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What is Food, Really?

How much easier would life be if food was not necessary? It sounds crazy, but consider it, even for a moment. Imagine never having to make a last-minute run to the grocery store, not having to leave your desk when you are being productive and most importantly, cutting food costs for you or your family in half. This idea may sound like a strange mix between utopia and dystopia, but it could be our reality, if Rob Rhinehart has his way.

Back in 2012, Rob Rhinehart and his friends were fresh off a failed project and trying to save money. While working long hours, Rhinehart began to resent the fact that he ever needed to stop work to eat food or spend his hard-earned money on it. Soon, he began to research exactly what nutrients one needs to survive and decided he was going to order just the essentials in supplements purchased online and make his own food. Thus, after a few attempts, Soylent was born. Since then, it has taken off in the media, becoming popular among people who work so hard they don't have time for food, for example, a large group of Caltech engineering students that created their own recipes for Soylent. This may sound like the idea of the century, but there are some downsides to it. Although a world that subsists on Soylent may make day-to-day life a little easier, the Soylent future that Rob Rhinehart dreams of is unattainable. In 2014, Lizzie Widdicombe, of the New Yorker, met and interviewed the creator of Soylent. After knowing Rob Rhinehart for a short amount of time, Widdicombe voiced some of her concerns, including dietary needs, social and cultural aspects of Soylent and climate change, in an essay titled *The End of Food*.

On an all Soylent diet, one realizes how much their day revolves around food and how much they anticipate it. Widdicombe even went as far as to try a Soylent diet herself. She writes, "You begin to

realize how much of your day revolves around food. Meals provide punctuation to our lives...”

(Widdicombe, 2014). If one really thinks about it, it is true. Food is one of the most important things in our lives and not only because we need nutrients from it to survive. People plan lunches to catch up with old friends, dinner parties to introduce friends to others and even going out and getting breakfast with a loved one to spend some time together. These are huge cultural aspects of life as a human. Asking any random person on the street what their favorite food is would most likely result in a story of why they like it, the times that they eat it and the people they eat it with. Personally, my favorite meal is my father’s homemade chili. This dish reminds me of home and of cold winter nights on the couch watching tv with my family over dinner. These memories fill me with warmth and nostalgia for the days that I would come home and smell it cooking in the kitchen, knowing it would be a good night. Even imagining that I would never have that experience again is almost heartbreaking because of how big of a role those memories have played in my life, even now.

What Widdicombe is trying to say here is that when Soylent takes over the role of food in one’s life, it takes away a large aspect of day-to-day life as a social human being. It then replaces it with nonstop work because nobody has to get up and get lunch when their lunch is just liquid in a bottle next to their computer. An all Soylent diet would turn the working class into the closest things to zombies ever seen, taking away the time they had to interact with other human beings. Although this is an important aspect of the Soylent world Rhinehart imagines, it is not the biggest problem concerning jobs.

A consequence of a Soylent fueled world that Widdicombe doesn’t really touch on in her article is the jobs that it would terminate, if it were to go into full effect. Rob Rhinehart states in the article that “Agriculture’s one of the most dangerous and dirty jobs out there, and it’s traditionally done by the underclass.” (Widdicombe, 2014). While Rhinehart is not incorrect in his statements, he is pointing out one of the massive downsides to Soylent becoming popular, and that is job loss. He stated himself that farming is traditionally a “underclass” career, and that is exactly who would be in danger if Soylent took off the way that it was expected to. By people not eating regular food anymore, hundreds of farmers all around the world would be out of business and most would be out of the income they support their family

with. Rhinehart does not seem to have a positive view on farms, clear by when he called farms “very inefficient factories.” It is easy to see why one would think that, but if you put it into a humanitarian perspective, it is clear that farms are important to keep many people in America in their houses and with the food they need to survive, whether that be traditional food or Soylent. As someone who comes from a small town where a great deal of the jobs are in agriculture, I know first-hand that a Soylent fueled future would cause great distress on my community. In my small, twelve square mile town in Connecticut, half of the town is covered in farms. These farms are all family operated and employ many people from the surrounding areas. Hypothetically, if all farms in America were to shut down next week and Soylent was the new food for everyone, anywhere from 100 to 200 people in my small town would lose their jobs and have to find new ones that they are not equipped for as most of them have been doing this their whole lives. Obviously, shutting down every farm in America is a bit of a stretch, but if that many people were put out of jobs in a small town of about 3,000 residents, imagine the large scale effects of getting rid of all the farms in the country or even the world to move people toward an easier, more streamlined solution to food.

Although, Rhinehart does not seem to want to get rid of all farms, because he went on to tell Widdicombe “Surely it should be automated.” This shows that he does not expect Soylent to completely take over the world, rather than just supplement the regular food that we have begun growing low on.

Another group that would be affected to only a slightly smaller extent than farmers, restaurant owners and workers along with grocery store workers and owners. Soylent would destroy more jobs than could really be justified. Keeping this in mind, there are still more downsides to the world going on an all Soylent diet, and that is that we do not know if that is truly what is best for us, our health and our bodies.

For this article, it is clear that Widdicombe did as much research as she possibly could, even going as far as to consult doctors about Soylent and whether or not a human really could live off that alone, if they wanted or needed to. The doctors consulted by Widdicombe agreed that one could survive on Soylent alone, which sounds like a big win for Rob Rhinehart. The chair of the Harvard School of Public Health nutrition department, Walter Willett, told Widdicombe “it’s a little bit presumptuous to

think that we actually know everything that goes into an optimally healthy diet,” and he is correct (Widdicombe 2014). However, just because Soylent has all the known necessary ingredients for a healthy diet, there is no way of knowing for sure if that is all that humans need. Science is a field that is always changing and discovering new things we had yet to learn about everything from the environment to our bodies. The long-term effects of drinking Soylent have yet to be discovered, as it has only been around for about six years. Six years is hardly enough time to know anything about a product besides what goes into making it. Widdicombe herself noted the negative side effects she experienced in her article, stating she had bad gas, stomach bloating and intense food cravings while trying to subsist on Soylent alone. Not to mention, Soylent completely bypasses the benefits of different foods that are not necessarily required for survival. For example, studies have shown that the chemical that makes tomatoes red, lycopene, is linked to lower rates of prostate cancer. The same goes for flavonoid compounds, found in blueberries and associated with lower rates of diabetes in people who eat them (Widdicombe 2014). With all this information, it seems that Soylent has the cards stacked against it. However, it is not all bad news when it comes to this meal replacement drink.

One of the most pressing issues facing the world today is climate change. When people think about climate change, they usually imagine the ice caps melting, storms getting worse and the summers getting hotter. However, there is a side to climate change that doesn't get as much coverage and it's the way it affects our food. With the rise of farm-to-table restaurants and lifestyles, farming has become even more of a booming industry in America especially. Now, this may not sound like a bad thing, but this “healthier, organic” lifestyle has all but completely missed the working class that makes up most of America. Lower class Americans are now left to deal with new struggles including obesity and even malnutrition, because all the good food is too expensive for them to afford reliably, due to the popularity of farm-to-table dining. This leaves them in a tough spot, food wise. “A recent U.N. report warned that climate change is threatening the global food supply,” Widdicombe writes. She also interviewed the head of food policy and climate change at Oxfam, Tim Gore, who said “The main way that most people will experience climate change is through the impact on food: the food they eat, the price they pay for it, and

the availability and choice that they have.” (Widdicombe 2014). Food is also documented as a large cause of climate change through greenhouse gas emissions, through livestock mainly. Hypothetically, if the whole world started drinking Soylent, for at least one meal a day, then that number could be drastically reduced. Reasons like this are why people consider Soylent and substances like it as the “food of the future”, but one can only think that if they ignore all the reasons that Soylent is not the perfect substitute it claims to be. There are always other options to help global warming such as global efforts like sustainable farming, caps on carbon emissions and efforts to replace nonrenewable energy resources with solar, wind and hydropower. Soylent is not the only option to ease climate change.

The world is always looking for the next great scientific breakthrough. Whether it is in medicine, technology or even food science; we are all fascinated by new inventions that could make our lives easier. Rob Rhinehart definitely thought he had the next great scientific breakthrough when he invented Soylent back in 2013, but he didn’t seem to think of the repercussions of his creation before boasting his great plan. While Soylent does have upsides, such as helping those who are “food insecure” get their daily nutrition and helping fight climate change (if it is adapted worldwide), it is not without its downsides as well. Problems with Soylent include changing social norms, job loss and dietary needs not being met; none of these are to be overlooked. Losing the punctuation of meals throughout the day would destroy cultural norms that humans are so dependant upon. Along with this, Soylent would also eliminate jobs in the agricultural and consumer markets and it could provide people with improper nutrition. All this just goes to show that Soylent is just not the huge scientific breakthrough that Rhinehart thinks it was.

Works Cited

Widdicombe, Lizzie. "The End of Food." *The New Yorker*, *The New Yorker*, 19 June 2017,
www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/05/12/the-end-of-food.