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The Omnivore's Dilemma

(excerpt from "The Anxiety of Eating" & "The Ethics of Eating Animals")

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One way to think about America's national eating disorder is as the return, with an almost atavistic vengeance, of the omnivore's dilemma. The cornucopia of the American supermarket has thrown us back on a bewildering food landscape where we once again have to worry that some of those tasty-looking morsels might kill us. (Perhaps not as quickly as a poisonous mushroom, but just as surely.) Certainly the extraordinary abundance of food in America complicates the whole problem of choice. At the same time, many of the tools with which people historically managed the omnivore's dilemma have lost their sharpness here — or simply failed. As a relatively new nation drawn from many different immigrant populations, each with its own culture of food, Americans have never had a single, strong, stable culinary tradition to guide us.

And so we find ourselves where we do, confronting in the supermarket or at the dinner table the dilemmas of omnivorousness, some of them ancient and others never before imagined. The organic apple or the conventional? And if the organic, the local one or the imported? The wild fish or the farmed? The trans fats or the butter or the "not butter"? Shall I be a carnivore or a vegetarian? And if a vegetarian, a lacto-vegetarian or a vegan? Like the hunter-gatherer picking a novel mushroom off the forest floor and consulting his sense memory to determine its edibility, we pick up the package in the supermarket and, no longer so confident of our senses, scrutinize the label, scratching our heads over the meaning of phrases like "heart healthy," "no trans fats," "cage-free," or "range-fed." What is "natural grill flavor" or TBHQ or xanthan gum? What is all this stuff, anyway, and where in the world did it come from?

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Being an omnivore occupying a cognitive niche in nature is both a boon and a challenge, a source of tremendous power as well as anxiety. Omnivory is what allowed humans to adapt to a great many environments all over the planet, and to survive in them even after our favored foods were driven to extinction, whether by accident or because of our own too-great success in overcoming other species' defenses. After the mastodon there would be the bison and then the cow; after the sturgeon, the salmon, and then, perhaps, some novel mycoprotein like "quorn."

Being a generalist offers us deep satisfactions, too, enjoyments that flow equally from the omnivore's innate neophilia — the pleasure of variety — and neophobia — the comfort of the familiar. What began as a set of simple sensory responses to food (sweet, bitter, disgusting) we've elaborated into more complicated canons of taste that afford us aesthetic pleasures undreamed of by the koala or cow. Since "everything that is edible is at the mercy of his vast appetite," [Jean Anthelme] Brillat-Savarin writes, "the machinery of taste attains a rare perfection in man," making "man the only gourmand in the whole of nature." Taste in this more cultivated

sense brings people together, not only in small groups at the table but as communities. For a community's food preferences — the strikingly short list of foods and preparations it regards as good to eat and think — represent one of the strongest social glues we have. Historically, national cuisines have been remarkably stable, and resistant to change, which is why the immigrant's refrigerator is the very last place to look for signs of assimilation.

Yet the surfeit of choice that confronts the omnivore brings stresses and anxieties also undreamed of by the cow or the koala, for whom the distinction between The Good Things to Eat and the Bad is second nature. And while our senses can help us draw the first rough distinctions between good and bad foods, we humans have to rely on culture to remember and keep it all straight. So we codify the rules of wise eating in an elaborate structure of taboos, manners, and culinary traditions, covering everything from the proper size of portions to the order in which foods should be consumed to the kinds of animals it is and is not okay to eat. Anthropologists argue over whether all these rules make biological sense — some, like the kosher rules, are probably designed more to enforce group identity than to protect health. But certainly a great many of our food rules do make biological sense, and they keep each of us from having to confront the omnivore's dilemma every time we visit the supermarket or sit down to eat.

The set of rules for preparing food we call a cuisine, for example, specifies combinations of foods and flavors that on examination do a great deal to mediate the omnivore's dilemma. The dangers of eating raw fish, for example, are minimized by consuming it with wasabi, a potent antimicrobial. Similarly, the strong spices characteristic of many cuisines in the tropics, where food is quick to spoil, have antibacterial properties. The meso- American practice of cooking corn with lime and serving it with beans, like the Asian practice of fermenting soy and serving it with rice, turn out to render these plant species much more nutritious than they otherwise would be. When not fermented, soy contains an antitrypsin factor that blocks the absorption of protein, rendering the bean indigestible; unless corn is cooked with an alkali like lime its niacin is unavailable, leading to the nutritional deficiency called pellagra. Corn and beans each lack an essential amino acid (lysine and methionine, respectively); eat them together and the proper balance is restored.

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Guided by no natural instinct, the prodigious and open-ended human appetite is liable to get us into all sorts of trouble well beyond the stomachache. For if nature is silent what's to stop the human omnivore from eating anything — including, most alarmingly, other human omnivores? A potential for savagery lurks in a creature capable of eating anything. If nature won't draw a line around human appetite, then human culture must step in, as indeed it has done bringing the omnivore's eating habits under the government of all the various taboos (foremost the one against cannibalism), customs, rituals, table manners, and culinary conventions found in every culture. There is a short and direct path from the omnivore's dilemma to the astounding number of ethical rules with which people have sought to regulate eating for as long as they have been living in groups.

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The first time I opened Peter Singer's *Animal Liberation* I was dining alone at the Palm, trying to enjoy a rib-eye steak cooked medium rare. If that sounds like a recipe for cognitive dissonance, if not indigestion, well, that was sort of the idea. It had been a long time since this par-

ticular omnivore had felt any dilemma about eating meat, but then I had never before involved myself so directly in the process of turning animals into food: owning a steak-bound steer, working the killing cones in Joel Salatin's processing shed, and now preparing to hunt a wild animal. The steak dinner in question took place on the evening before steer number 534's slaughter, the one event in his life I was not allowed to witness or even learn anything about, save its likely date. This didn't exactly surprise me: The meat industry understands that the more people know about what happens on the kill floor, the less meat they're likely to eat. That's not because slaughter is necessarily inhumane, but because most of us would simply rather not be reminded of exactly what meat is or what it takes to bring it to our plates. My steak dinner, eaten in the company of the world's leading philosopher of animal rights, represented my somewhat tortured attempt to mark the occasion, and to try — a bit belatedly, I know — to see if I could defend what I had done already and what I was about to do.

Eating meat has become morally problematic, at least for people who take the trouble to think about it. Vegetarianism is more popular than it has ever been, and animal rights, the fringe-est of fringe movements until just a few years ago, is rapidly finding its way into the cultural mainstream. I'm not completely sure why this should be happening now, given that humans have been eating animals for tens of thousands of years without much ethical heartburn. Certainly there have been dissenters over the years — Ovid, St. Francis, Tolstoy, and Gandhi come to mind. But the general consensus has always been that humans were indeed omnivores and, whatever spiritual or moral dilemmas the killing and eating of animals posed, our various cultural traditions (everything from the rituals governing slaughter to saying grace before the meal) resolved them for us well enough. For the most part, our culture has been telling us for millennia that animals were both good to eat and good to think.

In recent years medical researchers have raised questions about the good to eat part, while philosophers like Singer and organizations like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) have given us new reasons to doubt meat is good to think — that is, good for our souls or our moral self-regard. Hunting is in particularly bad odor these days, even among people who still eat meat; apparently it's the fact of killing that these people most object to (as if steak should be gotten any other way), or perhaps it's the taking pleasure in killing an animal that is the trouble. It may be that as a civilization we're groping toward a higher plane of consciousness. It may be that our moral enlightenment has advanced to the point where the practice of eating animals — like our former practices of keeping slaves or treating women as inferior beings — can now be seen for the barbarity it is, a relic of an ignorant past that very soon will fill us with shame.

That at least is the animal philosophers' wager. But it could also be that the cultural norms and rituals that used to allow people to eat meat without agonizing about it have broken down for other reasons. Perhaps as the sway of tradition in our eating decisions weakens, habits we once took for granted are thrown up in the air, where they're more easily buffeted by the force of a strong idea or the breeze of fashion.

Whatever the cause, the effect is an unusual amount of cultural confusion on the subject of animals. For at the same time many of us seem eager to extend the circle of our moral consideration to other species, in our factory farms we're inflicting more suffering on more animals than at any time in history. One by one science is dismantling out claims to uniqueness as a

species, discovering that such things as culture, tool making, language, and even possibly self-consciousness are not, as we used to think, the exclusive properties of *Homo sapiens*. And yet, most of the animals we eat lead lives organized very much in the spirit of Descartes, who famously claimed that animals were mere machines, incapable of thought or feeling. There's a schizoid quality to our relationship with animals today in which sentiment and brutality exist side by side. Half the dogs in America will receive Christmas presents this year, yet few of us ever pause to consider the life of the pig — an animal easily as intelligent as a dog — that becomes the Christmas ham.

We tolerate this schizophrenia because the life of the pig has moved out of view; when's the last time you saw a pig in person? Meat comes from the grocery store, where it is cut and packaged to look as little like parts of animals as possible. (When was the last time you saw a butcher at work?) The disappearance of animals from our lives has opened a space in which there's no reality check on the sentiment or the brutality; it is a space in which the Peter Singers and the Frank Perdues of the world fare equally well.

A few years ago the English writer John Berger wrote an essay called "Why Look at Animals?" In which he suggested that the loss of everyday contact between ourselves and animals — and specifically the loss of eye contact — has left us deeply confused about the terms of our relationship to other species. That eye contact, always slightly uncanny, had brought the vivid daily reminder that animals were both crucially like and unlike us; in their eyes we glimpsed something unmistakably familiar (pain, fear, courage) but also something irretrievably other (?!). Upon this paradox people built a relationship in which they felt they could both honor and eat animals without looking away. But that accommodation has pretty much broken down; nowadays it seems we either look away or become vegetarians. For my own part, neither option seemed especially appetizing; certainly looking away was not completely off the table. Which might explain how it was I found myself attempting to read Peter Singer in a steakhouse.

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