The naturalists think that nature knows best and that most artificial human intrusions should be either resisted or approached cautiously. Scientific progressivists, like Pence, think biotechnology can only improve the quality of human life. Egalitarians suggest that food shortages lie neither in science nor scarcity of food, but in the politics of distribution. And, globalists believe that better economies, not moral passions, can raise the standard of living and that if we take the long view, more people will be helped by free trade and the rise of global economies.

The single greatest flaw of this book is that the author paints his opposition's arguments in very broad, vague, and frequently uncharitable brushstrokes. Those who oppose GM foods or suggest that biotechnology should be approached with caution are at best alarmists and at worst "ecofascists" who are morally bankrupt because they care more about preserving plants than feeding millions of starving humans (p. 113). Pence never seems to seriously engage the subtleties and distinctions between these views or the challenges they present to his own. The book, however, does provide a view that is underrepresented in the philosophical and popular literature on the subject.

A. B.

Redhead, Mark. *Charles Taylor: Thinking and Living Deep Diversity*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002. Pp. 231. \$25.95 (paper).

This book assesses Charles Taylor's confrontation, both in writing and in his political and personal life, with political "fragmentation," or the difficulties that arise when citizens of a polity strongly identify with a group within it, and the