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Chew the Right Thing



The philosopher talks about ethical eating, fast-food burritos, and why local food is overhyped.

By Dave Gilson

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Singer is currently professor of bioethics at Princeton University and laurate professor at University of Melbourne. MotherJones.com recently spoke with him about his new book, his disagreements with Pollan, and why he thinks obesity is unethical.

MotherJones.com: You're probably the world's best known utilitarian philosopher. Can you briefly explain what it means to be a utilitarian and how that applies to food?

Peter Singer: To be a utilitarian means that you judge actions as right or wrong in accordance with whether they have good consequences. So you try to do what will have the best consequences for all of those affected.

MJ: You write that local food often is the most ethical choice, but isn't always necessarily the most ethical choice. Why is that?

PS: You have to ask yourself what's particularly good about being local. People say, "Well, I want to support my local economy." But if you're living in a prosperous part of the United States, what's really ethical about supporting the economy around you rather than, say, buying fairly traded produce from Bangladesh...

MJ: But if you're concerned about animal welfare, one argument for local food is that farmers who know that their customers will be coming out to the farm are less likely to treat their animals badly.

PS: If you're buying animal products and can go to the farm and actually see how the animals are looked after, yes, that's an important point. That's definitely the best way of assuring yourself that the animals are being well treated.

MJ: In his new book, Michael Pollan writes about an exchange he had with you about the ethics of eating meat.

PS: Right, and I have part of a chapter that discusses his arguments as well.

MJ: One argument that he has put forward is that while being eaten is not in an individual animal's interest, from the standpoint of the species, domesticated animals owe their existence to humans having a need for them.

PS: I think there's a bit of confusion in this argument about the good of the species. The species isn't really a conscious being. But if he's saying that it's good that there are more cows around, I think that depends on how the cows are treated.

MJ: You argue that we should look at animals as individual beings, yet some would say that our concept of individual morality and rights only should apply to interactions between humans, not the human desire to eat animals.

PS: I'm a bit puzzled that he would think modern farming is the natural world. I don't understand the notion that modern farming is anything do to with nature. It's a pretty gross interference with nature.

MJ: Do you think there can be such thing as what Pollan describes as a "good farm"—a farm where animals live happy lives and are slaughtered with a minimum of suffering?

PS: Yes, I think it's possible. But I think it's rarer than Pollan thinks. He refers to Joel Salatin's farm as a model of a good farm. I've had other reports about that farm and I don't think it's nearly as good as Pollan is suggesting.

MJ: Have you been to Salatin's farm?

PS: No, I haven't. But one of my researchers has. There's another guy who's got a book about raising poultry outdoors [Herman Beck-Chenoweth, author of Free Range Poultry Production and Marketing] who talks about the system that Salatin uses for his hens and describes it as one of the worst of the methods of raising poultry outdoors—[he's] not comparing it to the factory cage, of course.

MJ: When you take the suffering of animals or factory farming into consideration, what role, if any, does the personal enjoyment of food play? Is enjoying a steak secondary to the ethical problems with eating a corn-fed cow?

PS: I think it is. I'm not saying that enjoyment isn't legitimate. But I think that compared to what the cow or steer has been through and compared to the impact you're having on the environment, I think your enjoyment of the steak is secondary. Don't forget, it's the net difference between your enjoyment of the steak and your enjoyment of whatever else you'd be eating instead.

MJ: Some people who want to eat ethically will probably feel that they'll never be able to live up to the ideal. What can people realistically aspire to?

PS: I do want to emphasize that I don't think eating ethically, particularly from a utilitarian point of view, is a matter of saying, "Here's this strict law that I have to do everything possible comply with."

PS: I don't eat meat. I've been a vegetarian since 1971. I've gradually become increasingly vegan. I am largely vegan but I'm a flexible vegan. I don't go to the supermarket and buy non-vegan stuff for myself.

MJ: I thought it was quite interesting that you write pretty favorably about Chipotle. Seeing as they are funded by McDonalds, I imagine many people who consider themselves ethical eaters would be loath to eat there.

PS: I think we have to work with the tools we have. In the United States the market is probably the best tool that we have to produce change. If I were writing in Europe, I might think that the political system is more useful as a way of bringing about change.

MJ: You write briefly about the ethics of obesity and suggest that we revive the idea that gluttony is a bad thing. Why?

PS: When you look at food as an ethical issue in the Christian tradition, you don't find very much about it. You don't find, as you do in the Jewish or Islamic or Hindu traditions, a lot of restrictions saying you can eat this but you can't eat that.

Dave Gilson is the associate editor of Mother Jones.

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