A Reaction to *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*

In the book *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, Michael Pollan describes the relationship that the human species has with food in three parts, industrial, pastoral, and personal. In the first part, he examines the policies behind agribusiness in the United States, exploring the politics and science that go into making the majority of what Americans consume today. One of the most important pieces of information in this part is the plight of the modern farmer. Because of how modern agricultural subsidies are arranged, combined with the relatively static demand for food, farmers are getting less and less for their crops as they grow more and more, providing the public with apparently cheap food, but hiding the costs that the public must pay for through tax subsidies and the environmental effects that intensive agriculture creates. The attention to the politics of the issue shows the root of the issue is not necessarily big evil corporations or corrupt government policies, but the very nature of economics itself combined with such things. Concentrated animal feedlots are also a focus of the first section of the book, with Pollan personally visiting one and describing the squalor that animals in them are forced to endure. Pollan also describes the organic farming market, including the rather oxymoronic notion of industrial organic that stemmed from the green movement in the 50s. I thought this was a particularly interesting part, as Pollan once again covers the economics of the matter, stating that through rebranding and slightly different farming practices companies can raise the price for a relatively similar product. The biggest emphasis in this first part about industrial agriculture was the fact that corn is in everything, which I had heard before, but when I tried out Pollan’s exercise of looking at the ingredients for what I eat and picking out which complex compound names were “code for corn” I found that I had severely underestimated how much corn you could fit into a product, and the wide variety of products it could be in. The second part of the book deals with a more traditional form of farming, the idealist pastoral farm that so readily comes to mind when farming is mentioned. The most interesting bit in this part is
where Pollan discusses the ethics of eating animals. The ethics of eating meat is something that I have thought about many times in the past when trying to defend it against vegetarians, and the slew of ideas that Pollan brings to the table are certainly cause for critical thinking. Do we have to be morally superior to other omnivorous animals? Should intelligence affect what we eat? What is the lifestyle the animal must lead to feed us? All very good questions, which made me have an internal debate when I read them. Pollan visits a farm that engages in what I can only describe as the most down to earth and environmentally conscientious practices possible. Every single element is taken into consideration, from the amount of chicken scat to the forest surrounding the farm. The amount of detail that goes into the farm is amazing, especially when contrasted with the industrial farming techniques of the previous part. The last part of the book was the least interesting, with Pollan trying to make a meal with ingredients that he hunted or harvested, and while it was a good tale in of itself, had a less analytical approach, with a definite change in tone from the last two parts, but was a good perspective on nature, which reminded me of *A Sand County Almanac*. I have never embarked on such a steep task, but I can agree with the sentiment that people need to get out more and experience nature and its fruits in a more unrefined state. This was the most important aspect, the part that brought the whole book together, this simple fact that we as a species need to have a greater appreciation for the natural systems that govern the world. After all, the world has been in a bountiful, relatively stable state for the last couple of million years, and the interconnecting cycles that keep it that way should be something that we take a cue from, not obstacles that we must overcome in order to fuel more pointless economic and population growth.