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## Michael Pollan's Ecology of Food

THE VERY FIRST PLEASURE TO BE OFFERED A READER of Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*<sup>1</sup> is the physical artifact itself: this notably handsome book. From its elegantly simple title page and its high quality, just-the-right-thickness paper, to its clean legible font surrounded by lots of airspace, the aesthetic experience of simply holding on to this well-designed volume is what first strikes a reader. It's a fitting complement to the clean prose and tactful virtuosity of Pollan himself, one of the unofficial stars of a distinguished clan of earth-oriented public intellectuals, starting with Wendell Berry and taking in John McPhee, Jared Diamond, Peter Singer, Gary Nabhan, Mike Davis and others I have unintentionally neglected.

Pollan's previous book, *The Botany of Desire: A Plant's-Eye View of the World*, has already become a sui-generis classic, a multi-faceted account of apples, tulips, marijuana, and potatoes. Since its appearance in 2001, Pollan has been nurtured by the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, where his essays have appeared on corn, obesity, beef, agribusiness, hunting, and—most recently—"Mass Natural," an early alarm signal about the potential downside of organic food being co-opted by Wal-Mart. *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, however, has carefully avoided merely collecting these previously published essays, excellent as they are, by artfully incorporating their contents into an ongoing narrative about Homo sapiens' unique capacity to adjust to almost any diet, including some that turn out to be lethal, though lethality can range from the almost instantaneous poisoning by a mushroom to the very slow debilitation from junk-food-induced heart attacks, obesity, and diabetes (and more food is ultimately junk than you can realize). The omnivore's dilemma is that while he is genetically predisposed to the formerly salvific (but scarce) sugar and fat of a hunter-gatherer's roller-coaster diet, he now must exert his will-power to reject the overwhelming quantities of today's manufactured diet of sugars and fats driving him to debility and death. But the *conscientious* omnivore's dilemma—pervading this whole treatise—is *philosophical remorse*, the irresolvable contradictions of mortality that Virgil described two millennia ago as "the tears of things."

In dealing with this subject, Pollan touches many bases: evolution, knowledge and ignorance, industrialization, consumer capitalism,

<sup>1</sup> THE OMNIVORE'S DILEMMA: A Natural History of Four Meals, by Michael Pollan. The Penguin Press. \$26.95.