

Three Educational Problems: The Case of Eating Animals

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In his book *Eating Animals*, Jonathan Safran Foer asks: “What did you do when you learned the truth about eating animals?” (2009, p. 252). Foer is concerned with both human animals and with other animals (cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, tunas, among other species) that many humans eat. His book discusses human practices such as raising (and catching), butchering, selling, and eating such non-human animals, and it also discusses the lives of these animals that are used for human consumption. So the truth to which Foer refers is large and complex. But at the heart of this truth are several facts: before animals are eaten they almost always experience confinement, fear, and pain, and, of course, death. One other fact: in most of the modern world, humans do not have to eat other animals in order to be healthy. Yet as reported by Foer, in America alone, more than ten billion land animals are slaughtered for food each year (2009, p. 15). According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), in 2009 (the same year Foer’s book was published) Americans consumed over 4.8 billion pounds of sea animals (NOAA, 2010, n.p.).

School lunch in modern America contributes significantly to the misery of farm animals and fish, both directly and indirectly. At a cost of over \$1 billion per year (Farm Sanctuary, 2013), the Agricultural Marketing Service, which is the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agency that buys agricultural products for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), purchases millions of pounds of meat, poultry, and fish, contributing directly to animals’ misery and death. Indirectly,

by serving animal flesh for lunch—typically without teachers’ or administrators’ comment or critique—schools help to normalize meat eating for millions of school children. Before exploring whether and/or how schools might address meat-eating practices, including school lunch, differently, I examine three types of animal eaters in connection with the truth to which Foer refers. Both parts of the discussion that follows are preliminary, to be deepened and refined in subsequent work on this topic.

Types of Relations between Meat Eating and Knowledge

Foer suggests a great number of important questions concerning the relation between knowledge and conduct, particularly where the consumption of meat, poultry, and fish is concerned. First are those who are *simply ignorant* and have no knowledge about the relation between the meat they consume and the animals from which it is derived (mostly young children). Second are those who are *willfully ignorant* about the meat they consume and the animals from which it is derived; they know (at least in part), but turn away from the truth to which Foer refers and continue to eat animals (mostly older children and adults). Third are those who “know the truth” and continue to eat meat, but are troubled in varying degrees by their consumption (also mainly older children and adults). It might be said that these meat eaters are *incontinent*, in the sense that they act in ways that go against their better judgment.

There are other types of relations between knowledge and conduct among those who eat animals, but the three mentioned above are common, and it is to these I turn for further discussion.

Simple Ignorance

Simple ignorance, conventionally understood, is a state in which a person lacks awareness, information, or knowledge. There is nothing inherently problematic with simple ignorance; indeed, it is a necessary precondition for education. It may not be the case that human infants are born “blank slates,” but it is certainly true that they lack the knowledge upon which survival, let alone thriving, depends. It is therefore not surprising that in both formal and informal contexts, education, particularly in the elementary years, is concerned mainly with simple ignorance, as parents, teachers and other educators seek to provide what is lacking in children’s awareness, knowledge, and the like. Not all knowledge is seen as being equally worthy or appropriate; and deciding what ought to be provided also entails deciding what *not* to provide.

In connection with Foer’s question, it should be noted that there are some, perhaps a significant number, who *do not know* the truth about

eating animals. Young children, in contrast to adolescents or adults, are the most likely to be ignorant of the particulars connected with meat eating. Children, by and large, have no way to clearly or accurately connect the meat, poultry, or fish they eat with the animals from which it is derived. This is due in part to children's isolation from contexts where they would normally acquire knowledge about factory farming and related aspects of meat, poultry, and fish farming. Relatively few children today see the shoe-box sized cages in which chickens are confined, usually with their beaks cut off, or the veal crates too small for calves to turn around; only youngsters raised on farms have heard the screams of animals being castrated or branded. (As they get older and have more first-hand experience in the world and more access to media, this lack of lived familiarity with animals raised for food becomes less an issue in terms of ignorance.)

Children's (and adults') ignorance of the animal-meat connection is also *cultivated*. The meat-eating adults in children's lives are surely loath to tell youngsters that such childhood favorites as hamburgers, hotdogs, chicken nuggets, and fish-sticks come from the flesh of cows, pigs, chickens, and fish. As noted previously, when animal flesh is served as part of school lunch, it is hard to imagine that its origins are mentioned, let alone discussed. The "patty" or "nugget" simply appears on the tray. Given that the animal-based foods children typically like most—and that appear with the greatest frequency on the school lunch tray-- look nothing like any animal on earth, it is not surprising that youngsters fail to connect, say, fish-sticks with actual fish. It is also not surprising that most children do like these foods so much; these are the foods they have been *taught* to like through advertising, repeated exposure, and in some cases through the association of the meat with a toy, as in the McDonald's "Happy Meals."

The meat, poultry, and fishing industries also do their part to keep children (and the general public) in the dark. Advertisements show cartoon laughing cows and dancing tunas and industry spokesmen have developed code to obscure the realities of life, pain, and death experienced by animals used for food. Animals are "processed," not killed and butchered; and their flesh is called by myriad pseudonyms that are innocuous sounding, if not positively cheerful.

Willful Ignorance

The very young will be unlikely to know the truth about eating animals because they, for the most part, are cut off from certain experiences. Older children, and certainly most adults, have at least some such experience; in varying degrees, they do know the truth about eating

animals. Yet most of these knowers close their eyes to this truth: they are willfully ignorant.

Familiar proverbs and other sayings, many of which use sight and light metaphorically, offer a clue about the phenomenon of willful ignorance:

“Love is blind.”

“He’d rather bury his head in the sand than see an ugly truth.”

“There’re none so blind as those who will not see.”

“He turned a blind-eye toward corruption.”

In a recently published book, Margaret Heffernan (2011) provides a brief history of the concept of willful ignorance, (which she refers to as “willful blindness”—the title of her book) as well as an astute and evocative account of the implications of such ignorance in numerous scandals, crimes, and man-made environmental disasters. While there are, no doubt, similar ideas rooted in other traditions, Heffernan traces the concept of willful ignorance in Western thought to a nineteenth century legal case, *Regina v. Sleep*. As she reports, a judge in the case ruled that the accused could not be convicted for possessing government property unless he knew that the goods in question came from the government or he had “willfully shut his eyes to the fact” (Heffernan, 2011, p. 3). The basic idea here is that if we could have known, should have known, then we are culpable when we act as if we did not know.

In psychology, willful ignorance is seen as a kind of “cognitive dissonance,” a condition famously theorized by Leon Festinger (1962). According to Festinger, we strive for consonance, harmony in our cognitions, and when that breaks down, the resulting discomfort typically drives us seek such balance anew. In a state of willful ignorance we avoid or reject evidence that contradicts existing attitudes and beliefs, thereby maintaining a relative state of cognitive consonance or harmony.

Failure to see the infidelity behind the proverbial lipstick on the collar, the serious illness behind the persistent cough, or the impending financial ruin behind the mounting debt are among the most familiar manifestations of willful ignorance, and one suspects in such cases that ignorance is a kind of psychological self-protection. Heffernan provides numerous examples illustrating how, on a large scale, this sort of failure to face the truth can have devastating consequences. She provides evidence that many of the world’s most infamous crimes and heinous misdeeds have not been perpetrated in secret, underground lairs, but rather in full view--the child abuses cases involving Catholic priests, the Bernie Madoff investment scandal, British Petroleum’s refinery disaster, and abuses by the military in Iraq. As Heffernan points out: “[The] central

challenge posed by each case was not harm that was invisible—but harm that so many preferred to ignore” (Heffernan, 2011, p. 1). To Heffernan’s list of misdeeds and atrocities, I would add the harm done to animals raised (or caught) and slaughtered for food.

Some of this harm is done in secret, and the meat and fishing industries do their part to keep the public in the dark. But despite industry efforts to hide the grizzliest aspects of their enterprise, most older children and adults encounter at least some evidence of the harm done to animals quite regularly. There are the trucks jam-packed with cows and chickens and filthy feed lots. There are the full-length documentaries, short clips, magazine, online, and other visual accounts of factory farms, industrial fishing operations, and various adjuncts to the animal-for-meat industry. (Some television food programs regularly show animals being killed and butchered before also showing them turned into apparently delicious food.) Then there are the meat and seafood departments in supermarkets and other food retailers where butchered creatures are on display. And finally there is the meat, poultry, and fish that appears on the tines of the consumer’s fork. The connections here are not shadowy and obscure; they are obvious to anyone who is willing to look.

A concept such as willful ignorance helps make sense of the fact that, despite multiple forms of evidence, most animal eaters behave as if they lack any awareness of the misery entailed in supplying mammals, fowl, and fish for humans to eat or of their personal implication in that misery.

Incontinence

In recent times, incontinence has not been widely discussed in relation to education, but the basic experience—and responses to it—are pervasive in modern societies. We humans seem to have a penchant for doing things we know we shouldn’t, and that, in fact, we would *prefer* not to do. We may gamble excessively, drink too much, or idle away precious time surfing the Net—and are wracked with guilt as a result. The proliferation of 12-step and other therapeutic/educational groups speaks to this problem.

Incontinence was described long ago by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985). Briefly, an incontinent person is one who reasons correctly, but acts contrary to reason, particularly in the pursuit of some bodily pleasure. A familiar example can be found in the millions of people who know their health would be better if they lost weight. These people *know* they should avoid too many sweets and fats in order to achieve better health, but many of the most nutrition-savvy nevertheless give in to desires for cakes, cookies, and buttery sauces. The basic phenomenon

thwarting dieters' efforts was described by Aristotle: when a person has made a "correct decision" (e.g. to consume fewer calories in order to lose weight) but then continues to give into the desire for fattening food, she or he is incontinent.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that a fair number of meat eaters are also incontinent in relation to their dietary practices: in Foerian terms, these individuals "know the truth" that their meat-laden diet is harming other sentient beings (and they may also know this diet is harming the environment and their own health), but continue to eat meat—and feel bad about doing so. I have heard numerous friends and acquaintances express pangs of guilt over their meat consumption, saying, in effect, that meat is a "guilty pleasure." Google searches under such terms as "becoming a vegetarian," "giving up meat," and "adopting a vegan lifestyle" provide tens of millions of results, suggesting that a great many people feel uncomfortable enough about eating meat to explore plant-based alternatives. Some fraction of these people truly want to stop eating meat, but are having enough trouble doing so that they seek advice on the Internet; these are the most clearly incontinent, living with the conflict between a self-made, rational decision and a desire that over-rides that decision.

Why Address Animals Used for Food Educationally

It is common for people who feel strongly about particular subjects or approaches to teaching to argue on behalf of their inclusion in the school curriculum. On what grounds should lessons about food, and in particular animal-based food and the lives of creatures from which it comes, be included as part of the curriculum? What makes this topic different from, say, the debate between those who prefer either phonics or whole-word reading instruction? One might imagine a great number of ways in which lessons about food and the animals used in its production differs from any other potential school lesson; here I examine three.

One difference is the centrality of food in human experience. The food we eat quite literally builds and sustains our bodies. While it is beyond the scope and central purpose of this essay to discuss the relative benefits of different types of diets for humans, it could be argued that students should be taught about meat-eating and vegetarian and vegan dietary alternatives on the basis of their health. A great many nutritionists, food scientists, and lay observers have argued compellingly that a plant-based diet is healthier for humans than one containing meat. (Key, Davey, and Appleby, 1999; Esselstyn, 2013). Food is also tightly woven into our cultural and other traditions and in that sense is partly constitutive of our identities and selfhood. So physically and

culturally, food is constitutive of whom we are as people. Anything that is so central in the human experience deserves consideration for a place in the school curriculum.

A second difference is that meat, poultry, and fishing industries, which exist only as long as there are meat, poultry, and fish eaters, take a tremendous toll on the environment. All industries that raise animals for human consumption harm the environment, but lamb, beef, and pork operations (listed in order from the most harmful) do the greatest damage (Goffman, 2012, n.p.). Mark Bittman provides a snapshot of that damage:

Global demand for meat has multiplied in recent years, encouraged by growing affluence and nourished by the proliferation of huge, confined animal feeding operations. These assembly-line meat factories consume enormous amounts of energy, pollute water supplies. . . and require ever-increasing amounts of corn, soy and other grains, a dependency that has led to the destruction of vast swaths of the world's tropical rain forests.

[A]n estimated 30 percent of the earth's ice-free land is directly or indirectly involved in livestock production, according to the United Nation's Food and Agriculture Organization, which also estimates that livestock production generates nearly a fifth of the world's greenhouse gases—more than transportation. (Bittman, 2008, n.p.)

It is instructive also to contrast a few differences in the environmental costs of raising meat-based and vegetable-based food. In California, it takes 2,464 gallons of water to produce one pound of beef and only 25 gallons of water to produce one pound of wheat; it takes 40 calories of fossil fuel to produce one calorie of protein from feedlot beef and only two calories of fossil fuel to produce one calorie of protein from tofu; U.S. livestock produce 2.7 trillion pounds of manure each year (Ogden, 2013, n.p.). All animals, including humans, suffer in some way when the environment suffers, and meat-production, such as it exists in most of the modern world, is very hard on the environment. If humans were obliged to eat meat to survive, the environmental costs of its "production" would be regarded differently; but the fact is, humans do not require a diet that includes meat, and we along with the environment—not to mention the animals used for food—would benefit if we adopted a plant-centric diet.

A third difference is that one food choice—to consume meat, poultry, and/or fish—immediately and directly concerns other sentient beings, creatures whose very lives hinge on this choice. There is overwhelming evidence that animals used for food endure varying degrees of fear, pain, and misery, often over extended periods. At the point these creatures are deemed ready for "harvest," their lives are ended altogether. Few

topics that might be addressed in school bear so critically on the living, breathing, feeling creatures with whom humans share this planet.

Using non-human animals for human purposes, including food, is perennially defended on the grounds that humans are special in a way that gives us dominion over non-humans. Peter Singer was among the first contemporary philosophers to argue against this view, which he calls “speciesist,” an ideology according to which humans are special because, well, we are humans (2006). Singer urges us to closely examine the respective interests of human and non-human animals and to give them equal weight when we find that our interests are alike or very similar.

The rejection of speciesism. . . does not require us to say that all lives are of equal worth, or that all interests of humans and animals must be given equal weight, no matter what those interests may be. It requires us to make only the more limited and defensible claim that where animals and humans have similar interests—we might take the interest in avoiding physical pain as an example—those interests are to be counted equally. We must not disregard or discount the interests of another being, merely because that being is not human. (Singer, 2006, p. 7)

Of course, animals also have an interest in living their own lives, so raising them in comfortable circumstances and killing them without causing distress or pain (assuming that’s possible) does not address Singer’s basic point. We and other animals share certain interests and it is not apparent why these interests are given more consideration when they happen to be attached to humans.

It is conceivable that regardless of what they are taught about the health and other consequences of eating animal flesh, the effects of meat, poultry, and fish industries on the environment, or the lives and deaths of animals used for food, students will choose to be meat eaters. But given the immediate and long-term significance of consuming meat, poultry, and fish, students ought to be helped to make an *educated* decision about eating animals. Without diminishing the significance of other curricular decisions, these facts lend weight and urgency to the prospect of including instruction about meat eating in schools.

Possible Educational Responses

Foer asks his readers what they did when they learned the truth about the lives and deaths of animals used for food. Foer’s book is geared toward a mature reader, one who already knows this truth or acquires it in the course of reading his book. Here, I have treated Foer’s question as an educational problem, and I have examined his question as if it had been modified to accommodate a larger audience, one including school age

children and youth. Such an examination leads quickly to a consideration of what might be done in response to those who do not know the truth about eating animals as well as to those whose relation to this truth is complicated in educationally significant ways. In addition to those who are in varying degrees ignorant about the lives and deaths of animals used for food, are those who possess such knowledge (at least in part), but actively turn away from it, and those who possess such knowledge and wish to act on it, but are having trouble with follow-through.

Any wide-scale effort to educate students about the health, environmental, and moral implications of meat-eating will require, minimally, two broad components, one largely political, and one curricular and pedagogical. The need for both is suggested by the old-time saying that actions speak louder than words. To elaborate: it is highly unlikely that, in the classroom, schools can educate students about the various problems associated with using animals for food while, in the lunchroom, selling McDonald's, Pizza Hut, and Chick-fil-A. The contradiction is too great. Food and agricultural industries have a huge stake in school lunch policies and practices, and as Susan Levine has argued, "fixing" school lunch—however one might conceive the nature of that fix—will require significant political work (Levine, p. 9). Putting the matter mildly, the interests of the big agricultural and fast-food industries do not altogether jibe with those of school children and animals. Thus part of the process of "educating" students about the health, environmental, and moral implications of meat-eating will entail efforts beginning outside school and outside the immediate concerns of children and most youth—in legislative, policy, and other decision-making arenas. If meat, poultry, and fish cannot be removed from school lunchrooms—and is highly likely that they cannot be in the near future—then their inclusion on the menu ought to be much more carefully and consciously monitored and balanced with appealing, nutritious, and delicious vegetarian and vegan options.

In addition to the political component of educating students about the health, environmental, and moral implications of meat-eating, is the classroom component. To the extent that ignorance, willful ignorance, and incontinence accurately capture the stance of different knowers in relation to the truth about eating animals, these constructs might be used as reference points in imagining possible classroom practices. It is worth stressing at this juncture: the educational situations of actual learners rarely match categories such as these exactly, and in many cases, there will be areas of overlap. To pick one example: there will be some instances where addressing simple ignorance, or a lack of information, about the conditions under which animals raised for food live and die will go a great length toward reducing incontinence in regards to eat-

ing of those animals. Complicating matters further is the fact that the particular learners involved in any real-life situation will significantly dictate what constitutes an appropriate educational response; developmental readiness, cultural background, and prior experience, among other characteristics, should influence decisions about educational practices in regard to whatever is taught in schools, including animal welfare. The following discussion offers some curricular and instructional ideas that might be considered in relation to the central question Foer poses. It is in no way meant to be definitive or exhaustive, but rather suggestive.

Education Against Ignorance

As discussed previously, many young and some older children are ignorant about the particulars of animals raised for food. Whether by means of fieldtrips, a visual pedagogy *showing* the realities of meat in the making (Rowe, 2011, 3012), or more conventional lessons and activities, students need opportunities to gain knowledge about the relation between living animals and the meat, poultry, and fish used for food. It is important to remember that on the force of knowledge about the lives and deaths of such animals, millions of people have stopped eating animal flesh and became vegetarians or vegans. That is not the most frequent or immediate response to Foer's truth, but willful ignorance and incontinence do not even arise as educational problems unless a person has first acquired some degree of insight into the animal-meat relation. And as Dewey might observe, while willful ignorance and incontinence *are* problems, they also represent stages of development beyond that of simple ignorance and can be viewed as opportunities for yet further growth. These opportunities will be explored presently.

Educationally speaking, even providing information, is more complicated than it might initially seem. First, there is the question of students' readiness. What a six- and a sixteen-year-old can comprehend is quite different, as are the intellectual and moral challenges they should be asked to face. Then there is the question of children's (and youth's) dietary options. Especially young children typically have little choice about what they eat at school and children in meat-eating families will almost certainly be fed meat at home. How far school lessons should challenge familial (and cultural) beliefs and practices is a recurring and difficult question. (It may be worthwhile to think about how a teacher might respond to a student whose parents insist that homosexuality is evil or that light complexioned people are stupid.)

Despite the complicating factors mentioned here, and there are certainly more, as it is with other topics and bodies of knowledge, it is possible to teach aspects of the life and death of animals used for food

in ways that respect children's developmental readiness and particular life situations. Organizations such as Compassionate Kids, the Humane Society, and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, among many others, have numerous educational resources. Individual authors have also published books appropriate for even very young children. Among these are Ruby Roth's, *That's Why We Don't Eat Animals: A Book About Vegans, Vegetarians, and All Living Things* (2012) Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books. Ruby Roth, *Vegan Is Love: Having Heart and Taking Action* (2012) Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, Julie Bass, *Herb the Vegetarian Dragon* (2007) Cambridge, MA: Barefoot Books.

There are books and other resources available for older youths as well, but I mention those intended for fairly young children for two related reasons. First, young children have less control over their own diets than anyone else and so engaging them in the topics addressed here demands special care. Second, dietary preferences and habits form early in life, a fact not overlooked by the fast-food giants who have set up shop in school cafeterias. It is important that young students have school experiences that might reasonably be expected to help them develop preferences and tastes that are consistent with human, environmental, and animal well-being.

***Fighting Willful Ignorance:
The Importance of Sympathy—and the Need for Action***

The philosopher William James captures a dimension of willful ignorance that is particularly relevant to the topic at hand: a deep and profound insensitivity to others we perceive as being significantly different from ourselves. Like Heffernan, James uses the term "blindness" rather than "ignorance" in relation to this phenomenon, of which he writes: "The blindness in human beings. . . is the blindness with which we all are afflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from ourselves" (1899/1962, p. 113). Such blindness, or ignorance, as James recognizes, enables one to discount, if not entirely ignore, the other's perceptions, feelings, wants, and needs, often without a twinge of conscience. James quotes Josiah Royce's *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy* at length, for Royce both illuminates James's insight and points toward an educational response:

Thou hast said, "A pain in him is not like a pain in me, but something far easier to bear." He seems to thee a little less living than thou; his life is dim, it is cold, it is a pale fire beside thy own burning desires. . . . So, dimly and by instinct hast thou lived with thy neighbor, and hast known him not, being blind. Thou hast made [of him] a thing, no Self at all. Have done with this illusion, and simply try

to learn the truth. Pain is pain, joy is joy, everywhere, even as in thee. In all the songs of the forest birds; in all the cries of the wounded and dying, struggling in the captor's power; in the boundless sea where the myriads of water-creatures strive and die; amid the countless hoards of savage men; in all sickness and sorrow; in all exultation and hope, everywhere, from the lowest to the noblest, the same conscious, burning, wilful [sic] life is found, endlessly manifold as the forms of the living creatures, unquenchable as the fires of the sun, real as these impulses that even now throb in thine own little selfish heart. Lift up thy eyes, behold that life, and then turn away, and forget it as thou canst; but, if thou hast *known* that, thou hast begun to know thy duty. (James, 1899/1962, p. 119, Italics original)

In a world where most children and youth have few opportunities to know animal life as it is actually lived, the arts, and especially literature, play a special role in overcoming the blindness, the kind of ignorance, to which James, Royce, and Heffernan refer. Literature provides the reader (or hearer) a depth of engagement in the lives of animals that information—as important as that is—cannot (Blount, 1974; Hogan, 2009; Ritvo, 1985). For present purposes, the greatest contribution of literature is to expand and extend our sympathies to include not only human animals but also four-legged and no-legged animals. If one can imagine what it might be like to be a pig, a cow, a chicken, a trout, it becomes much harder to maintain a stance of willful ignorance in regard to real-life pigs, cows, chickens, and trout.

Josephine Donovan (1998) provides a helpful account of highlights in the evolution of conceptions of sympathy, post-Kant, and describes the attribute thusly:

[Sympathy] . . . involves an exercise of the moral imagination, an intense attentiveness to another's reality, which requires strong powers of observation and concentration, as well as faculties of evaluation and judgment. It is a matter of trying to fairly see another's world, to understand what another's experience is. It is a cognitive as well as emotional exercise. (p. 152)

Donovan's conception has the advantage of capturing both the intellectual and affective aspects of sympathy, aspects that work together to enable one to at least partially enter into the experience of another.

There may be "natural sentiments," including sympathy, as some have argued, but we must also *learn* when different emotions are appropriate and how they should be manifested under different circumstances. By exposing students to good literature featuring animal life, engaging them in discussion about their reading, and encouraging serious reflection, teachers are creating the conditions under which such learning may occur.

There are some who appear to be incapable of much sympathy toward non-human animals (or other humans), but more typically, the absence of sympathy results, one may hope, from a lack of engagement in the lives of animals—real-time or in imagination—and a lack of guidance from adults who are themselves sympathetic to the hooved, winged, and finned among us.

Willful blindness is a conservative force. In the case at hand, it conserves practices that cause fear, pain, and death for countless animals. Sympathy for these animals is important because it shows due regard for their lives. But sympathy alone is not enough. Indeed, sympathy is sometimes used as an excuse for doing nothing, and in that respect may also be conservative: If one feels bad enough about animals' plight, isn't that enough? On James's conception, the greater significance of sympathy is apparent at the point when sympathy becomes a spur to action. Recall the last line James quotes from Royce: if one has come to *know* the reality of another, one has begun to know one's duty.

Incontinence

In Jamesian terms, it might be said that the incontinent person has begun to know her duty, but fulfills the duty imperfectly, if at all. This is a person who reasons correctly, but acts contrary to that reason, particularly in the pursuit of some bodily pleasure. Colloquially, the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. In the present case, incontinence may manifest as meat-eating by a person who has decided to abstain from eating animal flesh on the basis that it is bad for her health, the environment, and/or animals.

The problem of incontinence arises in individuals who are mature enough to have exercised "correct reason" in the course of decision-making over bodily appetites. But the "tools" needed to overcome incontinence are useful for many other purposes and are acquired by even young children. To a large degree, overcoming incontinence entails dropping old habits and cultivating new ones and then exercising the new habits consistently until they become part of the self. Eating is as much a matter of habit as bathing, dressing, and the dozens of other activities that make up an ordinary day and so it is worth considering the nature of habit and the means by which habit might be cultivated through education. Three aspects of John Dewey's analysis of habit are especially helpful in relation to the topic at hand. First is Dewey's conception of how habit works in our lives:

[Habit is] that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systemization of minor elements of action; which is projec-

tive, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity. The essence of habit is an acquired predisposition to ways or modes of response. (1922/1988, pp. 31-32)

A habit, he continues, is “assertive, insistent, self-perpetuating” (p. 43). One may be most aware of habits that “propel” or “demand” conduct when one has begun to disapprove of that conduct—over-eating, smoking, and the like. But even the habits we generally like in ourselves or in others—perhaps curiosity or good humor—are characterized by their capacity to initiate and animate conduct. So, for example, a person who had cultivated the habit of tenacity will stick with a difficult problem, trying to solve it after others have given up. The habit drives her forward, despite obstacles.

Second is Dewey’s idea that habits are social in nature. Habits are generally thought to be entirely personal traits; they are, in this conventional view, among the individual accomplishments (in the case of good habits) or shortcomings (in the case of bad habits) of an individual. In contrast, Dewey sees habits as being dependent on the environment in which they arise. He explains: “[Habits] are interactions of elements contributed by the make-up of an individual with elements supplied by the out-door world. . . . [Since] habits involve the support of environing conditions, a society or some specific group of fellow-men, is always accessory before and after the fact” (1988, p. 16). No one would cultivate the habit of, say, playing dice, in a society that lacked a conception of luck or chance.

Third is Dewey’s idea that habits are constitutive of self. Usually, habits and self are thought to be distinct, hence the old saw, “hate the sin and love the sinner.” The saying suggests that conduct and the person from whom it issues are separate and in some ways even unrelated. In contrast, in an early work Dewey says:

Habit reaches. . . down into the very structure of the self; it signifies a building up and solidifying of certain desires; and increased sensitiveness and responsiveness to certain stimuli, a confirmed or impaired capacity to attend to and think about certain things. Habit covers in other words the very make-up of desire, intent, choice, disposition. (1906/1960, p. 13)

Certainly, as Dewey recognizes, existing habits can be dropped and new habits can be developed, but this does not imply that habits are merely incidental to “true” selves. What it does imply is that dropping old and/or developing new habits brings into being a somewhat different self. If the new habits are consistent with certain kinds of development, their acquisition is educational. The reading habit, for example, provides the reader access to information, literature, and other forms of the written word,

that significantly broaden and deepen her world, providing the conditions whereby her world can be broadened and deepened yet further.

So where does Dewey's analysis of habit leave us in terms of the incontinent who, on the basis of sound reason, has decided to eliminate meat from her diet, yet is unable to follow through? Such a person's dietary practices are likely still governed in part by habits that have been exercised (and thereby strengthened) since she began consuming solid food (Rowe, 2012). In the U.S, most people are raised in a household where meat is eaten and attend schools where it is served at lunch. Therefore practically everyone who decides to adopt a vegetable-based diet will have to wrestle to some degree with a eating habit that "propels" them toward meat consumption.

Habit, Dewey theorizes, is social in nature. If he is correct, then part of helping disrupt the "drive" toward meat-eating is offering alternative ways of thinking about what constitutes good food for humans. But the incontinent has already decided to become a vegetarian or vegan and so for her what will likely be needed in the school lunchroom are attractively displayed, good tasting, plant-based options. Such a person will likely be aided further by seeing at least some teachers, administrators, and peers consuming such food. At present, as noted previously, the big-meat fast-food outlets are well-represented in a great many schools, reinforcing the impression that appropriate food for humans is meat. This view needs to be seriously challenged if students are to have much chance of developing new eating habits in which fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes take center stage. They need, in Dewey's words, the "support of enviroing conditions" (1922/1988, p. 16).

Habit, Dewey reminds, reaches down into the very structure of the self (1906/1960, p. 13). The point at which incontinence is overcome is the point at which a new habit is firmly established—and a new self emerges. In the case of changing eating habits, the emergence of a new self is literal, to the extent that body and self overlap. In terms of day-to-day life in the school lunchroom and beyond, the person who develops the eating habits of vegetarianism or veganism will likely lose all desire for the flesh of animals. If enough youth were to develop such eating habits we might, at some future time, expect incredulity in the face of Foer's question. This would be the response of a people who have come to believe that eating furred, feathered, and scaled animals is not something human animals sensibly do.

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