

Don't Eat Anything with a Face: A Discussion on Eating Meat

The Intelligence Squared team debated the impacts of animal consumption

December 6, 2013

By Sophie Johnson



ABC News correspondent John Donovan led the spirited debate.

The award-winning debate series, "Intelligence Squared U.S.," concluded its fall season with "Don't [Eat](#) Anything with a Face," moderated by ABC News correspondent John Donovan. The debate was centered on physical, psychological, environmental, and moral impacts caused by the American consumption of animal protein.

Not surprisingly, the topic ignited a strong reaction from vegans and omnivores alike. The program's chairman, Robert Rosenkranz, announced to audience members that the online response prior to the debate was so great that the Intelligence Squared website was unable to handle the massive increase in traffic. None of their previous events have ever sparked so much interest.

What made the public feel so strongly about something as basic as food? Rosenkranz speculated that it was because our dietary choices have become a form of branding.

Choosing to buy organic and locally grown foods, or to only consume a plant-based diet, is part of our identity that broadcasts our personal values to the rest of the world. For example, being a vegan implies that you [value](#) your own health and the well-being of other species and the environment. However, is it possible to be ecological, ethical, and health-conscious while still consuming meat? The debate's four panelists sought to answer that very question.

In his opening argument, Dr. Neal Bernard M.D. testified to the negative effects that animal products have on our health. He grew up in a family where [meat](#), specifically red meat, was present at just

about every meal. In his early 20s, he was dissecting a cadaver when his instructor pointed out a hard substance lining the cadaver's blood vessels. "There's your morning sausage," said the teacher.

Since then, Dr. Barnard has devoted his practice to the study of how a person's diet affects body weight, chronic pain, and diabetes. He cited cases where patients suffering from type 2 diabetes were cured simply by switching to a strictly plant-based regimen. He went on to say that other studies imply that people who consume meat have a greater risk of Alzheimer's and even cancer.

Countering Dr. Barnard's argument, Chris Masterjohn, Ph. D., a nutritional sciences researcher and blogger for The Daily Lipid, cited his own personal experience. Masterjohn lived as a vegan for several years and developed several health problems including lethargy, irritability, anxiety, and tooth decay during that time. He claims many fat-soluble vitamins and minerals, essential to bone, dental, and even psychological health, are most efficiently obtained by eating meat. Masterjohn suggests that the maladies Dr. Barnard attributes to meat are actually the result of modernized food processing as supported by the research of dentist and nutrition advocate Weston Price. Beginning in the 1920s, Price studied how dental health of people living in developed areas differed from those living in less modernized surroundings. He found that the developed areas had a far greater rate of tooth decay, which Price attributed to a diet of refined grains and sugar. Masterjohn concluded that a simple, unprocessed, well-balanced diet would not carry any of the negative effects Barnard presented.

Gene Baur, the president and co-founder of Farm Sanctuary, an organization that rescues animals from commercial farms, was most concerned with the ethical aspect of the debate. Baur stated, referring to our ability to gain nutrients from plant-sources rather than "murdering" animals, "If we can live well without causing harm, why wouldn't we do it?" He added that whenever animals are raised for consumption, no matter how humanely, there is always exploitation.

Joel Salatin, a third-generation alternative farmer, disagreed with Baur. Salatin expressed his deep love, compassion, and respect for the animals he raises. He also argued that environmental integrity depends on the cycle of life. Plants feed prey, which feed predators, which die and decompose to provide nutrients for the plants. Everything that lives must die.

Both sides of the debate could agree that large-scale commercial farming was a dangerous industry, and presented data on the nutritional quality and ethical considerations that were lacking in modern food productions.

"Don't Eat Anything with a Face" was a lively discussion with emotions running high for both parties. However, it would appear from this debate that the information on health defects relating to the consumption of free-range, grass-fed, "happy" animals as part of a balanced diet is still unclear at this point.

That said, it would suggest from Salatin's use of the word "dressing" instead of "slaughtering" when referring to an animal's final moments, that even he feels some guilt about it. So, health concerns aside, will meat eaters ever be able to feel like their brand identity is as morally intact as their vegan counterparts? Perhaps not.