

CAPITAL LETTERS



Meat-Eating, Health, and the Poor

To the Editor:

Dennis Avery asks, "Are meat eaters starving the poor?" (October 2002). While it may be a stretch to claim a causal relationship between the inefficiency of raising animals for food and global starvation, that does not negate the many other advantages of vegetarianism. To comment on some of his assertions:

"There has never been a voluntarily vegetarian society in all history." I assume that he believes that no society would voluntarily exclude a food source. When there are alternatives, however, many groups of thoughtful people do and have done so, throughout history. This includes groups such as Essenes, Buddhists, Hindus, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jains, as well as many others who, whether for religious or moral reasons, think before they eat. . . .

"Our Stone Age ancestors stole wild birds' eggs, gathered clams, and hunted any creature they could club, trap, or spear—to get the vital amino acids and micronutrients that humans need and can't get from plants." There is no nutrient in animal flesh or product that one cannot get from plants. . . .

Mr. Avery contrasts the diet of hunters and gatherers with those who settled down and developed stationary agriculture. He quotes an expert in Stone Age diets as saying "*The agriculturalists have bad teeth, bone lesions, small and underdeveloped skeletons and small craniums, compared to the hunter-gatherers.*" One can say that these "agriculturalists" obviously were lacking something in their diets, but one cannot say that what they were lacking was animal flesh. . . .

He claims that "Modern crop yields are not only the highest in history, but also the most sustainable." This is completely false. The studies I've read show that organic

farming, which is sustainable, has comparable yields. In addition, commercial farming mines the soil of minerals and cannot continue for very much longer because the only thing put back is nitrogen, potassium, and phosphorus. . . .

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To the Editor:

Dennis Avery makes the excellent point that vegetarianism will not solve the world's food problems. He is mistaken, however, that massive crop yields due to superphosphate fertilizers and pesticides are the answer.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), pesticides, mainly used on farms, are the worst environmental problem in the nation. They contaminate water supplies, pollute the air, and sicken animals and humans that happen to eat or drink the residues.

According to the EPA, up to 85 percent of human cancers are caused by toxic chemical exposure, much of which comes from farming. The cost of these cancers and many other toxin-related conditions must be considered in evaluating the wisdom of toxic agriculture. They contribute significantly to the spiraling health-care costs in our nation and others. Granted, figuring these costs is not easy. Unless it is done, however, the benefits of toxic agriculture are greatly overstated, as in this article.

In my medical experience of over 20 years, the answer to food shortages—and to many illnesses—is what is called the organic agriculture movement. It uses some of the new hybrid crop technology and all the mechanization and other modern methods, but not toxic chemicals. This is the fastest growing segment of the agricultural industry, increasing about 20 percent per year as thousands more Americans choose to pay more for clean food.

Organic agriculture is a better example of a pure free-market phenomenon than agriculture as a whole. It is not driven by government subsidies or special favors. The peo-

ple want it and farmers respond. It also saves many small farms as it is a niche market in which smaller farmers can make a living.

The author is correct, but does not emphasize, that so much of the food Americans consume has been refined and is nutritionally worthless. The need is not so much to “triple the yields” as it is to grow quality. Fortunately, more people every day realize this and are voting with their pocketbooks for organic agriculture.

—LAWRENCE WILSON, M.D.
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Dennis Avery replies:

Avery says we've never had a voluntarily vegetarian society. What about Hindus and Buddhists? Both Hindus and Buddhists are consuming livestock products in larger and larger quantities as their incomes rise. Asian meat consumption has more than tripled since 1975. India has always consumed prodigious amounts of dairy products, and from the standpoint of “the rich stealing the world’s resources,” a cow is a cow, whether it produces meat or milk. It eats grass and requires land either way. In surveys, about three-fourths of India’s Hindus today say they will eat meat (but not beef from sacred cows) when they can afford it. McDonald’s in India is already doing well selling lots of “muttonburgers with special sauce.”

There is no nutrient in animal flesh or product that one cannot get from plants. Key amino acids like lysine and tryptophan are often scarce in vegetable foods, along with such important nutrients as iron, zinc, and calcium. Children frequently suffer serious vitamin A deficiency when forced to forgo livestock products. My brother suffered a serious protein deficiency when he attempted to follow a vegetarian diet. Moreover, the human intestine evolved on diets high in livestock products; hunter-gatherers apparently got about two-thirds of their calories from animals. Our intestines are very short to wrest all of our calories from vegetable-only sources, which could mean energy loss.

The studies I've read show that organic farming, which is sustainable, has compara-

ble yields with conventional farming. Most comparison studies show field-by-field yield deficits of 10–40 percent for organic crops. The more important problem, however, is that organic farmers refuse to use “industrial fertilizers,” and the world has a huge shortage of organic nitrogen. That’s the major reason the Danish government’s Bichel Committee reported in 1999 that an organic-only mandate would cut that country’s human food production by 47 percent. (Chairman Bichel is the former president of the Danish Society for the Conservation of Nature.) The world’s conventional farmers take 90 million tons of natural nitrogen from the air each year through an industrial process. (The air is 78 percent nitrogen.) Nourishing our crops without nitrogen from the air would require the manure from another 7–8 billion cattle. Where would we get another 50 million square miles of land for cattle forage?

According to EPA, up to 85 percent of human cancers are caused by toxic chemical exposure, much of which comes from farming. The EPA agrees with the National Research Council and other authorities that less than 3 percent of our cancers are due to the whole bundle of environmental factors, including industrial emissions, dust, and pesticides. More than a decade ago, Congress hired the world’s two top cancer experts (Britain’s Sir Richard Doll and Dr. Robert Peto) to assess American cancer risks. They concluded that 98–99 percent of our cancers are caused by (1) smoking; (2) our own genetics; and (3) bad diet choices (too few fruits and vegetables and too many fats). Dr. Robert Scheuplein, long the senior cancer expert in the FDA’s Food Safety Center, said publicly that he doubts pesticide residues have ever caused a human cancer death.

Organic agriculture is not driven by government subsidies or special favors; it is a pure free-market phenomenon. Yes, but it created its own demand by lying about the health risks of conventional food and the environmental benefits of organic. The British Advertising Standards Authority recently barred its organic industry from making any claims about superior health or

nutrition since it offers *no* evidence to support such claims. As for environmental benefits, high-yield conventional farming takes far less land from nature, suffers much less soil erosion per ton of food than organic farms, and protects more than 12 million square miles of wild lands from being plowed for low-yield crops. Integrated pest management also minimizes pesticide use. The Soil and Water Conservation Society of the United States wrote in 1995 that such modern high-yield farming is “the most sustainable in history.”

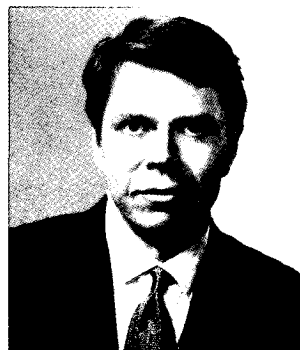
Much of the food Americans consume has been refined and is nutritionally worthless. I certainly agree that we’d be better off eating potato skins, rice hulls, and whole-wheat

bread. But most consumers choose not to do so. On the other hand, our processed foods contain not only a lot of good nutrition, but processing, in some cases, also enhances nutrition. Processed foods also contain some important additives that “natural” foods don’t offer. Before we added vitamin D to our milk, many of our kids suffered from bone-deforming rickets disease. Preservatives prevent a lot of dangerous mold spores, and pasteurized milk prevents transmission of tuberculosis, undulant fever, and a host of nasty organic diseases. Soon we’ll be offered irradiated foods, which could not only save thousands of lives per year from food-borne bacteria, but would also taste fresher. □

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Delighted? Alarmed?
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Self-Interest, Part 1

Asked on camera by John Stossel “Who has done more good for humanity, Michael Milken or Mother Teresa?” philosopher David Kelley unhesitatingly answered, “Michael Milken.”

Kelley is surely correct. But I’ve spoken to many people who are horrified by this answer. Mother Teresa’s name is synonymous with good deeds and humanitarian concern. In contrast, Michael Milken was a businessman, a financier. To comfort others, Mother Teresa sacrificed herself. Michael Milken did what he did only to make money for himself.

Self-interested motives are so frowned on—and other-regarding motives so admired—that the typical pundit, politician, and pedestrian believes that motives are *all* that matter. Mother Teresa is admired because of her motives, not because of her results. Michael Milken and other business people are famous—or, in many circles, infamous—largely because of the personal fortunes they’ve accumulated rather than because of the huge benefits their goods and services bestow on millions of people around the world.

One response to those who judge a person exclusively by his motives was made famous by Adam Smith. It says: Look, almost everyone is naturally self-interested. Whether or not this fact is regrettable, it is unalterably true. So let’s deal with reality. As it happens, a free market encourages self-interested peo-

ple to act in ways that benefit others. So we need not spend much time lamenting people’s self-interest.

Being a great admirer of Adam Smith, I find this line of argument compelling. But having now taught for 20 years, I’ve learned that it leaves a sour taste in the mouths of many students. “But wouldn’t it be great if we all were like Mother Teresa?” students earnestly ask.

No, it would not be great. It would be catastrophically bad.

Self-interest is not merely an unchanging fact of reality that, as regrettable as it might be in the abstract, turns out to be okay in a free-market society. Instead, self-interest is *necessary* to make a large economy work. If each of us cared as much for strangers as we care for ourselves and our loved ones, our lives would certainly be poor and short, and possibly also solitary, nasty, and brutish.

At least two reasons justify my claim that self-interest is a benefit to humankind—that our world would be worse, not better, if self-interest were not part of our mental make-up. This month I’ll address the first reason. I’ll address the second reason next month.

While it’s difficult to imagine the supposed ideal of universal love—a world in which no one distinguishes the welfare of strangers from that of himself and his loved ones—try to conjure in your mind this imaginary scenario.

One thing to notice is that, with everyone caring deeply about everyone else, our world would be a tyranny of busybodies. I often scold myself for caving into my weak-

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