

## [On "ethical eating"](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

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Last Saturday I attended a Battle of Ideas debate on whether or not food can be moral. It's an interesting question for libertarians, particularly when you try to consider the extent to which the non-aggression principle can apply to other animals. Some take a purist approach and consider all animal life to be inviolable. Others take the position that eating another animal is fine, so long as you didn't support the system that put it on your plate by buying it. This could have been a debate on exercising personal morality, using the power of the consumer to gradually change trends.

But the majority of this particular debating panel had other ideas. With the honourable exception of Kirk Leech, who put up a robust defence of the consumer, a bunch (or should the collective be 'a table'?) of food critics expounded their personal pet hates. Some raised valid environmental and ethical concerns, but an alarming consensus began to emerge on the inherent evils of cheap 'convenience' food. Apparently, the very cheapness and availability of food detracts from the moral worth we place on it.

The argument goes that these pre-packaged, processed foods mask the sources of other moral issues: instead of stuffing a tuna meal-deal sandwich into my face within seconds, I should first take the time to consider how that tuna was farmed, and who may or may not have been exploited in the process. All of this naturally leads to calls for more expensive food. One of the food critics went as far as saying we should artificially raise the price, even if it will impact lower income families. It's for their own good, you see.

I cannot think of a more snobbish, elitist and condescending attitude. The reality is that no matter how long I could contemplate the ingredients for a tuna sandwich (as that seems to be the implication of not having it pre-made), I probably wouldn't be any the wiser about its impact on the world. And that's the beauty of the free market: just like the short memoir of [I, Pencil](#) <sup>[3]</sup>, the price mechanism allows countless buyers and sellers to co-ordinate their actions and limited knowledge, not even needing to all speak the same language let alone understand each others' industries.

As Kirk Leech pointed out, the economic revolutions of the birth of modernity saw the democratisation of gastronomy, with the emergence of meat, sugar and wider choice for everyone, not just the feudal few. But just like the absurdly resilient notion that capitalism makes the poor poorer, food paternalists have convinced us that eating and buying food is a morally sanctioned activity. Ethical eating has become a form of penance rather than a source of pleasure. But not everyone can afford it.

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**Links:**

- [1] <http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/environment/on-ethical-eating>
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- [3] <http://www.fee.org/library/books/i-pencil-2/>
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