

Eating Animals

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Jonathan Safran Foer

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No ascetic can be considered reliably sane.

—A.J. Liebling, *Between Meals*

There are times when you can almost hear Foer thinking: Yes, these arguments have been made dozens of times before, but they've never been made in this font.

— John Williams, "The Oy of Cooking"

LAST NOVEMBER novelist Jonathan Safran Foer released his first extended work of nonfiction, a book about factory farming called *Eating Animals*. You may have heard of it. The title plays on the fact that we are *animals who eat* and that, except for Foer and his fellow vegetarians and vegans, we are *animals who eat other animals*. In an early section of the book Foer introduces us to one of the newest—and, for the author, most important—of humankind's eating animals, his son, whose very existence is the reason we have this book at all:

Perhaps the first desire my son had, wordlessly and before reason, was to eat. Seconds after being born, he was breastfeeding... Without explanation or experience, he knew what to do. Millions of years of evolution had wound the knowledge into him, as it had encoded beating into his tiny heart, and expansion and contraction into his tiny lungs. (p.11)

His son's first taste of food and the unprecedented awe it inspires in Foer account in large part for all that is to come in *Eating Animals*—from dark-of-night investigations of Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) and an excursion into Kafka's experience of the Berlin aquarium to long monologues by ranchers printed verbatim. There

is also a letter Foer himself wrote (over and over again) to Tyson Foods, in which he requests very politely that he "be able to speak with some of [their] farmers" (p.84). Although the letter is disingenuous in the extreme, it makes its point, as does *Eating Animals*, which ultimately is another damning account of factory farming. Foer's big number—99 percent—is an accurate accounting of the meat we consume in this country that is industrially raised. And yet, the book (and especially its media follow-up) is not, as he puts it, "a straightforward case for vegetarianism" (p.13), particularly because the narrative is so personal. It comes across instead as a straightforward case for the wisdom of protecting ourselves from a world where animals eat animals. From father to son we hear, "Father knows best."

Or, from a reader's point of view: Foer knows best.

Though humankind has been eating animals (and telling stories about eating animals) as far back as anyone can remember, we have never been perfectly comfortable with it. And for good reason. At some level, when faced with "meals involving beef, veal, lamb, pork, chicken, lobster, etc.," as David Foster Wallace puts it in his now-famous essay "Consider the Lobster," we have probably always been aware of the "(possible) moral status and (probable) suffering of the animals involved."¹ Wallace wanted us to think more about our behavior. So does Foer. And, indeed, so do I.

Nowadays, Foer notes (correctly, I'm afraid), "conversations about meat tend to make people feel cornered" (p.6). The implication is that there is something inherently unethical about eating animals. Foer's wife, also a vegetarian, once described to him a familiar "gnawing (if only occasional and short-lived) dread that [by eating meat] she was participating in something deeply wrong" (p.8). There is an unspoken sense that when faced with a vegetarian, the omnivore cannot possibly have anything ethical to say—unless, of course, the omnivore has read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*.

IN THE BEGINNING we were all vegetarians—we in this case meaning Adam and Eve, as well as all the other animals in the Garden of Eden. After all, in the beginning

God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so. (Genesis 1:29–30)

That was how it had to be. In Eden, the perfect world, there could be no suffering. Suffering came with the Fall or, more simply, with the natural order of things. The world as we know it. A world not as good.² As Italian scholar Stefan Pedatella has recently written, “[T]he new order by which man and animal survive through the destruction of other animals must be considered not only as contrary to the initial design of the world, but also on some level repugnant to the morality that informed it.” In other words, he continues, “there must be a design flaw in the very fabric of creation. So great is this conviction—in the Bible at least—that the only way to account for the evil of predation is to pass the buck, as it were, from God to man—not being reconcilable with divine goodness, predation has to be somehow implicated in man’s first fall from grace.”³

As with any utopia, Eden could not last. Or, more to the point, Eden never existed at all. That is to say, unlike in the myths we have created about ourselves, we have always been eating animals. And we have always been suffering animals, too. Try as we might—by blaming ourselves or taking up vegetarianism—there is no escaping this fact. There is no going back to Eden. Yet one suspects that Foer—like other animal rightists before him—would like to try.

I REFER TO FOER’S PREDECESSORS—*Animal Liberation* author Peter Singer, say, or the even more radical Mark Braunstein, whose 1981 cult classic *Radical Vegetarianism* was reissued this year⁴—in part to point out that what Foer is saying is not particularly new. Indeed, anyone who has read a word about animal agriculture over the last decade will be surprised and amazed at the surprise and amazement Foer brings to *Eating Animals*. As far back as 1999 South African novelist J.M. Coetzee could safely have his character Elizabeth Costello say the following without losing any of his (or her) authority:

In addressing you on the subject of animals...I will pay you the honor of skipping a recital of the horrors of their lives and deaths. Though I

have no reason to believe that you have at the forefront of your minds what is being done to animals at this moment in production facilities (I hesitate to call them farms any longer), in abattoirs, in trawlers, in laboratories, all over the world, I will take it that you concede me the rhetorical power to evoke these horrors and bring them home to you with adequate force.⁵

Which is to say, it no longer takes a book like *Eating Animals* to tell us that animals are treated horribly in CAFOs. We already know.

What’s more, no one who grants animals some moral status and agrees that they probably suffer could make a case for factory farming. I certainly couldn’t, nor would I want to. I am even inclined to side with Coetzee, as staunch a vegetarian as they come, in suggesting that those of us who eat factory-raised meat have, in a way, *closed our hearts*. As Coetzee has suggested, we have taken on a kind of stain that bears similarity to the sin of those who “did not know for sure” because “they could not afford to know, for their own sake,” the horrors of Treblinka.⁶ The immorality of factory farming can hardly be overstated, and that is Foer’s position, as it is Coetzee’s, Wallace’s, and undoubtedly Michael Pollan’s and his favorite farmer Joel Salatin’s. And yet, these last two figures—who, Foer concedes, have done more to shine a light on CAFOs than anyone in the last decade—are paraded out for a surprising sort of chiding in *Eating Animals*. Pollan is called (by Foer) evasive, a teller of half-truths, while Salatin’s farm is described—although not by Foer directly—as “horrible” (pp.113, 228). Meanwhile, Coetzee, Braunstein, Wallace, and, most strikingly, Peter Singer, are not mentioned at all.

John Williams, founding editor of the book blog “The Second Pass,” complained about this last point in an early review of *Eating Animals*. “*Animal Liberation* was a groundbreaking book,” writes Williams, “and it remains a hotly debated one. Yet amazingly, though Foer was a philosophy major at Princeton, graduating in 1999 just as Singer’s appointment to the university was generating a great deal of controversy, Singer’s name is missing from the index of *Eating Animals*, Foer’s *cri de coeur* against factory farming.”⁷ Foer’s reasoning for this omission goes like this: “Peter Singer writes about meat very directly, but in a way that I feel doesn’t include enough of the messiness of being a person in the world and having cravings, having personal history, having family.”⁸ Allow me to suggest another reason. Foer can’t mention Singer because Singer is ultimately not on his side.

Accused by Pollan, in some of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*’s strongest language, of being both “parochial” and “urban” (p.325), the animal rightist comes across as

completely out of touch with the natural world—the world as we know it. A world not as good as it once was. The ethics of eating animals, Pollan argues, is rooted not in any religious sensibility, “say, the internal consistency of our moral code or the condition of our souls.”⁹ No, the basis for ethical meat eating is found in the natural world, which Darwin reintroduced us to in 1859 with *On the Origin of Species*. We have evolved with animals, domesticating them along the way; and in a way we have been domesticated ourselves.

Domestication is an evolutionary, rather than a political development. It is certainly not a regime humans somehow imposed on animals some ten thousand years ago. Rather, domestication took place when a handful of equally opportunistic species discovered, through Darwinian trial and error, that they were more likely to survive and prosper in an alliance with humans than on their own.¹⁰

Displaying a kind of religious asceticism that stands in stark contrast to Darwinism, Foer lives in what Pollan would call “the vegan utopia”—that perfect *no-place* born of a “deep current of Puritanism [that] runs through the writings of animal philosophers, an abiding discomfort not just with our animality, but with animals’ animality, too. They would like nothing better than to airlift us out from nature’s ‘intrinsic evil’.”¹¹

This seems to be what Foer wants from his vegetarianism: A return to Eden, a safe place to raise his son (with his tiny heart and tiny lungs). A nursery where the lion will lie down with the lamb. But we live in a world where, over tens of thousands of years, people and animals have grown up together, suffering the whole time. Pollan’s central argument is that the same evolutionary processes that wound the knowledge of breast-feeding into the body of Foer’s little boy also shape the relations between humans and animals. “At least for the domesticated animal,” Pollan explains, “the good life, if we can call it that, simply doesn’t exist, cannot be achieved, apart from humans—apart from our farms and therefore from our meat eating.”¹² (As Pollan has said, understanding this, *really feeling Darwin in our bones*, is the cure for the kind of human self-importance that Foer seems to suffer from.¹³) Foer can’t refer to Singer because, in the end, the grandfather of animal philosophy, while doubtful that good farms “could be practical on a large scale,” ultimately makes what Pollan calls “the essential concession: What’s wrong with eating animals is the practice, not the principle.”¹⁴

Darwin, it turns out, knows best. ☺

NOTES

1. David Foster Wallace, *Consider the Lobster* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2006), 253. The essay was originally published in the August 2004 issue of *Gourmet* magazine.
2. Wallace takes advantage of the flexibility of the adjective *good*, especially as it appeared in the subtitle of *Gourmet* (“The Magazine of Good Living”):

After all, isn’t being extra aware and attentive and thoughtful about one’s food and its overall context part of what distinguishes a real gourmet? Or is all the gourmet’s extra attention and sensibility just supposed to be sensuous? Is it really all just a matter of taste and presentation?

These last few queries, though, while sincere, obviously involve much larger and more abstract questions about the connections (if any) between aesthetics and morality—about what the adjective in a phrase like “The Magazine of Good Living” is really supposed to mean—and these questions lead straightaway into such deep and treacherous waters that it’s probably best to stop the public discussion right here. (Wallace, *Consider the Lobster*, 254)
3. Stefan Pedatella, “Images of Animal Predation in Giacomo Leopardi’s ‘Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese,’” *Italian Culture* 27:1 (March 2009): 24–41.
4. Mark Mathew Braunstein, *Radical Vegetarianism: A Dialectic of Diet and Ethic*, 2d ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2010).
5. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 19.
6. *Ibid.*, 19, 34.
7. John Williams, “The Oy of Cooking,” *The Second Pass*, at <http://thesecondpass.com/?p=3589>, 16 November 2009.
8. Jessica Roy, “Jonathan Safran Foer’s Beef with Factory Farms,” *Salon*, at www.salon.com/books/int/2009/11/06/jonathan_safran_foer/index.html.
9. Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 327.
10. *Ibid.*, 320.
11. *Ibid.*, 321–322, 325.
12. *Ibid.*, 320.
13. Michael Pollan, “Michael Pollan gives a plant’s-eye view,” video on TED.com at www.ted.com/talks/michael_pollan_gives_a_plant_s_eye_view.html.
14. Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, 327–328.