

Eating Animals [Little Brown] 2009

By Jonathan Foer

Review

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Foer has produced a work that is admirable as an exposé of the horrors of factory animal husbandry. In this regard it is one among several other similar works, which Foer recognizes. So, there is nothing new about the exposé itself. In this regard, Foer's contribution is to add to the corpus of such offerings and to remind us, again, of the problem and the challenge we face in addressing it. But while it is important to highlight the modern abuses of industrial husbandry, we need to keep in mind that the problem of animal abuse is not modern or limited to factory farming. Do we think it was humane or respectful when our human ancestors drove entire herds of animals over a cliff to suffer agonizing deaths in mangled, suffocating piles at the cliff base where humans only culled what they wanted from the animals lying on the top? Most predators have it in them to be abusive when the circumstances are conducive. "Hidden" factory animal farms are just one of these unfortunate contexts.

The solution to the problem that Foer proposes is unfortunately confused because the motives of the author in writing the book are in conflict. On the one hand, Foer is committed to reaching a logical conclusion, and he respects those husbanders whom he discovers who are responsible and exemplars of the fact that respectful husbandry is viable in the modern context. On the other hand, the author is clearly seeking to justify in the abuses of industrial animal farming his on-again/off-again personal journey in committing to vegetarianism. At the personal level, Foer WANTS to claim that vegetarianism is the solution to the factory animal farming problem. But he is restrained by his own awareness that his exposé and the evidence he develops do not necessitate this conclusion. So, as Foer is torn, so the reader is left betwixt and between, if sensitized to the underlying problem and desiring to do SOMETHING.

The justified conclusions from the Foer work are those of most other works on the subject:

- 1) Require of all animal husbanders that they treat their animals in a humane and respectful manner from inception to slaughter and butchering.
- 2) Recognize that the health of the husbanded animals correlates with the healthiness of the animal products that result for consumption by humans.

- 3) Recognize that animal husbandry is expensive environmentally to resources and is not sustainable as currently practiced, which necessitates:
 - a) Reduced meat consumption per capita on a global basis,
 - b) Acceptance by the public that meat will cost more per unit to produce and as a result to buy,
 - c) Acceptance by the public that more of their food will have to be vegetable in nature – more along the lines of the traditional Chinese diet where meat is more of a complement in food than the “entrée.”
- 4) Require that individuals and policy makers commit to 1), 2), and 3) and implement regulations to assure these requirements are met for the good of the animals, humans and the ecology of the planet.

The unjustified conclusion that Foer is everywhere tempted to claim and constantly on the edge of claiming is that if all the people of the world would commit to vegetarianism, as he has finally decided to do, the animal factory farming problem would be solved. Of course, vegetarianism for ALL would be a solution, but it is a solution that denies the evidence of the centrality of meat in the human diet throughout human evolution and that solves the problem by excluding a whole category of food resource. Taken to its vegan extreme this “solution” denies not just animals as food, but all sensate beings [including insects] as well as the reserves they produce and stockpile [eg. milk, honey]. We can get to the point in this idealized program of food resource exclusion where humans can not eat any living thing, because at some level all living things have being and identity, are connected to all other living beings, and should be entitled to life without predation. In short, we can carry food source idealism to the point of requiring that the human species starve itself into extinction.

In the real world, humans are predators – plain and simple, and with the technology they have developed, they exist at the top of both the vegetable and animal food chains upon which they depend as omnivores. And logically humans prefer animal food products when they can get them as the most concentrated form of nutrition and calories. This is the reality humans have inhabited since they became *Homo sapiens* 150,000 years ago. No brand of food idealism can deny this reality.

So, Foer’s dilemma is in fact our dilemma: to determine where the necessity for food for humans meets with respectful forms of predation. We should neither idealize ourselves out of existence nor brazenly disrespect other creatures and the environment upon which we depend. Culture can only be asked to shape our biological base and control its inclination to excess; it cannot be expected to

deny its basic condition. Michael Pollan in The Omnivore's Dilemma recognizes the animal abuse problem as well as the inclination to the vegetarian solution and exposes both the excess of the one and the fallacy of the other. Foer even quotes Pollan in this regard on page 255.

As in all things: food resource issues are a matter of achieving reasonable balance between biology and culture. No doubt, current animal factory farming is culture [in hiding] promoting an abusive and cheap pursuit of biology. But chemical based intensive vegetable and grain farming is equally abusive! And in the last analysis, excessive human population, the commitment to a constantly expanding economic model, and the expectation of a constantly more luxurious standard of living for ALL are what are driving both of these abusive food production trends. And almost all of us are hiding from having to attend to these underlying drivers.

So, yes all farming should be organic and respectful of both animals and the land, but how do we feed the world and not disallow the omnivore base of the human species in this context? Balance in this REAL world is not easy to achieve, even if we were really trying to commit to it, which we are NOT. Pollan is to be honored for both pointing out the very significant challenges of industrial farming, AND exploring the farming options/models that may offer viable answers at world scale, without jumping to the vegetarian solution, as Foer is inclined. On the other hand, Foer is correct: if population increases unchecked and we continue to pursue industrial farming on the basis we are, we will so foul the planet nest that we may well put the survival of the human species at risk.

There are a lot of different fronts on which we “civilized” humans must make progress if we are to achieve the kind of balance that will allow us to take advantage of our specie’s window of opportunity, and not BLOW it. The treatment of animals is just one of these.