**Philosophy as Therapy for Recovering (Unrestrained) Omnivores**

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**Introduction**

Philosophy “comes to dinner” most often in this volume as a valuable tool for constructing and criticizing arguments that can help us to discern our dietary obligations and evaluate various action plans we might adopt in striving to fulfill them. Recourse to a variety of well-constructed arguments is undoubtedly a significant strategic asset for cultivating more ethical eating habits and convincing others to follow suit.

Nevertheless, common obstacles often prevent even the best arguments from getting traction in our lives.  For one thing, many of us enter the discussion hampered by firmly-entrenched but largely uninvestigated assumptions about food that make it difficult to imagine how even well-supported arguments that challenge our familiar frames of culinary reference could actually apply to us. When an argument contests our cherished food ways, we are inclined almost reflexively to dodge, downplay, or dismiss it, and all the more anxiously if we suspect it’s a good one. Moreover, even when we find such arguments convincing and resolve to change, we often discover to our chagrin that, when the buffet is open, we lack the will to act on our convictions. Whether the obstacle is a lack of imagination or a failure of will, the way to concrete moral progress is blocked.

   Our aim here is to consider how other modes of philosophical inquiry can help us to overcome these two obstacles that arise at the margins of philosophy’s argumentative contributions to food ethics.  In part I, we diagnose these obstacles as common moral malaises—we call them the *malaise of imagination* and the *malaise of will*—that create existential unease for moral agents that can curtail their ability to eat in accordance with what they learn from philosophical arguments. We then propose that other modes of philosophical inquiry can serve as therapy for these malaises. In part II, we argue that philosophical hermeneutics (exemplified by Hans-Georg Gadamer) can treat the malaise of imagination by helping us to excavate and revise hidden prejudices that interfere with our ability authentically to engage arguments that challenge entrenched assumptions about food.  In part III, we argue that philosophy as care of the self (exemplified by Pierre Hadot) can treat the malaise of will by helping us to identify habits of thought and action that hamper concrete progress toward new dietary ideals and to replace them, through repetitive exercises, with transformed habits. In a brief conclusion, we identify some benefits of this approach.

**I. Two Common Moral Malaises and The Prospect of Philosophical Therapy**

*The Cases of Karla and Augusto*

Imagine that Karla learns in her ethics seminar that pigs are as intelligent as dogs.  She has a bulldog herself—the irreplaceable Mr. Chauncey “Chum” Thickleston III—and is horrified by the thought of eating him, not just because she loves him but also because he clearly seems to have an interest in avoiding a one-way trip to the deli case. This situation worries Karla because she wants to be consistent and her newly-minted awareness of porcine intelligence raises the possibility that she shouldn’t eat pigs anymore.  She mulls things over at lunch while enjoying the dining hall’s much-lauded pulled pork sandwich.

    As Karla considers the class discussion, various thoughts occur to her that allay her concern somewhat.  Pulled pork is delicious, and she and her father have a fifteen-year history of relishing the legendary barbequed version at her church’s annual pig roast.  Were Karla to go vegetarian, her father would be crushed; he always boasted that *his* daughter could keep pace with the footballers when it came to devouring barbeque. And if her church deems it suitable to celebrate the season with a pig on a spit, the practice can’t be that bad. Didn’t God give human beings dominion over animals along with direct permission to eat them? Besides, from a practical perspective, going vegetarian is expensive, judgmental of others, and probably unhealthy, so it would be bad stewardship of her finances, her relationships, and maybe even her body. Notwithstanding these consolations, Karla still feels remarkably unsettled when her classmate Augusto offers an articulate case for veganism in a follow-up class discussion. As compelling as his argument seems, though, she just can’t imagine how it could be right.

    Now consider the case of Augusto, Karla’s classmate.  He has always had a heart for animals and chokes up every time he sees a commercial on mistreated dogs or a truck full of cows en route to slaughter.  The article discussed in class has hit Augusto hard, convincing him that eating meat is often morally wrong, and that all things considered, he shouldn’t do it. He swears off eating animals and resolves to choose a veggie burger over meatloaf at lunch.  Approaching the cafeteria, he smells the pulled pork. He notices his friends at a nearby table, gleefully gorging on the vaunted sandwiches.  His conviction is weakened by the pork’s irresistible aroma, combined with the knowledge that he’ll take a pummeling from the guys if he turns up with an anemic veggie burger.

    He guiltily swipes a pork sandwich and consoles himself that *this* sandwich is already prepared and would probably just go in a landfill if he doesn’t eat it.  Besides, it’s Shotz-n-Wingz night at Baloneez and he’ll surely have better luck breaking old habits at the start of a new day.  Or maybe a new month, given that his grandparents will want to take him to Admirals Wharf for his birthday. Actually, it might just be best to wait until semester’s end, given that learning to cook will take time, and he’s locked into a meal plan at this green-forsaken cafeteria anyway.  At the next class discussion, he compensates by speaking up for veganism, silently lamenting that the argument that so readily changed his mind has been decidedly less transformative of his will.

    In certain respects, the cases of Karla and Augusto are similar.  Both are moved by philosophical arguments to question the moral adequacy of some of their current beliefs and behaviors. Both feel significant discomfort, even anxiety, when confronting these argumentative challenges. And both find the consolations of continued argumentative engagement alone to be insufficient means for quelling their anxiety and moving toward concrete moral progress. Maybe Karla and Augusto just haven’t happened upon the game-changing argument yet, and a more rigorous engagement with the right counter-example could provide the cure for what ails them. But suppose that even after significant grappling with the arguments and counterarguments, they still find themselves stymied in the above-described ways. Beyond helping them to discern the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments they encounter, does philosophy have any additional resources at its disposal to aid them?

    We think the answer is yes. To prepare the way for explaining how philosophy can help, it is instructive to distill the differences between Karla’s and Augusto’s predicaments into two common moral malaises that offer a clearer picture of the specific obstacles to moral progress they confront.

*The Malaises of Imagination and Will*

Karla suffers from a malaise of imagination. Her anxiety is a function of the bewilderment caused by feeling the pull of a provocative argument for eating otherwise while simultaneously being unable to imagine a world in which eating otherwise is possible for her without compromising important aspects of her identity.  Her imagination is limited thus in part because her identity has been shaped by a number of largely uninvestigated but nonetheless pervasively influential assumptions about the world (and its human and animal denizens) that are inhospitable to the prospect of changing her diet. For instance, she has religious assumptions about divine designs for human/animal relationships that render her wary of views that seem to accord inordinate moral importance to subordinate creatures; in the back of her mind, she worries that policing her meat consumption would mean impiously holding animals in higher esteem than God does. She also has gendered assumptions about eating and personal and familial attachments to particular foods that regulate her self-understanding and self-esteem; how could she dash her father’s pride and jettison tradition for bunny-hugging? Karla has been shaped, too, by an economic system in which cheap, convenient foods are often products of industrial farm animal production (IFAP), and by a popular-scientific outlook that deems animal protein essential for health, so she is inclined to assume that replacing animal products would be unaffordable and unhealthy.

Unlike many of her classmates who succumb to this malaise without becoming aware of the assumptions generating their unease, Karla identifies them and even pits them against the proposed argument to mitigate her anxiety. But her eagerness to defeat an argument that has genuinely piqued her moral concern nonetheless betrays a kinship with her less reflective colleagues: her identity-framing background assumptions are interfering with her ability to be as open to the argument as she would be if there weren’t so much at stake. Karla would have a hard enough time imagining herself as ‘Karla the vegetarian’ or ‘Karla the agrarian’ even if it were just a matter of choosing veggies over animal products most of the time. But in her malaise of imagination, she worries that adopting such ideals could compromise cherished religious, personal, familial, economic, and physical aspects of her identity. She suspects, even if she can’t bring herself to believe, that she has good moral reasons to change her diet. But her malaise obscures potentially liberating interpretations of the world—of her religion as enjoining her to more compassionate eating, of her family as able to benefit from her example, and of her economic and physical circumstances as enhanced by eating less meat—and thus it dampens her fledgling inclination to follow her moral curiosity into new and potentially transformative experiences.

    Augusto, by contrast, suffers from a malaise of will. His anxiety is a function of his unwillingness to initiate and/or consistently maintain daily adherence to a dietary ideal he feels morally inspired and/or obligated to live out. His failure to follow through is hardly mysterious; it results from a potent cocktail of all the usual challenges that thwart best intentions: peer pressure, bad faith, aesthetic preferences, wish-fulfillment, laziness, dubious traditions, placation of loved ones, entrenched habits, lack of experience, and the demotivating inertia of society’s pervasively compromised institutions.[[1]](#endnote-1)

But if Augusto’s malaise is initially easier to identify than Karla’s, it is potentially more debilitating to endure. Like Karla, he experiences existential unease: he is discomfited by cognitive dissonance and anxious about what to do next. But unlike Karla, whose identity-framing assumptions render her initially unreceptive to argumentative indictments of her diet and offer a semblance of plausible deniability against them to boot, Augusto *is* receptive to the indictment and feels convicted by it. He now believes that a specific behavior modification is required and he desires to respond accordingly. Whether his conviction that this modification is obligatory is in fact supported by the proposed argument is not our concern here.  The point is that Augusto’s strong belief that he should change his behavior and his earnest desire to do so combine to make his unease over failing to do so all the more acute.

*Philosophical Therapy for Moral Malaises*

Most moral agents will recognize these predicaments from experience. Indeed, both malaises are ubiquitous obstacles to moral progress. For many, moreover, philosophical argumentation alone won’t budge these obstacles because of entrenched and often unconscious attitudes and behaviors that interfere with their ability to engage and apply arguments. To help dispel these malaises, we recommend engagement with other modes of philosophical inquiry—hermeneutics and care of the self—that can, respectively, increase receptivity to moral arguments for dietary modification by reframing assumptions that hamper one’s ability to imagine new dietary possibilities (part II) and facilitate concrete striving toward dietary goals by habituating practices of thought and action that supplant bad habits with new and better ones (part III). In these ways, the modes of philosophical inquiry we consider may serve as therapy for the malaises in question and as welcome supplements to philosophical arguments.

A few clarifications are in order before we proceed. First, we understand ‘therapy’ here as a strategy or set of strategies that aims to help one recover from some ill or set of ills that compromises wellbeing and that represents a falling away from a health ideal.[[2]](#endnote-2) The health ideal we have in mind is a moral life in which an agent reflects on and feels appropriately satisfied with the degree of harmony between her beliefs and actions, and in which she has the tools to identify and assume beliefs and actions that authentically reflect her values. The malaises in question threaten this ideal. Though they can arise in the context of any moral issue, we’re concerned here with how they pertain to the challenges of ethical eating.

Within this context, our proposed therapy is explicitly *philosophical*. This clarification is important in order to distinguish our project from *psychological* approaches, which we do not engage here. Our therapeutic is philosophical because it prescribes philosophy as an antidote to a common problem in ethics that is especially widespread where arguments for dietary changes are concerned. People see that such arguments have great force—and genuinely have no objection, though they might still strain to think of one—and yet are curiously unmoved by such arguments. This stagnancy is curious because in cases concerning, say, voting ethics or the ethics of deception, people are typically moved by forceful arguments. Vis-à-vis such arguments, we distinguish two ways one might be moved: moved to accept the conclusion (Karla is unmoved in this way); and moved to modify one’s behavior in response to accepting the conclusion (Augusto is unmoved in this way). Then, we distinguish two corresponding strategies for using philosophy (namely, hermeneutics and care of the self) to move one in these respective ways. Because philosophical confusion of various kinds is the source of the problems that Karla and Augusto face, philosophical therapy is an appropriate response.[[3]](#endnote-3)

We hope this exercise in diagnosing a moral ailment and observing how philosophy can help cure it is interesting in its own right to a variety of audiences. One audience that might benefit especially, however, is a group we call “recovering unrestrained omnivores.” By “unrestrained omnivore” we mean someone whose dietary habits are such that even when she has many options available to her, she mainly chooses, by default or design, products of IFAP. By “recovering” unrestrained omnivores, we mean those within this demographic who believe (or at least suspect) that dietary changes are morally requisite and want to change on some level, but whose progress is hampered by one or both of the malaises.[[4]](#endnote-4)

In proposing philosophical therapy for these malaises, we take for granted that many people see unrestrained omnivorism as an obstacle to moral wellbeing. We do not argue here for the moral inadequacy of unrestrained omnivorism, nor do we defend any particular set of ‘restraints’ as an alternative to it.[[5]](#endnote-5) Our aim is rather to show how philosophy can help those who, challenged by one or more of the numerous arguments against IFAP or in favor of some alternative dietary ideal, sensibly take themselves to have good moral reasons to restrain their consumption in particular ways (whether by avoiding eating and/or purchasing IFAP products, eating and/or purchasing them more selectively, or becoming agrarian, vegetarian or vegan) but lack the imagination or will to do so.

    We set the scope of our project thus because, as other chapters in this book illustrate, there is widespread agreement that IFAP is morally problematic but considerable debate about what this consensus means for our dietary obligations.  By targeting unrestrained omnivorism generally, we take aim at a common moral foe and preserve the prospect for alliances with many arguments advanced in this volume.  If one finds Nobis and Hooley or McPherson compelling, one might undertake the proposed therapy in pursuit of veganism. If Budolfson or Van Dyke strikes a chord, altruistic omnivorism might be the goal, whereas agreement with Lipscomb may find one striving for the agrarian ideal.  In each case, the proposed therapy aims to aid those struggling with the challenges of improving on unrestrained omnivorism, either by broadening their imaginations in ways that increase receptivity to these arguments, or by strengthening their wills to live out the commitments to which the arguments give rise or both.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Readers will have noticed, finally, that ethical concerns regarding animals take center stage in our diagnoses of the malaises and in our framing of related worries about IFAP and unrestrained omnivorism. This trend continues throughout the chapter and is largely a function of the limits of our personal interest and professional expertise. In emphasizing the animal-related dimensions of the struggle to eat more ethically, however, we do not wish to minimize important objections to IFAP and unrestrained omnivorism issuing from serious concerns about the environment, human health, or worker justice. We hope the proposed therapy is useful, pending relevant modifications, to those whose malaises are prompted by reflection on these other important pieces of the food ethics puzzle.

**II. Treating the Malaise of Imagination: Philosophical Hermeneutics**

*Gadamerian Insights for Hermeneutic Therapy*

Let’s return to Karla, who suffers from a malaise of imagination. Recall that she is moved to serious reflection by a class discussion on ethical veganism. The argument intrigues her and she suspects it has merit, but it provokes anxiety because she’s unable to imagine a world in which it could apply to her without challenging a variety of seemingly non-negotiable identity-framing assumptions. Our task now is to draw on Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to identify a treatment plan to help Karla reframethe uninterrogated assumptions she brings to bear on new experience, thereby opening the way to less defensive, more authentic engagement with arguments and experiences that challenge even her most deeply-held beliefs and attitudes. Gathering the relevant Gadamerian insights requires a short hike into higher altitudes than we have had to ascend thus far, but the goal is to be back on the ground with Karla in a few paragraphs, bearing some down-to-earth therapeutic advice.

When asked to characterize his approach to philosophy in a nutshell, Gadamer once said: “Philosophy is the way not to forget that man is never God.”[[7]](#endnote-7) The guiding insight here is that philosophy’s perennial task is to illuminate human finitude in order to curb our self-forgetful and often self-defeating inclination to overestimate the objectivity and extent of our knowledge. This reminder issues from Gadamer’s writings as a descriptive account of the essentially hermeneutic (i.e., interpretive) character of finite human understanding. Such understanding is neither impartial nor complete because it is always already shaped in advance by the interpretive legacies of its evolving historical and linguistic inheritances. Simply put, human beings understand on the basis of what we have already understood, and shaping forces like history, language, and tradition drive this ‘hermeneutic circle’ of understanding forward, handing down interpretations of the world that both *facilitate* and *limit* our ability to understand it.[[8]](#endnote-8)

These shaping forces put the world before us and orient us within it by inculcating us with ‘prejudices’ through which we ‘have the world in advance’ even as we remain beholden to the incomplete understanding of it inherited from the past. Prejudice-dependent understanding is thus always both underway and as yet unfinished; it is simultaneously indebted to a formative past and open to an amorphous future. Gadamer is careful to add that these prejudices need not be false or unfounded judgments (as the term’s pejorative sense in English conveys); they are best understood, rather, as guiding pre-judgments of experience that can have positive or negative value but that provide, in either case, a necessary starting point for interpretation.[[9]](#endnote-9) If prejudices are a necessary condition of understanding, however, *uninterrogated* prejudices can distort our understanding of things and limit our receptivity to new experiences that could redress such distortions.

Gadamer calls this blinkered condition “the tyranny of hidden prejudices” and argues that it “makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition.”[[10]](#endnote-10) When this tyranny prevails in our understanding of the world, we remain beholden to uninterrogated assumptions even when new experiences challenge them in potentially edifying ways. In the event of such provocative new experiences, an individual in thrall to hidden prejudices—call her hermeneutically “inexperienced”—feels anxiety resulting from the tension between her assumptions and her new experience. Because she is naïve of the influence of her hidden prejudices, however, she has difficulty bringing them reflectively to the fore and reevaluating them in light of new information. Instead, her anxiety prompts her to seek the comforts of the familiar, thereby foreclosing the opportunity to learn from ongoing experience. The more acute her anxiety becomes, the more tightly she clings to her untutored prejudices.

In contrast to the inexperienced person who shrinks from the new, the strange, and the challenging, Gadamer holds out the “experienced” person who has learned through hermeneutic training how to be tutored by these provocations. Such a person responds very differently to the anxiety that arises from having her prejudices brought up short by challenges to their interpretative adequacy. Rather than fleeing from anxiety into the safety of past understanding, the experienced person moves toward the source of her unease, expecting to learn something and recognizing that such provocations are necessary for making her governing prejudices conscious to her.[[11]](#endnote-11) The experienced person thus sees her anxiety as the harbinger of an opportunity to learn what her prejudices are and to observe how they both enable and curtail her current understanding. As a result of her careful attention to the dependence of her understanding on revisable prejudices that must be tested against and reframed in accordance with experience on an ongoing basis, the experienced person is “radically undogmatic:” “because of the many experiences [s]he has had and the knowledge [s]he has drawn from them, [she] is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

*Overcoming the Tyranny of Hidden Prejudices*

If her pulled-pork coma has subsided and Karla has been listening in, she’s already gleaned the lesson: she is Gadamer’s inexperienced person! She resists the provocation of an argument that intrigues her because she is unprepared to recognize her anxiety as a symptom of her dependence on contestable (and now contested!) assumptions. She finds it easier simply to cling to these assumptions uncritically than to commit to the daunting work of riding out the experience and risking them to evaluation and revision. In short, Karla’s malaise is a function of the tyranny of hidden prejudices: the very pre-judgments whose experiential revision could prompt her to imagine new possibilities for moral flourishing are functioning, in this case, as obstacles to her piqued moral interest in following experience where it leads.

The therapy is already working. Even this dawning of a clearer sense of why she feels so anxious is liberating. But in realizing that her malaise is in part a symptom of inexperience, Karla has also attained a new health ideal: where arguments about ethical eating are concerned, she wants to become the experienced person. And she sees how to do it: she will employ this argumentative provocation to illuminate her uninterrogated assumptions and test their interpretive adequacy by seeking out new experiences that eventuate their ongoing evaluation and revision.

Karla quickly discovers that certain of the assumptions contributing to her malaise are little more than defense mechanisms. For instance, the worries that eating differently would be unaffordable and unhealthful are—for her, if not for everyone—easily revised beliefs. However expedient these were for keeping her guard up, her new openness allows repressed or overlooked experiences to take retroactive effect and now counterexamples abound, from her (modestly compensated) math TA who eats meat only from trusted sources to the (ultra-fit) vegan marathoner she saw on *Oprah*.

Her anxiety around the church barbeque, however, leads to murkier depths. She realizes that her religious upbringing has primed her to believe that humans have divine permission to use animals, including for aesthetic enjoyment. With this assumption foregrounded, she sees just how much hangs on it. For argument’s sake, she brackets recourse to divine permission and finds it difficult to see how she would otherwise justify ranking her superfluous pleasure in eating pork above the pig’s most basic interest in living. That a benevolent creator would prefer this arrangement now seems worth reconsidering. In nosing around online, Karla discovers that many religious people—in her tradition and most others—are thinking about these issues too: there is an ever-expanding scholarly literature,[[13]](#endnote-13) growing concern in religious magazines and blogs, and even major activist organizations enjoining faith groups to eschew IFAP on religious grounds.[[14]](#endnote-14)

But her barbeque-induced anxiety isn’t just about religion. It’s also rooted in her identity as a life-long community-member at her particular church, and as a friend, a daughter, and a woman. She has always assumed that anything widely supported by her trusted community is morally permissible. Wouldn’t her concern over the provenance of the meat be judgmental of her fellow congregants? Interrogating her anxiety over potential fallout with loved ones is even more daunting, but as the process unfolds, Karla comes to see how beholden she is to the assumption that she has an obligation to engage in communal meat-eating traditions that outweighs many good reasons to abstain. As for her father, she has always just accepted that he is justifiably proud of her ability to “eat like a man.” Under scrutiny, though, this belief seems to rely on the assumption that eating in accordance with “masculine” norms makes a person more praiseworthy, and she now realizes that her delight in transcending Dad’s gendered expectations is both a bigger source of self-esteem than she’d prefer and a questionable motive for overeating barbeque.[[15]](#endnote-15)

As her awareness of these governing assumptions grows and her openness to questioning them increases, Karla notices something they all have in common. They are unreflectively anthropocentric: if they countenance the possibility that ‘food animals’ have interests at all, they inevitably assume that these interests are less important than the human interests putatively served by using animals. More concretely, whether Karla’s dietary interests lie in avoiding expense, maintaining health, demonstrating piety, experiencing gustatory pleasure, preserving community, following tradition, or boosting self-esteem, she has always just assumed that these interests take precedent over any interests ‘food animals’ may have. Moreover, perhaps *because* of this anthropocentric prejudice, she’s assumed thus without ever really contemplating whether these dietary interests can be met in other ways that take better account of animals’ interests.

But do animals have morally significant interests? If so, what are they? And how are we to weigh them against competing human interests? In arriving at these critical questions, Karla makes a major breakthrough: it’s not just her individual prejudices that are under discussion now, but the broader anthropocentric frame of reference they share. At the same time, however, these questions bring her up against perhaps the biggest obstacle to moral progress erected by the tyranny of hidden prejudices: the tendency to render invisible the possibilities and interests of the very beings who are most harmed by the attitudes and actions these prejudices suborn.

To wit, a culture dominated by androcentric prejudices diminishes the possibilities and interests of girls and women; in such a culture, a woman herself, or men around her, may dismiss a passion and aptitude she feels for a leadership role, because it is widely accepted that women are ill-suited to such roles. Similarly, a culture dominated by anthropocentric prejudices diminishes the possibilities and interests of nonhuman animals; in such a culture, a cow who expresses intense distress over separation from her calf may not be recognized as grieving because it is widely accepted that cows are incapable of forming such bonds.[[16]](#endnote-16) For some, it might even be difficult to conceive of cows as unique individuals at all (much less as individuals capable of grief) rather than as merely interchangeable members of the bovine species.

*Reframing Anthropocentric Imagination Through Experiencing Animals*

Reframing inadequate prejudices about animals is thus a challenging prospect. Given the pervasiveness of unreflectively anthropocentric attitudes toward them, the present culture provides few opportunities for animals—especially ‘food animals’—to appear in lights that would provoke the requisite imagination-expanding conflict between our pre-judgments of them and our experiences with them as more than sentient underlings at best and mere resources on the average.

Interestingly, one of the very few opportunities the present culture *does* provide for provoking this conflict is precisely the one that initially prompted Karla’s anxiety, namely the horror associated with projecting the deep moral concern—even love—she feels for her canine companion onto the animals she eats. But just as her moral indignation was dawning in the thought that pigs, like dogs, might be irreplaceable individuals, the tyranny of hidden prejudices deflected her horror into defensive consolations that prevented deeper engagement with the argument.

That was then. But now she’s in a different position vis-à-vis these prejudices; she’s aware of what some of the more influential ones are, she’s seen through and revised some of them, glimpsed the revisability of others, and gleaned insight into both the human-centered frame of reference they share and the moral risks of operating unreflectively within that frame. These experiences, moreover, have increased her confidence; she’s no longer intimidated by further investigation. Now, wishing to be tutored by the anxiety provoked in attempting to imagine her cherished Mr. Chauncey and a nameless pig as moral equals, Karla undertakes an intentional examination of why other animals shouldn’t be accorded the same levels of care and compassion that her companion enjoys.

Toward that end, she does some reading about other animals—both domesticated and free-living—and discovers that their inner and social lives are rich and complex.[[17]](#endnote-17) She’s not entirely surprised, given what she already knew of Mr. Chauncey, but she is delighted and comforted, too, that science corroborates her experience of animals as sentient creatures capable of caring about their own and others’ lives; she isn’t just bunny-hugging here. But what if she were? Frankly, her anxiety over being labeled a “bunny-hugger” has all but dissipated, thanks to her realization via feminist literature that minimizing the compassion we feel for vulnerable fellow creatures (and mocking those who display it) is one of the oldest tools in the oppressor’s kit for concealing injustice to suffering others.[[18]](#endnote-18) This emerging sense that animal advocacy is something she could actually support surprises Karla, but she must admit that few things presently agitate her more than images of animals—both suffering and flourishing—presented in the work of activist artists like Jo-Anne McArthur and Sue Coe.[[19]](#endnote-19)

She follows this growing compassion and courts the company of other animals about whom she’s been reading. She visits some local places that keep pigs and carefully considers the differences between those she encounters at petting zoos, county fairs, local farms, and a farm sanctuary (where she ends up volunteering on weekends). She visits the city zoo, famed for its conservation work, and is surprised by how much more sensitive an observer of animal behavior she has become since her previous visit. Last year, she would have assumed that pacing lions and arm-biting chimpanzees were just “doing what animals do.” Now she sees the telltale signs of boredom, frustration, and stress. Having observed what these creatures’ lives are actually like, Karla is incredulous that she recently believed they were dim-witted, anti-social, or uninterested in their own lives. Her experience now confirms the contrary.

Karla can’t deny that this experience has furnished a powerful corrective to her untutored assumptions both about animals (and their prospects) and about human beings (and the relative importance of our uses for animals). By experiencing animals as they are, she has cultivated compassion, appreciation, respect, and wonder that have helped her to overcome her inclination to see them—at least those outside her self-interested sphere of concern—as mere resources. Animals in their fullest flourishing, she has discovered, are not always or only vulnerable like industrially farmed or other exploited animals are; they can be and are mysterious, beautiful, forceful, ingenious, and autonomous (in species-appropriate ways).

When Karla revisits her notes from that fateful class discussion, the arguments that seemed bewildering just six months ago now seem crystal clear, even persuasive. Though she hasn’t figured out exactly where her reframed perspective will lead her, she *can* now imagine herself as ‘Karla the agrarian’ or ‘Karla the vegan’ or even ‘Karla the animal rights activist.’ Her malaise of imagination has lifted but her state of unease is now even more pronounced. Previously, her fleeting anxiety upon eating pork was readily assuaged by wistful memories of church picnics; she could even laugh it off with a bacon joke at the expense of vegetarian friends. Now, such jokes seem perverse. Doing nothing feels deeply wrong. But adopting new habits seems like harder work than she can manage. Karla, like Augusto, now suffers from a malaise of will.

**III. Treating the Malaise of Will: Care of the Self**

*Hadot’s Itinerary From Philosophical Exercises to Transformed Living*

Let’s return, then, to Augusto’s case. Recall that he’s convinced that he should (at least) avoid eating meat. He lacks the will, however, to make this major change in the face of many obstacles, including entrenched preferences and habits, lack of experience, bad faith, laziness, and peer pressure. What he needs are role models and practical strategies that will fix his attention on the self-defeating consequences of being beholden to these bad excuses and empower him to think and act authentically in accordance with his conviction.

He can find these resources in abundance in Hellenistic philosophy’s emphasis on care of the self. In engaging this tradition via its contemporary appropriation by Pierre Hadot, moreover, Augusto can get a compelling introduction to a rich and complex historical literature from a single trusted source. Following Hadot and the ancients, he can approach philosophy as a type of training for living, and as a potentially transformative way to engage the world.[[20]](#endnote-20) As Hadot explains, “philosophy then [in antiquity] appears in its original aspect: not as a theoretical construct, but as a method for training people to live and to look at the world in a new way. It is an attempt to transform mankind.” [[21]](#endnote-21) Philosophy is thus a way of life—a process aimed at transforming one through a regime of practices—and it opens a compelling way forward for those, like Augusto, who are intellectually committed to changing but lack the will to do so.

What sorts of therapeutic practices might Augusto employ, then, to cure his unrest and modify his behavior? Care of the self aims to help one cultivate an authentic, consistent, satisfying life, in part by requiring close attention to and reflection upon one’s actions. This attention demands the application of repetitive daily exercises—some intellectual and some practical—that serve to heighten his consciousness of the world beyond himself, and through habituation, transform his seeing and being within it.[[22]](#endnote-22)

The intellectual exercises will look familiar even to contemporary philosophers; these include reading, listening, and investigation.[[23]](#endnote-23) These exercises occur for Augusto in the context of further class discussions, conversations with professors and peers, and efforts to seek out articles that bolster or challenge his existing views. Such exercises can help to dislodge the obstacles of lack of experience and bad faith that threaten to stymie his progress. To broaden his experience, for instance, Augusto seeks out arguments from various perspectives, reflecting on what new challenges they pose for his evolving understanding of ethical eating. To keep bad faith at bay, he discusses these issues with a community of others who take his concerns seriously, help him sharpen his thoughts, and keep him intellectually honest and consistent.[[24]](#endnote-24)

To convert the discoveries of these intellectual disciplines into authentic behavior modification, however, Augusto must undertake other complementary exercises in tandem. In the Stoico-Platonic tradition of philosophical therapy,[[25]](#endnote-25) attention and meditation are valuable practices that help one assimilate arguments in a way that is truly transformative, converting intellectual information that merely enables us ‘to know’ into wisdom that helps us to ‘be in a different way’.[[26]](#endnote-26) For the Stoics, attention meant a vigilant focus on the present moment—a constant self-awareness of one’s thoughts and actions and of how they reflect one’s principled commitments. Such attention guards one against acting mindlessly in ways that undermine one’s commitments and lead to distress or cognitive dissonance.

As Augusto enters the cafeteria, for example, he might strive to keep present to mind the connection between the meat there and the individual animals that meat used to be. He can remind himself that his self-conception as “Augusto the vegetarian” is important to him, and that actions inconsistent with it will ultimately cause him discomfort and degrade his authenticity. Careful attention to these realities of the present moment can aid Augusto in his pursuit of behavior modification[[27]](#endnote-27) by reminding him of the urgent nature of his concerns, thereby staving off the convenient excuse that his desired behavior modifications are best left for some future occasion. His vigilance can thus offer an antidote to the laziness that threatens to undermine his resolve and hasten his return to entrenched habits.

But if he is to face the cafeteria with such attention and conviction, it behooves him to prepare in advance. Here, the exercise of meditation is useful. Ancient philosophers meditated by imagining themselves experiencing poverty or illness in order to be ready to respond appropriately should these afflictions befall them.[[28]](#endnote-28) While this practice might seem morbid to contemporary sensibilities, the idea of mentally preparing oneself for a difficult situation need not be. Augusto might begin his day with a reflection on why he wishes to avoid eating meat, mentally reviewing the arguments for adopting this behavior, and imagining what situations may arise on a particular day to test his resolve.[[29]](#endnote-29)

To take it further, he might follow the Stoic model of adopting a particular practice he initially finds difficult for a prescribed period of time. Seneca counseled others to adopt temporary poverty as a way of “toughening the soul,” cautioning that it should be undertaken as “a test of yourself instead of a mere hobby.”[[30]](#endnote-30) In that spirit, Augusto could adopt veganism (the most stringent dietary regime) for an appointed time as an exercise in cultivating the most vigilant attention to what he is eating, even if he is unwilling or unable to maintain that level of vigilance indefinitely.

*Habituating Self-Mastery and Accomplishment of Duties*

Augusto can also benefit from adopting repetitive practical exercises that promote “self-mastery,” in Hadot’s language. It is instructive to note that ancient philosophers often compared living philosophically with honing athletic skills. Living philosophically, much like developing athletic ability, involves repetitive, daily, practical exercises that may be mundane in themselves, but that train the individual to achieve loftier goals.[[31]](#endnote-31) In Augusto’s circumstances, these daily, repetitive practices may prove the most powerful remedies for many of the obstacles he encounters.

A simple practice like grocery shopping at an appointed time each week can preempt the laziness that might otherwise find him cruising the Frank-n-Burger’s drive-through on his way home to an empty fridge. Packing a lunch every evening that is ready to grab on his way to campus each morning can dampen the siren song of the pork and diminish the threat of cafeteria peer pressure. Planning regular outings with sympathetic friends to exciting new veg-friendly restaurants can broaden his experience and supplant alienating interactions with encouraging fellowship. By the next birthday dinner, hopefully, he’ll have both a variety of new eateries he loves and the confidence to recommend them to his grandparents. Longer term, learning to cook a variety of delicious plant-based meals for all occasions could liberate him from dependence on convenience foods that might otherwise erode his resolve. Practical exercises like these may seem trivial, but in the context of adopting a new behavior, they can help Augusto to form habits that make the difference between success and failure.

In addition to habituating self-mastery, practical exercises emphasize the “accomplishment of duties”—the assumption of positions of leadership or responsibility and the fulfillment of their associated obligations.[[32]](#endnote-32) Augusto could volunteer for a student organization or convene a meatless cooking demonstration, even and especially if such measures take him outside his comfort zone. He might consider donating monthly to an animal advocacy non-profit, carefully reading the stories of the animals who benefit from his contributions. By taking on obligations to others in ways that stretch him and require him to live up to his own aspirations, Augusto raises himself above his individual perspective, and begins to see the implications of his actions for the whole.

If all goes well, once he initiates some of these exercises, the combination of good reasons and repetitive actions has a transformative effect over time, supplanting entrenched behaviors that both caused unease and degraded his moral integrity with new and better habits. To the contemporary philosopher, the practical exercises that have brought Augusto to this point may not look much like “philosophy.” But in the tradition of care of the self, “doing philosophy meant practicing how to live” by training oneself to adopt actions that are “just and in conformity with reason.”[[33]](#endnote-33) Philosophy thus serves as a “therapeutic” that can cure the “anguish” of failing to live up to one’s aspirations.[[34]](#endnote-34)

The role for philosophy sketched here may sound idealistic or unattainable, but its advocates are not naïve of the fact that it is always a process we undergo as moral progressives, never an end point reached by the elusive sage.[[35]](#endnote-35) This should prove heartening rather than discouraging for those inclined to worry that their strivings to eat ethically are futile, causally impotent, or impossible to uphold consistently.[[36]](#endnote-36) Because care of the self focuses on transforming how an individual sees and acts in the world, it is possible for one to make real moral progress even without achieving sage-like wisdom, a life of purity, or large-scale institutional reform. Though the measurable effects of one person’s actions may be insignificant, that person may experience the very significant transformational effects of a life lived with enhanced attention to consistency between thought and deed.[[37]](#endnote-37) For Augusto, pursuing this consistency requires him to stand in symbolic solidarity with oppressed animals by refusing to use them as mere instruments. His focus on holistic moral transformation in the areas of his life that he *can* control mitigates lingering anxiety about not making a quantifiable impact in ways he *can’t* control.

For care of the self, acknowledging this distinction between what one can and can’t control is key for facilitating personal transformation, but also for extending the individual’s circle of concern beyond his or her own interests.[[38]](#endnote-38) If achieving statistically significant results in terms of “animal lives saved” or “people converted to vegetarianism” is beyond Augusto’s control, he is nonetheless very much in control of his own attitudes and responses, and finds that his new solidarity with animals alleviates his feelings of unrest and enables him to live up to his own vision of authenticity.

As his anxiety abates and solidarity with animals becomes a way of life, he notices that the disciplines of intellectual and practical attentiveness that have transformed his attitudes and actions concerning animals are affecting other aspects of his vision too. His consistent attention to the interests of animals, to wit, has heightened his awareness of the interests of other individuals exploited by our food system. He finds himself contemplating the circumstances of people who work in slaughterhouses, tomato fields, and coffee plantations. He starts taking note of the distance traveled by produce purchased at the grocery store, begins paying attention to the vast swaths of corn and soybeans in the fields beyond campus, and initiates research on the impact of these practices on everything from topsoil erosion to climate change. What began with occasional, unpredictable uprisings of compassion for cows nuzzling the vents of transport trucks has expanded into a systematic and holistic vision of the impact of his food choices for the world at large. Hadot might describe this change as Augusto’s achievement of a more cosmic view of the whole.[[39]](#endnote-39)

Although striving for this cosmic vision may seem quaint to many contemporary philosophers, Hadot maintains that aspiring to this frame of reference is as relevant for us today as it was for the ancients. Following thinkers in the phenomenological tradition including Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Bergson, Hadot argues that our daily struggle to cope with finite existence inclines and often requires us to envision the world as a collection of disconnected objects and to act as if its denizens were mere resources for accomplishing our myopic ends.[[40]](#endnote-40) Practicing care of the self, however, can serve as an important corrective to this pervasive tendency to instrumentalize and consume the constituents of our world. Says Hadot,

[This] utilitarian perception we have of the world, in everyday life, in fact hides from us the world qua world. Aesthetic and philosophical perceptions of the world are only possible by means of a complete transformation of our relationship to the world: we have to perceive it for itself, and no longer for ourselves.[[41]](#endnote-41)

Ancient though this wisdom may be, it is difficult to imagine advice more pertinent to the present situation, in which the collective impact of our shortsighted decisions at dinner is now well known to threaten the oceans, the atmosphere, and everything between. Those who, with Karla and Augusto, can imagine the flourishing of the whole and resolve to act in accordance with it have a world to gain—for humans, animals, and the planet.

**Conclusion**

We hope to have offered a helpful diagnosis of common moral malaises of imagination and will, as well as to have made a good case that therapeutic philosophy can help people overcome these obstacles that might otherwise prevent them from authentically engaging and responding to argumentative challenges to their eating habits. Though we have focused here on food ethics, we believe that readers who resonate with the predicaments of Karla and Augusto in other arenas of moral discernment may find hermeneutics and care of the self illuminating and even liberating complements to argumentative challenges in those other arenas too. We see an added benefit in the opportunity our approach affords to pay increased attention to philosophical traditions that are underrepresented in contemporary food ethics, but that have significant resources to contribute to the discussion.[[42]](#endnote-42)

1. **Endnotes**

   A discussion of the complex and often contested ways in which these obstacles figure into philosophical and social scientific accounts of weakness of will is beyond the scope of this paper. For much more on these topics, see Stroud and Tappolet 2008 and Mele 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Diverse thinkers from antiquity to the present have argued that philosophy has therapeutic value.   Western philosophers in this tradition include Plato, Aristotle, Hellenistic philosophers, Wittgenstein, Foucault, and Hadot.  For discussions of philosophy as therapy and of these figures and others, see Banicki 2014 and Fischer 2011. For discussion of the Hellenistic tradition, see Nussbaum 1994.  Nearly all accounts of philosophy as therapy, Banicki maintains, have in common the notions of “the health ideal, disease (or illness), and the process of treatment” (14).  We borrow Banicki’s language in referring to a “health ideal” above (Nussbaum calls this the “norm of health,” 19).  Note that both Fischer (2011, 50) and Nussbaum (1994, 5) stress, as do we, that philosophy as therapy is not incompatible with philosophy in its argumentative mode, but rather includes argumentation.  We agree with Nussbaum, too, that philosophy as therapy must respect the agent’s conception of her own health, rather than simply promote a norm of health that is “’out there’ to be discovered and then applied to [her] case” (19).  Accordingly, we operate with the very broad understanding of “health ideal” identified above. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. We are grateful to Terence Cuneo and Tyler Doggett for help framing this clarification. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We treat each malaise in turn without addressing the complexities of their relations, which—space permitting—would be interesting to explore. For instance, sometimes anticipation of a malaise of will (say, anxiety over the difficulty of taking action if one becomes convinced one should) might (un)consciously exacerbate a malaise of imagination (by leading one more trenchantly to protect uninvestigated assumptions for fear that investigation would only increase unease and inauthenticity). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This territory is well surveyed in the literature, including numerous chapters in this volume. For an overview of the wide array of moral problems associated with IFAP, see Rossi and Garner 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Hooley and Nobis, xxx; McPherson, xxx; Van Dyke xxx; Budolfson xxx; Lipscomb, xxx. The proposed therapy may prove useful as well for those struggling with some of the “food failures” discussed by Doggett and Egan, see xxx. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Pyke 1993. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Gadamer develops this account of the hermeneutic character of understanding at great length in his magnum opus, Gadamer 1992. He addresses its therapeutic applications more explicitly in Gadamer 1996. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Gadamer 1992, 265-300. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 270. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 299. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid, 355. Gadamer is not claiming that experienced people are bereft of (even strong) commitments; his point is that their awareness of the influence of hidden prejudices keeps these from acting as immovable obstacles to learning from assumption-challenging experiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. On Christian discussions, see Halteman 2013. On world religions more broadly, see Kemmerer 2012. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Humane Society of the United States Faith Outreach, for instance, offers resources on ethical eating for Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Unitarians. See http://www.humanesociety.org/about/departments/faith/facts/statements. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a classic treatment of the gendered aspects of meat eating, see Adams 1990. Van Dyke (this volume, xxx) draws on and contests aspects of Adams’ account. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. As an example of the anthropocentric bent of the institution of language, “autocorrect” suggests depersonalizing animals from “who” to “that” even as we type these words. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Balcombe 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Donovan and Adams 2007. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. McArthur 2014 and Sue Coe, <http://graphicwitness.org/coe/enter.htm>. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Philosophical discourse is certainly an important tool, but it must be understood as propaedeutic to living the philosophical life. Hadot 1995, 107. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. For an overview of the diverse range of thinkers and traditions that approach philosophy thus, see Chase, Clark and McGhee 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. For a full discussion of these exercises, including Hadot’s illuminating account of why he calls them ‘spiritual’ exercises, see Hadot 1995, 79 ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Seneca speaks of the value of “fellowship of wise men,” noting that a true friend will help one keep “his virtues…and point out to him opportunities for honourable action.” Seneca 1925, CIX, 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Hadot 1995, 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. In Hadot’s language, “real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way.” Ibid., 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See Marcus Aurelius 2011, 20 (3.10.1-4): “Remember, furthermore, that each of us lives only in the present, this fleeting moment of time, and that the rest of one’s life has either already been lived or lies in an unknowable future.” [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Hadot 1995, 84. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. As Marcus Aurelius (2011, 10 (2.1.1 ff)) advises, “Say to yourself at the start of the day, I shall meet with meddling, ungrateful, violent, treacherous, envious, and unsociable people. […] But I, who have observed the nature of the good, and seen that it is the right, […] I, then, can neither be harmed by these people, nor become angry with one who is akin to me, nor can I hate him”. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See Seneca’s letter XVIII to Lucilius, “On Festivals and Fasting” (1917) where Seneca describes the importance of this practice and highlights that Epicurus used to do the same. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Seneca compares the virtuous sage to a wrestler in top form (1917, CIX); Epictetus invokes an archer hitting his mark (1928, Enchiridion 27); Marcus Aurelius says “In the application of one’s principles, one should resemble [a boxer].” (2011, 116, 12.9.1) [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Hadot 1995, 86. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 86. Hadot and the ancients he follows go to great pains to make clear that the exercises themselves are not distinct from “philosophy” but are a key part of it, since “the philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being.” Ibid., 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid., 266. “Wisdom, then, was a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness. First and foremost, philosophy presented itself as a therapeutic, intended to cure mankind’s anguish.” [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Hadot quotes Quintillian on this point: “We must…strive after that which is highest, as many of the ancients did. Even though they believed that no sage had ever yet been found, they nevertheless continued to teach the precepts of wisdom.” Ibid., 265. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See Warfield xxx and Chignell xxx in this volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. According to Hadot, for the ancients, “each school had its own therapeutic method, but all of them linked their therapeutics to a profound transformation of the individual’s mode of seeing and being. The object of spiritual exercises is precisely to bring about this transformation.” Hadot 1995, 83. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For Stoic philosophers in particular, becoming aware of this distinction is the first and most important step one can take. Epictetus begins *Enchiridion* with this insight: “Some things are under our control, while others are not under our control…If you believe the things which are slavish by nature are also free…then you will be hindered.” 1928, *Enchiridion* 1.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Hadot 1995, 252. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid., 258. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 254. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Thanks to Andrew Chignell, Terence Cuneo, Tyler Doggett, Dan Hooley, Ben Lipscomb, and Nathan Nobis for their helpful advice. We are grateful, also, to the Schlegel brothers—Karl Wilhelm Friedrich and August Wilhelm—for their inspiration as pioneering philosopher siblings.

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