

## **The Way We Eat** Why Our Food Choices Matter

A book review by Perry Mill

Authors: Peter Singer and Jim Mason

Publisher: Rodale Books

Length: 328 pages

Here is a book for those who have found themselves in moments of moral paralysis when faced with conflicting food choices: do I choose to eat nutritiously, inexpensively, humanely, help preserve the environment, support food labour rights, or if possible do all five?

Peter Singer's reputation as an ethical straight shooter follows him in this book, which he co-authors with former farmer and now activist lawyer, Jim Mason. Pulling no punches, the authors make a strong case throughout the book for closely analyzing, before deciding to accept, the ethical claims made by food production and consumer advocates.

The authors show that small, local food producers do not necessarily provide more ethical choices for consumers than large multi-nationals (they cite the industry standard for humane treatment of animals set by the McDonald's food chain). And, that low market prices for food ignore the often-huge social and ecological food production costs of "cheap" food.

The authors also challenge what some might consider common-sense notions and assumptions. For example, they pose the question of why it should be ethically questionable to genetically modify animals and plants using *in vitro* laboratory methods, but ethically *unquestioned* to induce such modifications through more traditional selective breeding.

Singer and Mason make clear at the start of the book that it is not intended to examine the health implications *for the eaters*, of their food choices. It *is* intended to focus on the ethical impact of the eaters' food choices on others: human, animal and environmental. (There is, however a section in the book on *The Ethics of Obesity*, which explores the costs to society of medical care for those who choose to eat unhealthy diets.)

The authors' ethical exploration of the food choices made by actual consumers and producers is replete with heart-wrenching examples, such as the "meat that comes from an animal who died an agonizing death" because of inadequate U.S. inspection of slaughterhouses.

Even in cases where the sentient capacity of the particular animal is in question (e.g., shrimp, crabs, lobster), Singer and Mason ask the reader to consider giving "...the benefit of the doubt to the being whom we might harm...as long as the costs of doing so are not too high."

The need to consider the costs and/or hardships which the consumer or producer might face to eat ethically, is explored later in the section *Food is an Ethical Issue-But You Don't Have to be Fanatical About It*.

This book is not all doom and gloom, however. There are heart-warming examples of individuals and families who are doing their best to eat and produce food, which is healthy and humane. Singer and Mason interview three American families about their unique views on food, and some farmers (in the U.S. and abroad) who have taken a stand on providing food animals with a reasonable quality of life.

Singer and Mason also provide a liberal sprinkling of web-links, mini-vignettes, and references for the readers to seek out new ways of eating, allowing us to come to our own conclusions about the ethical arguments in the book. The book also contains some detailed (and quite delicious) recipes.

In the end, *The Way We Eat* comes down, ethically, (and one might say, “predictably”) and with very few exceptions, against the factory farming of animals, (citing arguments from vegetarians as well as meat-eaters), and against meat-eating in general (unless costs or hardship prohibit eating foods other than meat).

Whether or not you agree with Singer and Mason’s ethics, this is a highly informative, provocative, and entertaining book, and arguably a must-read for all humans with a stake in the way we eat.