

A Responsible Steward Eats No Meatballs:
A Reading Experience of Jonathan Foer's *Eating Animals*

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As a small boy, Jonathan Safran Foer ate chicken with carrots at his grandmother's table, a dish he still considers the most delicious he has ever eaten. That's how he begins his book *Eating Animals* and captivates his reader from the first page onward. What was it that made this meal with his grandma so special? Not the chicken nor the carrots, but the experience of unconditional love, of security and of family bonding. Foer writes that his Jewish grandma would never eat pork, not even when she almost died of hunger during post World War II in Eastern Europe. What are really the ingredients that define the quality of a good meal? They are especially its communal pre-history, the environment and the company.

I have immersed myself in Foer's search as an exciting adventure. The book, like previous publications by this author, provides a penetrating reading experience. It encourages the reader to think in a special original and confrontational manner about one's daily food. I began to read it with an open mind without any particular pre-assumptions. I had bought the book, because I am interested in issues like sustainability and ecology. However, my objective manner of reading did not last long, for after only a few pages the book forces one to take a stand. It is precisely the open and almost naïve description of his search that the author sees to it that the reader cannot avoid making a choice. Contrary to what the title suggests, this book is not simply a plea for vegetarian eating. From the beginning, eating animals is not disapproved simply because it is dishonest, unethical or painful for animals.

Slaughtering Practices

¹Original Dutch title of article: "Een goed rentmeester eet geen gehaktballen: Een leeservaring van het boek *Dieren eten* van Jonathan Safran Foer." Transl. Jan H. Boer. The original title of the book *Eating Animals* is *Dieren Eten*. The choice of meatballs or *gehaktballen* in the title of the article is because it is one of the favourite traditional ways of beef eating in The Netherlands. *Beweging*, Fall 2010, pp. 10-13. (Translator's note: I find it an interesting and humorous coincidence that Foer writes a book about eating animals, when a Dutch word that sounds basically similar to that name, "voer," means "animal feed.")

It is precisely the lack of predictability that renders Foer's argumentation particularly convincing. I am not that sensitive to detailed descriptions of slaughter practices or of animal suffering. To be honest, I am not that fond of animals. That will undoubtedly be very different for many readers of this magazine, but I don't need animals around me to live a great life. During my youth, we had a slaughterhouse in our neighbourhood. Apart from the first couple of times, the work that was done there was a pleasant pastime for my friends and myself. One can get used to anything; I do not lose any sleep over a pig sawn in half or a stripped cow carcass. After it's had a good life, an animal may be eaten and I can enjoy it without pangs of conscience. How have I arrived at that starting point? To be honest, I have no idea. That's just the way I was brought up and had never given it much thought before reading this book.

I find healthy eating important. In our family we do our shopping as consciously as possible, so that we do not unexpectedly find ourselves overstocked. Meat is a normal part of our diet. I don't consider it pitiful to eat a cow anymore than that I feel sorry for a tree that has been cut in order to turn it into a table. But, still, there is something awry about this kind of reasoning. The distance between my daily food and the butchering of an animal is really very great. I am happy that I no longer have to kill these animals myself. If I were ever to get into a situation in which I had to completely care for my family from scratch, I suspect that the growing of vegetable and the production of lumber would be much easier for me than butchering an animal myself.

It is pleasant that the distance between slaughter and food is so great in a modern society. Usually we do not think much about where our food comes from and we have every faith that it will be of good quality. That is, till we suddenly, as in reading Foer's book, are confronted in a shocking way with the nasty side effects of large-scale food production. Since he became a father, Foer started consciously to consider the question why he actually eats animals. I have never yet asked myself the question in that way and am not sure whether it would be a meaningful question for my children. But the book has set me to thinking where and when our responsibility as consumer begins with respect to what happens in the chain of food production. And that issue takes you further than the production of meat and even further still than just food production.

Involvement in Production

In my lectures about sustainable production, I have the last few years encouraged discussions around so-called “cradle-to-cradle” thinking. I often declare that we should feel ourselves much more involved in the production of our consumables. After all, I often add, don't we all want to eat good and healthy food? That being the case, why do we then consider it normal to have in our possession electronics that are produced in a particularly unhealthy way? Having read Foer's book, I will no longer make that kind of comment. It is, after all, the question whether we give any thought to the health and quality of our food. Of course, in the supermarket we can choose the best brands, but as consumers we really know very little about the chain of production that lies behind it all.

That question I find answered very well in Foer's book. First he works out the question whether the companies and the individuals who are responsible for our food chain actually carry out our expectations. It is unavoidable that I outsource the keeping, killing and processing of animals to professionals, but do these professionals do what I actually want? And why is it so difficult to get to know precisely what happens to animals in their stalls and slaughterhouses before they finally end up on my plate? Information on these subjects is either highly biased and selective or very veiled and really revealing nothing. What is the truth? And what is good?

Herewith we have returned to basic philosophical questions. I must unfortunately ascertain that I lack a detailed philosophical theory about food production and the role of food with respect to the quality of life. Much more has been written about the individual responsibility of a consumer in a complex and extremely technological society. It would be possible here to point to publications about the philosophy of technology or of the environment, but even those publications do not help much towards the theme under consideration.

An animal is a living being. More than ever before we must ask ourselves what is important for the quality of that life. We could allow ourselves to be tempted to regard this cow or that pig only as a fast and effective biotechnological process to produce proteins, fibres, tissues and fat for us. The question is then whether we are allowed to kill an animal for the product it can supply us? My first reaction to the question would be that this

is certainly allowed, provided the animal has had a good and meaningful life and it met its end in an animal-friendly manner.

And that immediately brings up many more questions, such as may I slaughter an animal just for its skin, while I destroy its flesh or the other way around? And what would actually constitute a benign way of butchering? Foer describes a slaughterhouse that treats its animals in a very concerned and devoted manner. You can read between the lines that the author is almost convinced by the methods of this company that if all companies would follow those methods, he might well concede that there is not a single objection to the eating of meat.

I observed that reading the description of this company, in contrast to Foer, did convince me. This is the manner of slaughtering and processing as I see it before me when I think of that slaughterhouse in our neighbourhood. It is small-scale with direct contact with the farmer who supplies the animal. A useful and honest trade, with perhaps a degree of nostalgia associated with it. That's how I would wish to see my furniture, my clothes or my electronic gadgets produced as well.

Amish

I realize, of course, that this way of thinking is much too romantic in a modern society with a dense population. It is the ideal of the Amish² or the Luddites. A return to the past is usually not a solution. We need to bring the questions about how we can feed a large population in a responsible and careful manner forward much more clearly in the ongoing social debate. Relatively speaking, the production of food has become a minor economic activity. At the beginning of the twentieth century more than 80 per cent of the working population was employed in sectors related to food production. Currently, that is less than five per cent. And, to use another statistic, at the beginning of the twentieth century more than 90 per cent of the average income was spent on food, while this is currently less than ten percent. Food is available in large quantities for almost everyone at a relatively low price. That is the reason that reflection on food production cannot come from the market or from the companies involved. It will have to be an idealistic kind of reflection in which consumers and producers

²Translator: I doubt that Korevaar understands Amish philosophy adequately to make this statement.

must weigh ethical issues, even if that happens at the expense of profit or price.

As a consumer, I need knowledge and confidence concerning the history of the products I purchase. Armed with those, I can carry out my responsibility for the choices I make. Freedom of choice and responsibility go together with insight and confidence. My insight and trust was not all that great when it came to the production of food and meat especially.³ Foer has contributed to decreasing my confidence in the food industry and brought it to a new low.

A few months ago, I watched the documentary *Our Daily Bread* by Nikolaus Geyerhalter. The treatment of animals in this film is horrifying, but the silly manner of harvesting cauliflower was very hilarious. The documentary has a clear message: As consumers we have no idea about how our food is prepared and where it comes from. The statistics and examples Foer adduces speak volumes. There would not be much sense to repeat them here or to dispute them. The images in the documentary and the comments of the Animal Party are not figments of the imagination. There is something basic amiss in the food industry and in the inability of that industry to put the disturbed consumer at ease is perhaps as convincing as Foer's statistics.

I am no conspiracy thinker. However, I will not easily regain the lost confidence in large corporations, whether they produce cell phones or sell beef. There is a feeling of discomfort that stays with you after a reading of *Eating Animals*. And this feeling will not dissipate by simply becoming a vegetarian. I have the conviction that I will not change the world by going in that direction. I can possibly help change behavior by making conscious purchases, where this is possible. This will require asking questions about the origin of the products I buy. And definitely I will not create change by thinking that it's not all that bad and things will probably improve.

This argumentation has not led to a firm conclusion. It would be clear and convincing if I had finally been able to answer the simple question: Does a

³Translator's note: So far, this essay has not clearly spelled out this lack of trust. We have here one of the many examples of sloppy writing that was halfheartedly admitted by the editors of the magazine when it merged with *Sophie*. I generally find the philosophy acceptable and, therefore, promote it, but the writing style in *Bewegung* often leaves much to be desired, marked as it is by carelessness especially in sentence construction and vague references.

responsible steward eat meatballs or not? I am sure that every reader of Foer's book will ask himself at least a few times why we still eat meat. I have asked this question myself and as a family we have weighed the possibility of become vegetarians. It would indeed have been easy to declare at the end of this essay that, given all the uncertainties and doubts described so far, it is better to opt for vegetarianism than to continue with our meat consumption.

However, I can still not make that definite choice. Why not? Because I assume that the production of meat products can be done in a sustainable and animal-friendly, benign manner and that I also as consumer will increasingly get the space to choose alternatives. In this manner, the possibility to take responsibility will increase more and more. In addition, I do not find eating meat a problem and can even enjoy it tremendously. At the end of this piece that attitude again allows the doubt you may have hoped would be eliminated, to stand. Am I really so egocentric that I cannot not come up with a carefully formed moral conclusion? Nevertheless, I will allow the title of this essay to stand, but with the emphasis on "good," while I allow myself more time and space to work towards that qualification.