

Eating Animals

Also by Jonathan Safran Foer

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

Everything Is Illuminated

Eating Animals

Jonathan Safran Foer



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ANIMAL

Before visiting any farms, I spent more than a year wading through literature about eating animals: histories of agriculture, industry and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) materials, activist pamphlets, relevant philosophical works, and the numerous existing books about food that touch on the subject of meat. I frequently found myself confused. Sometimes my disorientation was the result of the slipperiness of terms like *suffering*, *joy*, and *cruelty*. Sometimes it seemed to be a deliberate effect. Language is never fully trustworthy, but when it comes to eating animals, words are as often used to misdirect and camouflage as they are to communicate. Some words, like *veal*, help us forget what we are actually talking about. Some, like *free-range*, can mislead those whose consciences seek clarification. Some, like *happy*, mean the opposite of what they would seem. And some, like *natural*, mean next to nothing.

Nothing could seem more “natural” than the boundary between humans and animals (*see*: SPECIES BARRIER). It happens, though, that not all cultures even have the category *animal* or any equivalent word in their vocabulary—the Bible, for example, lacks any word that parallels the English *animal*. Even by the dictionary definition, humans both are and are not animals. In the first sense, humans are members of the animal kingdom. But more often, we casually use the word *animal* to signify all creatures—from orangutan to dog to shrimp—except humans. Within a culture, even within a family, people have their own understandings of what an animal is. Within each of us there are probably several different understandings.

What is an animal? Anthropologist Tim Ingold posed the question to a diverse group of scholars from the disciplines of social and

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cultural anthropology, archaeology, biology, psychology, philosophy, and semiotics. It proved impossible for them to reach a consensus on the meaning of the word. Tellingly, though, there were two important points of agreement: “First, that there is a strong emotional undercurrent to our ideas about animality; and, second, that to subject these ideas to critical scrutiny is to expose highly sensitive and largely unexplored aspects of the understanding of our own humanity.” To ask “What is an animal?”—or, I would add, to read a child a story about a dog or to support animal rights—is inevitably to touch upon how we understand what it means to be us and not them. It is to ask, “What is a human?”

ANTHROPOCENTRISM

The conviction that humans are the pinnacle of evolution, the appropriate yardstick by which to measure the lives of other animals, and the rightful owners of everything that lives.

ANTHROPODENIAL

The refusal to concede significant experiential likeness between humans and the other animals, as when my son asks if George will be lonely when we leave the house without her, and I say, “George doesn’t get lonely.”

ANTHROPOMORPHISM

The urge to project human experience onto the other animals, as when my son asks if George will be lonely.

The Italian philosopher Emanuela Cenami Spada wrote:

Anthropomorphism is a risk we must run, because we must refer to our own human experience in order to formulate questions

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about animal experience....The only available “cure” [for anthropomorphism] is the continuous critique of our working definitions in order to provide more adequate answers to our questions, and to that embarrassing problem that animals present to us.

What is that embarrassing problem? That we don't simply project human experience onto animals; we are (and are not) animals.

BATTERY CAGE

Is it anthropomorphism to try to imagine yourself into a farmed animal's cage? Is it anthropodenial not to?

The typical cage for egg-laying hens allows each sixty-seven square inches of floor space—somewhere between the size of this page and a sheet of printer paper. Such cages are stacked between three and nine tiers high—Japan has the world's highest battery cage unit, with cages stacked eighteen tiers high—in windowless sheds.

Step your mind into a crowded elevator, an elevator so crowded you cannot turn around without bumping into (and aggravating) your neighbor. The elevator is so crowded you are often held aloft. This is a kind of blessing, as the slanted floor is made of wire, which cuts into your feet.

After some time, those in the elevator will lose their ability to work in the interest of the group. Some will become violent; others will go mad. A few, deprived of food and hope, will become cannibalistic.

There is no respite, no relief. No elevator repairman is coming. The doors will open once, at the end of your life, for your journey to the only place worse (*see*: PROCESSING).

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BROILER CHICKENS

Not all chickens have to endure battery cages. In this way only, it could be said that *broilers*—chickens that become meat (as opposed to *layers*, chickens that lay eggs)—are lucky: they tend to get close to a single square foot of space.

If you aren't a farmer, what I've just written probably confuses you. You probably thought that chickens were chickens. But for the past half century, there have actually been two kinds of chickens—broilers and layers—each with distinct genetics. We call them both chickens, but they have starkly different bodies and metabolisms, engineered for different “functions.” Layers make eggs. (Their egg output has more than doubled since the 1930s.) Broilers make flesh. (In the same period, they have been engineered to grow more than twice as large in less than half the time. Chickens once had a life expectancy of fifteen to twenty years, but the modern broiler is typically killed at around six weeks. Their daily growth rate has increased roughly 400 percent.)

This raises all kinds of bizarre questions—questions that before I learned about our two types of chickens, I'd never had reason to ask—like, *What happens to all of the male offspring of layers?* If man hasn't designed them for meat, and nature clearly hasn't designed them to lay eggs, what function do they serve?

They serve no function. Which is why all male layers—half of all the layer chickens born in the United States, more than 250 million chicks a year—are destroyed.

Destroyed? That seems like a word worth knowing more about.

Most male layers are destroyed by being sucked through a series of pipes onto an electrified plate. Other layer chicks are destroyed in other ways, and it's impossible to call those animals more or less fortunate. Some are tossed into large plastic containers. The weak are trampled to the bottom, where they suffocate slowly. The strong

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suffocate slowly at the top. Others are sent fully conscious through macerators (picture a wood chipper filled with chicks).

Cruel? Depends on your definition of cruelty (*see*: CRUELTY).

BULLSHIT

- 1) The shit of a bull (*see also*: ENVIRONMENTALISM)
- 2) Misleading or false language and statements, such as:

BYCATCH

Perhaps the quintessential example of bullshit, *bycatch* refers to sea creatures caught by accident—except not really “by accident,” since bycatch has been consciously built into contemporary fishing methods. Modern fishing tends to involve much technology and few fishers. This combination leads to massive catches with massive amounts of bycatch. Take shrimp, for example. The average shrimp-trawling operation throws 80 to 90 percent of the sea animals it captures overboard, dead or dying, as bycatch. (Endangered species amount to much of this bycatch.) Shrimp account for only 2 percent of global seafood by weight, but shrimp trawling accounts for 33 percent of global bycatch. We tend not to think about this because we tend not to know about it. What if there were labeling on our food letting us know how many animals were killed to bring our desired animal to our plate? So, with trawled shrimp from Indonesia, for example, the label might read: 26 POUNDS OF OTHER SEA ANIMALS WERE KILLED AND TOSSED BACK INTO THE OCEAN FOR EVERY 1 POUND OF THIS SHRIMP.

Or take tuna. Among the other 145 species regularly killed—gratuitously—while killing tuna are: manta ray, devil ray, spotted skate, bignose shark, copper shark, Galapagos shark, sandbar shark, night shark, sand tiger shark, (great) white shark, hammerhead shark, spurdog fish, Cuban dogfish, bigeye thresher, mako, blue shark, wahoo, sailfish, bonito, king mackerel, Spanish mackerel,

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longbill spearfish, white marlin, swordfish, lancet fish, grey triggerfish, needlefish, pomfret, blue runner, black ruff, dolphin fish, bigeye cigarfish, porcupine fish, rainbow runner, anchovy, grouper, flying fish, cod, common sea horse, Bermuda chub, opah, escolar, leerfish, tripletail, goosfish, monkfish, sunfish, Murray eel, pilotfish, black gemfish, stone bass, bluefish, cassava fish, red drum, greater amberjack, yellowtail, common sea bream, barracuda, puffer fish, loggerhead turtle, green turtle, leatherback turtle, hawksbill turtle, Kemp's ridley turtle, Atlantic yellow-nosed albatross, Audouin's gull, balearic shearwater, black-browed albatross, great black-backed gull, great shearwater, great-winged petrel, grey petrel, herring gull, laughing gull, northern royal albatross, shy albatross, sooty shearwater, southern fulmar, Yelkouan shearwater, yellow-legged gull, minke whale, sei whale, fin whale, common dolphin, northern right whale, pilot whale, humpback whale, beaked whale, killer whale, harbor porpoise, sperm whale, striped dolphin, Atlantic spotted dolphin, spinner dolphin, bottlenose dolphin, and goose-beaked whale.

Imagine being served a plate of sushi. But this plate also holds all of the animals that were killed for your serving of sushi. The plate might have to be five feet across.

CAFO

Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation, a.k.a. factory farm. Tellingly, this formal designation was created not by the meat industry but by the Environmental Protection Agency (*see also*: ENVIRONMENTALISM). All CAFOs harm animals in ways that would be illegal according to even relatively weak animal welfare legislation. Thus:

CFE

Common Farming Exemptions make legal any method of raising farmed animals so long as it is commonly practiced within

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the industry. In other words, farmers—*corporations* is the right word—have the power to define cruelty. If the industry adopts a practice—hacking off unwanted appendages with no painkillers, for example, but you can let your imagination run with this—it automatically becomes legal.

CFEs are enacted state by state and range from the disturbing to the absurd. Take Nevada. Under its CFE, the state’s welfare laws cannot be enforced to “prohibit or interfere with established methods of animal husbandry, including the raising, handling, feeding, housing, and transporting, of livestock or farm animals.” What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Lawyers David Wolfson and Mariann Sullivan, experts on the issue, explain:

Certain states exempt specific practices, rather than all customary farming practices....Ohio exempts farmed animals from requirements for “wholesome exercise and a change of air,” and Vermont exempts farmed animals from the section in its criminal anticruelty statute that deems it illegal to “tie, tether and restrain” an animal in a manner that is “inhumane or detrimental to its welfare.” One cannot help but assume that in Ohio farmed animals are denied exercise and air, and that in Vermont they are tied, tethered or restrained in a manner that is inhumane.

COMFORT FOOD

One night, when my son was four weeks old, he developed a slight fever. By the next morning he was having trouble breathing. On our pediatrician’s recommendation, we took him to the emergency room, where he was diagnosed with RSV (respiratory syncytial virus), which often expresses itself in adults as the common cold,

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but in babies can be extremely dangerous, even life threatening. We ended up spending a week in the pediatric intensive-care unit, my wife and I taking turns sleeping in the armchair in our son's room, and on the waiting-room recliner.

On the second, third, fourth, and fifth days, our friends Sam and Eleanor brought us food. Lots of food, far more than we could eat: lentil salad, chocolate truffles, roasted vegetables, nuts and berries, mushroom risotto, potato pancakes, green beans, nachos, wild rice, oatmeal, dried mango, pasta primavera, chili—all of it comfort food. We could have eaten in the cafeteria or ordered in. And they could have expressed their love with visits and kind words. But they brought all of that food, and it was a small, good thing that we needed. That, more than any other reason—and there are many other reasons—is why this book is dedicated to them.

COMFORT FOOD, CONT.

On the sixth day, my wife and I were able, for the first time since arriving, to leave the hospital together. Our son was clearly over the hump, and doctors thought we'd be able to take him home the following morning. We could hear the bullet we'd dodged whistle past. So as soon as he'd fallen asleep (with my in-laws by his bedside), we took the elevator down and reemerged into the world.

It was snowing. The snowflakes were surreally large, distinct and durable: like the ones children cut out of white paper. We glided like sleepwalkers down Second Avenue, no destination in mind, and ended up in a Polish diner. Massive glass windows faced the street, and the snowflakes clung for several seconds before descending. I can't remember what I ordered. I can't remember if the food was any good. It was the best meal of my life.

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CRUELTY

Not only the willful causing of unnecessary suffering, but the indifference to it. It's much easier to be cruel than one might think.

It's often said that nature, "red in tooth and claw," is cruel. I heard this again and again from ranchers, who tried to persuade me that they were protecting their animals from what lay outside the enclosures. Nature is no picnic, true. (*Picnics* are rarely picnics.) And it's also true that animals on the very best farms often have better lives than they would in the wild. But nature isn't cruel. And neither are the animals in nature that kill and occasionally even torture one another. Cruelty depends on an understanding of cruelty, and the ability to choose against it. Or to choose to ignore it.

DESPERATION

There are sixty pounds of flour in my grandmother's basement. On a recent weekend visit, I was sent down to retrieve a bottle of Coke and discovered the sacks lining the wall, like sandbags on the banks of a rising river. Why would a ninety-year-old woman need so much flour? And why the several dozen two-liter bottles of Coke, or the pyramid of Uncle Ben's, or the wall of pumpernickel loaves in the freezer?

"I noticed you have an awful lot of flour in the basement," I said, returning to the kitchen.

"Sixty pounds."

I couldn't read her tone. Was that pride I heard? A hint of challenge? Shame?

"Can I ask why?"

She opened a cabinet and took down a thick stack of coupons, each of which offered a free sack of flour for every bag purchased.

"How did you get so many of these?" I asked.

"It wasn't a problem."

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“What are you going to do with all of that flour?”

“I’ll make some cookies.”

I tried to imagine how my grandmother, who has never driven a car in her life, managed to schlep all of those sacks from the supermarket to her house. Someone drove her, as always, but did she load down any one car with all sixty, or did she make multiple trips? Knowing my grandmother, she probably calculated how many sacks she could get in one car without overly inconveniencing the driver. She then contacted the necessary number of friends and made that many trips to the supermarket, likely in one day. Was this what she meant by ingenuity, all those times she told me that it was her luck and ingenuity that got her through the Holocaust?

I’ve been an accomplice on many of my grandmother’s food-acquisition missions. I remember a sale of some pelleted bran cereal, for which the coupon limited three boxes per customer. After buying three boxes herself, my grandmother sent my brother and me to buy three boxes each while she waited at the door. What must I have looked like to the cashier? A five-year-old boy using a coupon to buy multiple boxes of a foodstuff that not even a genuinely starving person would willfully eat? We went back an hour later and did it again.

The flour demanded answers. For what population was she planning on baking all of these cookies? Where was she hiding the 1,400 cartons of eggs? And most obviously: How did she get all of those sacks into the basement? I’ve met enough of her decrepit chauffeurs to know they weren’t doing the hauling.

“One bag at a time,” she said, dusting the table with her palm.

One bag at a time. My grandmother has trouble making it from the car to the front door one step at a time. Her breathing is slow and labored, and on a recent visit to the doctor, it was discovered that she shares a heart rate with the great blue whale.

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Her perpetual wish is to live to the next bar mitzvah, but I expect her to live another decade, at least. She's not the kind of person who dies. She could live to be 120, and there's no way she'll use up half of the flour. And she must know that.

DISCOMFORT FOOD

Sharing food generates good feeling and creates social bonds. Michael Pollan, who has written as thoughtfully about food as anyone, calls this "table fellowship" and argues that its importance, which I agree is significant, is a vote against vegetarianism. At one level, he's right.

Let's assume you're like Pollan and are opposed to factory-farmed meat. If you're at the guest end, it stinks not to eat food that was prepared for you, especially (although he doesn't get into this) when the grounds for refusal are ethical. But how much does it stink? It's a classic dilemma: How much do I value creating a socially comfortable situation, and how much do I value acting socially responsible? The relative importance of ethical eating and table fellowship will be different in different situations (declining my grandmother's chicken with carrots is different from passing on microwaved buffalo wings).

More important, though, and what Pollan curiously doesn't emphasize, is that attempting to be a selective omnivore is a much heavier blow to table fellowship than vegetarianism. Imagine an acquaintance invites you to dinner. You could say, "I'd love to come. And just so you know, I'm a vegetarian." You could also say, "I'd love to come. But I only eat meat that is produced by family farmers." Then what do you do? You'll probably have to send the host a web link or list of local shops to even make the request intelligible, let alone manageable. This effort might be well-placed, but it is certainly more invasive than asking for vegetarian food (which these days requires no explanation). The entire food industry (restaurants, airline and college

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food services, catering at weddings) is set up to accommodate vegetarians. There is no such infrastructure for the selective omnivore.

And what about being at the host end of a gathering? Selective omnivores also eat vegetarian fare, but the reverse is obviously not true. What choice promotes greater table fellowship?

And it isn't just what we put into our mouths that creates table fellowship, but what comes out. There is also the possibility that a conversation about what we believe would generate more fellowship—even when we believe different things—than any food being served.