

*JUST FOOD: HOW LOCAVORES ARE ENDANGERING THE FUTURE OF FOOD  
AND HOW WE CAN TRULY EAT RESPONSIBLY*

JAMES MCWILLIAMS, LITTLE, BROWN & COMPANY, 2009

What does a contrarian historian who has argued against the form of animal agriculture supported by Michael Pollan and Joel Salatin, against organic fertilizers, and for cloned pork and GMOs have to offer those interested in the environmental dimensions of food? Much more than at first glance. James McWilliams's *Just Food* provocatively challenges many environmental orthodoxies surrounding food. McWilliams, author of *American Pests* and Atlantic columnist on food issues, is generally skeptical of traditional environmentalist defenses of alternative agriculture. If we forgive some of the contrarian tone, his book is a rich addition to the increasingly popular literature on food and the environment.

*Just Food* is split into content areas—local food, organics, biotechnology, meat, aquaculture, and economics—each confronting a perceived environmental ideology; for example, that local food is environmentally preferable to imported food, and proposing (often technical) solutions to the problem. While there is a consistent tone and methodology in the work, there is also a refreshing lack of ideological commitment to the bucolic, small-scale, pre-industrial models of agriculture that is so common today. This approach allows McWilliams to take a new look at topics such as genetically engineered plants and the role of animals in agriculture. I discuss two content areas (animals and local foods) as well as some conceptual questions that the book engages.

While there are differences in the community of scholars and popular authors writing about food and environment, there is also a near consensus that rejects factory-farmed animal agriculture on both environmental and welfarist grounds. Michael Pollan, Jonathan Safran Foer, Marion Nestle and Mark Bittman all share this view, even

if their reasons differ (at least in degree of emphasis). On this main point, McWilliams agrees, although he does an admirable job of spelling out exactly why most food animals have a disproportionate impact on the environment. In short, a large percentage of arable land in the world is used for agriculture. Much of this land (and pesticides and fertilizers) is used for commodity crops such as corn, soy and wheat. And much (in many countries, most) of this land is used for animal feed. Even many of the ocean animals harvested end up as animal feed. If you add in grazing land, the percentage of land and resources used directly or indirectly for animal agriculture is enormous. If we accept this line of reasoning, we should also recognize that an accurate shorthand for the environmental impact of food boils down to animals, rather than to localist, anti-modern or anti-technology views of agriculture.

While many in the literature note the important role of animals, McWilliams seems to treat it more proportionally. Instead of arguing for absolute abstention from meat, he offers the shorthand of thinking of (grass-fed, humanely raised) beef as we would a rare delicacy like caviar. Such an approach has a relatively specific behavioral outcome, and accurately targets environmentally impactful foods. This is in contrast to Pollan's shorthand to not eat anything your grandmother wouldn't recognize, which evokes traditional, labor intensive, and often non-industrial consumption patterns, and arguably has little connection to environmental impacts. As with Bittman and Pollan, he shares the "less is better, and therefore good" attitude toward reducing consumption, an ethical and behavioral assumption that often goes unquestioned. If such consumption is so impactful, why not abstain? Or at least why is this approach chosen over others? Some ethical and psycho-



logical analysis would improve this argument.

McWilliams is also critical of the alternative of pasture-raised, humanely slaughtered cattle, noting that their methane production is substantial and the welfare standard for their care still insufficient. As the environmental impacts of seemingly more natural animal husbandry is substantial, one suspects that McWilliams would be less supportive of this practice than Peter Singer, who [argues](#) that Pollan successfully defends the 1% of animal agriculture that is ethically defensible. In doing so, Singer reminds us that significant ethical questions about eating meat—for example, that the ethics of ending sentient life, however humanely—remain largely unresolved, and that eating meat is very rarely an environmentally benign option. Conceptually, this focus on animals strongly suggests that the modern/non-modern and local/non-local binaries prevalent in contemporary food discourse might be of limited utility in understanding the environmental impacts of food. It also suggests that existing scholarship in animal ethics might play a more substantial role in agricultural and food ethics than it currently does. McWilliams doesn't make novel contributions to the animal ethics literature in this section, but that doesn't detract from his argument. Often philosophical progress is made in the recognition and adoption of pre-existing, sound arguments rather than in novel theories.

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But why criticize well-intentioned alternatives like Salatin's small-scale animal agriculture operation? Is it possible that alternative animal agriculture unintentionally serves the role of justifying meat eating, thereby reinforcing the industrial practices that most think are abhorrent? Or perhaps it sidesteps the ethical question about ending life? It would be helpful to hear why McWilliams chooses to criticize alternative animal agriculture so directly when, by most accounts, upwards of 99% of meat production is industrial. Criticizing the sacred cows of the sustainable food movement can come across as combative, whereas the common ground between McWilliams and his interlocutors is quite substantial.

Localism is a second tenet of the sustainable food movement that McWilliams tackles. Despite food miles having become a proxy for sustainability, only a small percentage of the environmental impact of food is attributable to transportation. Production is almost always more environmentally burdensome, even for food shipped thousands of miles. As a result, McWilliams asks us to stop “fetishizing food miles.” While he does not propose a detailed, positive vision, he nonetheless has evidence on his side, and forces the reader to engage with the multiple conflicting values in this area. The environment is only one—importing food from poorer countries is arguably ethically preferable to keeping money in local, wealthier economies. While such ethical topics come up indirectly, justice is a secondary topic in the book. The chapter on fair trade heavily emphasizes subsidies, but does not offer a substantive discussion of justice as it relates to food.

Of special interest to environmental philosophers, McWilliams challenges problematic, moralistic notions of a bucolic and pre-modern “natural” model of agriculture, for instance traditional, small-scale, organic farms, as solutions to environmental problems. He rejects the conceptual dichotomy between “organic” and “conventional” farming practices, which do not map cleanly onto environmental or human health impacts. He is rightfully critical of the notion that naturalness indicates what is right, or that pre-industrial agricultural landscapes are an appropriate model for modern, high-population contexts. Basic is-ought distinctions and critical analysis of idealized conceptions of nature can both contribute conceptual clarity to such claims. This is rich terrain for environmental ethicists, who could shed light on many of the concepts used in such conversations.

While much of *Just Food* moves beyond conceptually fraught notions of environmentally better agriculture, it is unclear how much it helps. While rejecting the organic-conventional distinction, McWilliams proposes a “continuum of farming systems,” a “golden mean” and a “middle ground.” But like Aristotle, moderation seems fine until we have to figure out the details of what this perspective would look like, what metrics we would use to assess it, and how we ought to implement it. As with the chapters on meat, local food and GMOs, he solves one problem (e.g., by rejecting simplistic, absolutist notions of an environmental good, or arguments based on naturalness), but raises other ones (e.g., what thresholds to use, or what ethical standards to adopt).

When McWilliams offers solutions, they often require clarification and justification. His focus on technical solutions is based on a handful of assumptions that philosophers are well equipped to assess. He criticizes rejecting GMOs based on their unnaturalness, and proposes aquaculture as an inexpensive protein source, but relies heavily on predicted and promised outcomes to justify them. These arguments would have benefited from reference to ethics and social science literature in the area, starting with Garrett Hardin, and by incorporating criticisms of technical approaches to solving problems.

Finally, a note on the tone of the book. McWilliams is not a methodological contrarian (as, say, climate contrarians might be) but rather, he likes to attack dominant orthodoxies. [Some](#) interpret him as “lob[bing] artfully wrought little polemics that typically end up promoting the interests of Big Food.” Such a claim effectively argues that those who don’t promote small-scale, organic, animal-integrative, anti-GMO agriculture are *eo ipso* defending the status quo. However, this is not evidenced in McWilliams’s writing, which is skeptical of most food ideologies. Given that many conversations about the various sacred cows in the food debate escalate quickly, a heated response such as [this](#) is expected. Challenging deeply seated beliefs is bound to upset many.<sup>1</sup> Yet flirting with contrarian views, and doing so in such a self-aware way, comes with costs. Reinforcing the mainstream view that environmentalists make irrational decisions or that there is little substantive basis for the promotion of organic agriculture plays too easily into the hands of defenders of the status quo. Provocation often cuts through

1. Pamela Ronald and R. W. Adamchik’s *Tomorrow’s Table* (2010), which defends organic, genetically modified foods, is one of the few counterexamples I know of.

media noise and gets attention, but can do so at the cost of more subtle and accurate messaging. Very few books avoid this problem, and even fewer that straddle the academic and the mainstream worlds manage to do so. When compared to Michael Pollan’s hugely popular *Omnivore’s Dilemma*, McWilliams’s *Just Food* comes across as more transparent, better researched, and ultimately more thought-provoking.

Despite its shortcomings, *Just Food* makes important points persuasively: that local food is often not environmentally preferable; that even humane and ecologically oriented animal agriculture is still very resource- and climate-intensive; that animals lie at the center of the environmental impacts of food; that we need to balance multiple conflicting values to achieve a just food system; and, that GMOs might be a viable partial solution to certain agricultural problems. Even if his tone and stances are occasionally combative, McWilliams’s arguments might help to move the conversation about food and the environment from the outdated concepts of localism and pre-industrial models to something more appropriate for our current, high-population context. Is this just another grenade lobbed in the food wars? Some might dismiss it as such, but they would miss some important arguments that don’t fit neatly into popular conceptions of food and the environment.

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## *PLANTS AS PERSONS: A PHILOSOPHICAL BOTANY*

MATTHEW HALL, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, 2011

In his groundbreaking *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany*, Matthew Hall counters the animal bias that objectifies the plant lives making up the overwhelming mass and diversity of the biosphere. His discussion supports an alternative view of the personhood of plants, presenting scientific data underscoring plant individuality, self-

recognition, self-direction, learning capacity, self-preservation, and self-initiated movement.

Hall’s conclusions are not without dissenters, and true to the intentional heterarchy of his stance, he presents his ideas in a framework of dialogue, offering both botanical