

The Ethics of Eating:  
How People's Relationships with Food are Determined through Nearness and Attention

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Eating is inarguably a necessary part of our daily lives. Besides the obvious biological importance, eating is an incredibly social ritual. Perhaps more than any other practice, eating connects us to family and friends, our religion and culture, by using such social constructs as meal times or traditional holiday feasts. Every day we must decide what we are going to eat; these decisions implicitly mean that we choose and thus determine how it was produced. We even must decide with whom we will eat: alone in the car, at a table with dozens of friends, at a restaurant with a loved one. All of these decisions impact our on-going individual and societal relationship with our food.

However, it appears this relationship has been disregarded, like so many integral components of our lives in this modern world. The co-founder of the “100-mile diet”, J.B. MacKinnon, addresses this relationship we have with our food in the post-Green Revolution era. He asks of food:

[t]his most intimate nourishment, this stuff of life—where does it come from? Who produces it? How do they treat their soil, crops, animals? How do their choices—my choices—affect my neighbors and the air, land, and water that surround us? If I knew where my food and drink came from, would I still want to eat it?” (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007:6-7)

MacKinnon here brings up a theme that is all-too common in the post-Industrial, globalized world: the disconnect between our consumptive behaviors and the processes involved in sustaining them.

Although this disconnect occurs in nearly every social sphere of the modern world, it is the relationship we have with eating that concerns me. This disengagement involves ignoring the practices of industrialized factory farms (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations—CAFOs), turning a blind eye to the soil and water pollution generated by traditional agriculture, and overlooking the regional

and global impacts of commercializing and commodifying food. Over half a century ago, Aldo Leopold addressed this disparity, advising that

there is value in any experiment that reminds us of our dependency on the soil-plant-animal-man food chain, and of the fundamental organization of the biota. Civilization has so cluttered this elemental man-earth relationship with gadgets and middlemen that awareness of it is growing dim. We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry. (Leopold, 1949:178)

Our relationship with food is one that we cultivate daily, every time we sit down to a family meal, grab a bagel from the nearest coffee shop, take a drive to the grocery store...so how could we have let it become so mysterious, and even meaningless? I argue that there are two theoretical explanations for the disconnection we, as members of the twenty-first century, have experienced with our eating.

First, there is the concept of *nearness*, articulated by Mary Midgley in her book, *Animals and Why They Matter* (1984). Midgley uses the term to explain how we consciously and unconsciously justify our moral obligations to non-human animals; however, I argue that the theory of nearness is equally applicable to all things influenced in our daily manifestations of our relationship with food. She presents the commonly used moral dilemma of being faced with a decision of whom to save when on a lifeboat to illustrate her meaning of the term nearness. She says,

those nearest to us have special claims on those limited powers—claims which diminish in proportion to distance. If, therefore, these were the only claims we knew of, then the most distant (physically or socially) must always come at the end of the queue. The principle of nearness or kinship has been used to defend a wide variety of behaviour which can loosely be called selfish, from the dismissal of animals now under discussion through various forms of political narrowness right up to egoism proper, which admits no claims except one's own. (Midgley, 1984:21)

Midgley's concept of nearness crops up again and again when eating habits are being discussed, both in the literature I have explored and informal conversations with my

family and friends regarding my project<sup>1</sup>: whether it is a friend remarking that her environmental ethics made her feel morally obligated to abstain from consuming animal products, thus indicating a unique sense of global nearness; or another remarking that he has never thought to ask parents or college to purchase ethically raised farm animals; or an author stating that her visit to a CAFO turned her off of factory farmed animal products for life, showing that when she was physically close to the process she was able to better understand the implications of her consumption. In all of these cases and more, nearness seems to be the unifying factor amongst these three points. However, as Midgley herself asserts: “We are subject to other claims. Nearness alone can never have a walkover.” (Midgley, 1984:21).

As such, I propose that there is another factor at work, actively hiding the implications of our food choices, making developing one’s “eating ethic” seem like a project of hippy-dippy idealists. This phenomenon has been addressed by another philosopher, Kathie Jenni who expounds the vices of *inattention* that plague our modern society. Jenni defines inattention as the “failure to attend to morally important aspects of our lives” (2003:279). In fact, she specifically mentions the cruelty of factory farming in her explanation of the lack of attention humans exhibit to issues about which we claim to care. However, as with Midgley’s nearness, inattention can be applied to all facets of eating in the modern world: ignoring the exploitation of farm laborers in the third world, refusing to acknowledge the impact our importing of food stuffs from across the world has on global warming, choosing

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<sup>1</sup> I want to whole-heartedly thank my immediate family—Bryan, Mom, Dad—for their enduring love, support and encouragement in every decision I make; be it food related or otherwise. From stubborn 14 year old vegetarian, to nutrition-driven 20 year old vegan, their support has been truly remarkable and much appreciated. Specifically, I wish to thank them for speaking so candidly (and with immeasurable patience) with me over winter break about their personal food ethics and relationship with food. These listening exercises facilitated my initial framework for addressing the ethics of eating, and thus heavily influence this entire work.

not to consider the implications of administering hormones and antibiotics to animals on CAFOs, etc.

Jenni begins her description of the vices of inattention by claiming it “obscures responsibilities to prevent harm, erodes autonomy, manifests a lack of virtue, and undermines integrity.” (2003:279) I argue that these are the exact phenomena witnessed by partaking in the industrialized food economy. Buying a saran-wrapped piece of sirloin obscures responsibility to the consequences of your purchase: this pinky substance does little to remind one of the factory-farmed cow it used to be. Similarly, the modern food systems “erode autonomy”: the pervasive chain supermarkets make it difficult for consumers to seek out new options or pursue change. This sentiment of “undermining integrity” is echoed by authors of the New York Times Bestseller *Skinny Bitch*<sup>2</sup>, who advocate for a vegan diet. In their irreverent (read: verbally abusive) argument for giving up animal products in your diet because of the way in which they are produced, the women demandingly remark, “Closing your eyes to the problem will not make it go away. You don’t want to see it, but you’ll *eat* it?” (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005: 52).

To begin my conceptualization of the theories provided by Midgley and Jenni, it is fundamental to address the current animal discourse. Whether the author be a self-proclaimed “temporary vegetarian”, an omnivore, or a vegan, there are several themes that continue to crop up in their discussion on the morality of eating animals and their by-products that are produced on factory farms. Some of these authors’ ethics are highlighted through the following statement, “What’s wrong with eating animals is the practice, not the principle” (Pollan, 2006: 328); while others believe that humans have no need for animal products in their lives to have a healthy and

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<sup>2</sup> I sincerely thank my great friend Devren for introducing me to this book, letting me borrow it, and allowing me to expand my understanding of the ethics associated with a vegan diet.

happy life (Devine, 1978; Hill, 1996; Maurer, 2002; Freedman and Barnouin, 2005). Regardless, most food activists cite the following as an argument to eat ethically produced food: innumerable factory farms throughout the country have been documented as having unsanitary living conditions which necessitate the administration of tons of antibiotics annually to the animals, the feeding of foods livestock did not evolve to consume (including pesticide ridden grain, chicken feces, beef fat, bones and blood), castration, the removal of tails and beaks without anesthetics, and slaughtering animals inhumanely (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005; Pollan, 2006; Maurer, 2002). Why does this system, based on the brutal suffering of millions of animals, exist? Furthermore, why do we as consumers allow for our purchasing dollars to propagate its existence? Is our consumer demand for its continuation evidence for a complete lack of personal morality?

Jenni offers an answer to these troubling questions:

They continue not primarily because of sadism, cruelty, perversity, or greed (although all of these are present in some individuals involved), but because of obliviousness and inattention on the part of the general public—ordinary citizens who support the practices by purchasing their products and who could effect change through consumer pressure.

Factory farms are kept well-hidden from consumers... (2003:280)

Put another way, “Out of sight is usually out of mind, and it is all too easy to forget about cramped chicken coops, filthy slaughterhouses, and the like when we sink our teeth into a juicy charbroiled steak or grilled chicken breast.” (Jacobson, 2006:144)

That is, our inattention to these issues allows us to continue to take part in the industrialized food economy. This participation should not be taken lightly: eating underscores a person’s social connections and integrates them into the larger society. When a person rejects the social norm of eating from the industrialized food chain, he is in part scorning modern society. The ethics-driven vegan or locavore (a term

coined by Barbara Kingsolver in her 2006 book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*<sup>3</sup> to describe those who support only locally produced agriculture), often has to forego an evening with friends at the local diner because of this personal morality. This sharing of experiences is vital to the fostering of our interpersonal relationships.

However, if we choose not to acknowledge the origin of our food, or the ethical implications of our decision to eat it, we can continue to take part in this aspect of modern society. By following the often-trod path of inattention we can “continue complicity and hide the truth from [ourselves]” (Jenni, 2003:283). That is, we can ignore the impact our actions have if they have been concealed by others; also, we conceal them from ourselves, as James Pollan does after he visits a CAFO. After reflecting on his loss of appetite upon seeing cows standing in their own excrement, eating cow by-products, and being milked from infected udders, he says, “Yet I’m sure after enough time goes by, and the stink of this place is gone from my nostrils, I will eat feedlot beef again. Eating industrial meat takes an almost heroic act of not knowing, or, now, forgetting.” (Pollan, 2006:84) It takes a lot of effort to exert that much inattention.

Even when face to face with the realities of factory farming, Pollan admits he will still consume meat manufactured in this way. I propose that this is because of Midgley’s theory of nearness. The first time we successfully harvested grains and produce and domesticated animals (and were thus able to abandon the dependence on the natural world that every species must maintain) launched us into a different ecological framework metaphorically, if not biologically. We no longer had to depend on the patterns of the herds or the availability of wild nuts: we had discovered the ability to manipulate nature. Massimo Montanari, an Italian food historian

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<sup>3</sup> Here I wish to acknowledge Professor Johnston for suggesting that I read this book, back in January, after she realized my passion for ethical eating.

proclaims, “the fresh, local, and seasonal food we prize today was for most of human history “a form of slavery,” since it left us utterly at the mercy of the local vicissitudes of nature.” (Pollan, 2006:91) Finally, through industrialized agriculture, we were free from this slavery. Moreover, I believe, we thought of ourselves as the slavemasters: believing ourselves separate from and even *above* “nature”<sup>4</sup>; no longer were we mere animals that now walked on two feet: we were humans, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, with the innate ability to manipulate other animals and use them to our benefit. Clearly, by arrogantly perceiving ourselves to lie outside the rules of nature, the concept of nearness had already begun to fade. With the onset of industrialized factory farming of the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is unsurprising that most people do not consider our relationship with animals.

However, some do consider it. Devine suggests that we struggle with nearness (although she does not use the same specific language, her sentiments are highly reminiscent of Midgley’s theory) in relation to animals because of our inherent anthropocentric value on spoken language. “Now in the case of animals one crucial point is lacking—animals are permanently and by their nature incapable of telling that they are in pain, as distinct from (say) moaning.” (Devine, 1978:486) Therefore, as animals do not have the human standard for communication, they are automatically distant, and are treated as such. However, just because animals cannot articulate their pain to human standards, this does not mean they deserve unjust treatment. What Midgley proposes is a different mind-set: one in which we aim for understanding and empathy. Similarly, well-known animal activist, vegetarian and utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer argues that “equality among creatures should be based not

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<sup>4</sup> I here wish to acknowledge the extensive work of human-nature geographers such as Gorgon Waite, David Demeritt, William Cronon and Bruce Braun. The conclusions of such authors indicate that humans paradoxically view themselves as being separate from nature, and even, alarmingly, unaffected by its course.

on identity (the creature's apparent similarity to humans) but on the creature's capacity for suffering." (Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals*, 1975 quoted in Maurer, 2002:72).

This point underscores the relativism of morality, a position that is often glossed over. I may be morally opposed to the suffering of animals, while you are opposed to their being killed. Which view is correct? Are we both able to behave morally if we act according to the moral guidelines we establish for ourselves? Some philosophers seem to uphold that either one has a rigid sense of moral absolutism or that one is fundamentally amoral (Pojman, 2006). I first began thinking about the relativity of morals after reading Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*<sup>5</sup>, where she ultimately argues that morals are relative: subjectively, one may feel abortions (or any other moral dilemma, i.e. eating animal products) are generally wrong, but they could be viewed as morally justified in certain social situations.

It could be argued that one such case is the cultural ethics of eating. Cultural relativism intends that one's actions are morally justified if they comply with the moral standards of his or her culture (Pojman, 2006). For example, eating a diet composed of grazing herd animals would be justified if you were a member of a nomadic African tribe that had been doing so for thousands of years. Similarly, eating a diet of grain fed battery farmed cow would be justified if you were a member of modern United States society. Although this slippery slope fallacy looks promising, there is another manner to examine the moral principles of these two eating ethics. As much as some morally-driven spurners of meat may like to argue otherwise, some regions are better equipped to provide themselves with protein through the raising of cattle (Carlsson-Kanyama, 1998). In arid regions of Africa, it would be impossible to

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<sup>5</sup> Here I acknowledge Sheila's recommendation that incorporate a feminist perspective into my paper through the work of Gilligan.

grow enough rice and beans to sustain a vegan lifestyle: the grassy landscape is much better adapted to roaming cattle which transform the indigestible grasses into animal protein for human consumption. However, in my reading of the vegetarian literature, I have found virtually no recognition of this disparity. Many argue that it is always wrong to consume animals because being a meat-eater inherently connotes a utilitarian perspective where one arrogantly places human pleasures over animal pains. Yet, clearly these authors are coming from a Global North perspective where we can ship each and every meal 1500 to 3000 miles to ensure that it has the proper nutrition we desire (Kingsolver, 2007; Smith and MacKinnon, 2007). This transportation, this connecting into the industrialized food economy is not possible for many in the developing world. This viewing of the world through one's own cultural lens is a case of arrogant perception, described by María Lugones as the inability of someone to have complete understanding of and compassion towards another's situation (Lugones, 1990). Furthermore, Lugones proposes that each of us "world travels" to the reality of social groups, thus gaining new perspectives into their reality. Keeping these theories of Lugones in mind, perhaps these morally driven writers have never paused to think about the underdeveloped world when commenting on the meat-eater's inherent selfishness and ignorance. Perhaps they are incapable of, or unwilling to, world travel to these economically destitute areas.

Moreover, it is not possible for many socioeconomically disadvantaged people to act in a way that corresponds to many people's views of responsible consumerism. Those proponents of the moral treatment of animals who are primarily concerned with animal suffering (as opposed to animal death) frequently advocate consuming animals that have been raised as cruelty-free, or "clean". However, this source of meat is considerably more expensive than that which has been grown on a CAFO

(Kingsolver, 2007; Pollan, 2006). This price differential makes it considerably challenging for those of lower economic status to partake in this method of “ethical” consumption of animals. However, abstaining altogether from the industrialized food economy can seriously alienate one from society, as I discussed earlier in the vegan context. The underprivileged have already been so marginalized by social and political institutions that choosing to further remove oneself from society probably does not seem like a valid option, especially when one could easily continue to participate in this societal practice relatively inexpensively, thanks to the vices of battery farms.

Here I would like to confess that when I first examined the issue of economic class as a potential barrier to ethically produced meat, I balked<sup>6</sup>. (“Rice and beans are wildly inexpensive!” I believe is the exclamation that ran through my head). However, although I admit that I still have a difficult time world travelling, as I suggest above, I now acknowledge the importance of eating as a cultural convention. My ability to choose to avoid animal products, and to assume my continued acceptance in society at large completely without reflection, is unexamined privilege, as Patricia Williams addresses in her book *Seeing a Color Blind Future* (1997). That is, by virtue of my being born into economic and racial privilege—comparatively, if not objectively—I have the ability to shop at such boutiques as Hamilton Whole Foods to sustain my desire for vegan and organic cuisine. Many families in the country were not born into such privilege, and their eating habits are likely a reflection of this, as I discuss later.

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<sup>6</sup> I would like to thank Professor Johnston for encouraging me to push through these moments of discomfort, which has allowed me to explore an entirely new facet of the ethics of eating issue which I had previously ignored. It truly has given me a new understanding of the complexities of the food debate, regarding which I will no longer arrogantly perceive.

Nevertheless, this idea of responsible consumerism, regardless of the cost, is pervasive in our society. One Virginian farmer, whose agricultural practices and incorporation of ethics into these practices I generally very much admire, is apparently guilty of an inability to world travel to the lowest of the socio-economic rung. Whilst being interviewed, Joel Salatin claims that he is irritated by the litany of people that complain his “beyond organic” and “clean food” is much more expensive than that which is produced in the typical industrialized chain. He goes on to remark that

[clean food] is actually the cheapest food you can buy...with our food all of the costs are figured into the price. Society is not bearing the cost of water pollution, of anti-biotic resistance, of food-borne illnesses, of crop subsidies, of subsidized oil and water—of all the hidden costs to the environment and taxpayer... You can buy honestly priced food or you can buy irresponsibly priced food (Pollan, 2006: 243).

The language that Salatin uses here noticeably shows his arrogant perception of the lower classes. He employs very normative language, like “irresponsibly priced” to demonstrate his ethic that it is immoral to purchase food that has social and environmental externalities. While of course it is his right to argue this, I in turn argue that he is able to do so so unabashedly because he has been born into economic privilege. As a middle class white farm-owner, Salatin is apparently unable or unwilling to world travel to the life and realities of a low-income family.

However, when one does world travel, it can be quite an enlightening experience that will increase one’s understanding and diminish inherent tendencies to cast judgment. This is exemplified by Barbarah Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), who literally world travels to the lowest socioeconomic bracket by subsisting solely on minimum wage occupations. The author demonstrates that an unskilled worker earning minimum wage has neither enough capital nor enough

leisure time to purchase and prepare food for themselves; ultimately revealing that many of her diner coworkers shop for calorie dense foods like potato chips at the local convenience store. The Dollar Menu at McDonald's is decidedly not vegetarian<sup>7</sup>.

If purchasing high calorie, low cost processed food is the only manner for a low-income person or family to survive in this modern world, how can one demand that purchasing "clean" food is the only ethical way to eat? Simply, one can make these demands if they are responsible of inattention: Jenni describes than one can either refrain from participation in the unjust system, or participate and ignore one's liability in it, or knowingly participate while acknowledging one's complicity.

Although I earlier applied these three options to the purchasing of animal meat, here I extrapolate the scenarios to being inattentive of our fellow man: Salatin, like many others, participates in the society that systematically marginalizes specific social groups, and seems to discount the impact of this participation.

This disregard, this institutional bias, which renders our so-called classless society here in the United States to a pseudo-caste system, is a pervasive theme in equality discourse. Williams asks us to "[c]onsider: for a supposedly classless society, the United States nevertheless suffers the greatest gap of any industrialized nation between its richest and poorest citizens." (1997:34) Furthermore, Williams addresses these concepts of class and how they impact the way an individual identifies himself and how society shapes that self-identification. Most importantly for this discussion, however, is William's concept of the collective social group's self-identification and how those not belonging to said social group often miss this. Once again, this is an occasion for Lugones' concept of loving perception through world travel. Similarly, Williams proposes "little shifts of empathy", attempting to identify

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<sup>7</sup> I attribute this remark to the wit of my housemate Allison, who made a very similar comment one day in our discussion of veganism as economic privilege.

with and understand the conventions placed on other social groups, in order to better understand other classes.

The connection between this “self versus other” means of identification can be directly applied to one’s relationship with food. Food choices are a very personal matter, as we all know. They are also a way to identify oneself as a member of a cultural or socioeconomic group—Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving, Irish Catholics eat meat and potatoes [*sic*], rich WASPs eat caviar. Indeed the degree to which one’s social identity is constructed through eating can be seen by one sociologist’s remarks that “[f]ood consumption patterns are associated with social class, ethnicity, and gender.” (Maurer, 2002:8) The 2001 documentary “People Like Us: Social Class in America”<sup>8</sup> explicitly acknowledges this connection: Levi Sanders, a volunteer at a food cooperative for lower income families bluntly states, “Bread is a class issue.” Here Sanders is reflecting on the refusal of the cooperative’s low income customers to buy local organic sourdough bread (“We can’t even *give* it away”), although it is as inexpensive as the white bread varieties. Why would individuals, especially those who would seem to need the extra nourishment, reject what is freely given to them?

I believe that this question can be addressed by an interesting, if not altogether surprising, statistic this same film presents: the higher a family’s income, the less white bread they eat. It can be concluded, as one city councilman interviewed in the documentary alludes, that a rejection of “healthy” food is a rejection of those that eat them: the “middle class, counter-cultural hippies who eat strange foods and probably have the idea that the food they eat is better”. The implications of this are enormous: if you are what you eat, and what I eat is better than what you eat, I am better than

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<sup>8</sup> Here I wish to acknowledge and thank my housemate Kelly for telling me about this movie, and how it may help me address issues of class in my paper. It sure did!

you. Ultimately, being concerned about what you eat is a rich white person thing, economic privilege. Privileged people can worry about their ethical or healthy eating habits because they are not worried about making enough money at a minimum wage job to feed their family. If you have neither the time nor the means to be concerned about the nutrition of your food, let alone the ethics associated with growing and processing it, how could that be held against you? Clearly, even those labeled as morally conscious consumers are still culpable of inattention as they struggle with distance.

To address these issues, and the general lack of empathy present within our society, is of course Jenni's theory of inattention. Similarly, philosopher Iris Murdoch mentions "just attention"<sup>9</sup> which she defines as "a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality" as an integral step towards individual morality (1985:34). She promotes this theory in her book, *The Sovereignty of Good*, specifically in the opening chapter "The Idea of Perfection", in which she addresses morality. Murdoch asserts that she feels "a just and loving gaze" is "the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent." (Murdoch, 1985:34) Once again, we see the clear connection to Lugones' concept of loving perception and Williams' "shifts of empathy": all three authors propose that empathizing with the other will lead to understanding and ultimately a more just way of identifying with them, and thus establishing an ethic with which to process the unknown. Thus, middle-upper classes or arrogantly perceiving organic farmers would be well-served by withholding judgment from the impoverished in order to attempt to understand their "individual reality". Correspondingly, all human beings must use this understanding to identify with our fellow animal: trying to put ourselves in an animal's proverbial shoes (as

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<sup>9</sup> I here wish to thank Josie for reminding me of Murdoch's concept of "just attention".

Lugones recommends) may be exceedingly difficult, given their inability to speak as Maurer addresses, or their lack of footwear; however, it is still a necessary step in incorporating morality back into our individual and societal expectations of eating.

Murdoch also employs Midgley's theory of nearness, although she does not label the concept as such. Instead, Murdoch refers to the ability of one to "see" the other as one of the fundamental components of morality:

I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort...One is often compelled almost automatically by what one *can* see (1985:37)

As Midgley says we can identify, and thus empathize with those to whom we are *near*, Murdoch says if we can *see* that (or those) with which we are unfamiliar we will be able to integrate them into our morality. This connection has already been made by many vegetarians. Linda McCartney is famously quoted by many moral advocates of vegetarianism as having said, "If slaughterhouses had glass walls, we'd all be vegetarians." (Freedman and Barnouin, 2005:79) Although here McCartney is assumed to be explicitly mentioning the filth of the slaughter rooms and the well-documented brutality that occurs there, it is also probable that she refers to our failure to world travel to the experience this animals have. If we were able to *see* into these CAFOs, and understand the lives of the animals that live there, perhaps it would change the largely unquestioned assumption that humans can and therefore *should* eat animals, and that the most inexpensive manner to do this is the most superior, according to our conventions of capitalism.

The ideas of nearness and attention culminate perfectly in MacKinnon's astute comment: "Distance is the enemy of awareness." (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007:63) He and his partner are the co-founders of the "100 mile diet", and they follow this nutrition program rigorously. Although they begin this challenging adaptation by

buying exclusively from the local section of the grocery store—spending an “unsustainable” amount of income on Canadian grown blueberries and wild Oregon fish—they quickly discover that moving their purchasing dollars to a different section of the grocery store is neither going to enlighten them as to how their food is produced, nor deepen their relationship with their food and those that grow it. As such, they decide to invest themselves even more into this relationship, by seeking out local farmers and getting in touch with the miracle of in-season wild Saskatchewan fruits and wildflowers. The authors make the connection between the industrialized capitalist economy in which we live and how it has led to the commodification of our food:

It’s no secret that we, as a society, have been losing the traceability not only of our food, but of every aspect of our lives. On any given day, chances are high I will have no idea what phase the moon is in...I suspect I will go through life without meeting any of the people who make my shoes, or even seeing the factories where those shoemakers work. (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007: 55)

By reconnecting with not only their food, but their natural environment, this couple is able to counter this problem of distance—the remarkable 1500-3000 miles most meals travel—attempting to integrate the concept of nearness back into their disconnected urban lifestyles.

However, buying locally is about so much more than making the distance between them and their onions disappear: the importance of eating locally had much more of an impact than reconnecting the writers with their root vegetables. “Buying your goods from local businesses rather than national chains generates about three times as much money for your local economy.” (Kingsolver, 2007:149) Indeed, beyond mere economics, a theme that crops up again and again with these locavores—Kingsolver, Pollan, Smith and MacKinnon—is the strength of relationships that comes from eating locally: browsing the local farmers’ markets,

visiting friends' farms, asking virtual strangers to take them morel scavenging and boar hunting—these are the modes through which humans originally began to foster relationships. The incredible amount of time it takes for us to gather, hunt, and farm our varied omnivorous diet made collaboration not a product of the privileged class that can volunteer at the local co-op, but a necessity for individual and clan survival. However, the industrialization of food has not only removed us from the process, it has removed us from our neighbors. The solution, Kingsolver announces, is to eat locally.

‘[L]ocally grown’ is a denomination whose meaning is incorruptible. Sparing the transportation fuel, packaging, and unhealthy additives is a compelling part of the story, but the plot goes well beyond that. Local food is a handshake deal in a community gathering place. (Kingsolver, 2007: 123)

Eating locally allows you to see, not only your food and the natural environment in which it was grown, but the conditions of the workers—no *bateys*<sup>10</sup> here—the treatment of the animals, the process from start to finish is there to be seen, if you choose to see.

However important the ecology of your hometown or the well-being of farm animals, I now wish to focus on Kingsolver’s notion of eating locally as a means to simply foster relationships with your neighbors. The industrialization of food has not only completely removed us from the origin and process of our dinner, it has also separated us from our relationship with our neighbors. The epitome of this

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<sup>10</sup> Although it is beyond the scope of this paper, I wish here to acknowledge the incredibly significant yet oft overlooked relationship we have with the developing world as reflected by our eating habits. Many agricultural products from the Global South have their origin in human exploitation: men, women and children are overworked and underpaid in dangerous conditions so that we North Americans may eat lettuce in January and bananas all year-round. MacKinnon touches on the one-sidedness of this relationship, remarking on the sugar cane industry: “...the *bateys*, the shanties inhabited by mainly ethnic Haitian sugar workers, certainly some of the world’s poorest people...I had taken on the irritating habit, whenever Alisa came to me with some complaint that I considered overly modern and urban, such as the effects of rainfall on suede or a pinched nerve from talking too long on the phone, of saying that I would make sure to let them know all about it in the *bateys*.” (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007: 6)

industrialization is, of course, fast food: “I loved everything about fast-food: the individual portions all wrapped-up like presents (not having to share with my three sisters was a big part of the meal); fast food was private property at its best.” Before the industrialization of food, before grocery stores, there was nothing individual about eating. Indeed, everything about food centered on community: people had to work together very closely in order to ensure that every family had enough food. In fact, our true American holiday Thanksgiving is centered (heavily romanticized, but centered nonetheless) on the generosity and knowledge of the relationship with Native Americans that enabled the settlers to survive the winter. The locavorous authors all rely heavily on friends, neighbors and even complete strangers when they experiment with local eating. Pollan asks an eccentric Italian to teach him to hunt and gather; Smith and MacKinnon take an old friend wild berry picking; Kingsolver invites all agrarian-minded neighbors over for the canning of August’s bounty of tomatoes. These authors all remark on the new relationships they have formed, as well as the strengthening of the ones they already had through their trials and tribulations with eating locally.

Whereas depending on your neighbors for help in the barn—or depending on them to eat several pounds of this year’s especially prolific squash crop—requires a strong relationship, even a unique form of symbiosis, driving to the local Grand Union requires no such emotional effort. In the incredibly fast paced modern world, it does seem as if there simply is not enough time to plan all meals around eating seasonally, or going to the perhaps inconveniently timed farmers’ markets, or befriending a new neighbor who has dairy cows. Also, aren’t all of these suggestions more expensive than the processed foods we generally eat? ...Maybe not. As Kingsolver points out, becoming responsible for your eating habits may in fact save

you time and money. In fact, Kingsolver discovers she has in fact saved money by growing all of her own produce. However, beyond this, by working in her garden, she saves fifty bucks a month in gym memberships. Also, just as it is better to eat whole foods with whole nutrition (as opposed to bleached, stripped, processed and fortified foods), it is better to have whole relationships with whole emotional and physical connections. By this I mean the following: Kingsolver and Pollan, Smith and MacKinnon, all four writers develop and deepen their relationships with others through their eating locally<sup>11</sup>. Instead of driving to the grocery store and cooking some dish with which the consumers have no connection whatsoever, and then making plans to go out to the movies with friends, as a means to spend time together and thus foster their relationship—a trend indicated by my previous analogy as fortifying what you have previously processed out—these locavores are able to keep the relationships strong and meaningful. Their acts for fostering relationships center around food: working together in the garden, inviting friends over for dinner, seeking out fresh fruit...keeping the relationship grounded, whole.

Yet, this is not the accepted norm in our society. Our human relationships are not whole and nurturing, instead they are often times as disappointing as Wonderbread. MacKinnon makes quite an insightful conclusion about the lack of connection witnessed in our society, an absence that most people choose to ignore, admitting,

Like many people, Alisa and I have lost all trace of traceability to community. We've lived five years in the same crappy apartment block...We've never met the owners of the building, and we know none of our neighbors by name. If we had children, we'd be too busy to get to know their teachers. (Smith and MacKinnon, 2007: 55)

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank Tanya for sharing with me a news report that she heard on National Public Radio. This report disclosed that a family that lived without electronics strengthened their relationships through enjoying each other's company in a way that they would not have expected if they lived with the traditional U.S. standards of technology.

Again, it seems just as we have lost traceability of our food, so too have we lost traceability of our relationship to our fellow man.

However, these are relationships we cannot afford to forsake. Even in modern individualized society, we are social beings: we are as dependent on our fellow human beings as the first day we were born. It is whether the attention to this dependency that has been forgotten. The shopper who buys the groceries from Grand Union is equally reliant on the Iowa corn farmer, Nebraska cattle CAFO worker, Ecuadorian child in the banana plantations as is the locavore Kentuckian who depends on her entrepreneurial daughter for chicken eggs, her neighbors for dairy and the bees for honey. In the former case, there are many obstacles to the relationship between the food producers and the eaters: physical distance, apathy, societal conventions of values and eating habits, etc. For the latter, the relationship is founded on nearness, and is thus easier to create, maintain, and foster. Granted, this relationship will take an extraordinary amount of time; however, given the importance of food on our health (never mind the ethical implications of our consumer dollars) I'll rely on the old adage and suggest that anything worth doing is worth doing well. Something with which you have such a close relationship, such as food, should not be taken lightly. It should be thoroughly and critically examined, with "just attention," "loving perception," and "little shifts of empathy."

And what will this examination ultimately conclude? Well, I believe the answer is eating locally<sup>12</sup>. There are literally thousands of farmers' markets across the U.S. alone, and they are becoming more popular and prevalent all the time (Kingsolver, 2007). "Local food...implies a new economy as well as a new agriculture—new social and economic relationships as well as ecological ones. It's a

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<sup>12</sup> I would like to sincerely thank my roommate and good friend Steph for being the first to really share and discuss with me the joys of eating locally.

lot more complicated.” (Pollan, 2006: 257) Buying from such farmers’ markets (or directly from the farmers) not only supports your community economically, it sustains it socially: by fostering relationships between producer and consumer, between neighbors. Furthermore, locally grown produce is likely to use less harmful pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers because of the smaller scale, and general ethics of people interested in traditional pre-Green Revolution farming. Lastly, locally produced animal products are also much more likely to be cruelty-free than the products offered at the supermarket. Many people first participate in farmer’s markets because of the nearness of the locally raised animals that they can witness being humanely fed, housed, milked, treated, and slaughtered (Kingsolver, 2007; Pollan, 2006).

However, eating locally raises the same problems I addressed earlier with economic privilege and social inclusion. Once again, I do not wish to arrogantly perceive and imply judgment when I make these recommendations. Nevertheless, there are federal programs that may make feasible possibilities for those of the lowest socioeconomic bracket: for instance, the Women Infant and Children Farmers’ Market Nutrition Program<sup>13</sup>. This program supplies local foods and nutritional education for free to pregnant women and new mothers, and to children up to five years old (FNS.USDA.gov, 2008).

As good as local eating seems, however, this is not a band-aid problem, and it cannot be fixed with a band-aid, such as federal subsidies for farmers’ markets. As Maurer warns “food is central to people’s lives—their memories, identities, and social relationships—changing both how they think about food and what they actually

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<sup>13</sup> Here I thank Lisa for informing me about this WIC program. At this point in the paper I had been struggling to integrate praxis, while still trying to world-travel and pay just attention to those who are not as privileged as I. I think knowing about the existence of such programs allowed me to do both, so I acknowledge the importance Lisa played in this crucial concluding section.

consume is a monumental challenge.” (2002:150) It is clear, at least to me, that our entire food-production and distribution system, both within the U.S. and abroad, are unsustainable, unethical, and unjust. What must follow is an individual and societal examination of the current system.

To avoid unrealistic and futile moralism, we must turn our attention to the broader context. This involves addressing corrupting social influences such as the deliberate hiding of abusive practices, misleading advertising, the prevalence of obfuscating language and widespread antipathy to moral reproach and discussion. (Jenni, 2003: 290)

But first, every person must accept responsibility for the implications of our decisions we make.

I may not eat meat, but I am far from perfect. I eat soy products, a lot of soy products, knowingly taking part of the industrialized food chain that is destroying thousands of acres of Brazilian rainforest annually. Also, I eat chickpeas...from Egypt, apparently. Those things have a lot of food miles, and I have no idea what the working conditions are like for the workers that are growing them there. But I am trying to take responsibility for my actions by not eating factory farmed, resource intensive animal products. As Gilligan reminds us:

The willingness to express and to take responsibility for judgment stems from a recognition of the psychological costs of indirect action, to self and to others and thus to relationships. Responsibility for care then includes both self and other, and the injunction not to hurt, freed from conventional constraints, sustains the ideal of care while focusing the reality of choice (1993: 95).

The fact that one does not directly inflict suffering onto an animal or directly support unjust working conditions, does not mean that we are wholly innocent. As Jenni oft repeats, engaging in the system that does support these values, implicitly convicts us of unethical behavior.

Ultimately, however, despite these social conventions and the inattention that seems to be plaguing every aspect of our society: I am optimistic. Admittedly, this is

my natural disposition, but even after this exploration in the ethics of eating, I am still hopeful for the state of food production and consumption in our society. In the year that I have become vegan, I have inspired two close friends to adapt this lifestyle<sup>14</sup>. I see this as a significant contribution, as *they* will no doubt influence others for the rest of their lives to choose to decrease meat consumption or increase consumption of ethically produced animal products. Even my contractor father<sup>15</sup> has committed to stop eating beef at home and now uses soy milk in his morning coffee: two pledges that I find incredibly hopeful and inspiring. Similarly, many of my already environmentally minded friends, now understand the importance of eating locally for social, political, ethical and environmental reasons. As I think about how I will continue on this path to action with food activism<sup>16</sup> later on in life, I find all of this new-found awareness through open discourse incredibly heartening. Through attention and education, discourse and action, I truly believe I will see profound change in the system of food production in our society in my lifetime.

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Liz, the first of my converts, for happily sharing all her vegan desserts all year and Devren for delightful dinner dates and recipes.

<sup>15</sup> I would like to acknowledge Jackie's comments on the difficulties of inter-generational discussions on such personal habits as eating.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie's remark referencing Vijay Prashad reminded me to mention activism—and the role it will play in my life—in the concluding paragraph of my paper. I thank her for her helpful comments.

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