

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

Eating Animals

by

Jonathan Safran Foer

A conversation with Jonathan Safran Foer

The author of *Eating Animals* talks with Jeffrey Goldberg,
national correspondent for *The Atlantic*

Jonathan Safran Foer's new book, *Eating Animals*, is an eloquent exploration of something most sentient humans think about at some point in their lives: Just what exactly am I eating? Or more to the point, Just *who* exactly am I eating? Foer has written an excellent, serious, and earnest book, and I spoke to him about his conclusions recently. What follows is an edited version of our conversation.

It seems, from reading Eating Animals, that you want people to adopt vegetarianism, but you don't actually say, "I've presented you with evidence that makes it morally impossible for you to eat meat." Why don't you go all the way?

I don't know that I would put it quite like you just did. I was really moved, I have to say, by some of the small farms that I went to. I would say that the goodness of good farmers might have surprised me more than the badness of bad farmers. Maybe that's just because I had more exposure to what factory farming was. But I went to farms where animals were treated better than I treat my dog, and it would just be impossible to try to honestly argue that they don't have good lives. So, of course, they're killed in the end, but our lives are destined for death also. And while they are rare, there certainly

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are slaughterhouses that kill animals in ways such that the animals don't anticipate death or feel it. So to argue against this kind of farming you have to get into a sort of philosophical terrain that I don't get into—an argument having to do with an animal's right to continue living. That is entirely different from its right to live without being treated cruelly, and I don't know what my own feelings about that issue are.

So are you a vegetarian because, at this point in the history of farming, it's safer, morally, to be a vegetarian? In other words, if you absolutely knew that all the meat or eggs and milk that were produced by X farm were produced according to your standards, would you go back to eating meat?

You mean assuming that that farm existed in the context of this world?

Yes, assuming that there was a farm somewhere where the animals, from birth to painless, unknowing death, where everything was as humane and gentle and kind as possible, would you then eat that animal?

I wouldn't, for two reasons. One, because endorsing the exception is to endorse the rule. People would see me as another person eating meat. You know, it's like what happened with farmed fish. Salmon farming was originally created to take pressure off of wild salmon populations, because it's been clear for a long time that they're going to run out. But what happened was, when more supply was created, there was more demand for wild salmon, because our eating habits are contagious. There was more salmon on the menu suddenly, and you see your friends eating salmon, and so

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you eat salmon—that has more power than does conscientious eating.

There’s also the fact that the kind of farming you’re talking about can’t be scaled. There’s enough humane chicken now raised in America to feed Staten Island, at the rate we’re eating chicken. You can use child labor as an analogy. It’s easily conceivable that there are many situations in which giving a six-year-old a job would improve that six-year-old’s life and, on a case-by-case basis, would be a good thing. But we don’t create systems for the exceptions, we create them for the rule.

Isn’t it terribly boring to be a vegetarian?

I don’t find it boring. Maybe I’ve just been a vegetarian for long enough.

Maybe you’re a good cook.

Maybe I’m a good cook. I don’t look at other things on menus and long for them anymore. Of course, I was in a restaurant the other day and the guy at the table next to me got this amazing-looking steak, and my mouth watered and I thought, “I’m having something that is probably not going to be as good as that.” There are a lot of things that we crave, there are a lot of things that would make us more fulfilled in a sensory way that we just say no to.

When I was a vegetarian, the first thing I would cut out was mammals, because I figured that mammals are the closest species to me. Birds are more distant and fish are still more distant, but you argue very strongly that beef is actually the most humane thing to eat. Do you differentiate at all,

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on a moral scale, between eating mammals and eating birds and eating fish?

Another way to think about this is how different does an animal have to be for us to simply regard it as a living thing. And I think this kind of dichotomous way of framing this—it does a real disservice to the conversation. Even the word *vegetarian*. You were talking about cutting things out of your diet, instead of cutting down. There are an awful lot of people who care about this stuff and for reasons good or bad just can't envision becoming vegetarian. So what do we do with that? Do we throw our hands up in the air and say that since I'm not going to be perfect about this I'm completely off the hook?

I care about the environment, I try to buy good appliances, I certainly turn the lights off when I leave rooms, and so on and so forth, and yet I also fly. So should I, when getting off the plane, say, "Okay, I know that was bad, so I'm now bad, I'm going to leave lights on, I'm going to let my car idle"? It's nuts. I wish people would talk about food in a way that was more similar to how we talk about the environment. The question of "Are you an environmentalist or not?" is nonsense.

Something is better than nothing.

There's a really broad consensus that exists in this country now on the question of factory farming. Any person in America who is not on the fringe of society, who is exposed to a factory farm firsthand, wouldn't automatically say, "I'm never eating this again." But they would say, "This isn't right. This isn't who I am. I don't want to give my money to make more of these. It's not what I choose.

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It's antithetical to the lessons I teach my kids and that my parents taught me." Maybe one day the world will change, and we'll be in the luxurious position of being able to debate whether or not it's inherently wrong to eat animals, but the question doesn't matter right now.

Go back to this question, because it's one of the many surprising things in your book: Why is eating beef, which comes from mammals, more humane than eating a chicken?

There are two reasons. One is that it takes 220 chickens to make one cow, so just in terms of individual suffering from a utilitarian perspective, that's 220 lives versus one life. Also, cows are the only species that still get to live at least part of their lives, and in many cases it's most of their lives, in habitats that make sense for them. To my knowledge, all cattle in America now spend at least some time on pastures, except for dairies.

Factory farming that produces milk—is it more inhumane than non-factory farming that produces beef?

Dairy cows are, in fact, being used to death.

So does the dairy cow have a less pleasant cow-life than the beef cattle in the pasture?

I would say that's certainly true.

It upends the assumption that milk is cruelty-free. Turkey, by the way, from your book, sounds like the absolute worst.

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You wouldn't want to be a turkey. Actually, analogous to the milk question, a free-range hen is the worst. If there's any farm animal you wouldn't want to be, that's what it is.

What about cage-free, cruelty-free eggs?

Well, cruelty-free means nothing. Free-range, when applied to hens, means zero. It is literally not defined and it is up to supplier testimonials whether or not to use it, so you should take as much comfort from “free-range” as you should from “starry and magical.” Cage-free does mean something: it means exactly what it sounds like it means, literally not in cages, which is not to say that much for the welfare of animals.

That could mean a small building that has 3,000 of them crammed in.

More like 30,000. You won't get buildings with 3,000—it's 30,000, 50,000, or 60,000. That being said, there are people who actually quantify how much space cage-free hens have, and I think it's something like 110 square inches as opposed to 67 for those in a cage, so that's a lot more space, but draw yourself a rectangle of 110 square inches—it's not what people have in mind when they spend more of their money to buy this product. Cage-free and free-range eggs are the fastest-growing sector of the food industry right now, which says something so amazing about Americans.

People want to feel good about the product they're buying.

Right. They don't taste better, and they're not better for us. People all across the country are spending more of their money on something simply because they think it's the right thing to do, and they

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are being taken advantage of, and that should make everybody very angry.

Let's talk about Michiko Kakutani's review of your book, which showed, I think, that she's ideologically opposed to raising this issue as a serious issue. How do you respond to someone who would say, "How could you devote your life to worrying about a chicken over a child?" It's an argument that I'm sure you've heard in other places.

I actually haven't heard it anywhere else, which is a strange thing. Obviously I care more about kids than I care about chickens, but that's not to say that I have to choose. It's not a zero-sum game. People who care about animals tend to care about people. They don't care about animals to the exclusion of people. Caring is not a finite resource, and even more than that, it's like a muscle: the more you exercise it, the stronger it gets. This is what Tolstoy meant when he said famously that if there were no more slaughterhouses, there'd be no more battlefields. It's a silly statement in its own right, but it gestures at something that's true.

The question is, if we don't say no to this, what do we say no to? If we don't say no to something that systematically abuses 50 billion animals, if we don't say no to the number one cause of global warming, and not by a little bit, but by a lot, if we don't say no to what the UN has said is one of the top two or three causes of every significant environmental problem in the world, locally and globally, if we don't say no to something that is clearly—not clear to me, but clear to the World Health Organization—a prime factor in the generation of avian and swine flus, if we don't say no to something that's making our antibiotics less effective and ineffective, if we don't say no to something that causes 76 million cases of food-borne illness every year, just what do we say no to? This is not a case where we

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need to go to war with another country or spend a trillion dollars or elect a new government. We just need to say no to it.

Does meat-eating and the cruel treatment of animals make you feel worse about humans?

Eighteen percent of college students are vegetarian now. There are more vegetarians in college than there are Catholics, there are more vegetarians than any major, except for business, and it's very close, by about 1 percent. That's something I feel very good about. How can you feel bad when people have been fed lies, literally from nursery school? I spoke at high schools all around the country and almost without fail there'd be a poster in the gym from the Dairy Council, or from some sort of meat board, telling them why it's necessary for their health, why it's cool. The labeling is manipulative; it's impossible for people to see where the food comes from. Does that say something about consumers, that we're buying the wrong things? I really believe, and I think I'm right to believe, that if you were to poll 100 Americans from all over the country, take them to a factory farm, you'd have 95 of them saying, "I'm not going to eat that."

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Questions and topics for discussion

1. Conversations about eating animals—and the reasons behind the decisions we make—can be polarizing and often alienating. In “All or Nothing or Something Else,” Jonathan Safran Foer writes, “We need a better way to talk about eating animals. We need a way that brings meat to the center of public discussion in the same way it is often at the center of our plates” (page 33). What does Foer mean by this? Do you agree with him?
2. Why do you think that something as essential as what we put in our bodies is so often disregarded or not thought through carefully? What is the potential convenience of such nonchalance and what problems can it lead to?
3. What are some of the challenges of being a vegan or a vegetarian? Does where you live matter? To what extent do you think economics play into the decision of eating responsibly or of supporting local farms?
4. We have so many food choices available to us now. Is this, in your opinion, a blessing or a curse?
5. We sometimes hear in the media about the inhumane treatment of animals in factory farms and about the unhealthy—and sometimes fatal—consequences that such treatment can have for us. In your opinion, how do books such as *Eating Animals*, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* by Michael Pollan, and *Animal*,

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Vegetable, Miracle by Barbara Kingsolver, or documentaries like *Food, Inc.*, differ from “breaking news” stories and exposés? Why are both modes of information important and how do they contribute to the conversation in different ways? Is one more lasting than the other? If so, explain why.

6. Were there any facts cited in *Eating Animals* that shocked you? If so, what were they?
7. At what point do you think awareness of factory farming will be sufficiently raised in the public eye? Do you think that if people have enough information they’ll stop buying factory-farmed meat?
8. Foer’s relationship with eating is grounded in his memories of meals shared with his grandmother and the stories she told about food. Even when she was on the run from Nazis and starving, she would not eat pork. “If nothing matters, there’s nothing to save,” she tells Foer and his brothers (page 17). Foer concludes *Eating Animals* with the same thought, after more than twenty years of his own experiences informing his choices about food. Discuss the significance of this sentiment and how its implications can find universal resonance.
9. How do you feel about making food choices for other people? Discuss Foer’s decision to raise his children as vegetarians before they are old enough to understand the ethical reasons behind such a lifestyle. Would you ever make a similar choice?
10. Discuss the aspects of *Eating Animals* that you found to be controversial, if any. Were they helpful in opening a dialogue on the subject? Why or why not? Have any of your eating habits changed since reading this book?

Resource guide

Now that you've read *Eating Animals*, you know that factory farming—which accounts for virtually all meat sold in supermarkets and prepared in restaurants—is almost certainly the single worst thing that humans do to the environment and to animals. Changing the way our food is produced begins with us, with the choices we make every day. Here are eight things you can do to make a difference:

1. Spread the word. Talk about this issue with your friends, family, and colleagues.
2. Eat conscientiously—as few animals as possible, ideally none. More than 99 percent of animal products are produced under factory farm conditions (www.farmforward.com/farming-forward/food-choices).
3. Support pending state and federal legislation to improve standards for farms. Learn more about legislation aimed to improve conditions for farm animals (www.hsus.org/farm/camp/legislation.html) and legislation that addresses the effects of farms on our environment (www.waterkeeper.org/ht/d/Contents/cids/275,1383/pid/201) and communities (www.sustainabletable.org/issues/community/).
4. Tell Congress that you want to support alternatives to factory farming. Every year, agribusiness receives billions of dollars in

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subsidies and grants that make factory farming possible (http://fdn.actionkit.com/cms/sign/Factory_Farm_Bailout/#1).

5. Have a conversation with the people who produce your food. If you aren't allowed to see where your food comes from, avoid eating it (www.eatwellguide.org/i.php?pd=Home).
6. Stay informed about current issues in the fight for more humane and sustainable farming. Sign up to receive newsletters from groups such as Farm Forward (www.farmforward.com) and the Humane Society of the United States (www.hsus.org).
7. Support organizations working for change:
 - Farm Forward: www.farmforward.com
 - Farm Sanctuary: www.farmsanctuary.org
 - Food and Water Watch: www.foodandwaterwatch.org
 - Food Democracy Now!: www.fooddemocracynow.org
 - Humane Society of the United States: www.hsus.org
 - People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals: www.peta.org
 - Sierra Club: www.sierraclub.org
 - Sustainable Table: www.sustainabletable.org
 - Waterkeeper Alliance: www.waterkeeperalliance.org
8. Buy products from the most progressive farmers in America. Sustainable Table's "Eat Well Guide" (www.eatwellguide.org/i.php?pd=Home) provides an extensive list of small farmers.