

The Carnivore's Quandary:
Connecting the Disconnect Between Ideals and Diet

by

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Disconnect (noun): a lack of or a break in connection, consistency, or agreement.

Disconnect One: Me (and Maybe You, Too)

I have loved animals since I was a young girl, and yet it took me nineteen years to stop eating them. My earliest memories are of crawling into the doggy igloo of my aunt's Boston terrier, Petey, in order to nap with him, or holding my dying gerbils, Mary Kate and Ashley, as they suffered from their last days of what my father diagnosed as wet tail, a gerbil disease I later learned can be caused by too much handling. Parallel to these memories are those of begging for KFC, devouring my aunt's brisket during the high holidays, and watching my mom pack my brother and me roast beef and BBQ sauce sandwiches for lunch.

When I look back, it's hard to understand why my decision to become a vegetarian took so long. When I did decide to stop eating meat, it was because of a book I read called Eating Animals, by one of my favorite fiction writers, Jonathan Safran Foer. Although Eating Animals is filled with information I mostly already knew (eating animals is bad for our health, bad for the environment, and, in the majority of cases, cruel toward the animals in question), Foer was able to put these arguments into a more personal context—the story of his own journey toward vegetarianism. Eating Animals not only made me understand why I should become a vegetarian, but also made me ask myself what had prevented me from becoming one earlier. Further, it made me question what prevented so many other people from becoming

vegetarians. In a society that values animal rights, where animal abuse is criminalized, where people donate large sums of money to humane societies and animal sanctuaries and zoos, where people obsess over pets and children snuggle with stuffed animals, why is it that so many people consciously choose to eat meat, and only 5% of the U.S. population, as of July 2012, has made the decision not to?¹

I quickly determined the explanation for my own nearly two-decade delay in becoming a vegetarian, and when I did, I was disappointed in myself. I came up with two reasons. One: I thought animals tasted good, and I wanted to eat them. Two: I did not want to be a vegetarian, meaning I did not want to adopt the image of *The Vegetarian*. When I was younger, The Vegetarian was the doped out, piece-sign yielding hippie, clad in dreads and tie-dye. At my high school, The Vegetarians were the attention-seeking girls, the girls who made a show of their compassion by subsisting on Cheetos, Diet Cokes and cigarettes. When I started college, The Vegetarians became a matured permutation of the high school Vegetarian: semi-hipsters who pushed PETA propaganda and critiqued every bite of burger en route into anyone's mouth—*Do you know how cows are raised and slaughtered? Do you even care?* Today, I claim myself as a one of these college vegetarians, although I try not to publicly comment on anyone's diet unless it is in jest or they've solicited the opinion of a "Certified Vegetarian".

When I finally determined why I had decided to eat meat those first decades of my life, I felt like a kid caught with her hand mid-cookie jar. My reasons for not eating meat had nothing to do with the actual consequences of eating meat. Instead, they were based on my own superficial interests, even though these interests ran counter to what I fundamentally believed in: that animals are feeling creatures that should be respected and protected, that the environment is important, that my personal health is important. Many people I talk to share this same discrepancy in belief and behavior. People who love animals and would never consider injuring an animal (insects and rodents excluded), continuously choose to eat meat. People who care about the environment or spend hours at the gym or seek out healthy food options still choose to eat meat. Not surprisingly, most of these people choose to eat meat for the same

¹ Frank Newport, "In U.S., 5% Consider Themselves Vegetarians" *Gallup* (26 July, 2012): <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/156215/consider-themselves-vegetarians.aspx>>

reasons I once chose to eat meat: the taste, the hesitation of adopting The Vegetarian persona. Clearly, something is not adding up. Is the taste of meat so good, the hesitation to be a vegetarian so great, that we can ignore the moral imperative many of us should rightfully feel, according to our own values, to not eat meat?

Disconnect Two: The Animal Lover

Many people who genuinely care about animals and admit that animals are capable of pain and suffering continue to eat meat, and fail to feel a sense of moral dissonance when they do. The average person is likely to feel morally opposed to kicking a mammal, especially a dog or cat. Yet, this same person is unlikely to feel a sense of moral apprehension when biting into a burger or chicken wing. There are several reasons for why this is: the animal has been already been slaughtered, and the slaughtering was done by someone else; the animal's purpose is for consumption, not as a pet or object of entertainment; human's have been eating animals for millennia, and it's therefore natural for people to continue eating animals; etc.

For many vegetarians, the decision to avoid eating meat was provoked by learning how animals are treated and slaughtered in factory farms. It is not as easy to eat meat when you can visualize the process that manufactures it. Thinking about the bones of chickens audibly snapping as workers shove more than 105 chicken per 3.5 minutes into metal crates² can make a chicken finger exponentially less appetizing. Eating a hamburger isn't as appealing when it incites images of cows being hung upside down to bleed out, sometimes fully conscious, their eyes darting back and forth. A hotdog conjures tales of pregnant pigs kept in such tight quarters they develop sores all over their bodies and are forced to sleep in their own excrement³. Those who believe that animals are capable of pain and suffering should not in any good conscience be able to eat meat if they acknowledge that animal abuse on factory farms is a reality. And yet, millions of people do it every day.

² Jonathan Safran Foer. *Eating Animals* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2000), 132.

³ Foer 182.

Recently, Britain experienced a sharp increase in their sales of frozen vegetarian meals. One might assume the English have decided to stop eating meat for the all the reasons outlined in this essay. Of course, one would be incorrect. The real reason Britons are turning to vegetarian alternatives is because of the recent meat industry scandal involving the presence of horsemeat in some frozen beef products⁴. The obvious question is why accidentally eating one type of meat would cause someone to become a vegetarian. Why wouldn't this disgust be translated to all types of meat? Are horses so fundamentally different from cows that it's totally unconceivable to eat one and not the other? Have cultural norms so defined what is acceptable to eat that we no longer stop to think about why we eat the foods we do, and why we don't eat the foods we don't? The horsemeat escapade suggests the answer is absolutely yes. What this scandal reveals is the need for meat-consumers to consider why they choose to eat the animals they do. We must ask ourselves why, as a culture, we simultaneously cherish dogs and eat cows, why we allow cats into our homes and onto our furniture while pigs may enter only in the form of packaged bacon, hotdogs, or ham.

Disconnect Three: The Environmentalist

Many environmentally minded people choose to eat meat, despite evidence that livestock are one of the top contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. There is a disconnect when someone drives her eco-friendly car or rides his emission-free bike to a burger joint. There is a disconnect when a person carrying bags of groceries, cold cuts and frozen chicken breasts included, chastises the Hummer in the parking lot. Because animals raised for slaughter are responsible for 40% more greenhouse gas emissions than all modes of transportation *combined*, one cannot rightly condemn one act and not the other⁵. After all aspects are taken into account, factory farming comes out as the top contributor to global climate change⁶.

⁴ Sarah Butler, "Horsemeat scandal sparks rise in sales of vegetarian alternatives," *Guardian* (March 5, 2013): <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/mar/05/horsemeat-scandal-sales-vegetarian-alternatives>.

⁵ Foer, 58

⁶ Foer 58.

In his book, Foer states his claim rather bluntly: "...someone who regularly eats factory-farmed animal products cannot call himself an environmentalist without divorcing that word from its meaning⁷."

The environmental impact of eating meat does not stop at greenhouse gas emissions. Raising animals for slaughter also has a great impact on the world's water and land supplies. One does not always think about the resources that go into raising an animal for slaughter. First, the animal itself requires food and water, and in no small amounts. The amount of grain required to sustain one cow is ten times greater than the amount of grain needed to reach the cow's caloric equivalent⁸. In turn, this food (grain, corn, etc.) also requires water and land (about a third of all available land on Earth) on which to be grown. Once grown, the food requires transportation to farms. One estimate suggests that eating 2.2 pounds of beef is the carbon equivalent of driving a European car 150 miles⁹. To look at it another way, eating one quarter pound hamburger requires 6.7 pounds of feed, 52.8 gallons of water, 74.5 square feet of land, and enough fossil fuel energy to power a microwave for almost 20 minutes¹⁰. Factory farming also negatively affects nearby water systems. Waste from cows, chickens, and hogs has contaminated more than 30,000 miles of U.S. rivers¹¹. This is what Foer means when he says environmentalism and vegetarianism are mutually inclusive.

Disconnect Four: The Health Nut

Anyone striving to lead a healthy lifestyle should not eat large amounts of meat, especially red meats, and should also avoid factory-farmed meat altogether. It's no secret that eating too much meat, particularly red meat, is bad for your health. Research strongly suggests that the consumption of excessive amounts of red meat is linked to both heart disease and cancer. For instance, a diet with a 3% increase in red-meat intake raises the risk of death from cardiovascular issues by 16% and raises the risk of death

⁷ Foer 59.

⁸ Mark Bittman, "Rethinking the Meat-Guzzler," *The New York Times* (27 Jan., 2008): http://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/weekinreview/27bittman.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

⁹ Bittman

¹⁰ Eliza Barclay, "A Nation of Meat-Eaters: See How it All Adds Up," *NPR* (27 June, 2012): <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2012/06/27/155527365/visualizing-a-nation-of-meat-eaters>

¹¹ Foer 179.

from cancer by 10%¹². One could argue that while red meats are unhealthy, lean meats like turkey and chicken are actually good for you. While it's true that lean meats are good sources of low-calorie protein, so are beans, whole grains, and nuts. In other words, it is not necessary for people to eat meat. People have practiced meat-free diets for centuries. When done mindfully, a vegetarian diet can provide the same nutrition as a carnivorous diet, but without the added health risks.

In addition to meat being inherently unhealthy when consumed in excess, much of the meat we consume is raised and slaughtered under less than sanitary circumstances. The safety standards for how chickens are raised and slaughtered are good examples of why the squeamish should probably avoid factory farm meats. USDA officials only take a few seconds to inspect chickens. Many of these chickens are approved for distribution despite the fact that they are, according to a journalist who interviewed dozens of USDA inspectors, "...leaking yellow pus, stained by green feces, contaminated by harmful bacteria, or marred by lung and heart infections, cancerous tumors, or skin conditions..."¹³ Despite this, the consumption of chicken in America has risen by 150% in the last century¹⁴.

Disconnect Five: The Government

The disconnect between thought and action is not limited to consumers; it also exists at a governmental level. The U.S. government constantly touts the importance of public health. With the rising cost of health care, Americans are constantly urged to improve their diets. Yet, despite urging citizens to reduce their consumption of meat and dairy, more than 60% of agricultural subsidies go to meat and dairy farming. Meanwhile, an astoundingly small 1% goes toward fruits and vegetables—the same food group the government encourages Americans to consume more of¹⁵. This discrepancy is only exaggerated when we look at how the government supports the diets of American schoolchildren.

Through the tax-supported National School Lunch Program, more than half a billion dollars goes toward

¹²Nicholas Bakalar, "Risks: More Red Meat, More Mortality." *The New York Times* (12 March, 2012): <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/13/health/research/red-meat-linked-to-cancer-and-heart-disease.html>

¹³ Foer 134.

¹⁴ Foer 137

¹⁵ "Taxing America's Health: Subsidies for Meat and Dairy Products," *Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine* (May 2011): <http://www.pcrm.org/search/?cid=2586>

buying meat and dairy for school lunches. Meanwhile, support for the fruit and vegetable industries is less than 200 million dollars¹⁶. The food pyramid doesn't exactly correlate to the funding pyramid.

Disconnect Five: The Humanitarian

Anyone who supports workers' rights and humane work environments should not buy or consume factory-farmed meat. There is arguably no job more horrific than working on a factory farm. These employees are paid trifling amounts to handle and partake in the slaughter of thousands of animals every day, often under hazardous conditions¹⁷. The following are normal activities for a factory farm employee: shoveling birds into crates with such force that the birds' bones often break beneath their grip; mercy-killing animals which have not been properly killed by the automated machinery; handling dangerous machinery. While one could argue that at least these people have jobs, the amount of labor provided by the entire agricultural industry is less than 2%.¹⁸

The only thing worse than an employee witnessing animal cruelty is when an employee begins to partake in the cruelty, when the demands of their job fundamentally alter their way of looking at living creatures. Reports of animal abuse in factory farms are rampant. Employees have been known to kick, throw, and even thrash animals with hammers, shovels, or rakes. Some workers have been caught putting out their cigarettes on animals or strangling them¹⁹. In Foer's book, one employee admits, "the worst thing, worse than the physical danger, is the emotional toll...you develop an attitude that lets you kill things but doesn't let you care²⁰." This admission is reflected in the fact that one factory auditor witnessed deliberate animal abuse in 1/3 of the farms she visited—even though the employees knew she was watching²¹. Would we still visit a zoo if we knew the employees were severely abusing the animals—or would we try to fix it, in the very minimum, by not supporting that zoo with our patronage?

¹⁶ Foer 147

¹⁷ Foer 133

¹⁸ Foer 162

¹⁹ Foer 182

²⁰ Foer 254

²¹ Foer 255

In order for people to comfortably choose whether or not they want to adopt a vegetarian diet, we must begin a dialogue about eating animals in which people are free to express themselves without judgment, a dialogue in which people are encouraged to closely examine their reasons for why they choose to eat what they eat. This means being open to hearing the truth about where the majority of our meat comes from, and the effects it has on the world, including the land, the people, and the animals. As easy as this sounds, I've found it a difficult conversation to start. There is, after all, something personal about what a person eats, and people are understandably hesitant to argue for the moral soundness of their own diets. What we eat says a lot about who we are and the things we want. No one wants to be accused of following an immoral diet. No one wants to feel ashamed of what they eat. We've all experienced the shame of revealing a culinary guilty pleasure. Yet, the more we talk about it and the more we listen, the more we can understand how our daily choices affect the greater world, and ask ourselves if these are the effects we really want our diets to have.

I will risk stepping onto the soapbox to say that the way the majority of the world looks at meat and the consumption of animals is fundamentally flawed. We cannot continue to separate the animal from the food it provides us, and we cannot continue to eat a diet contrary to beliefs so fundamental in our culture and legislation: that animals should not be tortured, that we are shepherds of an ailing environment, that our health is dependent on what we eat, and that people should not have to witness or participate in animal abuse in order to earn a living. We must connect the disconnects, first by learning why they exist and then by acting to resolve them.

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