Empathy and Moral Laziness

Kathie Jenni

University of Redlands

Abstract: *In The Empathy Exams Leslie Jamison offers an unusual perspective: 'Empathy isn't just something that happens to us – a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain – it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse' (23). This essay is dedicated to elaborating that crucial observation.*

A vast amount of recent research concerns empathy – in evolutionary biology, neurobiology, moral psychology, and ethics. I want to extend these investigations by exploring the degree to which individuals can control our empathy: for whom and what we feel it, to what degree, in what circumstances, and with what practical results. My inquiry is aimed toward showing that humans can find ways to empathize with non-human animals – a capacity that is manifest in our relations with animal companions, but more rarely exercised when we consider animal victims of human exploitation.

I introduce the notion of moral laziness: aversion to and avoidance of moral efforts and exertion. The foundation of this failing is often empathic laziness: aversion to imagining the mental states of others, feeling congruent emotions, and experiencing the impulse to help that empathy arouses. This is a serious moral failing because it enables continuing complicity in animal abuse and undermines integrity.

Jamison remarks in relation to empathy, 'I believe in intention and I believe in work. I believe in waking up in the middle of the night and packing our bags and leaving our worst selves for our better ones' (23-24). I offer practical suggestions for that work.

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Empathy isn't just something that happens to us – a meteor shower of synapses firing across the brain – it's also a choice we make: to pay attention, to extend ourselves. It's made of exertion, that dowdier cousin of impulse. (Leslie Jamison, The Empathy Exams, 23)

Introduction

A vast amount of recent research concerns empathy – in evolutionary biology, neurobiology, moral psychology, and ethics. Much is being learned about the evolutionary origins of our capacity for empathy, the brain structures and events that make it possible, and what authentic empathy involves. I want to extend these investigations by exploring the degree to which individuals have control over empathy: for whom and what we feel it, to what degree, in what circumstances, and with what practical results. My inquiry is aimed toward showing that humans can find ways to empathize with non-human animals – a capacity that is manifest in our relations with beloved animal companions, but more rarely exercised when we consider animal victims of human exploitation.

I will introduce the notion of moral laziness, a vice distinct from weakness of will and other failings, to prepare the way for exploring empathic self-improvement. As Jamison puts it, 'I believe in intention and I believe in work. I believe in waking up in the middle of the night and packing our bags and leaving our worst selves for our better ones' (23-24). I'd like to offer practical suggestions for that work.

Beyond moral self-improvement and the cultivation of virtue, this project has important implications for animal activism. Tremendous energy has been devoted to considering human obligations to nonhuman animals, both in scholarly circles and in public life. This attention has taken two distinct but overlapping tracks corresponding to those disparate contexts: (a) the development of rationally defended theories of the moral status of animals and (b) exposure and attention to the treatment of animals in large-scale industries. Some authors, most notably Peter Singer, have succeeded admirably in accomplishing both. While both activities have been crucial

in promoting better practices, I would argue that the latter has played the more essential role in the lives of ordinary people. When people learn of the brutal treatment of exploited animals, ordinary empathy and compassion move many to change their practices.

Still, many who are empathic toward humans and 'companion animals' such as cats and dogs fail to empathize with the animals most brutally abused in contemporary life such as chickens, cows, and pigs. Empathy with farmed animals, observed in many children, seems to be radically attenuated – squelched and 'tracked' into appropriate channels – by the onset of adulthood. How can we enhance empathy for exploited animals in ways that foster individual and social change? In focusing on choice, attention, and work, Jamison has identified a dimension of empathy often ignored by scholars and activists – one that we must recognize and engage to make a better world for animals.

What is Empathy?

The term 'empathy' is used to designate a wide variety of phenomena 'that vary, sometimes widely, in their function, phenomenology, mechanisms, and effects' (Coplan, 'Real Empathy' 41). There is no single, agreed-upon conception of empathy across disciplines and viewpoints, or even within a given discipline such as philosophy. As Amy Coplan notes, this is not a problem in itself: our everyday use of the term is 'highly varied, and often quite vague;' and it would not be useful or wise to try to 'regiment the term into one single meaning' (*Empathy* xxxi). What *is* necessary is that one make clear one's own conception of empathy in offering claims and arguments.

Coplan sets out to specify what is involved in various phenomena called empathy so that we can 'appreciate more fully the roles these processes play in our lives' ('Real Empathy' 43). She focuses on three processes commonly called 'empathy': emotional contagion, self-oriented perspective taking, and empathy proper ('Real Empathy' 44). I will employ her exposition here to make clear what sense of empathy I have in mind in my discussion.

Psychologists define *emotional contagion* as the 'tendency to automatically mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person,

and, consequently, to converge emotionally' (Hatfield et al. 153-4). This typically happens 'below the threshold of awareness,' so that we 'catch' another's emotion without realizing it. Through automatic 'facial, vocal, and postural mimicry,' we come to feel the emotions of others around us. This automatic process seems to be what David Hume meant by 'sympathy.' Hume noted our natural propensity 'to receive by communication [others'] inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own' (317). He observed that when we encounter another person experiencing an emotion, we know this through 'those external signs in the countenance and conversation' that give us an idea of it; this idea is then converted by sympathy into an 'impression,' which becomes the very passion or emotion itself (317). This process is automatic and involuntary, so there is no 'cognitive evaluation or interpretation' of another's emotions (Coplan, 'Real Empathy' 45). No effort, imagination, or thought are involved, and emotional contagion 'transmits no understanding' of another's feelings. For these reasons, we will not be concerned with it here.

Coplan describes *self-oriented perspective-taking* as 'an attempt to adopt a target individual's perspective by imagining how we ourselves would think, feel, and desire if we were in the target individual's position' ('Real Empathy' 54). This is the concept of 'sympathy' of Adam Smith, who revised Hume's conception and made it the foundation of his moral theory. For Smith, sympathy involved imaginative perspective-taking:

> By the imagination we place ourselves in [another's] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something, which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (9)

Smith's conception of sympathy differs significantly from Hume's: while Hume describes an involuntary, nearly instantaneous emotional contagion, Smith's focus is on a higher-level process involving deliberate use of our imagination (Coplan, *Empathy* xi). Coplan notes that Smith sometimes describes an observer 'imagining what *she herself* would feel in the target individual's situation' and sometimes describes the observer 'attempting to imagine *being the target in the target's situation*' (xi).

Coplan calls the former phenomenon 'pseudo-empathy' because although it can provide some understanding of others' experiences, 'one individual's response to a set of circumstances

is rarely a reliable indicator of what another's will be' ('Real Empathy' 54). We are subject to 'egocentric bias' that assumes greater similarity between ourselves and another than typically exists, so that we often mistakenly conclude that others feel, think, and want the same things as ourselves (56). Thus 'people often mistakenly believe that [self-oriented perspective-taking] provides them with access to the other's point of view when it does not' (56).

In *other-oriented perspective-taking*, or genuine empathy, 'a person represents the other's situation from the other person's point of view and attempts to simulate the target individual's experiences as though she were the target individual' (Coplan, 'Real Empathy' 54). One brings to the perspective-taking effort the other's 'character, emotions, moods, dispositional tendencies, and life experiences' (54).

Assuming that empathy is important for interpersonal understanding and moral responses to others, Coplan asks what we should do when we lack the knowledge to engage in other-oriented perspective taking:

> Would it be better in such cases to engage in self-oriented perspective taking? My answer is 'no.' We are better off recognizing that we are sometimes incapable of genuine empathy, rather than making the assumption that we know what the other is going through just because we know what we would be going through in some similar situation. ('Real Empathy' 56)

I disagree with Coplan here. We can be aware that we will never fully understand what another is going through, yet get *closer* to such understanding through self-oriented perspective-taking. Surely this is better than no perspective-taking at all. This is important not just in human interactions (for example, attempting to empathize with victims of racism or Holocaust survivors even when one can never fully experience what they have), but also (especially) when we observe other animals who are suffering. We can never experience *precisely* what it is like to be a sow confined in a gestation crate, a debeaked chicken painfully trying to eat, or a cow hung upside down and bleeding out. We can form an imaginative sense of how awful such things would feel to us, however, and still focus our attention on the other animal.

Coplan acknowledges that 'pseudo-empathy' is often a good thing, and certainly 'far better than experiencing the other in purely instrumental terms' (57). It is often motivated by

concern for the other and a desire to understand his experiences, and it 'may also be the path by which we learn to engage in other-oriented perspective taking' (57). But for her it is not full-blown empathy, in which (insofar as we are able) we imaginatively take the other's perspective and (attempt to) feel as they do.

Coplan defines empathy proper as a complex imaginative process 'through which an observer simulates another's situated psychological states, while maintaining clear self-other differentiation' ('Real Empathy' 58). She notes that it is 'difficult to achieve' (58). Staying focused on the target and moving beyond our own experiences requires mental flexibility and suppressing our own perspectives when necessary. When someone is very different from ourselves, these things are particularly difficult: 'the more unlike a target we are, the more difficult it is to reconstruct her subjective experiences' (58). In these cases, 'we must work harder,' and still may not succeed. For Coplan, empathy is 'a motivated and controlled process, which is neither automatic nor involuntary and demands that the observer attend to relevant differences between self and other' (59).

Meghan Masto agrees with Coplan that emotional contagion does not count as empathy; that genuine empathy requires 'some kind of cognitive effort' and is a voluntary process (77). Masto is less concerned, however, with Coplan's distinction between self- and other-oriented perspective-taking. Masto proposes the following conception of empathy:

> when one empathizes, one comes to share a relevantly similar affective state with the target of empathy because one has imagined oneself in the other's position, and one forms some relevant true beliefs regarding the psychological state of the target at least in part on the basis of the perspective-taking process. (76-7)

While an exact match of affect is too strict a requirement, empathy does require that one 'experience an affective state that is "in the same neighborhood" as the target's' (77). One experiences this 'because one has imagined oneself in the other's position' (76). Although a relevant true belief about the other 'may simply be the belief that the target is feeling similarly to the way in which the agent feels,' in other cases forming true beliefs about the other's state 'may involve further beliefs about the target's beliefs, desires, emotions, and other mental states' (77).

I find Masto's expression of what empathy involves more illuminating than Coplan's. The term 'simulate' can connote a kind of conscious imitation; thus Coplan's reference to the empathizer 'simulating' others' mental states may inadvertently suggest something less direct or immediate than what empathy ordinarily involves. Masto's formulation is clearer: in empathy we 'come to share a relevantly similar affective state with the target' (76) as a result of an imaginative exercise, while maintaining (as Coplan notes) a clear distinction between ourselves and the target.

Some authors include in empathy an urge to help the other: an action-guiding impulse. Roman Krznaric defines empathy as 'the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, *and using that understanding to guide your actions*' (x, my emphasis). Jean Decety defines it as '[t]he natural capacity to share, understand, *and respond with care* to the affective states of others' (vii, my emphasis). Lori Gruen defines empathy as 'a type of *caring* perception' focused on another's experience' (3, my emphasis). Heidi Maibom argues that in vicariously feeling what others feel, 'we *directly* come to be motivated by their projects and concerns' (161).

For these authors, empathy includes a cognitive, an affective, and a motivational dimension. The last element is somewhat controversial. Some have noted that sociopaths can use empathic knowledge – an understanding of what another feels – to increase the other's suffering.[1] Even in the non-sociopathic, empathy certainly does not always lead to caring action. Kaplan and others have observed that empathic distress and even vicarious trauma can occur to those looking at images of horrible suffering. In those cases, 'the original empathic impulse to help turns back on the viewer or listener because the shock is too much; it overwhelms and freezes the subject' (Kaplan 260). As Masto puts it, 'in some instances empathizing can overwhelm an agent into inaction' (79). Others have noted that empathic distress leads some to escape by leaving the scene or turning away from images that arouse empathy, rather than

[1] See, for example, Goldie.

helping.[2] This is borne out by the experience of teachers in animal studies: some students are so upset by images of animal suffering that they deliberately avoid them, or react by leaving the room (along with serious contemplation of the subject). But even here, note that it is an 'original … impulse to help' that ends up overwhelming subjects into inaction. This would suggest that a motivational element is normally present in empathy, but that it can be so threatening or disturbing that traumatized viewers short-circuit the urge to help that empathy arouses by diverting their attention from the source of empathic distress.

Whether or not we define empathy as including an urge to alleviate another's distress will not materially affect my discussion; for ordinary agents know very well that empathy at least normally *leads to*, or brings in its wake, a powerful impulse to help. That alone will prove enough to help explain – and make problematic – the empathic laziness discussed below.

In addition to a clear conception of what we mean by it, it seems important to note the phenomenology of ordinary empathy. Dan Zahavi and Soren Overgaard do so particularly well, characterizing empathy as our ability to access the life of the mind of others *via* their bodily and behavioral expressions, so as to gain 'a direct, noninferential, (quasi)-perceptual awareness of another's emotions, sensations, or other psychological states' (8-10). Similarly, Elisa Aaltola defines empathy as a method of understanding others through which we gain 'an *experienced insight* into the mental contents of others' (462, original emphasis). Carl Rogers, founder of humanistic psychology, wrote that when we empathize with another, we are 'entering the private world of the other … temporarily living in his/her life' (4).

While these authors recognize empathy as a natural human capacity, many also highlight its nature as an 'art' (Krznaric), a 'method' (Aaltola), a 'process' (Coplan, 'Real Empathy'), or an activity of 'think[ing] and feel[ing] oneself into the inner life of another' (Kohut). In this they acknowledge that we can exercise a measure of control over our ability to empathize, and become better or worse at it. While the ultimate awareness of others' feelings may be a directly

[2] See, for example, Eisenberg, et al.

experienced insight, the exercise of imaginative capacities to attain that insight is something we can direct and control.

My conception of empathy draws from Aaltola and Masto, for I think they best capture a widely shared understanding of the term. I mean by empathy *a natural capacity for (and the activity of) coming to share a relevantly similar affective state with another because one has attended to the other and imagined being in the other's position.* While this can happen as a result of reading about others' experiences, its most powerful manifestations come as a result of attending to another's 'bodily and behavioral expressions.' While empathy often brings in its wake an action-guiding impulse, we do not need to include that impulse in the definition of empathy itself. For a conception of empathic laziness, it is enough to note that ordinary agents know very well, from direct experience, empathy's power to arouse in us the impulse to help.

Empathy's Role in Moral Life

Jesse Prinz argues against empathy's importance in moral life, declaring that it is 'not a component, a necessary cause, a reliable epistemic guide, a foundation for justification, or the motivating force behind our moral judgments' (214). In fact, he argues, 'empathy is, by and large, bad for morality' (216). If Prinz is right, empathic laziness need not be a moral concern. In fact, given what Prinz calls the 'dark side' of empathy, empathic laziness might indeed be a good thing.

> Responding directly to Prinz, Meghan Masto argues that:
>
> empathy is sometimes epistemologically necessary for identifying the right action, … sometimes psychologically necessary for motivating the agent to perform the right action, and … sometimes necessary for the agent to be most morally praiseworthy for an action . (74)

To highlight the importance of empathic laziness, I will review this important debate, noting in advance that I come down squarely on the side of Masto.

As Prinz recognizes, one might argue that empathy plays a crucial *epistemic* role in moral judgment: 'By seeing that an action has caused joy, we are led to recognize that it

warrants praise, and by seeing that an action has caused suffering, we recognize that it warrants blame' (222). Empathy seems necessary for us to perceive 'the affective benefits and costs of human conduct' (222).

Prinz acknowledges that in this way empathy 'sometimes leads us to see good and bad actions whose status we might have otherwise missed' (223). Yet he insists that empathy plays this role only contingently and that it is 'epistemically unreliable' (223). There are other ways to know another's state of mind than by coming to share it through empathy; we can recognize distress without feeling congruent distress. In fact, sometimes (as noted above) vicarious distress interferes with attention to others and helping: a person may simply withdraw to avoid empathic distress, or become 'defensive and accusatory' (223). A better alternative, for Prinz, is to register another's suffering 'dispassionately' and thus more clearly judge whether it is 'an appropriate object of moral concern' (223).

Masto's rejoinder is that everyday moral decisions are often difficult because it is unclear how those involved will be affected by our choices. 'What should I say to a friend who has just lost her spouse? Am I obligated to leave my job so that my partner can accept his dream job across the country?' (83) In these cases:

> empathizing with others can help us be more informed and thus … make it more likely that we will do the right thing. In fact, empathizing is sometimes necessary for getting the information necessary for knowing … which act is morally right. (83)

Sometimes, we could not have grasped relevant information about how others will suffer or benefit as a result of our actions *without* having shifted our perspective in this way. In these cases 'empathy is epistemically necessary for identifying the right action' (85). Lori Gruen agrees, noting that the information gained through empathy often 'alters what is salient about the situation' (41). As a form of moral perception that helps us to see what is relevant and important in a particular context, 'empathetic moral perception guides us to perceive a situation more accurately…' (42).

Masto acknowledges that sometimes we can gather relevant information by other means; but even in those cases, knowledge we gain from empathizing is 'a richer, deeper kind of information'– namely, knowledge of 'how it feels to feel like that' – that is sometimes vital to

recognizing an action as the right one (84). This is vividly exemplified in animal ethics education. As teachers attest, empathizing (not just knowing the facts) is often necessary for students to grasp the situation of exploited animals in the 'richer, deeper' way that reveals the full horror of factory farming and other practices.

Is empathy needed to motivate moral action? Prinz is skeptical, citing studies showing that 'empathy promotes prosocial behavior but only when there is little or no cost' (225). Other research seems to show that empathy does motivate helping behavior at high personal cost; but Prinz is doubtful that it is just empathy that does the motivating, or that empathy is necessary at all (either in the laboratory or in the outside world). He notes that research subjects may have 'a complex motivational state that involves … anticipatory guilt, if they do not help; reward, if they do help; and empathy' (226). Empathy manipulations in the lab may 'increase the salience of suffering in a way that promotes these other emotions … and they [rather than just empathy] may drive the motivational effect' (226).

I share Gruen's skepticism about whether laboratory experiments illuminate agents' conduct in everyday life (54-5). But taking these studies on their own terms, why would 'anticipatory guilt' or psychological reward be present at all, in the absence of empathy? Further, why assume that empathy is *never* necessary to motivate moral action? Introspection and self-reports strongly suggest otherwise. Even when we know the right thing to do, we often struggle to actually do it. Masto notes that in such cases we need to take the perspective of another so that we can feel as he is feeling. This perspective is sometimes necessary 'for motivating us to do the thing that we know we should do' (91).

Finally, Masto observes that 'doing the right thing is not all that matters' in moral life; we also want agents to be moved by morally appropriate reasons (91). Empathy enables us to act on the basis of deeply felt concern for another's well-being. Even if we could condition ourselves and others to act well without empathy, as Prinz suggests we can, 'we would still suffer a moral deficiency' (90). Agents who do the right things merely because they have been conditioned to do so 'hardly seem praiseworthy for doing so' (90). Even those who do the right thing out of respect for a moral principle or a Kantian sense of duty often seem less praiseworthy than those who are moved to act by empathy. Thus, even if it is not always needed for correct moral judgment or moral motivation, empathy is a highly valuable capacity and state of mind.

Prinz doubts even this, noting the 'dark side' of empathy (229). Like others, he observes that empathy varies as a function of 'social proximity and salience'; we empathize less with strangers or distant others than we do with those who are like us or close by (224). Also, empathy can lead us to ignore 'more important criteria of blame'; sometimes the right action will lead others to suffer. Hence we 'cannot rely on empathy as an epistemic guide' (224). While useful as a heuristic, 'empathy is dangerously error prone when it comes to determining the scope of appropriate moral concern' (224); thus, when we use empathy as a guide to right action, we risk 'profound moral error' (224). Empathy is easily manipulated, partial to those more like us, likely to lead to unfair decisions, and (in general) an unreliable guide to right action. Prinz cites a salient example:

> [T]here is no way to cultivate empathy for every person in need, and the focus on affected individuals distracts us from systemic problems that can be addressed only by interventions at an entirely different scale. Empathy is ineluctably local… With empathy, we ignore the forest fire, while watering a smoldering tree. (228)

Prinz doubts even the expected rejoinder that 'attention to the individual can be used as a springboard for more global action' (228), describing empathy as a dyadic emotion that aligns the emotions (only) of people in a close personal relationship. Yet charitable organizations commonly arouse empathy through individual stories of suffering as a deliberate strategy for eliciting attention and responses to a wider cause. Contrary to Prinz, empathy with a single 'other' often leads to enhanced concern for *many* others. Moreover, we often empathize with those who are not personally or physically near us, and with others quite different from ourselves (Gruen 55) – hence the perennial power of 'human interest' news-stories.

Masto observes that rather than abandon empathy in moral life, the fitting response to empathic bias is 'to work to become more aware of our biases and to be more deliberate in our empathizing and to mitigate the biases that are problematic' (92). Indeed, Prinz's stance is striking in its refusal to recognize that we can *expand the scope* of empathy when deficits are brought to our attention; his arguments assume that empathy's range is rigidly fixed. This is to ignore historical evidence and activists' ample experience of humans learning to extend empathy to different and distant others. In the last few centuries, slowly and haltingly, people have come to empathize with prisoners (subjected to barbaric forms of capital punishment), marginalized

minorities (killed by police without cause), children (once industrial slaves), and others both unlike and distant from themselves.

Prinz comments that 'efforts to expand our moral horizons by empathetic induction may make us more vulnerable to errors of allocation' (231). This is his only mention of the possibility of people enlarging the scope of empathy, and he does not defend it. He may have in mind here issues of justice and fairness (where he thinks empathy can lead us astray), but empathy can certainly coexist with a moral concern for fairness.

Prinz is more careful when he refers to empathy's 'limitations that make it ill-suited for *some* moral ends' (230, my emphasis); perhaps here he is thinking of issues of fairness and justice. He acknowledges that emotions we feel upon attending to the feelings of others can be ways of *drawing attention to our reasons* for moral judgment – that is, to actual harms and benefits. Here, he says, empathy is playing '*only* an epistemic role in justification' (225, my emphasis). But as Masto argues, this is an exceptionally important and often an essential role.

Masto concludes that 'empathy is a crucial component of our moral lives and commonly plays an important role in moral epistemology, moral motivation, and thus, moral action' (91). I agree: personal experience and philosophical reflection reveal that 'empathy is indispensable to our moral lives' (92).

Moral Laziness

We generally think of laziness as an aversion to and avoidance of effort and work. We recognize that there are different types of laziness, and that a person may be industrious and energetic in one arena, but lazy in another. For example, some of us are physically lazy in the sense that we dislike and avoid physical exertions such as housework, physical labor, or exercise. Others are mentally lazy in that they dislike and avoid intellectual efforts such as reading, writing, or

academic learning in general. I would like to focus on a third phenomenon that I call *moral laziness*: aversion to and avoidance of moral efforts and exertion. [3]

What kinds of 'efforts and exertion' do the morally lazy avoid? At least two activities seem salient: (a) efforts to arrive at a moral judgment about what one ought to do and (b) efforts to follow through in action one's judgment about what one ought to do. A more specific failing is often involved in avoiding (a): avoiding the work of empathizing with those who are affected by a practice, which (as discussed above) can aid one in discerning what one ought to do. Empathic laziness can take at least three forms, corresponding to dimensions of empathy we noted earlier. One may avoid (i) imagining the mental state of another or taking the other's perspective (the cognitive aspect of empathy), (ii) feeling the emotion appropriate or congruent with that perspective (the affective dimension of empathy), or (iii) acting on the impulse to help another that empathy typically arouses. By avoiding (i), of course, one can thereby avoid all three dimensions of empathy.

There is a wealth of evidence for these moral failings. Although it is not the only factor involved, laziness is present in those who possess a vague sense that animals are treated badly in food-production, but decline to sharpen that awareness into concrete and specific knowledge. When someone declines to read or watch films about the brutality of meat (and milk and egg) production, choosing willful ignorance over knowledge of what the animals experience, they exhibit moral laziness, as well as (often) a kind of cowardice. (Cowardice is present in that the readings and documentaries are painful to take in, and may indicate that a difficult and frightening change in one's conduct is required.) Such agents would rather avoid the work of imagining the mental states of animals caused by their violent mistreatment – terror, confusion, grief, depression, pain – and thus avoid feeling the distress that accompanies imagining such

[3] I mean to identify a failing distinct from weakness of will, although moral laziness and weakness of will (failing to do what is best according to one's own reasoned judgment) may certainly overlap and compound one another. To explore how that is so, however, is beyond the scope of this essay.

suffering in another. By avoiding sources of information about how the animals are treated, they avoid having to imagine what it would be like to experience such brutal abuse.

Some who read about factory farming or watch relevant documentaries decline to come to full awareness of what the animals endure even as they learn of their abuse. They do not attempt to empathize with farmed animals – to imagine their mental states and feel congruent emotions – and thus do not allow the emergence of an accompanying impulse to help. Farmed animals' expressions and behavior are harder to read than those of our animal companions, so that some can easily avoid empathizing with chickens, cows, and pigs. Chicks barely seem to change expression as they are debeaked, for instance, and then may simply stand in stunned silence. Without learning about chickens' anatomy (the beak is full of nerves), one could observe a scene of debeaking, yet keep one's empathy at bay. Likewise, calves who are branded, suffering third-degree burns, may simply stand still afterwards, appearing to have taken the injury in stride. If one does not know that as prey animals, cows benefit by not showing weakness or pain even when they are severely injured, one can avoid empathizing with the calf in the way we would empathize with a severely burned dog who writhed and howled in pain.

As many have observed, the more unlike us a suffering being is, the harder we must work to enter imaginatively into that being's world. In trying to imagine farmed animals' misery, it may be wise and natural for an agent to begin by imagining *herself* in the animal's situation. Imagining oneself in the situation of being confined for years in a gestation crate, repeatedly giving birth to piglets who are taken away and never returned, can elicit in anyone (especially any woman) a nearly unbearable sense of claustrophobia, panic, and grief. As Coplan notes, this *self-oriented perspective-taking* may be an entrée into genuine (or better) empathy: *imagining that one is a sow* – an animal with a much larger body, a natural instinct to groom her young, and no expectation of future relief from a present discomfort – undergoing this torture. While we can never arrive at full knowledge of what it is like to be that pig, we are fully capable of initiating the motivated and controlled process of trying to attain that insight. While we can never completely succeed – while we may achieve only incomplete and fragmentary experiential 'glimpses' of the misery of sensitive beings treated in this way – the 'experienced insight' that we *can* manage to attain through empathy is a far richer, deeper knowledge of pigs' suffering than intellectual understanding by itself can bring.

Many whose empathy *is* aroused when they witness the violence of factory farming quickly turn away from the impulse to help it awakens. This is so even when 'helping' may simply require withdrawing one's support of the cruelty involved, by refusing to buy its products. 'I could never be a vegetarian,' many say, convincing themselves that this is a modest assessment of their own powers of self-discipline. But in taking this stance, they are giving up before they begin a potential project of self-initiated change. Perceiving it as almost impossibly hard, they decline to make the effort.

In all of these cases, people fail to empathize adequately with farmed animals, or to respond in action when they do empathize, because they do not try. In this they exhibit moral laziness.

Why Does Laziness Matter?

Many are puzzled that sloth appears on lists of the seven deadly sins. Sloth's nearest equivalent today is laziness; but is laziness a vice at all? Some regard it as 'an amiable weakness,' rather than a serious moral failing. Thus Evelyn Waugh remarks,

> The word 'Sloth' is seldom on modern lips. When used, it is a mildly facetious variant of 'indolence,' and indolence, surely, so far from being a deadly sin, is one of the most amiable of weaknesses. Most of the world's troubles seem to come from people who are too busy. (57)

To shed light on the moral significance of laziness, it will help to examine the precursor to our contemporary notion of the trait: the theological concept of sloth. In the following explication I follow the exceptionally helpful account of Rebecca DeYoung.

The concept of sloth (*acedia*) has its roots in the 4th century, A.D. The Desert Fathers of Egypt[4] meant by it a temptation to escape one's commitment to the solitary religious life, due to both physical weariness (a result of their asceticism) and weariness with the spiritual life itself. Someone suffering *acedia* was thought to feel oppressed by the tedium and burdens of a spiritual calling, and to want to escape and enjoy entertainments in the city (Wenzel 10, 18). Later, when religious life took a more communal form, the concept changed to mean the temptation to escape participation in a religious community and its spiritual life. The term retained a sense of being oppressed by commitment to the religious life and was characterized as a kind of sorrow (*tristitia*). The inertia and tedium caused by this sorrow sapped one's motivation to do one's part in the community; thus a link with laziness as neglect of one's duties (spiritual or physical) developed.

In the 13th century, Thomas Aquinas reworked the meaning of sloth in his *Summa Theologiae*, both narrowing and broadening the concept. For Aquinas, *acedia* was specifically opposed to 'charity,' which for him meant perfect friendship with God, and thus was a particular kind of threat to spiritual life. At the same time, his conception of sloth broadened its potential application to any person (not just religious figures), since for him all humans were made to live in relationship with God (DeYoung 176). For Aquinas, the human *telos* for any person was to become like Christ: the exemplar of human perfection who lived in perfect communion with God. At its core, then, spiritual and moral life involved personal transformation to achieve that kind of relationship with the Creator. For Aquinas, virtues were

[4] The desert fathers were 'early Christian hermits whose practice of asceticism in the Egyptian desert, beginning in the 3rd century, formed the basis of Christian monasticism… Following the example of Jesus' life of poverty, service, and self-denial, the early monks devoted themselves to vows of austerity, prayer, and work. Believers who chose to go into the desert as hermits were said to be answering the call of Christ: Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21).' (Brittania.com, 'Desert Fathers')

dispositions that helped one approach the *telos* of friendship with God, and vices were personal habits that thwarted this transformation (178).

Thus *acedia* meant much more than what we think of as laziness. It was an aversion not to physical or intellectual effort *per se*, but to the burdens of a relationship of love with God. It is appropriate that the Greek roots of 'acedia' meant 'a lack of care,' for *acedia* involved an unresponsiveness and aversion to the good of that potential relationship. The resentment, listlessness, sullenness, and apathy that accompanied sloth stemmed from seeing oneself stuck in a position one did not wholeheartedly embrace, but could not escape, since the potential relationship with God was given every human at birth (DeYoung 186).

Why would one feel aversion toward the relationship that constitutes one's own *telos* and perfection? Aquinas's answer resonates with our common understanding of sloth as aversion to effort, but also distinguishes it from mere laziness (DeYoung 187). He rejects the idea that we perceive friendship with God as essentially involving too much physical or bodily effort; for him, weariness or sluggishness is the *effect* of *acedia*, not the source of its sorrow. Physical inactivity, moreover, is not even a sure mark of the vice. The offspring vices stemming from it can include despair at having to live with an inescapable sorrow, or 'flight,' a restless escape into diversions. Thus Pascal noted that a frantically paced life may be as morally and spiritually suspect as a life of idleness: 'restlessness, as well as laziness, can be a hallmark of *acedia*' (DeYoung 191; Pascal nos. 139, 143, 146, 164, 171).

DeYoung's interpretation is that for St. Thomas, *acedia* was resistance to the transformation of self required to achieve 'friendship' with God. It involved:

> sorrow at the thought of being in relationship with God because of … 'the burdens of commitment.' In fact, a symptom of *acedia* is that one perceives being in a relationship and maintaining it as burdens to be borne. Love and friendship are felt as making demands on us, and *acedia* resists them as such. (196)

DeYoung elaborates through the example of marriage:

> to be in [a loving] relationship will change me and cost me; it will require me to restructure my priorities; it may compromise my plans; it will add obligations; it will demand sacrifice; it will alter the pattern of my thoughts and desires and transform my vision of the world. Stagnating and staying the same is easier and safer. (198)

In other words, love takes effort; and one who is slothful resists and neglects the effort involved in the 'slow, daily, self-mortifying change' required to maintain a loving relationship (202).

Using the insights of Aquinas and DeYoung, we can develop an analogous and thoroughly secular conception of moral laziness that shows it to be a serious failing. While (Medieval) sloth was a rejection of and sorrow over the burdens and effort required to achieve a perfect relationship to God, moral laziness can be seen as sorrow over and rejection of the burdens and effort required to maintain a caring relationship to others – in particular, for our purposes, to nonhuman others.

When we focus on animals, it is easy to see why one might resist and avoid the demands that caring will bring. Farmed animals are brutally abused and killed to produce inessential products; so caring seems to require, at a minimum, that we stop supporting their abuse and slaughter with our money and consumer (especially eating) habits. But changing one's diet is perceived as difficult, painful, daunting, and scary by someone steeped in a carnivorous culture. Even though it requires simply not buying and eating some things – omissions rather than actions, from one perspective – making that change is perceived as a severely challenging project and an onerous burden. Yet empathy with exploited animals points clearly to exactly that change as the *least* one can do if one cares.

Self-transformation is frightening and hard. It is illuminating to re-read DeYoung's diagnosis of why one might resist a loving relationship with God (or another human) and reframe it in terms of a caring relationship to other animals:

> to be in [a caring] relationship will change me and cost me; it will require me to restructure my priorities; it may compromise my plans; it will add obligations; it will demand sacrifice; it will alter the pattern of my thoughts and desires and transform my vision of the world. Stagnating and staying the same is easier and safer … (198)

Indeed.

The element of being 'stuck' with a relationship further illuminates contemporary moral laziness. In the context of Aquinas's metaphysical and religious outlook, the slothful are stuck in a position they don't wholeheartedly endorse, didn't ask for, and cannot escape. Similarly, in contemporary culture, someone who cares about animals is 'stuck' once she learns about factory farming. Once we know about it, we cannot un-know it; and we cannot escape making a decision (either tacitly or deliberately) about how to respond. We didn't choose to live in a context of brutal violence to animals, but here we are. Sullenness and resentment (at the culture, at those who bring the facts to light, at the demands of caring for animals) in those who are stuck with having to choose what to do is in some ways understandable. Why must moral life be so hard; our context so fraught and so full of demands; our cultures so brutal; our enculturation so hard to transcend?

Restlessness, feverish activity, or 'busyness' may characterize the morally lazy (as well as Aquinas's slothful), and in fact can ensure continuation of laziness; for one who is immersed in time- and energy-consuming projects (study, work, errands, service) can easily forget or lose track of the empathically stirred impulse to help they may have felt at one time. A crowded schedule can help one forget about a moral undertaking even when it seems clearly required by one's values.[5] While they may not intend it, those who allow busyness to crowd out an

[5] Although Pascal and Taylor are thinking in this context of frivolous diversions, DeYoung notes that 'the busyness of doing ostensible works of charity [i.e., service to others] may itself also be a form of resistance to the demands of charity [in Aquinas's sense of the term]' (191). I would add that a person might keep herself busy at worthwhile and authentically valued activities as a means of escape. If one is attempting to evade an especially burdensome demand, she might immerse herself in worthwhile activities such as athletics, artistic creation, or study – just not the activities that would show commitment to the moral demand in question.

intentional move toward vegetarianism are guilty of 'the cruelty of indifference' (Taylor 122). Dante's categorization in the *Purgatory* of sloth as 'defective love' (Taylor 16) seems apt in these cases, as well: while many meat-eaters claim to love animals, they suffer from defective love or caring. Like someone who allows a hectic schedule to crowd out caring for a spouse or friend, the morally lazy allow distractions to crowd out changing one's habits for the sake of animals.

Whether it shows itself in inertia or restless activity (or both, in different arenas), moral laziness is not an amiable failing, although some treat it as such when they make self-deprecating jokes about eating animals. The morally lazy recoil from and avoid the burdens of caring about animal others, even when caring requires only withdrawing active participation in abuse—i.e., withdrawing financial support from exploitive industries. Thus, moral laziness enables continued complicity in animal abuse.

Beyond this wrongdoing, moral laziness also means the person never takes action to enact what she thought was a significant value in her life (or one that, had she been asked, she would have claimed to have): preventing the needless suffering of animals, or at least rejecting cruelty. Moral laziness thus undercuts integrity.

Finally, moral laziness prevents the deeper transformation that can come from changing outward practices; for what we eat or don't eat, day after day and year after year, profoundly shapes our worldview (Rachels 70). The morally lazy thus pass up an opportunity for self-transformation and an expansion of their moral horizons.

I have focused here on the laziness of failing to take action in light of suffering, but it is neglect of empathy – the perspective-taking that enables one to understand animals' suffering and experience congruent emotions – that underlies that failing.

Overcoming Moral Laziness

It is my hope that coming to think in terms of laziness can motivate people to work harder at empathizing. After all, some Western societies are steeped in a Puritan heritage that places (even inordinate) value on effort and hard work, and that considers industriousness a virtue.

Most of us do not want to see ourselves as lazy (in the ordinary sense); when we describe ourselves as such it is a form of self-deprecation and a humble acknowledgement of weakness.

When we recognize moral laziness in ourselves, how can we act to correct it? When the failing is empathic laziness, how can we enhance our empathy? When we witness such laziness in others, how can we aid them in achieving better empathy?

As Jamison observes, empathy isn't something that just happens to us. It (often) involves choices we make to pay attention and extend ourselves. It can be enhanced by things we can do – by deliberate exertion and a certain kind of work.

A vast trove of practical advice about enhancing empathy can be found in self-help literature and philosophy, but none is more powerful than the idea of *attention* that Iris Murdoch elaborates, following the work of Simone Weil. Resisting a philosophical tradition that held morality to reside exclusively in outward behavior produced by an empty, choosing will, Murdoch focuses on inward dimensions of moral activity. She borrows the concept of attention from Simone Weil to express the idea of 'a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality,' which Murdoch regards as 'the characteristic and proper mark of the active moral agent' (33). She introduces the idea of attention or careful looking that we can actively direct, observing that 'I can only act within the world I can see, in the moral sense of "see" which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort' (36).

Murdoch offers a well-known everyday example: A mother-in-law (M) does not care for her daughter-in-law (D) and thinks her unpolished, pert and familiar, undignified, and tiresomely juvenile. She could settle down with a sense of grievance and a rigid view that her son has married a silly, vulgar person.

> However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again'. (17)

Murdoch imagines:

> M observes D or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters… D is discovered to be not vulgar but refreshingly simple, not undignified but spontaneous, not noisy but gay, not tiresomely juvenile but delightfully youthful, and so on. (17)

With this simple but compelling example, Murdoch illustrates that 'M's moral acts are more than her overt behaviour shows' (18). Even if there is no change in her behavior over time (D may even have died), it is clear that 'M has in the interim been active, she has been doing something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself' (19). M does not passively accept her initial state of mind as something that merely happened to her, but in assessing and attempting to alter it makes it her responsibility (Taylor 7-8). Specifically, 'M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention' (Murdoch 22).

This perspective enables Murdoch to highlight the idea of moral struggle and progress:

> M is engaged in an internal struggle… What M is … attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly… M's activity is essentially something progressive, something infinitely perfectible… M is engaged in an endless task (23). [That task is to attain] … a refined and honest perception of what is really the case, a patient and just discernment and exploration of what confronts one, which is the result not simply of opening one's eyes but of a certain perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline… As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection. (37, 39)

Murdoch's insight can help us understand a particular moral achievement: strengthening our empathy for exploited animals. As she notes, we have a measure of control over 'the direction and focus' of our vision (39). In fact, most of us (in affluent circumstances) have a great deal of control over what we can learn about animals and their abuse.

To empathize better with animals who are relatively unfamiliar to us, we must acquire knowledge about the species in question. The more one learns about farmed animals' cognitive and emotional capacities, instinctual drives and sources of frustration, body language and

methods of communication, the more one can imaginatively put oneself in their place as one observes their mistreatment.

We know that empathy is strengthened by similarity, proximity, and familiarity; and weakened by their opposites. It is easier for us to empathize with those who are like us, near us, and familiar. Other animals are in many ways vastly different from us, unfamiliar to many, and far removed from everyday life (both physically and in our field of awareness); but one can overcome difficulties of unfamiliarity and difference by becoming more familiar with them. Lori Gruen captures the task well:

> What we need to do when we are trying to empathize with very different others is to understand as best we can what the world seems, feels, smells, and looks like from their situated position… This requires gaining as much knowledge of the ways the other lives as is possible… To do it well we have to try to understand the individual's species-typical behaviors and her individual personality over time. Very often this is not easy to do without expertise and observation. (66-67)

Ethologists emphasize that there is no substitute for direct experience with other animals, to come to understand them. Barbara Smuts suggests that 'for the heart to truly share another's being it must be an embodied heart, prepared to encounter directly the embodied heart of another' (108). By spending months in close proximity with chimpanzees and other animals, she came to know every one as 'a highly distinctive individual' (111), and this, of course, made greater caring for each one possible (Hamington 182). Thus Smuts urges 'anyone with an interest in animal rights to open your heart to the animals around and find out for yourself what it's like to befriend a nonhuman person' (120). The best thing we can do to strengthen empathy for farmed animals, then, is to *be with them, physically*: spend time with cows and chickens, turkeys and pigs, observing closely and interacting with them.

This is not an easy thing to manage for people in urban areas, but some organizations offer just such opportunities. Farm Sanctuary is an American organization dedicated to rescue, education, and advocacy for farmed animals. It was founded in 1986 with the mission '[t]o protect farm animals from cruelty, inspire change in the way society views and treats farm animals, and promote compassionate vegan living' (farmsanctuary.org). Farm Sanctuary has rescued thousands of animals and cared for them at three sanctuaries in New York and

California. 'At Farm Sanctuary, these animals are our friends, not our food. . . . [W]e share our lives with chickens, pigs, and other farm animals, and we know them as individuals,' the website reports. A current campaign of Farm Sanctuary, The Someone Project, is dedicated to educating the public about farmed animals' behavior, emotions, and intelligence. This involves sharing 'recent science regarding farm animal emotion, cognition, and social behavior,' but also personal testimony: 'At Farm Sanctuary, we share our lives with farm animals… And we can tell you from personal experience that farm animals have the same range of personalities and interests as cats and dogs' (farmsanctuary.org).

While they can rescue only a miniscule fraction of animals destined to become food in the United States, Farm Sanctuary regards the animals at its sanctuaries as ambassadors for the billions of individuals who are slaughtered each year on factory farms – unseen, unrecognized, and uncared for. The public is invited to come for tours where one can spend an hour or two meeting and interacting with rescued cows, pigs, chickens, turkeys, ducks, goats, and sheep. As the website explains, individual stories of the animals on site 'give the public insight into the realities farm animals face in the modern factory farming industry, but also introduce us to inspiring individuals through their heartwarming tales' of rescue (farmsanctuary.org).

The guided tours provide thorough descriptions of factory farming's treatment of farmed animals, but the most powerful dimension of these events is the opportunity for each person to see, touch, hear, and smell individual animals, up close and personal. Gigantic cows follow one around like dogs and lick one's salty arms and legs with giant, sandpapery tongues. Pigs grunt and stretch with obvious pleasure as one rubs their bellies and chins. Turkeys spread their wings wide in encouragement when one pets them under their wings. Goats butt their heads and horns into one's hand to be rubbed. The animals' sentient awareness and their interest in each other and human visitors are fully manifest, unmistakably communicated in eye contact and expressive behavior.

In this kind of setting one can practice the disciplined attentiveness that Murdoch describes; one can simply (but intentionally) pay attention to what the animals are like. That's how we can best escape preconceptions and social norms about who is worthy of empathy; for as many people have discovered for themselves, farmed animals are not much different from their pets at home. Teachers know this to be a powerful and transformative experience: it often

brings students to a commitment to practical change (i.e., becoming vegetarian) that was absent before, even when they had accepted the rational arguments and watched the documentaries and judged that factory farming is brutal and wrong.

As Maurice Hamington observes:

> if we allow ourselves to experience rich proximal and tactile interactions . . . with animals our appreciation for their nuanced existence will grow… Through relations with nonhuman bodies we can find our way to care for animals, and perhaps by imaginative extension, understand unfamiliar humans. (181-2)

Hamington bases this thesis on the notion that 'moral imagination improves with use. Like a physical skill, moral imagination develops when it is exercised and it can atrophy if it is not utilized' (183). We can overcome the 'empathetic challenge' of imagining the experience of animals with a 'different embodied existence, physical capacities, and brain structures' through direct, tactile contact with them, in the way that we already do with our animal companions. For Hamington, '[p]roximity is crucial' (183). Similarly, Marc Bekoff emphasizes that there is no substitute for 'listening to' other animals in seeking to understand them.

Of course, not everyone has access to Farm Sanctuary rescues, small farms, or other sites where one can get close to individual animals. What then? pattrice jones offers this:

> if you can't listen to particular animals yourself, listen to those who have had the opportunity to do so. What do chimps want? Certainly, you can learn a lot about chimp ethology and then use your imagination. But you ought also find out what Jane Goodall or the folks at [a chimp sanctuary] think about that question. (102)

Animal ethologists can also tell us all we need to know about the natures of farmed animals, with support from evolutionary biology, anatomy, fieldwork, and direct observation.

Even if we are not in their actual presence, and even though we cannot come to know the personalities of individual farmed animals in their billions, we can exercise Murdoch's 'perfectly familiar kind of moral discipline' by trying to overcome prejudice (that chickens are insensate, that cows are dumb, that pigs are dirty), avoiding the temptation to see what we want to see (in order to eat what we want to eat), and directing our attention to the animals' actual

natures as revealed by biology (they have sensitive nervous systems) and ethology (they find being crowded stressful).

Lori Gruen adds that 'the relationships we [have] with immediate others who [are] different could help us expand our perception to even more different others' (77). Having experienced deep connections to animal companions, she notes that:

> drawing on the lessons we can learn about friendship, attraction, and respect in those relationships seemed like a good starting point [for enhancing empathy for other animals]… [T]he skills we learn in our closest relations can help us to make our more attenuated relationships better. (77)

Thus activists often highlight the similarities between dogs and pigs, noting their intelligence, sociability, and capacity for affection. 'How would you feel if your dog were treated that way?' is an effective way to bring out the horror of gestation crates and other torments visited on pigs in factory farms. Thinking of a pig as a disguised dog is not ideal, for of course pigs have their own species-specific characteristics and are not just the same as dogs. But realizing the similarities can help some people get beyond their perceptions of pigs as stupid or unfeeling, and in this way can get people closer to seeing them as they really are. As Murdoch would put it, knowing about the similarities can help us to see pigs *justly*.

Implications for Activists

Activists aim to ignite self-examination, moral efforts, and change. The most powerful way to accomplish this is to inspire empathy for the victims of oppressive social practices, and the most powerful way to do that for animals is to show people both animals themselves and the suffering that humans cause them. Visual presentations of animal suffering are critical to effective activism, as has been often observed (Jenni 6). But we also need to make possible direct experience with animals on the part of those we would change. How to do this on a large scale without endangering or distressing the animals is not easy to imagine. Farm Sanctuary sites host volunteer days, Thanksgiving celebrations of turkeys, and other public events that invite people to observe and interact closely with farmed animals who have been rescued. But such events

reach only a few, and attract mostly those who already empathize well with animals. Perhaps virtual reality technology and experiences can take the place of such actual, physical interactions.

As in other social and moral arenas, forming *personal relationships* (with nonhuman animals) and *experiencing the undisputed facts firsthand* (about animals' mental capacities, about the nature of factory farming) can bring about personal transformations, changes in worldview, and commitments to activism. Once one comes to know farmed animals, both in terms of species capacities and (especially) as individual beings, empathy comes naturally. It is also contagious in that people who come to appreciate chickens, cows, and other animals as they really are eagerly share their insights with family and friends. One of the beauties of good relationships is that friends help friends enhance their empathy.

Finding ways of bringing animals to public awareness in a way that would enhance the work of empathy requires imagination and tenacity. I hope that animal protection groups that so effectively bring animal abuse to our vivid attention (Animals Australia, Mercy for Animals, Tribe of Heart, World Animal Protection) and groups that bring people in contact with animals (Farm Sanctuary and other rescues) will find ways of putting more people together with animals as an avenue to social change. In fact, it should be the mission of all who care about animals to find ways of doing that, to overcome moral laziness and enable the work of empathy.[6]

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