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Against Food Consciousness

A central theme Michael Pollan wants readers of *Omnivore’s Dilemma* to consider is the true components of the food we consume. *Omnivore’s Dilemma* approaches this concept from many scales, from massive farms feeding essentially an entire country to a single meal Pollan forages for his family and friends. Here I will argue that if there is a strong or highly desirable *need* for general consumers to read a book like *Omnivore’s Dilemma* to understand our food, than our food system is intrinsically flawed.

Pollan takes his readers through a long discussion of the leading sources of nutrition for US citizens. He focuses on staple food items that are familiar to nearly everyone and provides an account of the often strange turns in history that the modern food industry is built upon. He points out many “hiden” truths about common food items that can have the effect of making a reader lose their appetite, a seemingly opposite reaction to the average food book that makes you salivate. After painting a rather dismal scene, both with respect to animal ethics and energy spent manipulating the earth and transporting and processing yields, Pollan offers a comparison on a small scale where he personally removes items from nature to eat. Pollan says “Rare in modern life, [I was able] to eat in full consciousness of everything involved in feeding myself.” His premise here is that consumers of store food are too detached from the items they are eating, and an unhealthy level of ignorance is accompanied by this detachment. The store food consumer must think beyond the item in hand and the accompanying food label to conceptualize the true ethical and energy cost of the item, which is likely less ethical and more energy intensive than you might first guess.

I agree with pollan that this level of consciousness is a benefit to today’s store food consumer. However, I think that because this level of consciousness is a benefit to today’s store food consumer, the agency tasked with regulating the food industry, the US Food and Drug Administration, has failed. The food we eat is intimately linked to our health and therefore food items made from components that are detrimental to humans can be considered unhealthy. Another situation that can be considered unhealthy is falling 14 stories to your death. However, when we walk out of the elevator into our hotel room on the 14th floor of a large building, we don’t feel a strong or highly desirable *need* for personal knowledge of the content and integrity of the steel beams and concrete supporting the building. We have unfaltering trust in the structural engineers and carpenters who built the building and walk carelessly to our room and fall asleep easily. Why? Because the rules and regulations the engineers and construction workers abide by simply have no tolerance for a subpar product. The FDA *does* allow subpar products into the hands of consumers and therefore creates a need for authors like Pollan to exist and tell us what is really in our food.

No book or exposé will convince all of America to stop eating processed foods which is the idealized solution to the ‘what are we eating’ question. It is also unreasonable to require all Americans to be well versed in food science and read books like *Omnivore’s Dilemma* in order to make healthy selections of food items at the store. We cannot all be specialists in every aspect of life, we need to be able to trust that our hotel won’t collapse and we *should* be able to trust that our food is composed of components not hazardous to human health, thus rendering a heightened food consciousness unessential.