

The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals

By **Michael Pollan**

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The Omnivore's Dilemma is the latest book by Michael Pollan, best known for his previous best-selling work, *The Botany of Desire*. Here, Pollan has crafted a well-written and enjoyable exploration of humans' relationship to food. The book is written for a lay audience, but is appreciable by all.

Pollan begins by focusing on a seemingly simple question, "What should we have for dinner?" The answer, it seems, is not so simple for omnivores like us. Pollan guides the reader by examining the three major types of food production and divides the book into these three areas: Industrial (focusing on the modern food industry's reliance on corn), Pastoral (focusing on organic food production, both "big" and "small" scale), and Personal (focusing on personally hunting and gathering one's food).

The first, Industrial, section of the book demonstrates that nearly everything we consume in Western society, particularly in America, is in some way derived from corn. The processed foods that seem a staple of modern living are derived largely (if not wholly) from corn. Even foods such as eggs, chicken, fish, and beef are essentially derived from corn: cows, chickens, and fish are coerced to consume a food that to them is highly

unnatural. If we are what we eat, as Pollan says, we are mostly corn.

Pollan describes the modern industrial food chain by tracing the path of corn from farmer to feedlot to finished product. Along the way, he explains how the modern food chain has come to be dominated by corn. He explains how corn has evolved from a simple grass to the dominant crop that it is today. Particularly interesting is his argument that corn exploits us as much as we it. Humans exploit corn by using it in everything from whiskey to sweetener. Corn exploits humans by becoming a seemingly indispensable part of the modern food chain. Certainly, corn is a wildly successful species, and has become so by evolving into such an attractive food crop.

Not surprisingly, Pollan is critical of the industrial food chain. He argues that the virtue of cheap food, particularly food derived from cheap corn, hides its cost. The true cost is instead borne by us all in the form of taxes and corn subsidies, environmental damage, and health problems. Pollan describes striking similarities between the modern obesity epidemic and the rampant alcoholism of 19th century America. Both are explicable by the need to use up an ever-growing surplus of cheap corn. Further, he argues that we are participating in an unsustainable system of food production, and that our dependence on a single crop is a glaring weakness that may have serious consequences for our health and for the environment. Next, Pollan examines the modern "alternative" to the industrial food chain.

The Pastoral section of *The Omnivore's Dilemma* makes a distinction between large-scale organic production ("big organic" in Pollan's words) and smaller, local organic producers ("small organic") Big organic is characterized by corporations such as Whole Foods. Here Pollan illustrates how the well-intentioned organic food movement has grown into a slightly

modified version of industrial food production. Striking examples are provided, such as the "free-range" chicken farm where chickens live in nearly identical conditions to their non-organic counterparts. They are afforded access to the outdoors only after spending weeks confined indoors. As a result, the chickens are too afraid to ever leave the sheds in which they spend their entire lives. Furthermore, because organic food production precludes the use of antibiotics, the chickens are so prone to disease that workers must wear sterile clothing and masks to prevent mass infection and death. Other flaws in "big" organic are discussed, painting a picture of a feel-good movement that provides few benefits. Pollan's final position on "big" organic is somewhat unclear. He clearly perceives substantial flaws in the system, such as the fact that it is as non-sustainable as typical industrial food production, but at the same time he seems to argue that it is at least a step in the right direction.

Pollan's position on "small" organic is much less equivocal. He spends a substantial section of the book detailing his visit to a small organic "grass" farm. Although Pollan does his best to maintain a journalistic, neutral view throughout the book, it is clear that he was captivated by the work being done by the grass farmers. Pollan shows that the most important crop to these farmers is in fact the numerous varieties of grass, which form the foundation of the life cycle on the farm. These farmers work to farm in a sustainable, natural way that closely resembles the symbiosis of nature. In this section, Pollan provides a fascinating look at the evolved relationships between different species of plants and animals, and how these relationships can be utilized to create a sustainable farming system. Although Pollan is clearly enamored with such "small" grass-based farming, he also recognizes the near impossibility of implementing such farming on a large scale. For example, the higher costs associated with this production method make it

unlikely to be adopted by the population as a whole.

Finally, Pollan examines our most ancient food production method: hunting and gathering. Of course he recognizes that such a system is no longer a viable one for many humans. But he argues that it is important to participate in and appreciate the shortest food-chain possible, by eating food hunted or gathered personally. In this way the true costs of food, such as substantial time and energy investments, as well as the loss of another living being, may be better appreciated. Here Pollan demonstrates just how difficult hunting and gathering is, even equipped with modern tools such as rifles or GPS. Passages detailing the author's shift into a hunter's mindset were particularly interesting. Even having never hunted before, Pollan quickly and automatically found himself attuned to the environment, aware of sights and sounds that normally go unnoticed. He writes "my attention to everything around me, and deafness to everything else, is complete... everything is amplified" (pp.334-335). Pollan's hunting guide refers to this phenomenon as "hunter's eye."

Scholars interested in the evolution of human behavior may be somewhat disappointed by the relative lack of attention Pollan gives to the field. It is clear that Pollan understands the importance of evolution, yet his discussion of evolved human psychology and behavior is minimal at best. Notably, Pollan devotes considerable time discussing the work of Paul Rozin, particularly his research on food selection behavior. Rozin postulated that the "omnivorous problem" would explain much about human nature, and this seems to have formed the basis of Pollan's thinking and writing. Little other empirical research is discussed. However, passages such as those mentioned above, detailing the emotions and experiences of hunting and gathering, seem to describe the operation of evolved mechanisms.

In summary, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* is an outstanding book aimed at a wide audience. Pollan provides a fascinating look at how we choose what we eat. Scholars may be disappointed by the little attention devoted to evolved human psychology and behavior. However, Pollan still provides a superbly written book offering a complex answer to a deceptively simple and increasingly important question.

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