

# Ethical Food

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Word Count: **2594**

While food is a necessity that is crucial for survival, humans have transformed this primitive need into a form of expression. The foods that we eat, as well as how we choose to present these foods, allow us to express our identity as individuals and as communities. The food choices that a person makes can even evoke a statement regarding social awareness or values. Many people make their purchasing decisions, such as buying organic or locally grown produce, because they believe that the process used to reach the final food product does matter. Others put a higher importance on convenience and cheap foods. The food choices that we make are affected by our morals towards food production processes and the state of our economic status.

Although America is full of diverse people, Peter Singer and Jim Mason, the authors of *The Ethics of What We Eat*, claim that a majority of Americans follow a “Standard American Diet.” Singer and Mason describe this diet as eating large amounts of meats, eggs and dairy and small amounts of fruits and vegetables. Furthermore, many Americans generally eat carbohydrates in refined form and eat a large amount of fried foods, which are approximately 35 percent fat (15).

Singer and Mason accompanied an average American family who followed the Standard American Diet during a grocery trip. They make their way to a Wal-Mart for food since the mega-store provides them everything they need for their busy lifestyle. They purchase mainly name brand food products such as Jimmy Dean sausages, Oscar Mayer bacon, Ball Park corn dogs and “Animal Care Certified” eggs. The family admits that the most important factors for their food choices are price and convenience. Singer and Mason ask the family about what they know about the production process of the animal products they purchase. The family admits that they know that chickens often live in confined areas, but do not know much about the handling of cows or pigs. They state that they would never eat veal due to the treatment of calves since

they often live such tight stalls that they cannot even move. They further state that they often do not think about the welfare of the meat that they eat. Singer and Mason ask them if their food choices would change if they were given more information about how their meat is processed. They honestly replied that their grocery purchases would not be different because buying organic and free range meat would be more expensive and would require a longer drive to a specialty grocery store(20).

Although the price of non-free range produce may seem inexpensive, there are more costs to these types of animal products than their price stickers would lead consumers to believe. These low prices come from the expense of the animals, who are subjected to cruel treatment in order for companies to maximize profits. Although these animals are supposed to be killed to be made into food, most people would agree that it is not necessary to put these animals in any unnecessary pain. However, this idea is not executed by large meat companies.

The largest American poultry company, Tyson Foods, contracts the actual growing of chickens to independent contractors who own their own land and machinery. However, Tyson controls all processes of chicken developments (21). These contractors normally keep their chickens in large sheds that are never cleaned and barely give the chickens any room to move. The chickens often have many health problems from living in this environment such as chronic respiratory disease, sores, breast blisters and can also go blind from the ammonia concentrations (24). During the slaughtering process, the chickens are hung upside down and put through an electric water bath. Dr. Mohan Raj, researcher at the University of Bristol, claims that the electrical current is not high enough to make the birds unconscious, which would jeopardize the meat, but just paralyzes them so that they do not struggle as much(26). The birds' throats are then slit and are boiled in scalding water. However, many birds miss the slitting process and are

therefore boiled alive. Many animal farmers are unwilling to provide better care for their animals due to restrictions from the market or their parent companies, like Tyson. If the market doesn't provide incentive for farmers to reduce the animals' pain, other business may run them out.

The costs of these types of farming practices are also reflected in the environment. Many farmers dump the excrement of their animals into the nearby land which can lead to waterways. The adult pig can produce four times the excrement of a human so a pig farm that holds fifty thousand pigs can produce half a million pounds of urine and excrement a day (43). The excrement that is spilled into waterways can stimulate too much algae growth which removes the oxygen in water. This in turn kills many forms of life that live in these waterways such as fish, crabs and oysters, which are essential to the ecosystem (30). These animal farms also create dangerous living conditions for those who live near them. The American Public Health Association state that these farms are a public health risk (44). While these foods that are mass produced may seem desirable due to their low prices, they have a large external cost to the environment.

While avoiding mass production of meat can benefit the treatment of animals and the environment, they are not the only concerns to the ethics of what we eat. Singer and Mason further interview a family with more awareness of food production and discover how their food choices affect American society. In particular, the family focuses on certain ethical principles, such as leaning to be green and being concerned for animal welfare, to guide their food choices. The family has both regular meat eaters, who only eat organic and humane meats, and a member who avoids all meat (for environmental issues) except for fish. The family's middle class status allows them to afford more ethically and humanely prepared food. Singer and Mason question the family on their ethical concerns about the food they purchase and they

reveal that their major ethical concerns involves “how well a food producer scores in the areas of labor relations, corporate responsibility, animal welfare, and environment (87). The major environmental concern with meat is that “it's just incredibly wasteful and environmentally degrading. It takes eight pounds of grain to produce a pound of meat” (87). They then go on to talk about the importance of environmentally friendly fishing practices talking about the need for “sustainable fishing that doesn't cause fish populations to crash” (88). The family discusses their ability to refrain from the consumption of meat, but the children admit that it is difficult to avoid eating meat all together because they enjoy the taste too much. This response is typical of most children; taste is very important to their food choices. The father states that it is easier to shop ethically when you're not a parent because "when you are a parent, what the kids will eat is a major consideration (88).”

The diet of this family is common: seafood is a significant and growing part of the American public. It is estimated that Americans eat 17 billion marine creatures a year. Therefore, the commercial fishing industry has become both efficient and wasteful to support this market. Commercial fishing brings two major concerns: environmental issues and animal suffering.

Advances in technology has brought about a number of environmental issues. Larger boats and nets allow the capture of enormous amounts of fish which cause over fishing. Bycatch, which is unwanted marine life that gets hauled up when fishing, has become another issue. Singer and Mason state that a “quarter of all fish taken worldwide is bycatch-that's some 27 million tons (111).” This unrestricted catching causes the extinction of many species, such as the Atlantic salmon which has become commercially extinct. In this modern age, boats can catch the same amount of marine life that used to take an entire season. Additionally, bottom trawling nets are known to cause significant damage to the seabed and coral reefs. This causes

the destruction to the habitats of dozens of sea creatures causing many to die or move from their natural habitats. Some organizations, such as the Marine Stewardship Council, have taken small steps towards sustainable fishing by creating a certification that checks for three things: the condition of fish populations, the impact of fishery machines on the marine environment and the fishery management system.

To further support the increase in demand for fish, fish farming has become a booming industry. Fish are stored in enclosures with hundreds of other fish and fed meals that promote quick unnatural growth. Daniel Pauly, a professor at the Fisheries Center at the University of British Columbia, has described the farming of salmon and sea bass as "feedlot operations in which carnivorous fish ... are fattened on a diet rich in fish meal and oil (122)." The fish used to feed farmed fish are caught by commercial fisheries, which negates any environmental advantage fish farming had over commercial fishing. The demand for fish meal and fish oil provides incentives for commercial fishing fleets to catch small fish. These fish could otherwise be used to feed people in third world countries. According to Singer and Mason, "three or four tons of this cheap fish will be made into pellets and fed to farmed salmon in order to produce one ton of expensive salmon to sell to people in the rich nations (123)." Fish farms have also been described by the Norwegian State Pollution Control Agency as "major polluters (123)." This is due to the antibiotics and pesticides that are given to farmed fish. Most of these additives are not ingested and instead float through the nets that enclose the fish, thereby polluting the surrounding area. Additionally, farmed fish that escape cause major hazards to the wild fish populations. Farmed fish tend to have diseases and parasites that wild fish do not normally contract. Therefore, when farmed fish escape into the wild, they introduce these diseases and parasites to the wild population which can be devastating.

Furthermore, the inhumane ways of slaughtering both commercially fished and farmed fish have become an issue with activists. The process of killing fish has become so brutal that it would be illegal if used on cows or pigs. Farmed fish are sometimes allowed to suffocate in the air, a process in which can take 15 minutes, for them to die. Large fish like salmon are bashed on the head with a wooden bat, which does not always kill them and leaves them to be cut open while fully conscious. They may also be stunned by carbon dioxide which causes them to thrash about for half a minute but they do not lose consciousness for several more minutes. They then have their gills cut and are left to bleed to death.

Some individuals prioritize ethical treatment of all foods that they eat. The last family that Singer and Mason interview is vegan. While others are running out the door and planning to just grab some McDonald's, they eat baked organic corn chips and bean dip; their kids think chocolate and other candies smell bad and have almost never had soda pop (193). For this family, dinner table staples include green salads and specialty salads made only with organic fruits and vegetables as well as rice dishes (189). The mother says that she buys organic products for the health of her family because organic produce contains fewer chemical contaminants than non-organic ones. More than that, she wants to have a voice in the corporate system and she does so by not supporting farming practices that pollute the air, water and soil (193).

In 2003, nearly 11 percent of Americans said they eat organic foods daily. In fact organic foods have been moving from stores like Wholefoods, Wild Oats, and Trader Joe's to stores like Krogers, Super Target, King Soopers, and Price Chopper and are now in about 75% of all supermarkets(197). In its modern usage the term “organic” came from J. I. Rodale when he launched the magazine *Organic Gardening* in 1942 which promoted the use of organic material like manure and compost in farming instead of inorganic fertilizers. In general, it has been

described as a system that promotes “environmentally, socially, and economically sound production”. It starts with soil health for many people but also includes a lack of irradiation and genetic engineering (199). The movement seems scientifically sound since many studies show that only zero to four percent of genetically modified (GM) animals survive. While GM plants are wildly successful, the threat of cross contamination is always a huge issue. Furthermore, studies show that even with all the ingenuity of modern farming, organic farming uses 35% less energy than traditional farming. Additionally, organic dairies use 74 percent less energy mainly because synthetic fertilizers cost so much energy to produce (208).

In the 2003 *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, six comparative studies examined the relationship between low meat intake and longevity. While one study states that there is no correlation, two found an average of an additional 3.6 years for those who ate little meat compared to those who ate meat consistently (225). Today many people still wonder about the health of a vegan diet, specifically what they get protein from. This question is a remnant of an earlier time when the US thought that more protein was necessary in one’s diet. Today studies show that an average person can get enough from bread, pasta, rice, and potatoes. Regardless, great consideration should be taken into account when raising children on a vegan diet. It is vital to have a plentiful access to a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and B12 vitamin supplements. Other families such as those in the Mid-West are often limited in these nutrients (228).

While personal health is often important to vegans, the health of the environment is also a huge factor for many vegans. Studies have consistently shown that the amount of protein one gets from eating animal meat is less than one would get from eating the grains that fed the animal. In 1971 *Diet for a Small Planet* showed that 21 pounds of grain produce one pound of beef and an acre devoted to grain would produce 5 times as much protein as a the same acre use

for meat production. Even with modern efficiency when you factor in bone weight the ratio is still 13 to 1. In pigs the ratio is a little better but still only 6 to 1 and chicken have the best after gutted ratio at 3 to 1. In fact for the whole world eat as much meat as we currently do would take 67% more agricultural land than this world has. And of course farm houses consume a vast amount of water and degrade land immensely (232).

It is commonly said that you are what you eat. Unfortunately, many products that food industries provide us with degrade our health, environment and treatment towards animals. Despite these often irreversible consequences, these food industries continue to use these production practices as well as hide their practices from the public. However, as consumers, we have the power to change the food industry through our buying power. As our demand for ethically responsible foods increase, supermarkets will continue to fill their shelves with organic and free range products.

## Works Cited

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