

Carrie Packwood Freeman

Appetizing Anthropocentrism

Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2006. 450 pp. \$26.95 hb, 16.00 pb.

It seems like ethics of what we eat has finally made it on the menu at bookstores these days, with popular books cropping up on agricultural ethics, factory farming, local and organic farming, and GMOs, from such authors as Barbara Kingsolver (2007), Bill McKibben (2007), Eric Schlosser (2001), Derrick Jensen (2004), Matthew Scully (2002), and Peter Singer & Jim Mason (2006). But perhaps no one deserves more credit for making food, especially meat-eating, a mainstream political issue than journalist Michael Pollan, author of several best-selling books on the topic as well as many in-depth articles in *The New York Times Magazine*. In one of his most recent best-sellers, *Omnivore's Dilemma*, he tackles his own ethical quandary over whether we should eat animals, and if so, under what conditions.

With his characteristic depth and knack for embracing complexity, he follows four different nonhuman animals from their plant-based sources in either industrial corn, organic grains, pastoral grass, or forest vegetation to their eventual place on his plate via a factory farm (cow), industrial organic farm (chicken), eco-friendly family farm (chicken), and a hunting excursion (pig), even killing the animals himself in the last two instances. While he admits that meat-eating is both physically and morally messy, in the end he concludes that it's not wrong in *principle*, so long as we Americans pay attention to the *practice*, and support hunting or small-scale pastoral farming, because he deems them more ecologically responsible and humane than large-scale animal farming. As an animal rights activist and scholar, I experienced the typical mixed emotions I always encounter when reading Pollan's work. I start off being excited at his harsh critique of the meat industry and his seeming promotion of ethical vegetarianism as he ardently stands up for nonhumans, but I end up disappointed by his eventual convoluted justification for eating certain animals. It's an exercise in frustration as my initial feelings of kinship and gratitude give way to a feeling of betrayal. The truth is that because he does not want to be a vegetarian, he never fully embraces that diet; hence his goal in this book is to find a way that he can feel good, or at least better, about eating animals.

I've never encountered a meat-eater who agonizes more than Pollan about the ethical complexities and transgressions of eating animals. Most people who are upset by animal killing would just choose to look away, but his thesis is that seeing leads to

caring and responsible choices, so he wants to be able to look, acknowledge, and still kill, but honorably. His descriptions of his experiences slitting chickens' throats and shooting a wild pig are laudable for their honest self-reflection, combining abhorrence with a bit of pride. He does admit in the end that vegetarianism provides more moral clarity than his choice to eat meat (hence there's less need for a *Herbivore's Dilemma* book), similar to Singer & Mason's (2006) claim that vegetarianism is, ironically, easier for Americans than conscientious animal consumption. But Pollan ultimately denigrates vegetarians as naïve and arrogant, as they fail to accept "reality."

Reality for him is a biological history of humans as omnivores not herbivores, although he fails to engage theories of a herbivorous origin for *Homo sapiens* (Mason, 1997). And Pollan's vision is for humans to return to a supposed state of symbiosis and respect that is presumed (at an undisclosed place and time) to have existed between humans and the nonhuman animals they kill:

That direction just happens to be the direction from which we came — to that place and time, I mean, where humans looked at the animals they killed, regarded them with reverence, and never ate them except with gratitude. (362)

Pollan believes this utopian vision of our past is possible for our future if slaughterhouses had glass walls. If Americans were forced to confront the brutality, we would surely eat less flesh and demand more humane conditions: "maybe when we did eat animals we'd eat them with the consciousness, ceremony, and respect they deserve" (333). Ironically, this solution could be accused of being more utopian and less realistic than a vegan's vision of just eating plants.

In addition to being accused of a certain naivete, vegans and animal activists are often othered by being referred to as "animal people" (a somewhat redundant title, as Pollan acknowledges that we are all animals). This dissociation presumably gives Pollan increased credibility with a mainstream audience, as he is not so "extreme" as to promote animal rights or veganism. His agenda is one with which most decent Americans could presumably identify — animal welfare. He simply wants to eat meat with a clean conscience. In this way, he remains within what Cox (2006) refers to as the "symbolic legitimacy boundaries" (61) of mainstream discourse. This does not help the cause of animal rights, as LaVeck (2006) and Francione (1996) have argued that when animal advocates promote animal *welfare* as the goal, it reinforces a hegemonic discursive environment where an animal *rights* discussion, such as seriously considering veganism, becomes unreasonable and ridiculous.

This is reinforced in Pollan's conception of veganism as one extreme (sentimentalism) and factory farming as the other (brutality), with his "humane"-meat-in-moderation solution being a reasonable compromise. It seems reductionist to characterize animal rights merely as excessive sentimentalism, when there are morally rational arguments made on its behalf (which Pollan cites), where philosophers such as Singer and Regan align it with an anti-discrimination position such as feminism and civil rights, causes which one would likely not reduce to mere sentimentalism. Perhaps more disturbing is how Pollan often lumps these extremes of veganism and factory farming together, as if they are equally responsible for preventing Americans from eating what he deems should be their natural diet:

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. (306)

One can hardly claim that vegetarianism is faring as well as factory farming, and it seems untenable to imply that animal activists have an agenda like the meat industry, who prey on public ignorance and make billions in profit from consumers' food purchases.

Pollan's conclusion that factory farming survives only on people's ignorance — "a journey of forgetting" (10) — is reminiscent of Derrida's (2004) prediction that the industrial violence against animals must change; the "spectacle man creates for himself in his treatment of animals will become intolerable" (71) because of the negative "image of man it reflects back to him" (73). Pollan thinks that you cannot take true pleasure in eating until you not only visually acknowledge your meat production but participate in a more humane and sustainable form of obtaining it. In support of greater accountability and awareness, Pollan advocates for increased integrity in pricing that accurately reflects food's costs "honestly," via paying more for more responsible production instead of buying "irresponsibly" priced cheap meat (243). In the end he thinks that the main right Americans should have is to *see* what is going on and make up our own minds about its ethicality in hopes that we will begin to value food according to social responsibility standards, not just price. But advocates of animal rights will be left wishing his conclusion was not just the right for human consumers to *look*, and hopefully to make more informed choices, but the rights of other animals not to be *used* as mere food objects in the first place.

I do give Pollan credit for making an attempt to include an animal rights perspective over the course of an animal ethics chapter, but it is ultimately not much more than a sophisticated animal *welfare* position, as advocated primarily by Singer (via *Animal Liberation* and personal emails with Pollan). The utilitarian focus on suffering sets up Pollan and the reader for the inevitable conclusion that it is ethical to eat nonhuman animals (presumably even if one does not need to) as long as their suffering is mitigated and they are given a happy life (either via a pastoral farm or freedom in the wild). While *necessity* for killing should receive greater consideration in Pollan's otherwise nuanced moral examination, it is largely overlooked in favor of emphasizing that eating nonhuman animals is natural and even ecologically beneficial. He is concerned with reducing animal killing and accuses vegans of killing more animals and being less ecologically sustainable than people who eat some grass-fed cows, citing Davis's (2003) study about small field animals inadvertently killed during mechanized crop harvesting. Pollan did not cite Matheny's (2003) refutation that a vegan diet is responsible for one fifth as many animal deaths, as veganism makes more efficient use of the land. Additionally, Pollan argues the need to have animals on the farm for natural soil fertilization, which is a legitimate ecological issue, but does not offer other solutions of compost or human animal manure.

One of Pollan's main theses in opposition to animal rights is that our relationship with domesticated farmed animals is symbiotic and not exploitative; therefore, if humans just allow other animals a safe and somewhat natural place for them to live for a period of time under our protection, they will earn a more humane death than they might have in the wild. Pollan is sincerely concerned about animal welfare and embraces the utilitarian position that it is better to lead a happy life for a short time than never to have existed, so he criticizes the animal rights position as leading to farmed animal extinction. While it is true that most animal-rights positions argue against domestication (Hall, 2006; Regan, 1983), Pollan's position fails to acknowledge that most farmed animals have heartier and more robust ancestors that still exist in the wild. Philosophers often have a field day with issues such as these, which might lead to a conclusion that all animal species, human included, have a moral obligation to breed, so long as some happiness will result. Animal rights arguments do not oppose procreation, but they ask for nonhumans to be able to live freely and mate and breed on their own terms, not to have their lives managed via humans, no matter how benevolent.

Pollan characterizes nonhuman domestication as prey to be natural evolution, symbiosis, rather than conceiving of it as an inversion of nature where humans start to unnaturally control other species. One could acknowledge that this control is for purposes of securing excess food rather than for ecological reasons of basic necessity or

the health of the ecosystem. Pollan doesn't consider questions of whether *humans* could be domesticated morally (by any species, even other humans) and whether it is natural for us to also be prey, as he rarely acknowledges our animality when questions of nature versus culture arise in debates over animal rights. It is only the *nonhuman* animals who are to be considered holistically as a species subject to nature's rules, more so than being considered individually as human animals are.

Pollan's inherent anthropocentrism is again revealed in a claim that "animal people" show contempt for nature and predation, implying vegetarians are ironically uncomfortable with acknowledging humans' position as animals. For different reasons, Derrida (2004) also critiqued a similar humanist paradox of animal rights, noting that it used humanist notions of rights to argue for a post-humanist position of nonhuman rights. I agree that animal rights advocates should emphasize human animality (Freeman, 2008), but not just in the solely "negative" way that Pollan does, relating our animal nature only to violence such as killing and rape. We can acknowledge our mutual status as animals who must kill to survive when necessary, yet still allow that kinship to enable us to see some "humanity" in other social animals, some of whom also make moral choices, including deciding who not to eat and generally avoiding enslavement and exploitation of others.

But when it comes to Pollan's arguments in favor of natural predation, like many environmental ethicists, he advocates a holistic view of other animals as prey who must be sacrificed for the good of the species or ecosystem (including a pastoral farm ecosystem), yet he doesn't then acknowledge that perhaps the human animal should also be considered holistically as a prey species under this nature-based moral logic with less respect for the individual. Regan (2002) acknowledged this paradox of "environmental fascism" (107) in a holistic ethic, and argued that an individual ethic could extend from animals to plants to benefit whole ecosystems. I ask if our own cultural values which allow for a blend of individual and group rights can't also be applied to human dealings with other animals, where we try to privilege individual rights as much as possible while still respecting the rights of the group. Pollan's astute acknowledgement that we may need two ethical systems — one for humans and one for nature — comes close to finding this balance, but it bifurcates humans from nature too drastically, while conveniently putting all other animals in the holistic category of nature not culture, allowing them to be sacrificed but not us.

For those who want to explore animal welfare and ecological issues related to their food choices, this book is highly useful, but it does not serve as a reference for a fair perspective in support of veganism and animal rights. However, I find it to be a useful

citation for environmental and animal welfare arguments that critique animal agribusiness, and it certainly would elicit interesting classroom debates on agriculture, meat-eating, and hunting. It addresses these moral issues in an accessible and fascinating, yet factual, scientific, and highly contextualized narrative that is especially good at connecting production and consumption and for showing us the true cost of our food choices — the toll that the standard American diet of the last half century is taking on other animals, public health, taxpayers, and the environment. Whether or not you agree with his conclusion to be a conscientious omnivore, his complicated and highly self-reflective ethical journey to discover a way to morally eat other animals will likely have you agreeing that the politics of food is indeed ethically messy, and it's hard to find a guilt-free lunch.

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