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### The Ethical Composition of Every Bite

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LA SALLE UNIVERSITY

# The Ethical Composition of Every Bite

*A Moral Reconnection with Food*

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**Rylee Charbeneau**

*Introduction: The Moral Issue of Choosing Food*

Food, as a means of necessary nourishment to the human body, is a deceptively complex matter. At first glance, eating seems rather simplistic. While it makes its way into our lives several times a day in our meals, we do not always take the time to contemplate the factors which constitute this essential part of our daily routines. However, we need to give food its due reflection. This need is created by determinants surpassing the mere biological triggers most of us already recognize. The primal instinct to fuel our bodies for survival establishes a connection between humans and food that cannot be ignored. Yet, our connection to food involves more than physical consumption – it reaches into our minds and souls and has a lasting impact on our body. Thus, an array of considerations become apparent that are necessary for us to make when choosing our food.

Becoming aware of the many factors that are involved in our food choices is overwhelming. Awareness makes us sensitive to what drives our decisions and our impact upon the environment. We then have to be conscious of not only what we eat, but how we prepare it, where it came from, and how we share it with others. After all, if we wish to distinguish ourselves from animals, which simply eat upon instinct, we are to dine<sup>1</sup> (Brillat-Savarin 1971, 189). However, this virtue of human interaction with food and others poses a complex moral issue: how are we to eat?

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<sup>1</sup> The etymological difference between the two German words “*essen*” and “*fressen*” is interesting to consider in this context. While “both words mean “to eat”, the difference between *essen* and *fressen* is in who (or what) is doing the eating. Essentially the verb ‘*fressen*’ is used when talking about animals eating, not ‘*essen*’, which applies to people: *Menschen essen, Tiere fressen*” (AllesGerman 2016). This elevates the human role of eating into a meaningful experience, which will be explored further in this paper.

This question first requires an ethical definition to serve as a basis for judgement. To make any ethical decision, we as individuals must accept that we are limited and less than perfect in our understanding of the world around us. However, we are still faced with difficult decisions and required to formulate responses to the stimuli and motives produced in our lives. While we do not have the wherewithal to live perfectly, if we accept our own limitations and adhere to nature's processes which are perfect, it becomes easier to make morally sound decisions.

The perfection of nature defines what is morally good for the human being. Thomas Aquinas' influential perspective creates the basis for the role of nature in this ethical definition. Aquinas' term *conveniens* is understood as what is fitting for something and where its "natural appetite" rests to the effect that its well-being is promoted (Hymers 2012b, 404). This concept is further qualified by Thomas's acknowledgement that nature is fittingness because of the convenient and interactive hierarchy that characterizes its composition (Hymers 2012b, 405).

This perfection in nature is evident in the food chains that make up earth's ecosystems. From the plants which photosynthesize sunlight to the humans that consume them, the natural order that is made up of living beings has a specific series of interdependences between species – the role of each being vital to its part in the chain. While this system is not understood in its entirety by the human intellect, it functions unceasingly in a perfected loop. Its innate harmony independent from human control provides the necessary reason to use it as the framework of ethical understanding. While humans are unmistakably flawed, nature is not. Therefore, the order of nature is a superior reference than the limited knowledge of humans in determining what is fitting for the ethical boundaries of humankind.

This ethical definition is applicable to the moral issue at hand. In fact, it drives the necessity of eating well because our physical, mental and spiritual needs are at stake when we decide what and how to eat. By choosing the components that make up our meals in terms of their fitting nature, we can improve the impact that food has. This impact will be addressed relative to our personal connection to food, as well as through the context of agriculture and industry. These culminate in a meal, which is how we connect with others and our environment.

To explore the methodology of making ethical food choices, this paper will compare the perspectives of Peter Singer and Michael Pollan, both of whom describe the proper way of doing so through the processes illustrated in their respective works. The ideas of Michael Pollan and Peter Singer provide the primary basis for my research, but the ideas I discuss are also shaped by alternate perspectives which add to the development of my conclusions<sup>2</sup>.

I will evaluate the effectiveness of both Singer and Pollan's texts in reference to each other as well as the ethical definition provided in terms of their individual ethical frameworks, argument construction, points of similarity, and spiritual influence. In doing so, I hope to cultivate a holistic understanding of the human relationship with food. This understanding gives rise to an appropriate awareness which will be developed to provide the tools to eat not only what is proper but in the proper way in respect to our human nature.

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<sup>2</sup> While the central textual references for this paper are "The Omnivore's Dilemma" and "The Ethics of What We Eat", it is important to note that it is the perspectives of Michael Pollan and Peter Singer that are the defining points of comparison. As "The Ethics of What We Eat" is a collaboration of Peter Singer and Jim Mason, it must be expressed that it is Peter Singer's perspective that is the central focus, and what is used in this paper. As such, the text will be cited to give both men due credit, but Singer's perspective will be referenced. This is validated through multiple other sources of solely Singer's composition which give further context for the analysis of his perspective in this paper.

Peter Singer's "The Ethics of What We Eat: Why our Food Choices Matter" serves as the primary source encapsulating his philosophy on the moral way to eat. By following the different dietary patterns of three families, Singer reveals which foods he believes are worth consuming. The research within his text is dedicated to uncovering the process required to produce the elements of such diets, including chicken, eggs, seafood, and organic options. As Singer describes the components that go into making these foods available, his utilitarian focus on the amount of pain in comparison to pleasure produced as a result determines his judgement on the morality of consuming each food. The effort of his text is to educate about the presence of the pain that comes from producing several commonplace foods, and to force the readers to decide what sacrifices they are willing to make in terms of a meal.

Michael Pollan's "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals" serves as the antithesis to Peter Singer's text, and the primary resource representing Pollan's philosophy of moral consumption. Pollan follows the path of three principal food chains – industrial, organic, and hunter-gatherer – to their presence on the American plate. His explorative format uses the experiences from research he conducted to produce this text to establish his moral standing concerning food. He develops a working awareness within the reader to genuinely acknowledge where food is coming from. This cultivates a connection with food through informed knowledge and appreciation for a meal.

Using the ethical framework provided, the food choices we make do in fact matter. While both Singer and Pollan work to convey this message, Pollan leaves his readers with more to contemplate in terms of cultivating a meaningful relationship with our meals. This provides open minds with tools to make informed decisions based on a connection with food and its origins, which is a greater position in terms of interaction and achievability than Singer's dictation of

right and wrong in terms of consumption. Pollan's perspective offers a deeper understanding of our daily meals and is what we should strive towards to eat virtuously. It is through the following discussion of Singer and Pollan's differences that this position is illustrated.

*Distinguishing Between Perspectives: The Ethical Construction Behind Michael Pollan and Peter Singer's Philosophies*

To discuss Peter Singer's perspective accurately, it is important to understand his ethical basis, which is largely shaped by the utilitarian perspective of Jeremy Bentham. Bentham's ethics consists of a systematic calculation of the amount of pleasure and pain caused by any activity, with the exceeding amount of pleasure or pain acting as the determinant of whether such an activity is morally sound. As such, goodness is thus defined as that which produces pleasure or averts pain and badness as that which produces pain or averts pleasure, the focus of which being on the effects of any given motive (Bentham 1999, 84). While Bentham is incredibly detailed in what qualifies as a pleasure or pain, it is this method of computation resting on overall effects which is apparent in Singer's work.

As stated in the opening of "The Ethics of What We Eat", Singer establishes that his focus is on the effect of individual food choices on others (Singer & Mason 2007, 4). While this intention seems particularly simple and clear, it is important to consider how Singer defines the "others" he is concerned about.

Singer's definition of personhood differs from the traditional association of a person as any member of the human species. Instead, Singer ascribes to a "non-speciesist" perspective which defines personhood as being rational and self-conscious under the constraint of four characteristics. These include a self-awareness of the body existing over time, capability to desire and make plans, a desire to live, and autonomy (Hymers 1999, 129). Under such

conditions, members of any species that meet these four marks are considered persons, specifically, non-human persons such as chimpanzees. This also creates the category of human non-persons which do not meet these four standards. This group consists of “defective humans” whose impaired mental capacity – such as in the case of the brain dead – disqualifies them from being defined as a person (Hymers 1999, 130). Therefore, the “others” for whom Singer advocates have troublesome implications that prompt further reflection on the impact of his perspective as compared with Michael Pollan.

Despite this issue, the intent of “The Ethics of What We Eat” is to inform readers about components of the American food industry that are commonly kept in the dark (Singer & Mason 2007, 7). This reinforces Singer’s ethical intention of focusing on the impact of individual food choices. By creating informed consumers through the educational content provided, Singer is attempting to reconcile what he sees as mistakes. Such mistakes are defined through utilitarian terms, in that the food choices that are morally good produce more pleasure than pain. This drives the style of “The Ethics of What We Eat”, as Singer explains the many injustices found in the production of commonplace foods frequently chosen by the three families he investigates. He uses such information to denounce the food options which he deems as morally wrong.

In contrast, Michael Pollan’s ethical basis is formed throughout the exploration of his text. Instead of using an established ethical framework to define his research findings, he allows the experiences he undergoes throughout his journey to shape his interpretations and the ultimate ethical conclusions he makes regarding food choices.

The parameters shaping his ethical standpoint involve an awareness and respect of food as both human need and means of connectivity. These principles are trustworthy because they

have evolved over the course of Pollan's investigation of food production, which the reader can just as easily obtain, apply, and defend through the narrative provided.

Pollan initially identifies the national eating disorder encapsulating American food anxiety as the return of the "omnivore's dilemma", in which humans must decide if the food they consume is nourishing or poisonous (Pollan 2012, 5). In the context of the modern supermarket, this innate human instinct is understandably confused given the range of heavily processed and artificial products which advertise an assortment of health claims despite their simultaneously detrimental chemical make-up. This dilemma necessitated Pollan's decision to follow three different food chains from field to plate. His personal cultivation of awareness of where the food we eat comes from is founded in resolving the modern omnivore's dilemma by knowing.

This knowledge has a depth that Singer's information does not. Pollan identifies eating as a pleasurable experience – a virtue which connects people to their food through culture. More specifically, it is the sole presence of soul which distinguishes Pollan's ethical perspective from Singer's on two accounts.

The first is the obvious application to differentiating between humans and animals. While Peter Singer assigns sentience and personhood on a case-by-case basis as defined by the four principles previously mentioned, Pollan understands humans in what would be characterized by Singer as "speciesist" terms since he makes a clear distinction between humans and animals that is based on the presence of a soul in the human species. However, this distinction does not eliminate human consideration for animals. Instead, it characterizes our interaction with animals through our nature as omnivores, and thus connects humans and animals through the inner workings of the food chains facilitated by nature (Pollan 2012, 6).

This relationship gives rise to the second implication of the presence of a soul in Pollan's ethical framework, where eating is the defining moment for human culture. Since humans have almost every imaginable kind of food available to consume, it is our soulful nature that drives the ethical obligation and responsibility to eat wisely, this being codified in human culture (Pollan 2012, 4).

Pollan's book then works to establish a cultural understanding for Americans who "never had a single, strong, stable culinary tradition to guide us" (Pollan 2012, 5). He does this through not only by exploring food production, but by demonstrating the value in how it is brought to the table and the communal experiences derived at the meal itself. This gives meaning and purpose to our consumption through an ethical basis of respect and understanding that can be applied with due diligence as inspired in this text.

*Points of Similarity: Reflecting on How Pollan and Singer Address the Moral Conditions of Food Choices*

An intriguing similarity between Singer and Pollan's works is the format in which they were written. While both men use the narrative of following three pathways – through families and food chains – to detail the truths of food production, the messages at the end of the two works are strikingly different. For this reason, it is important to consider the role that argument construction has in communicating the values of these two minds and the conclusions they form.

Peter Singer's navigation through the dietary patterns of three different families comes across as more of an exposé than a journey. His declarative, a priori perspective is not altered throughout the course of his work. Instead, he uses the specific foods acknowledged by these families to reveal unpleasant truths of the industrial tactics used to produce them. From these

harsh truths he applies his ethical principles to rationalize whether it is morally acceptable to purchase and consume the products he details.

In contrast, Michael Pollan's perspective is dynamic. His open-mindedness throughout his research allows his understanding to constantly be shaped by the experiences he shares with people who have cultivated their own knowledge and understanding of certain areas related to the ecosystems and processes within food production. His understanding of the meaning of food is established a posteriori and therefore has an implicit element of truth to its vulnerable transparency.

Perhaps the most interesting observation that comes of this is that Singer and Pollan ascertain and present their research in antithetical ways despite the almost identical format of their texts. While Peter Singer uses people to frame the three routes of his investigation, it is the shocking and disturbing facts of industry which define his writing and overall message to the reader. His presentation is impassive and absolute despite its focus on aspects of personal dietary choice. Conversely, Michael Pollan traces the facts of food chains but instead gains insight from the personal relationships he makes along the way which inform his message to the reader. His argument is stirring because it highlights the personal connection to food rather than the facts of industrial production as a means to eating morally.

While both men identify several of the same issues as important for consumer knowledge concerning modern food production, their attitudes towards such issues and the solutions they propose in response produce very intriguing contrasts. The most pressing topics that emerge from both works center around the principles of economic consequences, animal welfare, and application of knowledge.

**1. Economic Consequences:**

Singer and Pollan highlight the economic implications associated with food production, with specific attention to the impact mass production has played in encouraging large businesses to resort to unethical practices to increase profitability and efficiency. The aspects of industry that Singer and Pollan each point out indicate the ethical boundaries that each finds most important.

In “The Ethics of What We Eat”, monetary motivation in the form of profit is identified as the largest obstacle to ethical food production. As a result, evil arises when there is money to be made because large producers often prioritize economic gain over less quantifiable factors. The sum of resources available to factory farming operations are thus “geared to speed of production and labor costs”, which causes any minor improvements to the treatment of animals, such as gentler handling of chickens for a “few cents per bird”, to be averted in the name of economic yield (Singer & Mason, 2007, 35).

This profit-oriented corruption infects other industries involved in food production, which are highlighted in the many “Behind the Label” sections of Singer and Mason’s text. Producers of factory farmed food, fish, and marine animals alike are guilty of forgoing morality for increased profit margins. Singer paints this as a common deal with the devil, which allows for the relatively cheap costs of meat, dairy, and marine life to prevail in the modern supermarket. However, the manners that are taken to achieve such low prices are paid in the form of negative externalities that Singer identifies on social, environmental, and alternate economic levels. While these costs do not show up in the form of monetary measurement, they are harmful to all but the producers benefitting from increased earnings.

The devastating social impacts that are generated through cheap production show up most intensely in the lives of those closest to food production. The employees of large corporations are thrown into an environment of exploitation and danger which results in job turnover of over 100 percent annually in places like Tyson (Singer & Mason 2007, 32). The atrocities of production are not limited to the confinement of the factory either – local homeowners are negatively impacted simply because of their proximity to these operations. While they may not be employed by the company, they are forced to deal with the nauseating odors coming from the factories that impart a range of ailments from mouth sores to intestinal parasites, along with “hundreds of thousands of flies and mice” – all of which keep these people from going outside of their own homes (Singer & Mason 2007, 30). These impacts alone certainly violate the morality of respecting nature if nature itself must be avoided for the sake of personal health. Environmental externalities further exacerbate this premise, as this text exposes a wide range of sins against nature – from “thousands of gallons of wastewater” (Singer & Mason 2007, 31) being produced daily by poultry plants to the bycatch in commercial fishing which results in “27 million tons, billions of living creatures trashed” (Singer & Mason 2007, 112) every year. Therefore, if the larger costs that are passed on to the public and the environment were quantified, then perhaps our beloved convenience foods are not “really so cheap after all” (Singer & Mason 2007, 71).

Since large industries have been able to increase their economic growth through less-than-moral methods, many businesses have adopted similar practices, resulting in a chain effect that has spiraled out of control. The largest, most financially successful businesses therefore have uncontested political and industrial power and act as leaders on issues. This causes the rest of an industry to follow even the smallest of actions which become precedents for institutional growth and success (Singer & Mason 2007, 71). Large-scale contributors are therefore incredibly

difficult to combat or improve because their economic “growth” – in a solely monetary sense – encourages their continued influence.

This cycle of producing cheap food is perpetuated by consumers who have limited options when purchasing food. When a family is more focused on paying for housing and utilities, purchasing food is not the first priority and is therefore chosen based on cost over production methods. However, since “the ethics of what we eat encompasses... how our food is sold” (Singer & Mason 2007, 76), something must be done to reconcile the constant crossing of ethical lines by food production companies.

To solve the complex issues that arise in a competitive market system, Singer suggests that people use their income as their voice by voting via consumer dollar. By using the awareness of industrial practice that is created through this text, consumers can drive businesses to produce items that are more ethically sustainable in Singer’s terms by purchasing morally sound products. This is applicable in what we choose not to buy as well – Singer encourages us to abandon factory-farmed products altogether, as “the good that we can do personally by boycotting factory farms can be multiplied by the number of others we influence to do the same” (Singer & Mason 2007, 257). Perhaps the most inspiring part of this solution is that Singer makes a point to be inclusive of all socio-economic backgrounds. His notion that “virtually anyone, irrespective of income, can make a positive contribution” (Singer & Mason 2007, 5) is empowering on an individual level because it enables everyone to make a difference.

However, this rationale is motivated by a voice of reason that is more condemning than encouraging. Not only can everyone make a difference by changing their actions as consumers, they are obligated to do so. Failure to give this consideration is deemed unjust because it allows

for the continuation of practices which produce pain in the form of economic externalities. While Singer is considerate of different income availabilities, he demands efforts to be made all the same. This can be seen in his article in the New York Times Magazine called “The Singer Solution to World Poverty”. He details that what people decide to do with their money has a powerful impact that imposes a responsibility on how expenditures are made. Since the average American family spends almost one-third of its income on trivial luxuries instead of things “essential to the preservation of our lives and health” (Singer 1999, 2), the American consumer behavior raises a “serious moral issue” (Singer 1999, 3). Furthermore, since Singer “judges whether acts are right or wrong by their consequences” (Singer 1999, 2), any excess money that is spent on personal gain that could be spent on impacts that are more meaningful in terms of pleasure produced – from donating to philanthropic organizations or spending extra money on ethically-sourced food – is a selfish act indeed.

This position leaves the reader in an incredibly uncomfortable position that perpetuates any anxiety already present when deciding what to eat. However, feelings of guilt can be assuaged by Pollan’s alternate approach and response to these economic issues.

Like Singer, Pollan highlights several of the same issues within the economical scope. However, his primary criticism of large industries trace profitability through terms of efficiency, which has distorted the layout of the entire food production system and violated the laws of nature to do so. In terms of profitability, “nature is foremost a problem” (Pollan 2008, 94) for businesses trying to build profits within the constraints of agricultural productivity and the limited appetites of consumers. This leads to a deeper-rooted issue behind desire for profitability: the need to fight the limits of nature to maximize efficiency. This need is facilitated by human cleverness used to reconfigure the laws of nature to create cheaper products – which has

precipitated the spiral effect of horrifying practices leading to negative externalities. Pollan identifies the second fall of man from a state of nature as turning from the Baconian “logic of biology [to] embrace the logic of industry” (Pollan 2008, 45). Instead of simply listing the various negative impacts of large industry, Pollan traces the history of adaptations producers have made to compete in the market system, which reveals cultivation of corn as the culprit of industrial malpractice.

For the sake of efficiency, corn has been subsidized and overproduced to the point where it is reconfigured into “forty-five thousand different items” (Pollan 2008, 20) on supermarket shelves to provide a smorgasbord of processed corn in sheep’s clothing – or rather, commercial packaging. The use and abuse of corn emerged because it was the “crop that put cash in a farmer’s pocket” (Pollan 2008, 39), and as such became a sensational means of turning a profit. However, this spiral created a counterintuitive system of overproduction which turned corn into a commodity instead of the nourishing plant it once was (Pollan 2008, 34). The extensive efforts corn requires to be produced no longer outweigh its benefit to consumers, as the most appropriate resources used to produce corn become less available over time, which requires more resources that are less suitable to corn production to be used to produce the same amount of corn. This is illustrated in the economic law of increasing opportunity costs, which states that “as you increase production of one good, the opportunity cost to produce an additional good will increase.” (Wells). Hence, the biggest mistake of the industry has been to devote resources to change the nature of corn production instead of looking for alternate sources of energy to solve this problem. Nevertheless, the wheels of corn production keep turning: “impoverishing farmers, polluting the water, and bleeding the federal treasury, which now spends up to \$5 billion a year subsidizing cheap corn” (Pollan 2008, 54) to do so. Like Singer, Pollan identifies that the

cheapness of convenience food is actually quite expensive when the invisible impacts – taxpayers paying corn subsidies, food-borne illnesses and obesity imparted on the health care system, pollution to the environment, welfare of workers – are calculated into the true cost (Pollan 2008, 201).

These negative externalities are too numerous to flesh out completely, yet their presence is something that demands attention. It is important to recognize the impractical impacts that come as a result of irresponsible industrial practice, and how they are discussed in the context of Singer and Pollan’s ethical definitions. The distinguishing component of Pollan’s criticism of the “genius of capitalism” is its efforts to “recreate something akin to a state of nature in the modern supermarket” (Pollan 2008, 303). His reaction becomes deeply intuitive as a result of the perplexing absence of logic currently applied in industrial settings.

Pollan’s solution for the industrial woes he identifies goes several steps further than Singer’s voting with the consumer dollar. Singer’s efforts to speak through costs meets producers where they are: a price-centered orientation. Pollan validates voting with the consumer dollar, but his reasoning includes being “motivated by criteria other than price” (Pollan 2008, 244), and equips us with the tools of regarding quality and value as factors for buying decisions. This perspective resonates more effectively than Singer’s condemning tone because it makes people aware of more than just their purchasing power. It activates their power to reason which is inspiring and conducive to long-term adaptation.

Pollan asks us to go beyond speaking through purchasing by speaking through political action as well. His encouragement to “vote with our votes” (Pollan 2008, 421) produces a more powerful outlet to make a difference. This approach is even more inclusive of income differences

because it requires time rather than monetary contribution. His article “Vote for the Dinner Party” illustrates the power that is found in political action. This form of activism is advantageous because it specifically articulates the changes consumers desire rather than simply indicating a shift in consumer tastes, which is done through voting at the grocery store. And while the food movement of consumers has made undeniable progress, he insists it is necessary to “engage in the hard politics of Washington” because it is the only way to communicate with people in places of political power who can activate concrete industrial changes (Pollan 2012).

More importantly, Pollan addresses the root issue of current industrial practice: fighting nature to increase efficiency. Since this does create negative externalities that he and Singer address, Pollan proposes working with nature to create products that are not only more effective on a holistic level, but can also be purchased with human morality intact. He does so by advocating for an alternate kind of efficiency that he encountered on his journey in gathering information for “The Omnivore’s Dilemma”. Through a profoundly special farm that he experienced called Polyface, the owner Joel Salatin made the case for “a very different kind of efficiency – the one found in natural systems, with their evolutionary relationships and reciprocal loops” (Pollan 2008, 214). Through the symbiosis of interaction that occurs between different species on Salatin’s farm – from the grass to the bacteria in the rumen of the cow to the cow itself – each life source is allowed to do its natural part in the ecosystem it is in. This kind of system does not displace human interaction. In fact, it creates a role for humans in the food chain through the use of our knowledge and innovation. As depicted on the Polyface farm, people can “do more for the health of a place by cultivating it rather than by leaving it alone” (Pollan 2008, 214). While this combined effort seems more complex than the simplification of corn production, it is actually more convenient and efficient, as the power is given to natural

processes which are self-actualizing instead of solely human hands. Humans do not have to control every aspect of food creation – we simply have to play our part by aiding nature and using our creative talents to accentuate the symbiosis that takes place.

The multi-layered solution proposed by Michael Pollan is more effective than Peter Singer's anxiety-inducing moral calculus of decision making. Pollan encourages humans to act on their natural strengths and intuition in harmony with natural processes, thus leaving most of the work to a system which already functions perfectly. In terms of ethicality, Singer misses the mark because he fails to address implications on the alteration of nature through production. His response offers a surface-level band-aid approach which never reaches the possibility of actual prevention because he does not identify the entire depth of the economic problem. While Singer's solution reduces the issue of large industry to a matter of profit – much like the industry itself reduces nature down to components of singular exploitation – Pollan's approach is both intuitive and holistic in a moral sense. This creates an opening for growth which becomes a solution for other evils of the food industry.

## **2. Animal welfare:**

As a result of profit and efficiency-driven business, the mistreatment of animals in the food production system becomes a large issue that both Singer and Pollan tackle. Singer rightfully identifies the “commercial pressures that exist in a competitive market system in which animals are items of property” as the “core issue” (Singer & Mason, 2007, 55) behind the abuse that is allowed in farming operations. While both men acknowledge the immorality of current animal agricultural practices, their moral lines are crossed in different ways which leads to opposing means of rectification. Similar to their economic analyses, Singer is more interested in the

morality in terms of the pain that is caused in harming animals, whereas Pollan is focused on the extreme alteration of nature that is required to produce animals on a massive scale.

While Singer's definition of personhood certainly complicates his relationship with animals, his main concern with animal welfare is "whether [animals] can suffer" (Singer & Mason 2007, 22). Since this capacity for suffering is shared among humans and animals alike, the demand for equal consideration of all species emerges. This point is apparent in Singer's first publication "Animal Liberation", which he describes in his article "Some are More Equal". He motions to start taking the interests of non-human animals seriously since their apparent differences "do not justify the way we think of, or treat, animals" (Singer 2003). This places humans and animals on the same plane on account of their capacity to suffer rather than an ability to reason, which is variable among all species. With modern science demonstrating the genetic similarities between humans and animals such as chimpanzees, Singer argues that the "excuse for doing as we please" with animals is cruel and invalid (Singer 2003). This predates his extension of basic rights to humans and animals alike.

The practices of modern industry intensely violate this rationale, in which animals are reduced to pure commodities in a chain of production. This allows the egg industry to throw male chicks away in hatcheries because the egg and broiler industries have no use for them (Singer & Mason 2007, 40). It excuses the shortened lifespan of a dairy cow to five years from the natural twenty years because it "cannot sustain the unnaturally high rate of milk production" (Singer & Mason 2007, 58). Increased consumer demand for animal products and producer desire for profit have thus driven the overproduction of what used to be luxury foods and turned them into foods of convenience. However, the ease with which this food is obtained does not discount the fact that consumers are "eating meat that comes from an animal that died an

agonizing death.” (Singer & Mason 2007, 68). This realization produces a rather deterministic response.

The obvious solution for Singer is to abandon the practice of eating meat altogether. Through his moral determination to produce the least amount of pain, he can therefore easily propose the simplicity of boycotting anything that produces excessively negative impacts. In response to salmon farms which threaten wild fish and produce an extreme amount of waste, the “only safe course is to avoid salmon” (Singer & Mason 2007, 124). This avoidance applies to all animals, as we are told “if we are uncertain that [animals] can feel pain, we should try to avoid doing anything that risks inflicting pain on them” (Singer & Mason 2007, 133), this tying into Singer’s concept of equal consideration of comparable interests. For this reason, adopting a vegan diet – complete abstinence from animal products – is identified as the “only sure way of completely avoiding participation in the abuse of farm animals” (Singer & Mason 2007, 279), which turns out to be much simpler than dealing with the inability to truly determine where every animal product comes from and by extension its ethicality.

His all-or-nothing advocacy is perfectly illustrated in his article “The Abuse of Animals Won’t Stop Until We Stop Eating Meat”, in which he identifies the issue as the entire food production system, which “will not change until people stop buying meat” (Singer 2015). In the face of truly troubling information concerning animal agriculture, Singer’s response is consonant with his economic advocacy through consumer avoidance. As a vegan diet works to avoid the pain caused by animal agriculture, it also works to make the necessary industrial changes through creating a demand for products that are both economical and ethical, which are “available in every supermarket” (Singer & Mason 2007, 284). “The Ethics of What We Eat” is

then concluded on the premise that “we can make better choices”, which leaves us with a continued sense of anxiety around our food and no means to do so.

Like Singer, Pollan identifies the usage of animals as commodity products as morally wrong, yet his concern focuses on the objectification of nature to do so. This can be seen in the raising of calves, who must be conditioned to eating a diet that is unnatural to them – fueled by none other than the cheap industrial gold standard for energy: corn – in the process of being “bunk-broken” (Pollan 2008, 72). To worsen the problem, since this diet of corn is forced upon animals that do not have the biological structuring to properly digest it, they are forced to “overcome deeply ingrained aversions” by trading their “instincts for antibiotics” (Pollan 2008, 76). Such practices are implemented in all subsects of animal agriculture, from chickens to pigs to cows and their associated byproducts. The tension that exists between logic of industry working against the logic of nature creates a nauseating impact on the lives of animals caught up in methods of overproduction. However, Pollan identifies the immoral practice of CAFOs as their systematic deprivation of the natural characteristics of life for animals, not of life itself (Pollan 2008, 321). For this reason, he does not go to the same lengths as Singer in prescribing a vegan diet as the only safely moral way to eat.

While Pollan agrees with Singer that the current treatment of these animals is cruel, he does not eliminate their role in human consumption. He offers the sentiment that complete avoidance of animal-related production entails the “sublimation of part of our identity – of our own animality” (Pollan 2008, 315). Instead, he is able to extend a solution which incorporates their presence in a system of cultural tradition that offers respect for all species involved. This is based on their main difference from the human species: this being the aspect of a soul. As Pollan points out in his article “An Animal’s Place”, while humans do not need meat to survive, this

practice of consumption is “very deep indeed” (Pollan 2002). With this he bridges culture with food production to resolve the omnivore’s dilemma.

Pollan’s solution to animal abuse can once again be found in the natural order that is illustrated in the symbiosis of the Polyface farm. Natural food chains require the participation of every species involved; elimination of any part would hinder the interactions that take place. This is what Singer misses in his condemnation of eating animal products – he reduces the issue to a calculus of pain and pleasure when the issue at hand is a larger composure of natural proportion. In this sense, eating animals can be the most ethical course of action “if our concern is for the health of nature” (Pollan 2002), which is in fact the condition for exercising moral goodness. Pollan’s perspective is more effective as it engages all participants of the food chain and validates the worth of each piece by doing so, whereas Singer’s encouragement of avoidance is not conducive to a cultural appreciation.

Singer uses grotesque descriptions to shock the audience with the pain that occurs in the slaughterhouse, but this is the extent of his analysis. For Singer, the presence of pain is a good enough reason to abandon the practice of animal agriculture altogether. However, Pollan offers a more inclusive way of addressing animal slaughter: through transparency. This transcends Singer’s deterministic perspective which forces people to “look away or become vegetarians” (Pollan 2002). The open-air abattoir that serves as the environment for slaughter at Polyface farm is a “morally powerful idea” as it allows consumers to know their meat has been processed humanely (Pollan 2008, 235). This system does not allow meat production to hide behind walls which conceal abuse and other indecencies. Rather, it encapsulates a dignified death for animals who were granted the right to “fully express [their] physiological distinctiveness” through the encouragement of their own talents cultivated through mutualism on the farm in their lifespan

(Pollan 2002). Here, death becomes meaningful through the purpose that was maintained during animal lives. This significance allows humans to eat meat with a mutual respect for the practice and the life that was given to produce the nourishment. Through this, Pollan once again provides us with the tools to look at our food with morality intact instead of leaving us guilt-ridden and forced to turn away completely.

### **1. Application of Knowledge:**

Knowledge is an essential part to both Singer and Pollan's solutions in terms of food production and ethical eating, yet they encourage this knowledge through different expectations. In hopes of changing a sinful industry, Singer declares that knowledge is power (Singer & Mason 2007, 8) which serves as a basis for making decisions. Oppositely, Pollan views knowledge as tool to empower individuals (Pollan 2008, 260) which can be continuously shaped through additional learning. This creates an interesting dynamic between concepts of knowledge and awareness.

As Singer seeks to educate individuals through the information provided in "The Ethics of What We Eat", his purpose is to reveal what individuals need to change to conform to his ethical standards. Conversely, Pollan cultivates an awareness of how food is currently produced through his own learning experience, which he uses to discuss routes that can be taken to produce food in a moral way through adhering to natural processes. In this sense, Pollan emphasizes not what we should change but how we can change. This inspires an awareness of our actions and practices and incites the exercise of our own intuition and autonomy to make moral decisions. These decisions should be informed by "The Omnivore's Dilemma" as well as personal exploration. This exceeds the purpose of Singer and Mason's work, which is designed to simply inform and instruct, with little room for growth or personal understanding.

While our human capacity for knowledge and inventiveness can turn into our worst enemy, as seen within the means of mass food production, it can be used for morally superior purposes with the “right philosophy [and] information” (Pollan 2008, 260). Pollan’s application of knowledge creates a purpose for human cognition in a natural system that can thrive with appropriate interactions. However, he maintains an element of humility in the presence of nature which takes the reigns in dictating the interaction of a multi-dimensional connection of species. This humility is not present in Singer’s version of knowledge, which declares a moral line between what people can and cannot consume conscientiously. He leaves ultimate ethical power to humankind, which has no established record of perfection, especially not when compared to nature.

*Food as Religion: Establishing the mind-body-spirit connection in our meals and why it is important*

It is equally important to reflect introspectively to analyze the meaning of food beyond physical effects<sup>3</sup>. This can be found in the religious connection to food, which embodies an active connection between mind, body, and spirit through the context of a meal. Therefore, analyzing how the perspectives of Singer and Pollan contribute to this essential component of choosing our food provides a deeper context in not only comparing the two intellectuals, but also providing insight into how we should choose our food as a result.

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<sup>3</sup> This necessitates an understanding of hard and soft impacts, as defined by Dr. Hymers in “Food as Art: poiēsis and the importance of soft impacts”. While hard impacts are quantifiable in terms of technological and technical measurement (Hymers 2012a., 295). Soft impacts therefore “resist measurement” and, as applied to the discussion of consumption, define “what food means” (Hymers 2012a., 295). Furthermore, they are the “effects that technology has on the way we view the world... [through] culture or society” (Hymers 2012a., 296). Thus, the previous discussion of physical impacts of food production can be thought of as the hard impacts, whereas the discussion in this section focuses more on soft impacts.

Food is a religious experience. However, this takes a deeper understanding of the qualities of food to be useful for analysis. Hymers argues that food is “something sacramental” (Hymers 2012b.). He is referring to the Eucharist, which as a sacrament ties together spiritual and physical human elements by nourishing the soul while also affecting the body (Hymers 2012b). Hence, Feuerbach’s contention that “you are what you eat” as an “innately natural truth” (Hymers 2012b) extends the impact of food beyond its moment of consumption. This provides a context for understanding the depth of food’s impact, and requires a deeper understanding of its effects beyond physical observation that relate to the mind and spirit.

The application of transubstantiation to food consumption reveals that “when I eat, I transform one substance into another. I become the bread, or rather, the bread becomes me” (Hymers 2012b). This spiritual transformation creates a place for a human role in the food chain – plants convert sunlight into calories; animals convert plants and lower animals alike into energy; while humans make the efforts of all biological diversity meaningful through their transformation of food into self as a spiritual act. However, this act is not complete with the consumption of just any food, it requires a certain fittingness – in regard to the substance that is eaten as well as artistry of doing so – to be truly meaningful.

In terms of substance, food that is fitting is morally good, and can be understood as that which “promotes or preserves something’s being”, thus making it convenient to the human body (Hymers 2012b). Therefore, the edibility of food alone does not grant its consumption. This creates a danger with modern eating patterns which illustrate that “once we are removed from the notion of preparation, we are under the illusion that anything can be made into food” (Hymers 2012b.). It is not only what we eat that matters, but how we eat: this prefaces the subsequent point of artistry.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin tells us, in his work “The Physiology of Taste”, that “the Creator, while forcing men to eat in order to live, tempts him to do so with appetite and then rewards him with pleasure” (Brillat-Savarin 1971, 15). This creates an opportunity for artistry through the human traits of creativity and craftsmanship. These skills apply the strengths of human intellect which elevates food into the virtuous setting of a meal; this distinguishing humans from animals based on the ability to dine. Thus “the pleasures of the table are known only to the human race”, and consists of “careful preparations for the serving of the meal, on the choice of place, and on the thoughtful assembling of the guests” (Brillat-Savarin 1971, 190). These well-intentioned measures set the context for contemplative conversation, which further distinguishes the behavior appropriate to human nature. The “mixture of nature and craft” that occurs in the human experience of food defines its fittingness in terms of individual health, but more importantly: culture (Hymers 2012a.). This aspect of culture sets the parameters of human connection with food on a spiritual level, and is the major difference between the meaning that can be found in Singer and Pollan’s perspectives.

The absence of soul in Singer’s evaluation of ethical food choices leaves his argument rather flat and one-dimensional. Instead, the extent of religious influence on his discussion is the sole allusion to Christian principles of gluttony and dominion which define sin. For Singer, the ethical complications of gluttony are evident in the impact on others that this seemingly “personal choice” has in the form of health care costs for those who are obese (Singer & Mason 2007, 281). Singer identifies the idea that God gave humans dominion over animals as an “excuse for doing as we please with them” (Singer 2003). However, he incorporates the perspective of Pope Benedict XVI, who asserted that “human “dominion” over animals does not justify factory farming” (Singer & Mason 2007, 243). Even so, both topics are discussed on the

principle of their utility in supporting Singer's perspective. This limits the depth of his discussion and instead reflects Singer's own narrowmindedness within the wide range of meaning that food has to offer.

It is important to note that human consumption, or eating, "which is meaningful, is not feeding, which is not meaningful" (Hymers 2012a.), as this pertains to animals which are bereft of spiritual experience. However, Singer's placement of humans and animals on the same plane by their shared "capacity to suffer" (Singer & Mason, 2007, 246), eliminates the distinction of humans on the basis of their eating which would facilitate a discussion of culture but can never be actualized through Singer's perspective. The incredibly restrained scope of religious influence present in Singer's writing is based on an understanding of total pain caused by sinful acts. His argument loses significance within the context of spiritual consideration, as it never builds to the level of acknowledgement of the art and pleasure involved in a meal – a paradoxical situation indeed, as the pleasure that can be created from a meal would negate his otherwise guilt-inducing focus on pain within his own moral calculus.

Pollan, however, incorporates this aspect of fittingness as defined by culture into his perspective. Since food is our existence, its meaning is carried beyond simply nourishment in the moment because it is the makeup of who we are, which then becomes the "framework of all our experience" through culture (Hymers 2012a, 296). He describes culture as the "accumulated wisdom of the tribe" (Pollan 2009), which relies on elements of taste and tradition as a structural backbone (Pollan 2008, 300). While such conventions may not explicitly define nutritional components of a diet, they are the factors most essential for a group of people to rely on, for they bring people together in communities through cuisine (Pollan 2008, 295). This cuisine serves as the masterpiece of a culture, as it is the culmination of generations of wisdom and experience

which works to protect the future community. Culture thus encourages and creates the art form of the table, a setting where humans express the most virtuous parts of their being. Pollan acknowledges through Brillat-Savarin's influence that a meal encapsulates the "evolution from nature to culture" (Pollan 2008, 272).

In this way, the symbiosis of nature is emulated in a similar symbiotic relationship between the mind, body, and spirit that can only take place during a properly crafted meal. While this requires time and effort, it transcends the fast food lunch that "doesn't bear savouring" (Pollan 2008, 119) when judged on terms of fittingness as substance and experience. A properly prepared meal serves as a means of connectivity because it allows us to intimately know each other in a shared experience, whereas the most we can hope to gain from technologically convenient food is small talk.

The gratitude for a meal that is expressed through prayer thus originates from the context of producing something we can be proud of acknowledging before God. By praying we center our spirits in an event that is both mentally and physically stimulating. This is founded not only in the content of the meal, but the addition to culture that occurs during its consumption. The meal provides an opportunity for human potential to manifest itself by demonstrating our care for our food and one another through a conscientious effort that establishes the worth of our most essential connection with nature. The "miracle of transubstantiation" (Pollan 2008, 219) that occurs on ethically aware farms such as Polyface becomes a necessary precedent for the meal, where the miracle is paralleled as humans carry out their role in the food chain by transubstantiating food into spiritual being. Meaning is thus created by the amount of effort we attribute to cultivating and consuming our meals.

*Effectiveness: Evaluating the Impact of Pollan and Singer's Arguments*

Despite the obvious parallels within the construction and topics of focus in “The Ethics of What We Eat” and “The Omnivore’s Dilemma”, the similarities of the two perspectives end there. The formation and application of the content reveals two very distinct opinions that have their own influences upon the human condition of eating morally. These distinctions can be understood in the following three ways.

First, Singer communicates his ideas definitively, while Pollan’s expression is more dynamic. The condemnation present in Singer’s moral calculus of right and wrong places people in a reflexive state of guilt and constant anxiety, and demands people to conform to his specific guidelines. Pollan, however, encourages a flexible awareness that can be strengthened as new knowledge is obtained. This encourages an embrace with life’s mysteries instead of instilling a fear of the unknown. Hence this distinction makes Pollan’s perspective more meaningful and achievable since it leaves room for personal growth.

Second, the solutions of Singer and Pollan encourage opposite interactions with the natural food chain. While Singer eliminates human involvement with animals to reduce the possibility of pain, Pollan involves us with the condition that our interaction be actively engaged with and subordinate to the laws of nature. In taking part of and completing the symbiosis that defines nature, humans can eat to their full potential under the context Pollan provides. This position is also superior in that it upholds the ethical context of this paper by adhering to nature instead of negating it.

Third, the styles of these two perspectives conflict in that Singer identifies his version of truth through a quantitative lens while Pollan reflects qualitatively. While Singer brings up

several valid issues concerning morality around food, he is not able to quantify the presence of a soul, which limits his discussion to only observable impacts. It therefore never reaches the depth that Pollan achieves in his discussion of food as an issue of physical and spiritual qualities. Pollan is therefore more comprehensive in his approach to understanding food which validates his perspective and provides more clarity in his solution to the omnivore's dilemma.

While there are positive components and intriguing arguments on both Singer and Pollan's accounts, "The Omnivore's Dilemma" provides superior insight into the issue of consumption based on its dynamic and qualitative adherence to natural processes which are meant to define life.

*Conclusion: How We Should Eat*

To the stress of the human psyche, food poses a host of issues that are ever-present in the obsession over what we should eat. Outside of the omnivore's dilemma, which simply calls us to distinguish whether we are eating nutritive or poisonous substances, we are also faced with alternate factors – including but not limited to animal rights, economic costs, and social ramifications – to contemplate before we can take a single bite. This fosters an environment of uncertainty around food, where we can no longer determine if what we are choosing at the supermarket will trigger some kind of industrial or environmental harm, much less nourish our own bodies.

However, consumption should not consume us. In fact, if done right, it is meant to be a pleasure enjoyed by a culture of communal undertaking. The anxiety over what to eat can be assuaged with the knowledge that we have the potential to eat what is proper to our nature if we decide to take the time and care to do so. It is completely within our scope of ability as humans,

and requires us to simply listen to nature as the prominent guide. Ignorance, a frequently adopted path, thus becomes a vice. While it is easy to neglect our responsibility to eat properly, this leaves out our potential as humans to eat with dignity. To fulfil ourselves in conjunction with our natural place, we must cultivate an awareness that includes not only physical impacts, but mental and spiritual impacts as well. This will create a fitting, intuitive relationship with the nature of food and our own processes of consumption so that we can eat morally by extending culture to our plate. In doing so we will develop our own perceptions and better the cultural environment for future generations. This demands trust between ourselves and our community to define what is fitting for us to eat. If we can let go of the pressures which distract from our connection with food, then we can cultivate our own journey to understanding what to eat through our naturally symbiotic relationships with others. In this way we can reconnect to and through food to establish morality in our meals.

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Essay-grading Rubric – Prof John Hymers, La Salle University

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

	4	3	2	0	
Accuracy	Relates content accurately and fully	Relates content with minor errors, or not fully	Relates content with major errors (e.g.: contradiction, confusion)	Fails to relate content	4
Mechanics	No spelling, grammar, or word-choice errors	Minor spelling, grammar, and/or word-choice errors	Major spelling, grammar, and/or word-choice (3 or more errors)	Major spelling, grammar, and/or word-choice (5 or more errors)	4
Organization / Style	Well organized and well written (appropriate words arranged sophisticatedly)	Well-organized, less well written (less sophisticated)	Less well organized (a plan is evident) and less well written (plain)	Not organized and/or poorly written	4
Quotations (paper 1 and 2)  Research (research papers)	Excellent use of quotations  <i>Excellent research and excellently applied in term paper</i>	A few clear and helpful quotations  <i>Good research and/or well applied in term paper</i>	Unclear, or unhelpful quotations /  <i>Poor research and/or poorly applied in term paper</i>	No quotations /  <i>No or unacceptable research in term paper</i>	4
Insight	Excellent: consistently draws interesting connections and lessons from material	Good: able to draw some interesting connections or lessons from material	Poor: drawn connections or lessons not supportable (or supported) by material	No insight: Relates material drawing no connections or lessons	4
					20