



On Eating

I was a locavore before the term was invented and before we know that to be one was a righteous choice. It was not a choice actually. With my father off fighting the Germans in Europe and money remarkably scarce, we ate what was available, including, primarily, food from my mother's large "victory garden" and the chickens and rabbits we raised ourselves. The animals were both companions and food, strangely enough—or perhaps not so strangely. Meat was personal. We practiced then what Michael Pollan came to advocate later, namely, that you should have a relationship with what you eat, or at least the farmers that produce it.¹

But should we eat animals at all? In my younger days, it was Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* that made me consider swearing off meat. More recently, it is Jonathan Foer's *Eating Animals*.² Both are books you sort of wish you hadn't read.

Sinclair's 1906 novel was meant first to expose the miserable conditions faced by desperate immigrant workers. Indeed, it was dedicated "To the Workingmen of America,"³ and Jack London called it "the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of wage slavery."⁴ The book turned out to have a greater impact, however, on the public's view of the meat-packing industry, with its then unsafe, unsanitary, unregulated, and downright disgusting practices. It led, among other things, to the passage of the federal Meat Inspection Act and the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906.⁵

Were these enough? Certainly not for Jonathan Foer. If *The Jungle* exposed commercial meat as a contaminated product, *Eating Animals* exposes large-scale meat production as a contaminated process. Do we really want to know, for example, that "free range" chickens, where "access to the outdoors" is required, might inhabit "a shed containing thirty thousand chickens, with a small door at one end that opens to a five-by-five dirt patch"⁶? If you don't want to know how the animals you eat are sometimes treated and slaughtered—and much of it is far worse than that description of "free range" chickens—don't read this book.

Foer tends toward absolutism, without quite going there. He wrestles with the conflict between ethical vegetarianism and responding hospitably to the table fellowship extended by a gracious (meat-eating) host,⁷ but will apparently side

¹Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 240.

²Jonathan Safran Foer, *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown, 2009).

³Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co., 1906), front matter.

⁴See "Upton Sinclair," at <http://www.uptonsinclair.com/bio.html> (accessed July 2, 2013).

⁵See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Jungle#cite_note-2 (accessed July 2, 2013).

⁶Foer, *Eating Animals*, 61.

⁷*Ibid.*, 55–56.

with his Jewish great-grandmother who, in the last days of World War II, while literally starving, declined a piece of pork offered her by a Russian farmer because it was not kosher. Her religious principles required her to refuse it even to save her life, for, as she said, “If nothing matters, there’s nothing to save.”⁸

The issue of table fellowship versus dietary choice is a classic struggle between competing goods, always more difficult than the struggle between good and evil. When good things compete, decisions will be different and will need to be mutually respected in a civil society. A dear vegan friend resolves the conflict differently than Foer and his grandmother. She understands Jesus’ admonition to the disciples to “eat what is set before you” on entering a village (Luke 10:8) to point to something higher than her important concerns regarding diet. Indeed, Jesus’ command is remarkably radical—as radical, perhaps, as Foer’s grandmother’s refusal. For some commentators, at least, Jesus’ instruction goes far beyond issues of good manners (which do lie behind the similar sentence in Sirach 31:16); Jesus breaks open the Jewish dietary restrictions that are a matter of Torah itself, anticipating the later surprising revelation to Peter in Acts 10–11 (see also 1 Cor 10:27). Food raises big issues—not just nutritional issues, but ethical, moral, and religious ones—and Sinclair, Foer, Pollan, and others rightly demand that we face them.

For now, while certainly considering more carefully my meat purchases, I have not chosen the vegetarian/vegan option, in part at least because of the many responsible farmers and ranchers I have met, who take seriously their vocation to feed the world. Moreover, it seems clear that both evolution and God have made humans meat eaters. For God, to be sure, it’s a bit of an afterthought, granted in the post-flood blessing (Gen 9:3), but clearly all of our biblical heroes—including Jesus—were meat eaters. For evolution, it is there, some will claim, in our canine teeth, and more convincingly in the gnawed bones (some of them human!) found around prehistoric human campsites. Richard Wrangham’s argument from evolution is even stronger. In his book *Catching Fire*, he cites his own research and that of others to argue that eating meat and cooking are the two essential evolutionary developments that allow the development of human intelligence—the big brain.⁹ That is, no meat eating, no human beings. Though we might make the choice now not to eat meat, had our prehistoric ancestors made a similar choice, we would not be here to make any choices at all.

But what meat—if any—shall we eat? Both Sinclair and Foer base their exposés of commercial meat production, in part at least, on surreptitious visits to meat-packing plants and feedlots. My own similar visits, sometimes equally disconcerting, were quite open and quite legal. During my days as a young pastor in South Dakota, John Morrell & Co. still offered public tours of their butchering

⁸Ibid., 17.

⁹Richard Wrangham, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human* (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 113–114.

activities in Sioux Falls, though they did not allow what Pollan calls “the right to look”—that is, actually to witness the slaughter of the animals.¹⁰ I went to Morrell’s both out of curiosity and because many of my parishioners worked there (and some had missing digits to prove it). The sights and smells were both instructive and off-putting, though knowing many of the people (and many farmers who supplied the cattle) made it hard to label the enterprise as evil. It still allowed me to think of that food supply, too, as “local.” So did my home freezer, supplied by the local hardware store (“pay for it when you can”) and kept full by parishioners, deliberately seeking to augment my low salary, when they butchered or hunted. Once more, we knew the farmers and had seen the animals in the fields. Still, some of those sights repelled, particularly, for example, the huge feedlot at the edge of Sioux Falls, with its overpowering smell and its obviously deliberate steep slope into the road ditch for the waste to be carried off to the river. Indeed, that lot inspired my first direct entry into environmental activism as I collected air samples to test for hydrogen sulfide levels (I wasn’t a one-time chemist for nothing) and joined efforts to shut the place down or at least have it cleaned up.

Eating requires choice—though to say that is to betray something of an elitist position in the world. For many, throughout history and now, the choices are limited or nonexistent. With Foer, we might decry the cruelties of some factory farming and reject those products, but many of our fellow citizens would be hard pressed to afford the cost of what we might call ethically produced meat. And grain? The Green Revolution has its unhappy environmental side effects, but it has saved up to a billion people worldwide from starvation, including, perhaps, the entire Indian subcontinent. The choices are not easy, and there is no way to avoid the daily compromises modern living requires. As Elizabeth Kolbert notes in her review of Foer’s book:

But is even veganism really enough? The cost that consumer society imposes on the planet’s fifteen or so million non-human species goes way beyond either meat or eggs. Bananas, bluejeans, soy lattes, the paper used to print this magazine, the computer screen you may be reading it on—death and destruction are embedded in them all. It is hard to think at all rigorously about our impact on other organisms without being sickened.¹¹

Kolbert is right: none of us is finally “righteous” in these matters. Whether carnivore or vegan, whether human or grizzly bear, none of us can escape the fundamental compromise of eating what we are. Wendell Berry recognizes this, but with a slightly more hopeful outlook:

This is not to suggest that we can live harmlessly, or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of Creation. When we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament. When we do it igno-

¹⁰Pollan, *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 332.

¹¹Elizabeth Kolbert, “Flesh of Your Flesh,” *New Yorker*, November 9, 2009; at http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2009/11/09/091109crbo_books_kolbert (accessed July 8, 2013).

rantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration. In such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.¹²

As a bread baker, I too make choices, including grinding my own flour. Why count on nutrients being put back into the flour artificially once they have been removed in the milling process? I began baking bread, in part at least, because forty-five years ago, when I returned from studying in Germany, it was virtually impossible to buy what I would call a decent loaf of bread in my part of this country. It was all white, bleached, spongy, and plastic wrapped. It was do it myself or nothing. So, I went on my continuing quest for the perfect artisan loaf, even though my own bread often costs more than the cheap stuff at the supermarket. Does that make me, too, an elitist?¹³

Those who, like Foer, “support the best of animal agriculture”¹⁴—despite himself remaining a vegetarian—that is, people, including meat eaters, who don’t want their consciences to bear the weight of needless animal cruelty, will need to shop locally,¹⁵ know the sources of their meat, and expect to pay more—often a lot more. This will not be—indeed, cannot be—the answer for everyone, for, like it or not, those less well-to-do have to eat too. They are trapped by their relative poverty in a world they can do little to control or change.

But the rest of us are trapped as well. Whatever our individual eating choices, we live in a culture that supports and is supported by big agribusiness, as well as all kinds of other big business that provides our lifestyle while also inevitably bringing twinges to our consciences. As we are able, we make our own moral and nutritional choices. As we are able, we share the wealth with those who have less.

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¹²Wendell Berry, “The Gift of Good Land” (1979), in *The Gift of Good Land: Further Essays Cultural and Agricultural* (San Francisco: North Point, 1981) 281.

¹³In this, I welcome the support of Michael Pollan’s new book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation* (New York: Penguin, 2013), in which he argues that do-it-yourself cooking can bring us back to a healthier relationship with food (and, in fact, it made him a bread baker). In an interview promoting this book, Pollan surprisingly suggests that eating grass-fed beef might actually decrease our carbon footprint on the planet; see Mark Hertsgaard, “Reducing the carbon hoofprint,” *StarTribune*, July 5, 2013, A9; online at http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2013/07/michael_pollan_on_agriculture_s_role_in_fighting_climate_change.html (accessed July 8, 2013).

¹⁴Foer, *Eating Animals*, 242.

¹⁵Not surprisingly, “locavorism” itself has come under attack by some critics (see, for example, the criticism at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Omnivore%27s_Dilemma; accessed July 8, 2013).