Hungry for the Good Life: 
Exploring Michael Pollan’s Vision 
of Ethical Eating in America

Sarah Turkus
Haverford College
Department of Religion
Senior Thesis

Submitted April 19, 2010
Table of Contents

Abstract 3

Introduction 5

Chapter One: Michael Pollan 10
  Pollan’s role ...as a prophetic figure
  Pollan’s role ...constructing an ethical model

Chapter Two: The Fallen State 22
  Realities of our Situation
  Why Are We Fallen?
    A Deep Ecology Perspective
    A Spiritual Lacking, A Mindset Corruption

Chapter Three: The Ethical Issues 34
  Bodies
  Earth
  Animals

Chapter Four: Eating Ethically 42
  How?
    The Case of Whole Foods
    Defining the Access Issue
    Combating the Access Issue
    The Farm Bill
    The Local Approach

Conclusions 58

Bibliography 61
Abstract

This thesis examines the model of ethical eating that Michael Pollan, along with others in the movement for reforming our food system, proposes as an alternative to the standard American eating model. Conventional American food consumption is fueled by industrialized agriculture and factory farming, and advocates of the movement strive to educate the general public about the negative implications of practices common in the food industry on our health, the condition of the environment, and the wellbeing of farmed animals. By analyzing Pollan’s *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, I show how his vision of ethical eating reflects an ethical system regarding care for these three points of interest. I propose that Pollan operates as a prophet trying to mobilize the people towards the good life that we could have. In contrast to the good life, I show how Pollan and others have characterized the current American food system as representative of the fallen state of our society. I present the arguments that conceive of current American culture as demonstrating a deficit of values or a corrupted national mindset.

The path to achieve the good life, as suggested by Pollan and others in the movement, involves shifting the norm to consumption based on locally and organically grown or produced foods. Pollan presents this simple model for the good life as a way that every individual can take responsibility for the connections between their daily consumption and their ethical obligations. The ethical system implicit in Pollan’s message is assumed to be universally accepted.

However, there are various limitations to Pollan’s proposed mechanism for a national transition to the good life, and I explore the debates within the ethical eating movement regarding these issues. Critics of Pollan, such as Julie Guthman, take issue with the fact that Pollan’s message is one of individual solutions rather than large-scale reform efforts. They argue that these individual solutions are elitist, because sustainable local foods are difficult to access in many cultural and economic contexts, and organic foods are much more expensive than conventional goods.
Allegations of elitism are founded on the premise that purchasing a ‘personal organic bubble’ is only a feasible option for Americans of a certain class standing. Additionally, there are debates within the movement regarding whether individual solutions are prudent, as opposed to organized efforts to reform the government’s influence on the food system via the Farm Bill.

Guthman and others are also critical of Pollan’s mechanism for inciting change, which is to educate everyone with alarming horror stories about pesticides and animal cruelty and then to assume that, having been enlightened, everyone will feel compelled to change their ways. I examine, through Guthman’s arguments, the implications of such an assumption – that once educated, everyone would be driven to the same vision of the ideal good life.

I argue that Michael Pollan wants all Americans to reform the ways in which they think about their eating habits, to realize that eating is an ethically-charged act, and to consent to his ethical model. Though an enthusiastic leader, I problematize Pollan’s leadership role based on my conjecture that ‘spreading the good word’ is not a prudent strategy for achieving the kind of large-scale reform that Pollan is looking to achieve. Therefore, I conclude that ‘the good life’ that Pollan and other ethical eating advocates envision is perhaps farther out of reach than they would like to think. However, in an attempt to contend with the hopelessness that Roger Gottlieb fears is paralyzing Americans into inaction, I observe how venues and organizations in the local Philadelphia area are working to improve access to ethically-sound foods, as well as how I can hope to move forward as an active ethical eater.
INTRODUCTION

Helen and Scott Nearing published the instructional narrative *Living the Good Life* in 1954 after fleeing the realities of the Great Depression in America and settling into life on a farm in the Northeast. The following is an excerpt from their chapter regarding eating:

We believe… that nutrition is one of the primary factors in determining the health, happiness, and usefulness of every human being. We are equally convinced that the immense sums spent by food processors, drug manufacturers and pharmaceutical houses…are having a deleterious effect on the well being of the American… One of the chief factors that took us out of the city into the country was an awareness of the menace to health arising out of food processing and poisoning and a determination to safeguard ourselves against it.

We admit that our solution of the problem – raising our own food – is a personal one since it leaves millions of people in the United States more or less helpless victims of the food industry. We should like to make two points in answer to this contention. The first is that each time even one individual or family wakes up to the situation and takes steps to ameliorate it, an advance is made if only a tiny one for the family or person in question, and for those they influence through precept or example. The second point is even more important. While it is true, at the moment, that all too few individuals and families in the United States are doing anything practical to meet the menace of processed, poisoned foods, we hold that at least half of them, if they so decided, could (1) produce part of their own food…; (2) by creating an organized demand for whole organic food, greatly extend its production and availability; (3) purchase whole foods and prepare them at home instead of buying processed, packaged, chemicalized foods on the market. (Nearing 125-6)

Writing in the middle of the twentieth century, Helen and Scott identified the American food system as detrimental to the well-being of society. According to the Nearings, good health, and the good life, came from whole, organic foods. They saw their retreat from mainstream society as a personal, individual solution to a massive problem. But, they suggested, every person that challenges the system is a vote against it, and furthermore, “at least half” of Americans could feasibly choose to take their diet into their own hands.

Michael Pollan, author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* and a prominent advocate for reforming the food system in America, writes for an American society today that is living in a post-Nearing era. Pollan’s premise echoes that of the Nearings: the food you eat affects the person you will be, in
terms of your health and your happiness (which, for Pollan, is linked to your ethical stability). With a strategy more pragmatic for our current day, Pollan sets aside the homesteading aspect of the Nearings’ good life model and, instead, seeks to lead Americans into living the good life directly through their stomachs. The Nearings found themselves “in the midst of a technological and consumption-oriented American culture they found to be spiritually and ethically wanting” (Gould xvii), and through the practice of homesteading they attempted “to live a good and moral life, a life that might redeem society or at least the self” (Gould xxi). Pollan aligns with this view of society, an American culture that is ethically deficient, and he seeks to guide us out of our fallen state and into the good life via his model for ethical eating. It remains to be seen what we must have fallen from – an agrarian nation fallen into industrialization? a fall into blissful ignorance? Either way, Pollan has taken up the mission, through his popular texts such as *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, of educating us about the current state of our food culture and of showing us the way to a better life – with stomachs filled with organic and local foods.

One could argue that notions of the good life are predicated on a certain utopic idealism. Lucy Sargisson theorizes about utopic communities and writes that they are invariably fictions, to some extent, but that they can serve a very real function for those living within them and those on the outside as well. Sargisson lists:

- They imagine alternative realities;
- they stretch the conventions of the present;
- they re-present the world to us for inspection from another perspective;
- they imagine worlds transformed. (Sargisson 7)

Through these modes, by actively engaging in a speculation about what could be on a larger scale than is being realized, utopias are a perfect mechanism to engage in social or political critique while exploring the feasibility of alternatives to the norm.

Exploring Pollan’s vision for the good life, I’ve come to understand something about myself and my place within the narrative of the American food system – I live in a fantasy world. You
could also say I live in a utopia, or rather, a gastrotopia. I am a member of EHaus, an intentional co-operative community of twelve college students living and learning at Haverford College. EHaus functionally exists to provide a space to practice living communally and eating according to a particular set of standards: local, in season, organic, vegetarian, and together. Sargisson argues that utopias “work from the margins of fantasy” while addressing “frustrations of the present” (Sargisson 9); such a formulation could be applied to EHaus. As a community that is self-selecting on so many levels – there is an internal application process to be able to join EHaus, but more importantly, everyone in the cooperative is also a part of the Haverford community – EHaus exists within the safety bubble of an elite liberal arts college campus. We are provided with economic and logistical support from the institution, and furthermore, we are encouraged throughout our lives at Haverford to explore and push boundaries and engage our academic learning; EHaus is thus supported through a larger set of intellectual values and assumptions.

Once could argue that through this institutional support, Ehaus exists “on the margins of fantasy.” The lifestyle, and most importantly, the eating model, that we are encouraged and able to engage in is far from a reality for most Americans, and this is precisely the frustration that EHaus intends to subvert, as well as one of the problems that this thesis explores. Consuming only local, organic foods is a struggle both logistically and economically, and therefore the movement to make this eating model the standard for Americans often falls under accusations of elitism. Nevertheless, following this model of sustainable eating is what we in EHaus see as the way to live out our ethical obligations, and we are certainly not the only ones. Advocates of a revolution of the American food system, figures such as Michael Pollan, agree that the criteria to which we adhere in EHaus (organic, local, sustainable foods) represent a food system that is aligned with an ethical standard that should be the norm, not the exception.
By addressing the frustrations that many people experience with the current food system, EHaus’s existence as a gastrotopia serves to both criticize the norm and to function as a model for a viable alternative. Bill Devall and George Sessions, scholars of deep ecology philosophy whom we will hear from later, speculate about the value of utopias, and they conclude that “creating ecotopian futures has practical value, [because] it helps us articulate our goals” (Devall and Sessions 162). EHaus’s role, then, for its members and the extended community which interacts with and benefits from it, is to model and explore the feasibility of an alternative system. It works as a project to explore the potentiality of the ethical eating system for a broader scale.

As a leader in the movement for developing an ethical eating model for our modern systems of food production and consumption, Michael Pollan addresses his message to everyone. He operates under the presumption that if they only knew, if everyone was educated about the truths behind the food industry, then everyone would reject the standard American diet and demand a food system based on organic and local products, responsibly grown and produced. However, there are various obstacles on the way towards this vision of the good life. A straight path does not cut across this landscape; rather it is a tangle of avenues and barriers, from economic and race issues to misplaced government subsidies and industry corruption. Although Pollan imagines America as someday becoming a gastrotopia, the telos of his vision is a long way off, if not unattainable. The term ‘utopia,’ from its inception in Sir Thomas More’s imagination, is a formulation of the Greek words for ‘no place,’ and thus the impossibility of a utopic vision is implicit in the label itself. Thriving in EHaus gives me hope that ethical eating can be a reality, but living in such a contrived reality reminds me daily that the promise of the good life is still far off. In the course of this project, I examine the facets of the ethical eating movement as it has developed within modern American society, the futures it theorizes and the challenges it faces. The final section of this thesis will look at
the steps being taken, on the national government level as well as locally, in Philadelphia-area communities, to make ethical eating a feasible model for everyone.
Chapter One: MICHAEL POLLAN

Michael Pollan is currently a professor at the Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism. He is also the author of multiple books about food production and consumption, most recently In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto and Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual. Pollan regularly writes for the New York Times Magazine, and he authored an opinion blog online for the New York Times called “On the Table.” Pollan’s expertise on issues of food politics and sustainable agriculture is exhibited on countless television talk shows, news segments, and radio appearances, and as contributions to essay collections or as prefaces to relevant books, such as in the case of Food Fight, which will be utilized later in this project. He has been awarded many accolades for his work, and generally Pollan is highly regarded by both the mainstream and the scholarly field.

For the purpose of this thesis, I only examine Pollan’s views as he presents them in The Omnivore’s Dilemma, for this arguably presents his most successful and widely accessed work. The New York Times and The Washington Post both named it one of the best ten books of 2006; but more important than media recognition is the everyday familiarity that many people have with the book. The Omnivore’s Dilemma is written with compelling and accessible language that makes it popular for library book club reading lists as well as high school and college class syllabi, and it is even well-read as an airport bookstore pickup. A simple Google search of “Pollan talking about Omnivore’s Dilemma” pulls up interviews and video clips of Pollan in every imaginable venue: from NPR and TED Talks, to Democracy Now! and the Sierra Club, to TeenVogue and The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. The movie Food, Inc. is largely based off the premise of The Omnivore’s Dilemma, and Pollan served as a consultant for the film. The message of The Omnivore’s Dilemma is foundational for much

---

1 NPR is the National Public Radio station. TED Talks are a project of TED, a non-profit dedicated to “the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and ultimately, the world.” TED Talks are one of the venues through which TED makes public the knowledge and ideas of “the world’s most inspired thinkers” (TED.com).
of Pollan’s other work, and the book is often utilized as a first foray into the world of food reform by those hoping to educate other friends about these issues.

Pollan is very active in the debates over America’s modern food system that are constantly developing and deepening, and he engages with new information and challenges addressed to him frequently. It would be a mistake to assume that *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* represents the full scope of Pollan’s knowledge and opinions on the topic at hand. However, he presents *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* as an introduction to the field, as a venture across the landscape of food culture in America as he sees it today and hopes to see it change, and therefore this text is an ideal case study for Pollan’s vision of a ethical eating future for America.

**Pollan’s Role …as a prophetic figure**

*Can we eat our way to a better world?* Melanie Du Puis opens her overview of the history of food advice in America with this question, to which Michael Pollan and his ethical eating colleagues would answer unanimously, *yes we can.* Pollan and a host of other social critics and public intellectuals have drawn on a long tradition of Americans linking social progress with dietary reform. As Du Puis notes, the source of moral authority for what constitutes the perfect diet has changed over time, but the story is fairly standardized: “an invisible messenger, from angels to germs to vitamins [to organics]; and a mediator, from preacher to scientist [to foodie novelist], who sees himself or herself as the medium, the popular evangelizer” (DuPuis 34). Pollan is a popular evangelizer, spreading the good word of local and organic foods. The fact that the localism and organics movement is exploding in modern American mainstream does not take away from his assumed position as the source of the news; in fact, it only adds fuel to his fire.

Julie Guthman points out that the pedagogy of food is a burgeoning field attracting students as well. Speaking from her own experience as a professor at the University of California at Santa
Cruz, Guthman notes that “courses on food (from social, critical angles) are proliferating these days and students can’t seem to get enough… It is hard to resist the ‘what to eat’ move” (Guthman “Commentary” 261). While Du Puis remarks that modern popular food writers, such as Pollan, are “simply the latest in a long line of Americans who have sought to perfect the nation through its stomach” (DuPuis 43), trends seem to show that the advice is not unsolicited. Indeed, media attention has catapulted Pollan to stardom, particularly after the popular success of his 2006 *Omnivore’s Dilemma*. Pollan himself notes that Americans are avid ingesters of food advice – but in place of the messages of carbohydrate restriction and trans-fat warnings, Pollan is campaigning for local, ‘small organic’ diets (Pollan 2).

Long before Americans looked to the Barnes and Noble ‘new books’ display for direction, they relied on the advice that religion provided. Michael Pollan assumes this divine authority for himself when he utilizes a familiar religious narrative to declare his message – that of the fallen, awaiting a leader to guide them to a better life. Pollan is ready to be that leader, as a popular evangelizer or a prophet, for Americans. In the introduction to *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Pollan tells us that our “native wisdom” is gone; whatever understanding of what was good for us to eat that we as a people might have once possessed “has been replaced by confusion and anxiety” (Pollan 1). So we are left a misguided society, prone “to confuse protein bars and food supplements with meals… feed[ing] fully a third of its children at a fast-food outlet every day” (Pollan 3), and Pollan would have us believe that our commercialized and industrialized eating habits reflect a deeply corrupted state of being. America’s national eating disorder, as he diagnoses it, is derived from the fact that we are “a relatively new nation, drawn from many different immigrant populations, each with its own culture of food” (Pollan 5). Without a “single, strong, stable culinary tradition to guide us” (Pollan 5), we have fallen into this rut of culinary existence. *If we only knew*, Pollan insists, “if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely
change the way we eat” (Pollan 11). *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* operates on exactly this premise as it peeks over the high walls and carries the reader along, with the assumption that once we’ve seen the hidden truths, we will surely change our ways.

Michael Pollan is here to educate us, so that we can reform our pitiable habits and adopt a healthier, more sustainable, more ethical model of eating, and perhaps, model for life. The media has embraced Pollan in this role, as the messenger of a better world ahead. And the swarms of millions of Americans who read his books, follow his *New York Times* blog, watch his interviews on news channels, and attend his speaking events are the faithful of Pollan’s flock, eager to reform, or at least reconsider, their ways after hearing his “charismatic proselytizing” (DuPuis 34).

There is an interesting element of scorned indignation in the narrative of our modern day dietary prophets. In the preface to his 2006 book, *The Way We Eat*, Peter Singer laments that this message is not really new. Horror stories about the food industry and factory farming practices have been written about and made available to the public for a while now, and yet, we appear not to get the message. Singer writes how his 1980 book *Animal Factories*, co-authored with Jim Mason, incited a wave of publicity concerning factory farming throughout the mainstream media:

> We appeared on CNN and on NBC’s *Today*. The book’s warnings about the harm factory farming inflicts on the environment, on rural communities, and on animals have been echoed by many others since. And yet the publicity that *Animal Factories* stirred up subsided without any significant changes taking place. (Singer v)

While Singer’s remark is perhaps the most straightforward in its accusation, the discourse of ethical eating appears to agree that while there is ample information out there, people are not listening. In a conversation about food education, Julie Guthman points out that the exposés by Pollan and his colleagues are all “responding to the well-documented injustices, health and environmental risks of the industrial food system” (Guthman “Commentary” 261).

The danger of this frustration of not being heard that Pollan and others are up against is that the messengers, constantly having to repeat themselves, assume an attitude of moral superiority that
becomes palpable in their writing. Julie Guthman is currently one of the most vocal critics of Michael Pollan, and she has much to say about his unwarranted self-righteous tone. For example, Guthman accuses Pollan, among others, of making a leap from proposing that many Americans are overweight due to their unhealthy food choices to assuming that overweight Americans lack the agency to make better choices. She writes that Pollan must see himself as morally superior to others; he claims that “when food is abundant and cheap, people will eat more of it and get fat” (Pollan 102), and yet, he is able to resist the instinct to which fat people are beholden (Guthman “Stomach” 78)?

Beyond taking away agency from overweight Americans, Guthman’s main qualm with Pollan is that his messianic approach to inciting a food revolution is oversimplified and exclusive. Adopting an eating model that is both more ethically sound for the biosphere and more healthy for individuals is a fine and admirable goal, but Guthman, among others, argues that Pollan’s privileged proselytizing is only going to help some individuals, those with the access and income to purchase their own organic safety bubble. One might wonder from whence Pollan and his contemporaries have assumed their messianic authority; in response even Guthman would have to concede that their arguments are well researched (“Pollan is usually spot-on with his critiques of industrial food…” (Stoneman)). However, she bemoans the fact that, despite his accurate appraisal of the problem, when it comes to the solution, Pollan “tells readers to buy and eat just like him. He appeals in that way to those who already are refined eaters and want to feel ethically good about it” (Stoneman).

Ethical eating as a goal for an American norm is a bigger issue than just inviting everyone to the (organic) table, and this is the point that Pollan’s well-intentioned messianic approach is missing. The revolution that Pollan advocates for is inextricably bound to politics, to issues of class and race, and though neither my objective nor Guthman’s is to condemn Michael Pollan for his guidance thus
far, the issue stands that there is much more to be done. Du Puis noted in her *Angels and Vegetables* investigation that Americans are open to the help that Pollan is willing to provide:

because we have lost our faith in both religion and science as guides to eating, we rely on popular writers to steer us through a welter of confusing and contradictory information. (DuPuis 43)

However, Guthman notes, Pollan “seems to have given little thought to the efficacy of conversion attempts” (Guthman “Commentary” 261) by preaching the gospel of a universal redefinition of food to a select flock of economically-sound followers, when what we really need is a national revolution of understanding.

---

**Pollan’s Role …constructing an ethical model**

Michael Pollan presents a model in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* which dictates that in order to live ethically, you must exhibit your ethics through your eating habits. Eating is one of the most fundamental things that we do, and Pollan would argue that our consumption of food is an activity that is connected to absolutely everything else, and thus we cannot suggest that we are ethical beings if our eating habits are not in-line with our morals. In his role as a messiah of the ethical eating movement, Pollan both presupposes and constructs an ethical model that suggests that you should care for the integrity of your own body, the environment, and the bodies of animals. He goes on to educate us that we can do so by eating local and organic foods.

This ethical model is not based on any religious doctrine or higher power of truth, so Pollan has to convince his audience that this ethical vision has authority based on some other source. Through his narrative strategies, his liberal use of ‘scary science’ facts, and his reliance on the emotional reaction of anxiety to these facts, Pollan sets up a situation in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* in which his readers are meant to be convinced that they are clearly ignorant of important information and in need of guidance. This narrative structure allows Pollan to step in as a guiding figure, relying
on the authority of scientific research (of which he seems to have a masterful understanding), to lead
the reader to adopt his ethical model and subsequently his ethical way of eating. The doubt that he
instills in the reader is crucial, because he creates his ethical guidelines but also assumes that these
guidelines reflect values that the reader already holds. Even if some of his readers did not adhere to
this ethical system, Pollan aims to convince them that they must have been ignorant of the actual
workings of food production and consumption, and thus they should adopt the ethical model and
way of life that Pollan advocates. The strength of Pollan’s ethical eating message is that he assumes
your complicity. In telling you that typical eating habits are violating the ethics of respecting your
body, the environment, and the wellbeing of others, and then directing you how to eat alternatively
to fall in line with those ethics, Pollan presumes that the ethics themselves are values that you
already hold; and if you don’t, Pollan leaves little room for you not to feel implicated. Thus the
assumption on his part is that you will adopt his model, having been convinced.

Pollan endeavors to address every American in his exploration of the way that we should eat.
Many of Pollan’s underlying assumptions and the tone of his premise can be gathered from the
introduction to his book, a section which is titled “Our National Eating Disorder.” Choosing such a
title sends the message that this is a national problem, a collective American issue, in which we are
all involved. His choice of the term eating disorder capitalizes on Americans’ familiarity with
pathologies of eating and consumption. Such disorders are generally regarded as serious medical
conditions and are highly stigmatized in American society. Pollan’s opening statement of the
introduction takes another sweeping move: What should we have for dinner? With this opening
question, Pollan draws in the common audience. It is a basic question with every-day applicability,
and it makes his readers think immediately that whatever he has to say clearly applies to them. The
concluding sentences of the introduction play a similar role:

To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake might sound like a burden,
but in practice few things in life can afford quite as much satisfaction. By
comparison, the pleasures of eating industrially, which is to say eating in ignorance, are fleeting... In the end this is a book about the pleasures of eating, the kinds of pleasure that are only deepened by knowing. (Pollan 11)

Such pleasure of ignorance admittedly leaves no space for readers to feel like the message does not apply to them or that they do not have to care; the only other option once you’ve started reading would be to resign to your ignorance. Indeed, ignorance is part of Pollan’s strategy – as he sets up a power dynamic which makes his readers feel ill-informed, such that they have no choice but to read on in order to be enlightened.

There is also a running universality to Pollan’s message, such as when he reminds us that “like every other creature on earth, humans take part in a food chain” (Pollan 6) – not only are all humans involved in this process, but we are just like all the other creatures. Everyone is a part of the story. The quote goes on to argue that “our place in that food chain, or web, determines to a considerable extent what kind of creature we are” (Pollan 6). With this claim, Pollan emphasizes the importance of his message, placing a burden of responsibility on the reader to become educated, so that ‘the kind of creature you are’ can be an ethically sound one.

Once Pollan has secured every single American’s place in his story, he goes on to foster anxiety and emotional investment in the reader. His most prominent technique is to make the reader feel left in the dark and in need of guidance. In the introduction, Pollan states that “when you can eat just about anything nature has to offer [as humans can...], deciding what you should eat will inevitably stir anxiety, especially when some of the potential foods on offer are liable to sicken or kill you” (Pollan 3). This reminder, that as an omnivore you have endless options, and that those options should inevitably make you nervous, is ultimately as the title suggests a central premise in Pollan’s argument. Furthermore, his quip that some of the foods available might make you sick or even kill you is meant not only to spark interest but also fear in the reader, so that they must read on.
Pollan continues with this theme of our burden of choice and our predestined anxiety due to those choices. He uses this idea to vilify the American supermarket, remarking that “the cornucopia of the American supermarket has thrown us back on a bewildering food landscape where we once again have to worry…” (Pollan 4). Making the reader fear even the familiar space of a supermarket is another part of Pollan’s strategy. Such a formulation suggests that whatever you thought you knew should be questioned. This placement of doubt is used repeatedly when Pollan reveals that a food that you might have thought was safe is actually harmful, or the company promoting its consumption is actually sneaky, or, especially, that such companies have only money, and not your well being, in mind. One example is the case of the soda industry; Pollan relates that “by 1984, Coca Cola and Pepsi had switched over entirely from sugar to high-fructose corn syrup. Why? Because HFCS was a few cents cheaper than sugar and consumers didn’t seem to notice the substitution” (Pollan 104). Presumably, none of Pollan’s readers were under the impression that soda was healthy anyway, but Pollan brings in the added curse of the company trying to sneak around its customers, instilling more anxiety in his reader.

In contrast to Pollan’s repeated message that the food industry cannot be trusted, and that even regulatory or nutritional information labels often are not reliable, he uses discursive strategies to substantiate his own honesty. The text is set up so that the reader and the author, together, retrace each of the food chains that Pollan has delineated. Pollan appears to lay it all out for his reader, everything he discovers and how he perceives new data, and even in the order that he came to understand it, with comments about his revelations and hesitations thrown in for veracity. Pollan also often anticipates the reader’s skepticism openly, and then proceeds to explain it away. By staging arguments in his writing, Pollan negates any reluctance the reader might have about consenting to Pollan’s scripted path.
We definitely need a guide, a point that Pollan makes very clear. He repeatedly reminds us of our burden of choice and how vulnerable it leaves us. Pollan points out that “this most elemental of activities – figuring out what to eat – has come to require a remarkable amount of expert help” (Pollan 1). Here he is referring to American society’s tendency to look to nutritional fads and revolutionary diet techniques to be healthy. He reminds the reader that there is much they do not know, and since he has researched it all and is now writing this book, he is prepared to educate everyone. One of Pollan’s most elemental claims is that, “If we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat” (Pollan 11) – he has looked over those walls, and now he is prepared to reveal the truth to everyone else, with faith that they will surely change their ways.

Pollan’s authority, beyond his own experiences and observations, upon which he places a great deal of merit, comes from his explanation and illumination of extensive scientific facts. He uses data and statistics about the chemistry behind processed food, the harmful effects of pesticides, and so on to prove his premise that industrial is bad, and natural is good. One example is in his discussion of the McDonalds meal that he eats with his family. Picking up a nutrition fact sheet, he reads the ingredients of a chicken nugget with horror:

According to the handout, McNuggets also contain several completely synthetic ingredients, quasiedible substances that ultimately come not from a corn or soybean field but from a petroleum refinery or chemical plant. These chemicals are what make modern processed foods possible, by keeping the organic materials in hem from going bad or looking strange after months in the freezer or on the road… There are ‘anti-foaming agents’ like dimethylpolysiloxene, added to the cooking oil to keep the starches from binding to air molecules, so as to produce foam during the fry. The problem is evidently grave enough to warrant adding a toxic chemical to the food: According to the Handbook of Food Additives, dimethylpolysiloxene is a suspected carcinogen and an established mutagen, tumorigen, and reproductive effector. (Pollan 113)

Pollan assumes that his readers not accustomed to the scientific discourse he is explaining. The average person’s unfamiliarity with this discourse allows Pollan to shape his own explanations for
greatest rhetorical force. For example, the Handbook cited here lists the particular chemical being discussed as a “suspected carcinogen,” yet Pollan goes on to describe this substance as “toxic” to fully accentuate its danger.

The basic dichotomy that natural is good while industrial is bad is a crucial premise for Pollan’s entire conversation about ethical eating. He writes that “there exists a fundamental tension between the logic of nature and the logic of human industry” (Pollan 9), presuming that the logic of nature is infallible and that human logic is flawed. This designation is exhibited when Pollan points out that “health and environmental problems created by our food system owe to our attempts to oversimplify nature’s complexities” (Pollan 9) – our efforts to add industrialization onto natural processes have left us with negative side effects that could have been avoided if we had just let nature work its own way and not meddled. Julie Guthman notes in her article “Commentary on teaching food” that Pollan extends his designations of good and bad to the characters in his story. She says that Pollan shows “obvious fascination with the lay knowledge of farmers, cooks, gardeners, hunters, and gatherers” (Guthman “Commentary” 262) and contrasts them with his villains, characters including “food giants such as Frank Perdue and Don Tyson” (Guthman “Commentary” 262).

Pollan contrasts the industrial-food way of life, characterized by a meal at McDonalds, with the happy life of a sustainable farmer. Describing a day at Joel Salatin’s poultry farm, he relates how “the only thing missing from the scene was a happy shepherd, but then, wasn’t that the tall fellow loping toward me in the broad blue suspenders and the floppy hat?...” (Pollan 125). For Pollan, and for the sake of his story, Salatin’s “jaunty chapeau – made of grass, note, rather than plastic – bespoke independence, sufficiency, even ease” (Pollan 125). The model of life that Pollan is elevating in this passage seems nostalgic for a past era, but the reader need not pine for life on the farm, as long as they can relate to the pleasure of “independence, sufficiency, and ease.”
By the end of Pollan’s journey, when he arrives at what he labels his Perfect Meal, it is assumed that you will be in agreement with his decision. Pollan makes a value judgment for his reader by saying that the Perfect Meal, the one that he hunted and gathered and grew himself, did not even have to taste good for him to be satisfied. It was the rare opportunity to “eat in full consciousness of everything involved in feeding myself” (Pollan 9). This awareness, which Pollan alluded to earlier in his claim that eating in ignorance provides only fleeting pleasure, is Pollan’s highest good in the story of living and eating ethically. The point is a respectable one, namely that the more you know, the better off you are. He brings up the fact that even an organic label, which should carry some weight of truth, is “really just an imperfect substitute for direct observation of how a food is produced” (Pollan 137). And if direct observation of the various stages of food production is the highest ideal, then Pollan’s model for ethical eating which promotes locally produced goods, while arguably impractical, makes perfect sense.
Chapter Two: THE FALLEN STATE

The belief that the American food system represents a fallen state for our society, a crucial disconnection of ethical standards and tangible actions, is an idea that fuels Pollan’s message as well as the opinions of many other scholars and activists. The realities of our industrialized food system demonstrate critical problems with our placement of authority, our ability to hold offenders responsible for their misdeeds, and the structure of power within the food system more broadly considered.

The conviction that American food culture is fallen is supported by the belief system outlined within the deep ecology movement. Furthermore, several writers have identified the problem as a cultural or spiritual crisis, with hopes that some form of religion or spiritual guidance might be able to guide American society back onto an ethically stable track.

Realities of our Situation

The editor of the comprehensive text Fatal Harvest, Andrew Kimbrell, recalls the story of corporations taking over the food industry that he absorbed growing up. In the latter half of the twentieth century, “such corporate bromides as ‘better living through chemistry,’ ‘progress is our middle name,’ and even ‘DDT is good for me’” (Kimbrell xi) were standard rhetoric in America. He brings up the cartoon Jetson family as the anticipated model of the future, the theoretical pinnacle of the message that technology meant progress, and of course progress regarding all of our daily activities, including eating, had to be a positive thing. Kimbrell writes that throughout his youth, “behind all the jingles, ads, and media mantras of that time was the unquestioned message that the more we industrialized our food production, the more ‘modern’ and desirable the food” (Kimbrell xi). That message is a large part of what drove society into its fallen state, and it dominates our worldview still today. Although we have moved away some from believing that “artificial is better”
(Kimbrell xi), we are unwavering in our ability to be wooed by new technologies that further revolutionize the way our food is produced. Kimbrell bemoans that in less than a century, America was “transformed from a nation of farmers, with our hands and minds linked to the soil, to consumers lined up in supermarkets to buy an array of slickly packaged food products about which we know very little” (Kimbrell xi).

The multinational corporations which dominate the food industry have been very effective in convincing, or rather, coercing, us, the media, and our elected officials in the government that their industrialization of a natural process – growing food – is good for us. Kimbrell accuses the corporations of “strong-arming our elected officials and government agencies, buying out our educational institutions, suing recalcitrant farmers, and, of course, flooding the media” (Kimbrell xi) to ensure that everyone is in support of their ventures. *Fatal Harvest* attempts to expose and debunk the myths promoting the benefits of modern food production which the industrial food complex promotes, such as the idea that industrial agriculture has the power to feed the world; that it is safe, healthy, and nutritious; that it is cheap; and that it is efficient (Kimbrell 3). As writers throughout the ethical eating movement take pains to demonstrate, all of these claims are entirely false.

Activists and writers who promote ethical eating frequently point to how industrial agriculture corporations aim to convince the general public that they are working in our favor. Equally criticized is the power of agribusiness over the production and consumption of food as well as the failed system of governmental regulation. In an essay in *Fatal Harvest* entitled “The End of Agribusiness,” we read how corporations have been enacting, very effectively, strategies to “establish the unchallengeable right to [control] the [entire] food system” (Henson 232). One of these strategies is to beat out smaller-scale competition in order to monopolize the market. This is coupled with a move to influence governmental regulatory agencies, such as the Food and Drug Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture, often by placing their former, and
at times current, corporate administrators into government agencies. As a result, the people that are supposed to be protecting and guiding the public often work to promote the interests of the food industry. For example, the documentary film *Food, Inc* reports that in 1972, the FDA conducted about 50,000 food safety inspections, but by 2006, that number had depleted to only 9,164, a point which the film links to agribusiness lobbying efforts (*Food, Inc*). Another startling example presented in the documentary is how federal courts ruled in 1998 that the USDA does not have the authority to close plants, even if they repeatedly fail safety or contamination checks. Though a law has been proposed to grant the USDA such power, it has failed to pass repeatedly, evidently due to heavy lobbying.

*Fatal Harvest* gives an overview of the fallen state of society with regards to the food industry:

> Industrial agriculture is devastating our land, water, and air, and is now threatening the sustainability of the biosphere. Its massive chemical and biological inputs cause widespread environmental havoc as well as human disease and death. Its monoculturing reduces the diversity of our plants and animals… Its factory farming practices cause untold animal suffering. Its centralized corporate ownership destroys farm communities around the world, leading to mass poverty and hunger. The industrial agriculture system is clearly unsustainable. It has truly become a fatal harvest. (Kimbrell 3)

As others have also shown, agribusiness as it currently operates affects many features of our environment and violates what many would consider basic ethical behavior. Michael Pollan explains further why allowing our food system to be industrialized has had detrimental effects on society. He concedes that our ingenuity in producing food in new ways is exceptional, but unfortunately, our technologies have a range of harmful and often unnoticed consequences. Pollan argues that “a great many of the health and environmental problems created by our food system owe to our attempts to oversimplify nature’s complexities” (Pollan 9), such as the industry’s monoculture techniques versus the biodiversity promoted in many traditional farming techniques.

---

2 In *Food, Inc*, starting at 1:15 there is an overview of former corporate giants who went on to hold government regulatory agency positions.
According to Jonathan Safran Foer’s research for his book *Eating Animals*, the factory farming industry is currently more influential and wields more power than public-health officials. This imbalance is evidenced by the standard practice of feeding farmed animals antibiotics as a preventative measure rather than only for treating a particular animal’s health. Foer cites that the American Medical Association, the Centers for Disease Control, the Institute of Medicine, and the World Health Organization have all reported a link between non-therapeutic antibiotic use on factory farms and the increased antimicrobial resistance that is commonly observed in America today (Foer 140). These organizations have all called for a ban on the excessive application of antibiotics, but “the factory farm industry has effectively opposed such a ban in the United States” (Foer 140). Foer credits this powerful opposition to the fact that the factory farming industry is in alliance with the pharmaceutical industry, and together they have the strength to prevent such a ban (Foer 141).

So the health organizations are at a loss for effectively regulating a practice that they know to be harmful, and the USDA finds itself in a similar bind. The USDA is charged with informing the American public which eating habits and foods are healthy for us, but the USDA is largely under the influence of the food industry; so instead the public is given advice that will benefit the corporate interests. Foer writes, “since the rise of science itself, those who produce meat have made sure that they are among those who influence how nutritional data will be presented to the likes of you and me” (Foer 145). According to Foer, the USDA controls the “most important advertising space in the nation – those little nutritional boxes we find on virtually everything we eat” (Foer 146). This mechanism coupled with targeted rhetoric, such as the common fear about getting ‘enough protein’ in one’s diet, allows the USDA to guide American eating habits towards meat-heavy diets. Another striking example of industry posed as a legitimate health regulating organization is the National Dairy Council. The NDC is “a marketing arm of Dairy Management Inc, an industry whose sole
purpose, according to its website, is to ‘drive increased sales of and demand for US dairy products’” (Foer 145). Despite these vested interests, “educators and government have, since the 1950s, allowed the NDC to become arguably the largest and most important supplier of nutritional-education materials in the nation” (Foer 146).

In the realm of polluting the environment, the government has repeatedly caught and identified the worst of the offenders. Foer uses the example of the corporation Smithfield, the world’s largest pork producer, and “it is a cost-benefit analysis: paying fines for polluting is cheaper than giving up the [factory farming practices]” (Foer 178). Here Foer turns to the disturbing case of Smithfield’s pollution and payoff record:

> In 1995, Smithfield spilled more than twenty million gallons of lagoon waste into the New River in North Carolina. The spill remains the largest environmental disaster of its kind and is twice as big as the iconic *Exxon Valdez* spill six years earlier… In 1997, as reported by the Sierra Club in their damning ‘RapSheet on Animal Factories,’ Smithfield was penalized for a mind blowing seven thousand violations of the Clean Water Act… One violation might be an accident. Even ten violations might. Seven thousand violations is a plan. Smithfield was fined $12.6 million, which at first sounds like a victory against the factory farm… but this is a pathetically small amount to a company that now grosses $12.6 million every ten hours… (Foer 178)

Though the industry, in this example Smithfield, operated in deliberate violation of the law, Foer places blame on the American public as well. Admittedly this one massive dumping in 1995 was of course not the only incident of pollution by Smithfield or similar corporations, but the structure of government oversight over food production permits the continued violation of the regulatory system meant to protect the American public. Despite such violations, the American public, as many in the ethical movement are quick to point out, continues to support the industrial food complex. In fact, at the time of the 1995 spill, Smithfield was the seventh-largest pork producer in the US, and just two years later it had flourished to become the number one largest (Foer 179). As Foer scolds, our dollars are rewarding the worst conceivable practices.
Why Are We Fallen? A Deep Ecology Perspective

On the first day of his Religion and Ecology class at Swarthmore College, Professor Mark Wallace suggested a fundamental premise: we, as an American society, are never going to evolve, are not going to be able to change our ways with regards to how we interact with our world unless there is a total mindset shift. Furthermore, he proposed that, first and foremost, we need to change the way we think, and to take on the emotional gut feeling of responsibility, if we hold any hopes for a long-term solution to our current environmental crisis.

Professor Wallace’s claim came out of the tradition of deep ecology, a school of thought founded by Arne Naess that values the interconnectedness and inherent value of all life forms. The deep ecology perspective, when applied to the issue of current American food norms, emphasizes that the problem at hand is manifold. The problem stems from every angle – the agricultural practices, the chemical pollution from pesticides, the shipping practices, the animal raising and slaughtering norms, the treatment of farmers and farm workers – everything contributes to the condition of the food industry today. Deep ecology thinking understands that everything is connected, and thus challenges society to see the interrelated (negative) effects of the practices that they are encouraging. Furthermore, it encourages us to re-examine our understanding of the world and our values, with hopes that we will come to see the world as a connected whole and to value each individual part with equal respect.

Pollan has suggested that we are living as a fallen society, and the leading thinkers in the deep ecology movement agree that something is desperately wrong. Bill Devall and George Sessions co-authored Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered, a comprehensive exploration of the perspective of deep ecology as of 1985, when the book was published. In the introduction to their book, they preface their perspective: “we assume that the environmental/ecology movement has been a response to the awareness by many people that something is drastically wrong, out of balance in our
contemporary culture” (Devall and Sessions 2). Devall and Sessions go on to clarify a point that will be crucial to the rest of their arguments, that we are generally disposed to worry about ourselves with little regard for others, other life forms, and most especially, the world system. This is at the heart of our problem and helps to illuminate an issue that Pollan also addresses. By placing value on ourselves and our immediate pleasures, we go through our lives with an imbalanced perspective, neglecting the whole in favor of ourselves. By extension, it seems clear that our eating habits are a manifestation of our pleasure whims, and thus the state of the food industry is a victim of our selfish nature as well. Generally speaking, Americans do not question where their food came from, and although we are increasingly getting a sense that the origins of mainstream food are not good, we do nothing about it, because the food is cheap and convenient. Devall and Sessions note that even though surveys and polls reflect a general concern with environmental issues, “public opinion is fickle, shallow” (Devall and Sessions 5), and our collective response to the information provided for us regarding the food industry reflects this. Though exposés proliferate, flashy packaging and fast food meals for under five dollars prove too attractive for many Americans to make the jump and decide to value their health and the health of the environment.

The following is a list of the seven basic principles of deep ecology, paraphrased from Devall and Sessions:

1. all life forms have value for themselves, beyond their usefulness to humans
2. the richness and diversity of life forms has value
3. humans have no right to reduce this richness except to serve vital needs
4. the flourishing of nonhuman life forms requires a decrease in the population of humans
5. human interference with the natural world is presently excessive, and worsening
6. policies must be changed
7. “the ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of inherent value) rather than adhering to an increasingly higher standard of living. There will be a profound awareness of the difference between big and great.” (Devall and Sessions 70)
The seventh principle is crucial to the application of deep ecology ideas to the crisis of the food industry today; deep ecology teaches us that we should value life inherently, rather than seek bigger and better sources of pleasure. The logic runs that because we are selfish and strive only to increase our own happiness, we miss the pleasures intrinsic to life, particularly life full of the natural world, and we make poor decisions as a result of our selfish nature.

Founder Arne Naess calls for a re-evaluation of our values and principles, constantly asking why and how, why society runs the way that it does, and how we might be able to revolutionize our ways of interacting with the rest of the world. Naess describes deep ecology as a “process of ever-deeper questioning of ourselves, the assumptions of the dominant worldview in our culture, and the meaning and truth of our reality” (Devall and Sessions 8). Devall and Sessions go on to ask “whether the present society fulfills basic human needs like love and security and access to nature” (Devall and Sessions 74). Their assumption, of course, is that present society certainly does not fulfill the basic human needs that they understand. They suggest a turn to seeing the comprehensive whole, to understanding one as a part of that whole in community with all other entities.

Deep ecology presents a way of thinking that can help one to cultivate an understanding of complete connectedness, and “a way of developing a new balance and harmony between individuals, communities, and all of Nature” (Devall and Sessions 7). Devall and Sessions suggest that such a worldview “can potentially satisfy our deepest yearnings; faith and trust in our most basic intuitions” (Devall and Sessions 7). Deep ecology calls on these deepest yearnings and most basic intuitions as a source of wisdom, hidden beneath the false reality of modern culture. The idea that humans are one part of an interconnected system, and furthermore one part that is no more or less significant than any other part, is supposed to be at once comforting and liberating.

Out of the central idea of interconnectedness comes an approach to problems that is necessarily comprehensive. The understanding of everything as having effects on everything else
encourages problem-solving strategies that consider all parts of a situation. With regard to the ecocrisis, “deep ecology goes beyond a limited piecemeal shallow approach to environmental problems and attempts to articulate a comprehensive religious and philosophical worldview” (Devall and Sessions 65). In other words, deep ecology thought recognizes and emphasizes that the way to deal with the environmental crisis, or the flawed food system, is not through one specific route, but through an overarching conceptual shift.

Deep ecology’s roots in connectedness and the equal value of all parts of the system, therefore, lead to the conclusion that society is fallen, and specifically the modern food industry is a mess, due to our inability to understand these foundational ideas. According to this system of thought, our modern spiritual crisis is rooted in not valuing the whole, too distracted by our own individual desires. Accordingly, we must challenge our conception of the world and our values until we can see the big picture and come to respect and value the whole. Because we do not value the whole, we allow ourselves to fall victim to our own fickle whims and pleasures, and we have allowed the food industry that sustains us to thrive without valuing our health, the health of animals, or the health of our planet.

Why Are We Fallen? a spiritual lacking, a mindset corruption

Deep ecology is far from the only philosophy that would suggest that a mindset shift is what we need to get our society back on track and out of its corrupted state. Many others similarly suggest that our fallen state is a result of misplaced values, cultural moral lacking, and a spiritual deficit.

In the prologue to The Fatal Harvest Reader: the Tragedy of Industrial Agriculture, Andrew Kimbrell emphasizes the fact that the source of our fall is a cultural crisis. He argues that the crisis emerged as America moved away from agriculture as its core. Kimbrell writes,
We are currently in the midst of a crisis of culture and agriculture. This dual crisis, first described by Wendell Berry 25 years ago in *The Unsettling of America*, has now become tragically apparent. The cultural crisis is rooted in the transformation of America from an essentially agrarian culture to one that is now almost completely industrialized. (Kimbrell iix)

Part of his argument that the problem is cultural is based on the fact that it pervades through the entire food system. He notes that we can trace the crisis as it manifests itself in numerous ways: “in soil erosion, poisoned ground waters, food-borne illnesses, loss of biodiversity, inequitable social consequences, toxic chemicals in foods and fiber, loss of beauty, loss of species and wildlife habitat, and myriad other environmental and social problems” (Kimbrell iix). The problem is not from one troubling practice in particular and it does not show up as one expression – it is everything, and it is the result of our culture exhibiting and promoting norms that are deeply problematic.

Jordan Kleiman, in his essay “Local Food and the Problem of Public Authority,” similarly places the blame on our cultural norms, but more specifically, the unconscious habit of careless eating. The food system has been industrialized practically beyond repair as a result of the massive demand for the foods that industry created and was then encouraged to continue to provide. Our “frequently unwitting demand for highly processed foods, factory-farmed meats, genetically modified crops, and blemish-free produce shipped year-round over immense distances” (Kleiman 399) exemplifies the careless nature of Americans’ eating habits. As many scholars in the movement like to point out, every purchase we make is a vote; so purchasing industrial agriculture products directly reinforces the *status quo*, while a purchase of local and sustainable goods supports conscientious farming practices.

Because the crisis at hand is so overwhelmingly comprehensive, many have noticed the emotional and spiritual aspects of the issue. Roger Gottlieb, in the introduction to the text *This Sacred Earth*, claims that the current environmental crisis, which he identifies as a co-product of the food industry crisis, is so all-encompassing that it has created “an emotional crisis of despair”
(Gottlieb 8). He laments that this feeling of despair may be paralyzing Americans with fear, contributing to a crisis of confidence. Gottlieb lists that the situation has cast doubt “on our political, economic, and technological systems, on theoretical science and Western philosophy, on how we consume or eat” (Gottlieb 8). Unfortunately, the paralyzing despair that he identifies could prevent us from acting; in the face of so much to repair, one wonders where we can find the strength to begin.

This is exactly why so many people argue that a religious or spiritual change of attitude is the first step towards a solution. Gottlieb sums up this premise well:

> For many people religious beliefs provide primary values concerning our place in the universe, our obligations to other people and other life forms, and what makes up a truly ‘good’ life. All these are part of the religious world-view and part of what must be scrutinized and altered if we are to pull through. (Gottlieb 11)

Although the government, the corporations, and individuals could theoretically just stop acting irresponsibly towards the environment, this is ultimately an unrealistic expectation. So much needs to be changed, and as the quote says, so much needs to be scrutinized and altered to affect change, that a more big-picture approach is crucial. Ismar Schorsch writes in “Learning to live with Less: a Jewish Perspective” a similar point, that “in the West, where the environmental crisis springs from prosperity… the root of this macro problem is entangled with the values of the average American” (Schorsch 29). Perhaps, the troubled values of the average American are a problem to be addressed by religion. Religion is already structured and trusted to provide people with guidance regarding values, and furthermore, people in emotionally fraught situations, as Gottlieb suggests, often turn to their individual spiritual or religious tradition for support. Therefore, if a source of ‘green guidance’ can be found in religion or spiritual traditions, there is an encouraging hope for reform of our food system. However, it should be noted that much of the discourse framing the ethical eating movement does not overtly evoke or privilege religion, or spirituality, as the basis for an ethical
system. Rather, the movement engages with scientific reasoning, as we have seen in the example of Pollan, relying on the resource that modern American society has come to consider authoritative.
Chapter Three: THE ETHICAL ISSUES

Jonathan Safran Foer comments in *Eating Animals* that “food is not rational. Food is culture, habit, and identity” and, as a result, food choices tend to “not respond to judgments about how we should live” (Foer 263). Why not? Eating encompasses so much of our days, so much of what we do; there is no logical explanation for the disconnect between what we know is right and how we act. Nevertheless, according to the discourse of the ethical eating movement, the state of the food industry that typical American food consumption supports is horrific, at best.

Foer and Andrew Kimbrell of *Fatal Harvest* advance the discourse of prophetic voices hoping to guide society out of its fallen state and into the good life that we have examined through Pollan’s text. By detailing alarmist stories, these authors call out the emotional response of horror that they hope will then bring their readers to a realization of how miserable the current state of the food system really is. The vignettes illuminate how standard eating habits are harmful for one’s body, as well as destructive for the environment, and tales of cruelty to animals in factory farming settings are also narrated. These three categories (bodies, earth, and animals) represent an ethical system that the discourse assumes everyone inherently adheres to — we just did not realize, presumably, that our eating habits were violating these basic ethics. Here again we are presented with the foundational *if they only knew* sentiment. The authors of these texts are counting on the premise that once they educate the public about the horrors of the food system and how we are implicated in ethical negligence, everyone will change their ways and work their way out of the system and into an ethical eating model of local and organic consumption.

**BODIES**

Texts such as Foer’s and Kimbrell’s elucidate how the fallen state of the food system has grave implications for the health of our bodies. Their tales report that antibiotic use in farmed
animals as well as pesticide use in industrial farm settings that are non-organic have both been linked to specific health ailments in humans.

Foer’s interview with poultry farmer Frank Reese reveals growing concerns about the effects of common factory farming practices on the health of humans eating this industrial meat. Reese cites a conversation with a local doctor who was alarmed at his experience seeing more and new illnesses in recent years, particularly in children. He lists juvenile diabetes and inflammatory and autoimmune diseases as popping up at alarming rates. Furthermore, Reese brings up the fact that girls have been entering puberty earlier and earlier in recent years, and allergy and asthma rates in children are also skyrocketing. Reese claims that “everyone knows it’s our food. We’re messing with the genes of these animals and feeding them growth hormones and all kinds of drugs… and then we’re eating them. Kids today are the first generation to grow up on this stuff, and we’re making a science experiment out of them” (Foer 112).

Food-borne illness from factory-farmed meat is another reason for concern. Because factory-farmed “food animals are confined in shockingly inhumane and overcrowded conditions” (Kimbrell 12), they are more prone to illness, and often people end up eating disease-infected meat. Kimbrell’s *Fatal Harvest* reports that researchers from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) have estimated that up to 80 million people a year are infected by food-borne pathogens (Kimbrell 12). The CDC also released the statistic that “reported cases of disease from salmonella and E. coli pathogens are ten times greater than they were two decades ago… [Furthermore], the CDC saw none of these pathogens in meat until the late 1970s when animal factories became the dominant means of meat production” (Kimbrell 12). And as was discussed earlier, dangerous pathogens such as these are becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics, likely because of overuse of antibiotics in factory farmed animals (Kimbrell 12).
Foer introduces another cause for concern, which is that viruses have been mixing and ‘creating’ new viruses that are highly contagious and can spread between species, such as in the case of bird flu and swine flu. The mixing of viruses occurs within an animal; Foer explains that “when a single pig gets infected with two different virus types at the same time, there is a possibility of viruses trading genes” (Foer 128). Foer reports the danger of these new superviruses that humans are catching through infected food: “gene swapping could lead to the creation of a virus that has the virulence of bird flu and the everyone-is-getting-it contagiousness of the common cold” (Foer 129).

Pesticide use in industrial agriculture is another source of health risk for humans. Fatal Harvest reports that pesticide use as a trend has risen by about 8 percent since 1989 (Kimbrell 11). Furthermore, according to the Federal Department of Agriculture, at least 53 pesticides that are classified as carcinogenic are currently used in “massive amounts” (Kimbrell 10). If we are not ingesting the pesticides directly (many of them persist in small amounts on our produce even after washing), we may be drinking them in our tap water, as “more than 1 million Americans drink water laced with pesticide runoff from industrial farms” (Kimbrell 11), according to the EPA. Scientists believe that these pesticides are playing a central role in the current cancer “epidemic” among children, but also at high risk are the thousands of farmers, field hands, and migrant laborers in contact with the pesticides daily (Kimbrell 11). Beyond cancer, pesticide exposure is also linked to neurological and behavioral issues, reproductive and developmental deficiencies, and endocrine system problems (Moore 136).

New York Times columnist Nicholas Krisotf, writing on a possible link between factory farms and the flesh-eating bacteria MRSA, brings this issue to its main point: “the larger question is, whether we as a nation have moved to a model of agriculture that produces cheap bacon but risks the health of all of us” (Foer 180). He proposes that we, the American public, as a nation, are choosing to put our own health at risk.
EARTH

The literature shows us that standard practices of the industrial agriculture system and of factory farming animals are degrading the environment from every possible venue, including soil degradation, land misuse, water pollution, air pollution, and waste toxicity. Advocates for ethical eating base much of their argument on the premise that we are duty bound to respect and care for our planet, and our current system is exploitative and not conducive to a sustainable future for anyone.

Industrial Agriculture

The shift from small-scale, locally based agriculture to industrialized practices dependent on artificial fertilizers is causing a significant problem for soil fertility and sustainability. Certainly, agriculture supported by fossil-fuel produced fertilizers has increased productive output dramatically, but “at the cost of soil health, water and air quality, and the future fertility of our land” (McKenney 121). Fatal Harvest blames the shortsightedness of the industry and our assumptions “that we can manage farms as we manage factories” (McKenney 121) for the devastating debt that we have accrued with regards to soil health. In addition to the fertilizers, large irrigation systems and pesticides are blamed for problems such as salinization of the soil, toxins being leached into waterways, and reduced biodiversity of soil microbes (Warshall 167). Pesticides can take a long time to break down in the environment, and their ability to travel through air or water great distances from their intended destination is cause for concern. When pesticides find their way into water, they have “often devastating effects on fish, amphibians, and aquatic invertebrates” (Moore 142).
Factory Farming

The reality of raising thousands of animals in a contained area is predictable – tons of shit. Toxic manure from the factory farming industry is taking up massive amounts of land, and it pollutes the environment in unimaginable ways.

Foer reports that farmed animals in the US produce 130 times as much waste as the human population does: “today a typical pig factory farm will produce 7.2 million pounds of manure annually, a typical broiler facility will produce 6.6 million pounds, and a typical cattle feedlot 344 million pounds” (Foer 174). Add to that the fact that the “polluting strength of [the animal waste] is 160 times greater than raw municipal sewage” (Foer 174), and, unlike human waste, there is no infrastructure set up to process this animal waste. Instead, corporations (again, Foer uses the example of the pork producer Smithfield) pump their animals’ waste into huge ‘lagoons’ that surround the buildings on an factory farm’s property. Foer reports that the lagoons are typically 30 feet deep and can cover 120,000 square feet each. (Foer 177).

Foer relates a horrifying story about the toxicity of these waste lagoons – the essence of which is, if you fall into one of the lagoons, you will die within minutes (Foer 177-8). Jeff Tietz of Rolling Stone published an exposé about Smithfield entitled “Boss Hog” in which he lists some of the substances commonly found in the waste lagoons of factory farmed hogs: “ammonia, methane, hydrogen sulfide, carbon monoxide, cyanide, phosphorus, nitrates and heavy metals. In addition, the waste nurses more than 100 microbial pathogens that can make humans sick, including salmonella, cryptosporidium, streptococci, and girardia” (Foer 175). To make matters worse, things other than toxic manure end up in the lagoons; specifically, anything that fits through the slatted floors of the factory farm housing unit: for example, “stillborn piglets, afterbirths, dead piglets, vomit, blood, urine, antibiotic syringes, broken bottles of insecticide, hair, pus, even body parts” (Foer 176).
Needless to say, the fact that these toxins are released into a big pit open to the environment is problematic for the land, air, and water in the area. Foer relays a report by the EPA on the subject:

chicken, hog, and cattle excrement has already polluted 35,000 miles of rivers in twenty-two states (for reference, the circumference of the earth is roughly 25,000 miles). In only three years, two hundred fish kills – incidents where the entire fish population in a given area is killed at once – have resulted from factory farms’ failures to keep their shit out of waterways. (Foer 179)

Even worse than the runoff and the toxins that evaporate into the environment, it is common practice for Smithfield and other similar corporations to deal with nearly-overflowing cesspools by liquefying the contents and spraying it straight up into the air.

Communities living near these factory farms complain about problems with persistent nosebleeds, earaches, chronic diarrhea, and burning lungs. Even when citizens have managed to pass laws that would restrict these practices, the industry’s immense influence in government means the regulations are often nullified or go unenforced. (Foer 176)

**ANIMALS**

The factory farming system that produce the vast majority of the animal products (both meat and dairy) which we consume in America is widely reported to be cruel to the animals. The ethic of not causing unnecessary harm, or avoiding cruelty, applies here easily, but the issue of ethics in this conversation is also much larger. The distinction lies in a dedication to animal *welfare* versus animal *rights*. Those advocating for animal welfare are horrified by factory farming practices, but would generally consent to eating animals that have been raised in acceptable conditions and slaughtered, in the case of meat, responsibly. On the other hand, those that advocate for animals’ rights to life are against the conception that humans have the right to raise animals with the sole intention of using the animals for their own desires. For these advocates, eating animals, and in some cases, all animal products, is unethical.
Foer struggles openly with the ethics of eating animals, and he repeatedly brings up how difficult it is to make an outright decision. He points out to his readers of the insufficiency of labels like ‘vegetarian’, because for most people there are always exceptions. Foer recalls his own history of fluctuating between meat-eating and meat-abstaining, eventually concluding that “being vegetarian is a flexible framework, and I’ve left a mental state of constant personal decision making about eating animals for a steady commitment not to” (Foer 197). While Foer ends up choosing not to eat meat on the basis of simplicity, other scholars such as Peter Singer stand firm in their ethical stance against eating animals, for the sake of the animals.

Throughout *Eating Animals*, Foer elucidates the facts behind his scary stories and statistics. He defines the laws known as Common Farming Exemptions (CFEs) to explain why animal farming is allowed to be so cruel and irresponsible. Common Farming Exemptions, which vary by state, allow the farmers (really, the corporations) to define what is acceptable, or as Foer remarks, to define cruelty. CFEs “make legal any method of raising farmed animals so long as it is commonly practiced within the industry” (Foer 50). So any practice that the industry adopts as normal is automatically legal. He cites just a few examples:

Under Nevada’s 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 or livestock or farmed animals.’… 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.’ (Foer 50-51)

Not only is the industry treating and housing animals cruelly, with legal protection, but Foer explains how the industry has also genetically modified animals to the point that they cannot live as normal chickens or turkeys but are only suited to serve their purpose as future meat. A traditional poultry farmer, Frank Reese, was interviewed by Foer for *Eating Animals*, and he rants about the harm we have done to the species. Animals are bred to fatten up quickly and mature faster, to the
point that most poultry animals have to be killed by a certain (young) age, because their bodies are no longer designed to support their weight beyond that point. Reese emphasizes, “stop and think about that: a bird that you simply can’t let live out of its adolescence” (Foer 113). Farmer Reese goes on to explain that even on farms that produce organic and free-range meat, such as Polyface Farm which is highlighted in The Omnivore’s Dilemma, the animals have to be slaughtered early in their lives, after around forty days, because their genetics are so screwed up (Foer 113). Foer’s concluding remark on this issue is powerful: “we have focused the awesome power of modern genetic knowledge to bring into being animals that suffer more” (Foer 159).
Chapter Four: EATING ETHICALLY

How?

What do we need to do to eat ethically? With some minor variations, particularly on the issue of eating animals, advocates of the movement call for three standards: eating locally produced foods, eating organic produce, and whenever possible, going ‘beyond organic’.

Jordan Kleiman, in his article about local food, summarizes the main arguments that Michael Pollan makes in *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* that lead to these conclusions. Pollan argues that “a truly sustainable agriculture” needs to move “‘beyond organic’ into localism”, first of all because “industrialized agriculture is socially and environmentally unsustainable,” but also because “organic agriculture has largely been captured by corporations and watered down by the USDA’s control of organic standards” (Kleiman 407). In other words, eating locally farmed produce prevents the consumer from supporting the ‘socially and environmentally unsustainable’/irresponsible habits of industrial agriculture, and the same can be said for locally-farmed (and responsibly raised) animal products, which are not involved in the factory farming process. Consuming only organic foods reduces the individual’s personal risk of the negative health effects of pesticides, and it also helps to keep those pesticides and other harmful farming side effects out of the environment.

However, because of the corporatization of organics, the consumer should make efforts to move ‘beyond organic’ and to not blindly trust a USDA Organic label. Kleiman explains how the 1990 Farm Bill established the USDA’s National Organic Program, charging the USDA with the task of establishing national standards for organic food (Kleiman 405). Encouraged by this standardization, which critics such as Pollan have complained established overly lenient regulations, large agribusiness corporations have in recent years undertaken the task of industrializing organics. Now that “so much organic food is grown in industrial-scaled monoculture far from the places it is
consumed” (Kleiman 400), the USDA Organic label does not necessarily guarantee that the food’s production was as responsible to the environment as it should be.

So with a cautious eye towards “big organic,” food reformers are calling for a move towards local food systems, and Pollan argues that ‘eating local’ allows the consumer the simplest opportunities to follow an ethical eating model. Kleiman notes that “local food is hardly a new cause” (Kleiman 401); sustainable agriculture advocates have been pressing for local agriculture for much of their history. However, “extensive media attention and a host of new ‘locavore’ organizations touting the virtues of ‘100-mile diets’ and other strategies for minimizing ‘food miles’” (Kleiman 400) have boosted awareness of the value and logic of local food in recent years.

Lou Bendrick, a food advice columnist for the environmental magazine Grist and a self-proclaimed ‘environmental humorist’, provides a simple guide for the average consumer in Eat Where You Live: How to find and enjoy local sustainable food no matter where. Her book, published just recently in 2008, lists some straightforward reasons for why everyone should eat local. In Bendrick’s explanation, she uses the example of eggs. The local eggs she buys are sustainable – they come from hens (which, she clarifies, she has seen with her own two eyes) that are not fed hormones or antibiotics, so their lives do not contribute to degrading the environment. They are also healthier for humans than commercially raised eggs: they are “higher in brain-boosting omega-3 fatty acids, vitamins A and E, folic acid, and beta carotene, and lower in cholesterol” (Bendrick 13), and because they come from healthy chickens, they are not likely to be carrying diseases. Furthermore, supporting a local farmer helps to build community and keeps money and encouragement away from large corporations with harmful practices (Bendrick 14).

Arguably the most important reason to buy locally grown food, however, is the fact that it was not trucked or train-ed or shipped or flown across a long distance. Supporting local agriculture means not supporting the shipping processes that contribute to the burning of fossil fuels and air
pollution that degrade the environment (Bendrick 15). Founders of the 100 Mile Diet, one of the frontrunners of the local eating movement, cite on a list of reasons to eat locally that “a study in Iowa found that a regional diet consumed 17 times less oil and gas than a typical diet based on food shipped across the country” (100 Mile Diet).

But where to find the local food? Not everyone is lucky enough to have access to roadside stands selling backyard tomatoes and eggs. The rapidly expanding option is to find a local farmers’ market. Bendrick cites that the USDA recently reported 4,385 farmers markets in the US, an 18 percent increase over 2004 (Bendrick 30). Another option is a co-op store, which is much like a conventional grocery store except that it is co-owned and managed by the members that buy into the system. The members all have a say in what food is stocked in their store, and there is a high probability that your local co-op is in partnership with local farmers to sell their goods (Bendrick 34).

The Case of Whole Foods

Stepping into a Whole Foods Market, the world’s largest ‘natural’ foods chain supermarket, “selling the highest quality natural and organic products” (Whole Foods Market), the grocery shopper is transformed from an average consumer to a subject of an ethical dilemma – Whole Foods carries an organic option for everything from tomatoes and basmati rice to ketchup and instant soup packets. The question of where to find the “ethically sound” products is solved by Whole Foods, but in its place comes the personal burden of choice. How does one justify buying organic produce but not organic dry goods, if the option is available? The answer that Whole Foods hopes you will have is to not justify it at all, but to consume organically as much as possible. The complication, however, is that organic and other alternative products (such as grass-fed or non-genetically-modified cow dairy) come at an added cost, and I can personally attest to the experience
of going shopping for yogurt and coming out with a bag full of organic sesame crackers and organic chili sauce and a whole spread of other things that I never needed, having spent a chunk of money unnecessarily.

Whole Foods has come under much criticism, particularly by Michael Pollan, and thus it deserves some attention in this discussion of how a consumer can make choices to eat ethically. Josée Johnston authored an article in 2007 exploring how Whole Foods advocates for and supports ethical consumerism. He posits that Whole Foods is providing an outlet to exercise the citizen-consumer hybrid – ‘voting with your dollar’ – and that consumers are encouraged in a setting like Whole Foods to “change the world by changing what they eat” (Johnston 230). The experience of shopping in a Whole Foods Market is one inundated with messages that hope you will “feel good about where you shop,” under the auspices of the slogan Whole Foods, Whole People, Whole Planet (Johnston 230).

On the one hand, Whole Foods has revolutionized the way that many people engage with their ritual food shopping, and as a result, more people than ever before are eating organic, natural, and often local foods. On the other hand, Whole Foods is an example of the “corporatization of an increasingly unsustainable organics industry” (Johnston 235) which Pollan warns about. The CEO of Whole Foods John Mackey has on many occasions defended his company against Pollan’s critiques by arguing that Whole Foods “is helping increase sustainability by expanding the accessibility of organic foods” (Johnston 235). Indeed Whole Foods is expanding access to organic foods, yet only to the sector of America that can afford to shop there. Whole Foods is notoriously expensive\(^3\), and rightly so, considering how ‘artificially cheap’ mass-produced foods have become in comparison; nevertheless, the simple fact is that not everyone has proximal or economic access to a

\(^3\) “A journalist comparing a basket of monthly food goods (based on the minimal, USDA-recommended ‘low-cost food plan’) required to feed a small family calculated that the basket would cost $232 at WalMart, and $564 at Whole Foods Market (using only the lowest price foods in each category, and excluding the store’s popular luxury items).” (Johnston 256-7)
Whole Foods shopping experience. While Mackey has been quoted stating that “Whole Foods is not a business for a clique or for the elite” (Johnston 255), Whole Foods is “constructed to distinguish itself, its clientele, and its products from a culinary mainstream” (Johnston 249).

**Defining the Access Issue**

The case of Whole Foods as an elite ethical eating outlet illuminates its counterpoint – the case of food deserts, identified areas that are devoid of access to healthy, sustainable foods and are often oversaturated with unhealthy food outlets. Food deserts have been a popular topic of study recently, and they have been used to illustrate the shortcomings of an ethical eating model as proposed by advocates like Michael Pollan. Certainly, the arguments for eating local and eating organic are valid, but some scholars are troubled by the myopia of ethical eating leaders; many Americans do not have the economic or logistical means to gain access to this ethical eating model, so the movement has come under charges of elitism.

Mark Winne wrote a book entitled *Closing the Food Gap: Resetting the Tale in the Land of Plenty*, in which he proposes that ‘the food gap’ is an illumination of “the failure of our market economy to serve the basic human needs of those who are impoverished” (Winne xvi). Rachel Slocum defines the difference between food security and food insecurity: “food insecurity is present when people cannot obtain affordable, nutritious, culturally appropriate and personally acceptable food in sufficient quantity and quality to sustain health, well being, and culture” (Slocum 328). The phenomenon of supermarkets abandoning urban and rural areas, which is a major cause of food deserts, represents a larger issue that we have been exploring, which is that America does not have its food-priorities in line. Johnston lays out part of the problem: “While state programs to provide marginalized populations with healthy, nutritious food are grossly under-developed, market options
for channeling healthy organic foods to middle and upper-middle income populations are increasingly well-established” (Johnston 256). The imbalance perpetuates itself because of this.

There are a few issues here to consider: many Americans are hungry and do not have enough access to food, or they can only afford/obtain unhealthy foods that are certainly not a part of the ethical eating model⁴; venues for local foods such as Whole Foods and farmers' markets are largely inaccessible to low-income and/or non-white consumers; and, the ethical eating model of buying local and organic is an individual solution that does nothing to improve the fate of the system, a move that would help with the access issue in the long run.

The charge of elitism manifests in two forms: that ethical eating advocates are elitist because their model is economically impractical, and that ethical eating advocates are elitist because they do not address the bigger picture.

Josée Johnston reviewed a book by Andrew Szasz entitled Shopping our way to safety: how we changed from protecting the environment to protecting ourselves, in which Johnston presents the problematic practice of buying one’s own personal organic bubble. Szasz calls it an “inverted quarantine… to assemble a personal commodity bubble for one’s body… one’s home and body become a sanitarium where you seek protection from contaminated food, water, and air” (Johnston’s review 465). This personal solution “inevitably has a class dimension, since consumer-based solutions require a substantial outlay of capital that only a small section of society can consistently afford” (Johnston’s review 465).

Katherine Mangu-Ward criticizes Michael Pollan specifically in her essay “How the upper crust eats: food as a status symbol”, where she writes that Pollan fails to acknowledge, “that his brand of boutique eating is a luxury good… The Omnivore’s Dilemma could easily serve as a how-to guide for elite eating” (Mangu-Ward 71). Pollan proposes a model for eating that many, including

⁴ FeedingAmerica.org reports that, in 2008, 14.6% percent of households (17.1 million households) were food insecure, an increase from 11.1 percent (13.0 million households) in 2007.
Mangu-Ward, identify as ‘luxury’ or ‘elite’. Kleiman summarizes the problem, that the local eating proposition made by Pollan and others disregards a “deepening concern over issues of social equity, particularly those related to class, race, and ethnicity” (Kleiman 402).

The counterpart of the economic elitist charge is that purchasing a personal organic bubble, or supporting only local food vendors, does not do anything to serve the bigger picture. Kleiman identifies Julie Guthman, a professor of community studies at UC Santa Cruz, as “one of the most trenchant critics of The Omnivore’s Dilemma” (Kleiman 407), and he lays out her position against Michael Pollan’s call for localism and individual ethical eating models. Pollan’s argument for localism stems from the premise that the government regulatory system for food “has largely failed to protect public health and the environment” (Kleiman 408), a premise which Guthman and most scholars in the field agree with. Guthman’s indictment is that Pollan’s solution of localism tells consumers to ‘opt out’, “that is, they should turn to direct observation of farmers and processors as the only reliable means of ensuring that our food is responsibly produced” (Kleiman 409), and that this is merely abandoning the fight. Guthman argues that “Pollan and other localists appear to embrace the idea that the food system can be changed one meal at a time” (Kleiman 409), but this idea is “not a road to change for society as a whole” (Kleiman 410) and therefore scorned as limited and elitist.

Guthman, along with her colleagues Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman, as well as others, explicitly rejects “the fantasy that individual, yuppefied, organic, slow food consumption choices are the vehicles to move toward a more just and ecological way of producing and consuming food” (Kleiman 410). The assumption that ‘the local’ embodies the ideal future of the food system is problematic. Our culture generally sees it as a triumph that you can get California avocados in Maine and Georgia peaches in North Dakota. For better or worse, Americans are accustomed to the array of choices that they have in the grocery store today, and a shift to largely local food
systems would uproot that norm completely. Furthermore, local foods are not necessarily organic or otherwise ethically responsible; there is a danger in blindly exalting the local without additional standards. Kleiman writes that “Pollan’s critics… worry that localism [could be] taken too far… Federal regulations may be weak and even irrational, they argue, but the solution is to reform the state rather than abandon it” (Kleiman 402).

Julie Guthman conducted a study of community food efforts in her article, “If they Only Knew: Color Blindness and Universalism in California Alternative Food Institutions.” Her basic argument is that farmers’ markets and CSAs (farms supported by and benefiting community members) are “frequently heralded as ideal spaces by alternative food advocates” (Guthman “If” 388), but that research suggests that these spaces are not serving people of color, and especially African Americans. She concedes that, of course, African Americans do frequent farmers’ markets and other local food venues, “but not nearly to the extent reflecting neighborhood demographics” (Guthman “If” 389). Her issue with this statistic is not only that African Americans are not utilizing spaces available to everyone for finding ethically-sound and healthy food, and therefore we should not be so quick to see these venues as the ideal solution to our food system problem, but also that our non-recognition of this fact is “allowing whites to retain a sense of being morally good” artificially (Guthman “If” 390).

Guthman identifies universalism as a notion partly to blame in this situation. Her view of universalism is “the assumption that values held primarily by whites are normal and widely shared” (Guthman “If” 391). Guthman charges Pollan with this belief, as well as tying it to the common assumption that permeates the movement, that if they only knew, “the food system would be magically transformed” by a triggered desire for local, organic food (Guthman “If” 387). “Many US alternative food advocates see lack of knowledge as the most proximate obstacle to a transformed food system” (Guthman “If” 387), but this premise assumes that everyone holds the same values
and standards, and that if they were enlightened, that would be the end of the problem. Guthman is adamant that there is “a need to do something different than ‘invite others to the table’” (Guthman “IF” 388).

Guthman’s insistence that we cannot just assume that educating people about the horrors of the food system and opening farmers’ markets will change everything is supported by the results of her 2004-5 study of farmers’ markets and CSAs in California. Essentially, her study built upon other research that these venues are largely white spaces. She found, through interviewing managers of these institutions, that this could be due to the fact that most are unwilling to make efforts to change it. Guthman writes that “overall, we found that managers of these institutions generally support the idea of improving the affordability of the food they provide” (Guthman “IF” 391) (which would theoretically encourage more participants). However, responses to interview questions about diversity showed that respondents primarily feel that affordability is not the real problem, but rather lack of knowledge or lack of the ‘right’ values (Guthman “IF” 393). Guthman summarizes,

> In responding to the question, ‘what do you think are some of the reasons that it is primarily European-American people who seem to participate in CSAs’, respondents consistently imputed personal characteristics and motives rather than structural problems with access and affordability. (Guthman “IF” 393)

Guthman concludes that the tendency of assuming the universal applicability of one’s own values (for ethical eating, for localism, etc) is a roadblock on the path towards a reformed food system (one that will reflect the ethics proposed by Pollan and his colleagues).

Rachel Slocum writes in “Anti-Racist Practice and the Work of Community Food Organizations” that the community food movement, which strives to increase access to healthy food to underserved communities, is a movement marred by unacknowledged whiteness (Slocum 327). The movement’s good intentions of justice and sustainability are, in her view, overshadowed by the fact that “those who experience food insecurity – American Indians, Latinas and African Americans, [among others] – tend to be ‘on the table rather than at it’ – the objects of the work but not the
leaders of it” (Slocum 330). According to Slocum, attempts at social change on behalf of the underserved, without attention to the particular needs and social relations of a community, “will remain limited in scope no matter how welcoming or inclusive they aim to be” (Slocum 343). The issue of unrealized exclusiveness with regards to race ties in to Guthman’s issue as well.

**Combating the Access Issue**

Clearly, there is a problem with access to the foods needed to follow Pollan’s ethical eating model. Locally produced foods and sustainable agriculture are not available to all people living in all economic and geographic situations, at least not yet. There is a debate in the field over the merits of ground-level solutions and a large-scale government backed overhaul, a debate in which Pollan has been caught in the crossfire. Kleiman summarizes that Pollan is really on both sides of the fight: he *does* implicitly suggest that “food activists abandon the fight for a strong regulatory system in favor of constructing a localized ‘culture of audit’” (Kleiman 411), wherein every individual is responsible for overseeing the ethical soundness and quality of their foods. However, Pollan’s 2008 open letter to “the next Farmer in Chief” details extensively the steps he feels the government needs to take to restructure the system that’s in place which currently supports industrial agriculture. Clearly, “Pollan’s recent turn to public policy as a tool for restructuring the food system should lay to rest the charge that he has been too quick to abandon government regulation” (Kleiman 415). So although the debate rages on, most within the ethical food movement seem to agree that the best approach would be to play both sides: we need to build up local food economies *and* fight to improve the influence of the government.
The Farm Bill

The Farm Bill appears to some activists to be the most immediate, direct way that we could make significant improvements to the state of our food system. Advocates for Farm Bill reform see the legislation, and its potential amended state, as the key to the whole problem.

The Farm Bill has its roots as a progressive part of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal agenda, when, in the face of the Depression, the legislation worked to cushion the economic blow for farmers whose crops were failing. In its modern day manifestation, The Farm Bill manages the USDA’s budget for subsidies granted to a few key crops – key crops that happen to be the cornerstones of industrial agriculture and, furthermore, “the building blocks of a fast food nation” (Pollan’s Foreward 7). By providing subsidies for certain crops, the Farm Bill effectively decides which foods will be plentiful and cheap. As Michael Pollan explains in his foreward to David Imhoff’s book, FoodFight: the Citizen’s Guide to a Food and Farm Bill, “A dollar buys hundreds more calories on the snack food aisle than it does in the produce section. Why? Because the Farm Bill supports the growing of corn but not the growing of fresh carrots” (Pollan’s Foreward, 8).

The issues continue with the current trend of Farm Bills. The subsidies handed out by the Farm Bill support five crops (wheat, soybeans, corn, cotton, and rice), and the money goes mostly to the largest and most productive industrial farms. It goes without saying that these large industrial farms are already extremely profitable; in fact, Imhoff reports that “the richest ten percent of farm-subsidy recipients (many of whom are corporations …) take in more than two-thirds of [commodity support] payments” (Imhoff). So the government’s money through the Farm Bill (or rather, Americans’ tax money) largely supports industrial agriculture corporations, who we’ve seen are responsible for pollution and other environmental degradation through their farming practices. As a

---

5 Pollan explains that corn and soybeans are “the building blocks of the fast food nation: a McDonald’s meal (and most of the processed food in your supermarket) consists of clever arrangements of corn and soybeans – the corn providing the added sugars, the soy providing the added fat, and both providing the feed for the animals” (Pollan’s Foreward 7).
result, smaller farms receive little to no subsidy funding, and there are no subsidies for other crops like the vegetables, fruits, and nuts that make up a healthy diet.

What does this all mean for our access to the foods we have been discussing, foods that are locally and responsibly produced? The lack of government support for small, local farms and the produce they grow means that healthy food will remain significantly more expensive than processed food. Foodbattlete.org reports that “because of massive subsidies in the Farm Bill for corn and soybean producers, the price of soft drinks and other sugary foods decreased by nearly 20% [from 1985-2000] while the price of fruits and vegetables increased by 40%” (foodbattle.org). Money flowing to industrial agriculture means that money does not flow to organic endeavors or other sustainable practices – the structures for that kind of support are built in to the Farm Bill, but the influence of industry on the Congressmen who are involved in the Farm Bill means that those areas of the legislation receive very little funding in the end.

So the frustration of Farm Bill reform advocates, such as Pollan and Imhoff, stems from the fact that the Farm Bill as it stands today, after its most recent iteration in 2007, works to support the irresponsible and unhealthy industrial agriculture corporations while doing nothing to support small local farmers or sustainable farming practices. Advocates for Farm Bill reform are hopeful that “farm and food subsidy programs could be ... reoriented toward food chains that produce and distribute locally grown, healthy foods” (Imhoff). A shift in the workings of the legislation to support ethical food production would mean greater security for local farming industry, increased incentives for more people to switch over to sustainable agriculture, and overall more good food to be had by everyone.
The Local Approach

While the efforts to reform the Farm Bill continue, there are also efforts to find and provide healthy, affordable, and ethically sound food to everyone today. They take many forms: farmers’ markets, CSA farms, buying clubs, and co-op grocery stores are some examples of venues through which people can find local produce and other ethical foods. There are also many community food organizations, who bring together resources and work to “promote fair prices and sustainable practices in farming as well as accessible, affordable, culturally appropriate nutritious food for all” (Slocum 327).

The Philadelphia area has a flourishing network of activists and organizations working to improve access to ‘the right foods’ for everyone. Living at Haverford and trying to figure out the food landscape of the area over the past few years, I have come across a variety of organizations and venues that have influenced my experience of ethical eating.

The Food Trust, “creating solutions for everyone,” is a non-profit based in Philadelphia that has been working since 1992 to “make healthy food available to all” (The Food Trust). The Food Trust has developed a comprehensive approach to this mission that involves working with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers, and policymakers at various levels, and they are careful to combine improved access with improved education about the food system and people’s health.

One of the most influential projects that The Food Trust is involved in is working with the government to finance supermarkets and bring access to food to under-served areas. The Pennsylvania Fresh Food Financing Initiative gives grants and loans that support supermarket development, so that food deserts can begin to find new life.

In its other efforts to improve access, The Food Trust works with corner-store grocers to bolster their stocks of fresh and healthy foods. The Food Trust also organizes and runs farmers’ markets throughout the city, accessing its network of regional farmers to bring their goods to
previously-ignored areas. The Food Trust’s farmers’ markets accept food stamps “to ensure that fresh, local foods are available to everyone” (The Food Trust).

Similarly, Farm to City is another Philadelphia-based program with a mission to “unite communities, families, and farmers year round through good locally grown food” (Farm to City). Farm to City also works to organize and run farmers’ markets in diverse areas of Philadelphia, and they are affiliated with a vast network of CSA farms and buying clubs, helping to increase awareness of and access to these local-food venues. A CSA (or Community Supported Agriculture) operates through a mutually-beneficial arrangement between community members and a local farmer – the community members assist the farmer by ‘buying a share’ of his farm, and the farmer in turn provides produce and other farm goods during his growing season. The fact that the CSA members provide money up front means that both the community members and the farmer are sharing the benefits and the risks of the farming process. CSAs tend to end up being very cost-effective, providing a lot of produce every week to its members, but, as Guthman’s study explored, the upfront cost is a deterring factor for lower-income consumers.

Alternately, buying clubs operate by bringing together local vendors and farmers under one umbrella system, through which members can order food periodically from whatever is available. The pay-as-you-go system is more feasible for many people, and the multiple vendors means that more and different goods are typically available than with a single CSA farm. Often, “the items offered in local food buying clubs are not available to consumers anywhere else” (Farm to City).

EHaus, my personal gastrotopia, gets its local produce through a bulk buying club known as the Common Market Philadelphia. Because so many of us live and eat together, we are able to get produce weekly in large quantities through the Common Market, although we have to be careful to not order too many different vegetables at a time or else we end up wasting food. The Common Market brings together local farmers and goods producers on a large scale, so that retailers, schools,
restaurants, and institutions such as the Thomas Jefferson University Hospital can purchase bulk quantities of local goods. The system benefits the consumers, who get local and fresh produce at wholesale prices, and also the farmers, who would otherwise have to bring their goods into the city and make multiple deliveries.

For consumers interested in the standard grocery shopping experience that they are used to, co-ops are the perfect option. As an alternative to supermarkets, co-ops are member-owned and thus under the direct control of the community which they serve. Members typically pay a one-time member fee and support the co-op by working a set number of hours every few weeks. Members of the co-op democratically decide how the co-op will operate and which foods it will carry, and as a result, co-ops are an excellent outlet for increasing access to local and organic goods.

The Mariposa Co-op of West Philadelphia and the Chester Community Grocery Co-op are two examples of local Philadelphia-area co-ops that were started by small groups of people who took the initiative to find a way to bring healthy foods to their under-served areas. In the case of West Philadelphia, Mariposa Co-op has been operating since the 1970s to provide access to good food in an area where the closest grocery store offering comparable products (locally sourced, organic, etc) is at least a 35 minute public transportation journey away (Mariposa Co-op). Overall, access to healthy food is quite limited in West Philadelphia, but Mariposa Co-op currently serves 700 member households and is poised to expand its space and membership very soon. As for the Chester Co-op, Chester had been devoid of a grocery outlet for the past seventeen years as a result of the massive economic decline that the city went through in the latter half of the twentieth century. Chester Co-op was formed in 2006, at a time when the city was finally beginning to come around and see some economic and population development again. The Chester Co-op now provides fresh produce and other healthy goods to over 100 member households, and it, too, is
working on an expansion project to a larger location that will be able to serve more households (Chester Co-op).

Both Mariposa and Chester Co-op value the fact that they are bringing local or otherwise-sustainable goods to their respective areas that previously were experiencing a serious deficiency. Although they both carry conventional produce and other goods as well, the access to what Pollan would call ethical eating has been revolutionized by the co-ops in these two areas. Co-ops by nature also have the added function of bringing together communities and serving as organization hubs to help stimulate development and solidarity in other ways as well. Co-ops often provide educational services to their members, to help encourage understanding of the state of the food system and how it relates to their health and their world, and how their support of the co-op system plays in to the larger scheme. The Co-ops’ plans for expansion reflect the great successes that each has been experiencing. Mariposa Co-op laments its current inability to serve all of West Philadelphia due to its limited space for goods, and the barrier that the stunted membership creates between Mariposa and the West Philadelphia community is troubling to the group. Mariposa’s goal is to be able to serve all of West Philadelphia in its expanded form, in the near future, which would truly revolutionize the food climate of that area. Currently, Mariposa has an extensive waiting list for membership that can last months, so the interest is certainly there. The challenge facing Chester Co-op in its expansion efforts is that the Chester community is still in the process of being educated about the benefits of a community-owned and operated grocery experience. Members of Professor Wallace’s Religion and Ecology class at Swarthmore College, myself included, are currently working with the members of the Chester Co-op to help them figure out how to spread the word and spark support for the co-op within the Chester community.
CONCLUSIONS

Echoing Pollan’s strategy of guiding his reader through the web of the American food system before settling into an understanding of the local and organic eating model as the ideal, I have tried to forge a path through the contours of the ethical eating movement’s discourse. After examining the assumptions powering the label of ‘ethical eating’ and the system proposed to pull Americans out of their fallen state of food-ignorance, we are left to muse on the fact that Pollan’s model is feasible, but limited.

To label Pollan a prophet, spreading the ‘good word’ of ethical eating is to ascribe for him a role that he has welcomed as a public intellectual. Pollan has been seen to be zealous in his mission to educate everyone about the truths that he dug out of the industrial food system. In *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Pollan strives to convince us that we are fallen, and his colleagues in the food reform movement assist in this effort with their texts relating alarmist narratives of pesticide side affects and factory farms’ irresponsibility. By elucidating the connections between our eating habits and the negative effects we have seen on our bodies and the environment, ethical eating advocates such as Pollan envision that Americans will be plagued with guilt about their ethical negligence. Pollan speculates that once we see the implications of fast food indulgences and imported fruits for our bodies and our environment, we will look around and see the fallen state that we have cultivated for ourselves, and we will look to his model of eating to shape our enlightened existence in ‘the good life.’ The good life that contrasts with our fallen state today is one where our eating habits reflect a conscious accountability to the effects that consumption choices have on our health and the health of the environment, as well as the well being of farmed animals.

By studying the charges of elitism that run through the discourse, we see how the vision of the good life, an image of bountiful organics and thriving local food economies across America, is highly problematic. Organic food is expensive, and local foods are difficult to access for many
Americans. Furthermore, educating everyone about the repercussions of conventional food consumption has proven to be insufficient pressure to convince everyone to change their ways. A widely adopted ethical eating model may be in America’s future, but discussion surrounding the movement today proposes that it will not happen by merely inviting everyone to the (organic) table.

The model Pollan proposes that will raise us all out of the fallen state is reminiscent of the good life model held by the Nearings and other modern homesteaders, who seek to escape the complications of industrialized society and find solace in the natural rhythms of a simpler life. Although Pollan does not suggest that we all start farms to align our ethics and our eating habits, his message of personal responsibility for one’s foods does evoke a nostalgia for the happy farmer, living in harmony with his crops and his cattle. If the good life lies in the past, then certainly Pollan will have trouble mobilizing America to rediscover it. Americans have moved too far past their agrarian roots to be willing to revert on a large scale. We are accustomed to choice, we are proud of our ability to find Idaho potatoes and Florida oranges anywhere in the country, and our consumption-driven society would require radical restructuring. From this perspective, and considering the logistical limits of the local and organic eating model being proposed, it seems that we are left in a hopeless situation. I would argue that Pollan’s suggested ideal is unreasonable for America as a whole. On the other hand, I am on the brink of having to move out of my gastrotopia, and hopelessness is not the feeling that I want to go out into the world with. Though it has been frustrating to expose how troubled the movement seems, I see hope in the fact that the movement continues to be dynamic. Pollan and Guthman and many other scholars are constantly engaging one another’s criticisms and pushing the limits of the debates, and every five years there is another chance to reform the Farm Bill, which in terms of engaging the political process is one of the major means of reshaping the landscape of food production and consumption.
The Omnivore's Dilemma has been criticized for proposing a personal solution that does nothing to amend the full scope of the problem, but as the Nearings sought to point out, there is something to be said for standing up to reject the norm, one individual at a time. Books like The Omnivore’s Dilemma which are targeted to the everyday American can be depressing and unnerving, but their messages of what you can do to change your life are what render them heartening and, ultimately, effective. Looking backwards for the good life will not help us progress, so we are left with looking forward, and at this point, that means supporting organic and local food systems with an eye towards improving universal access and reforming the regulation system piece by piece.

Living in the illusory utopia of EHuas, I have been compelled to deepen my understanding of how American society can move forward out of its fallen state. As I prepare to leave Haverford, this project, itself an on-going commitment to the elusive ideal of the good life, continues with plans to start my own organic farm in Maine. My vision is to do my part to bolster the strength of local and organic food systems. While I grow as an ethical eater and forge my way in the burgeoning community of young, ambitious farmers in America, I hope to be providing a community with an ethical eating option – the greatest and most rewarding accomplishment that I can imagine for myself in trying to promote change.
Bibliography


