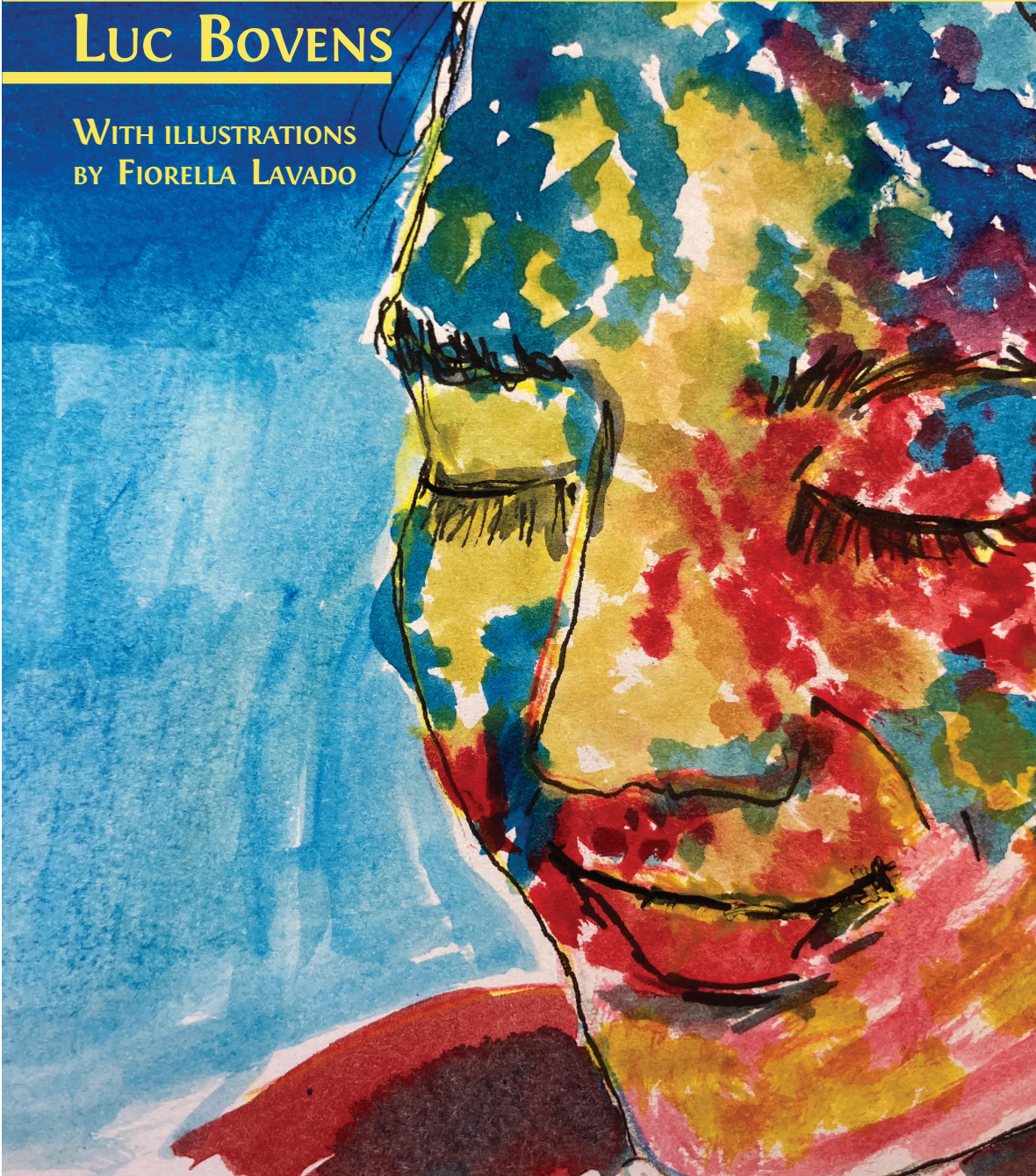


COPING

A PHILOSOPHICAL GUIDE

LUC BOVENS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY FIORELLA LAVADO





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Luc Bovens. Illustrations © Fiorella Lavado



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs license (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work; to adapt the work and to make commercial use of the work providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that they endorse you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Luc Bovens. Illustrations by Fiorella Lavado. *Coping: A Philosophical Guide*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0268>

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0268#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0268#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800642782

ISBN Hardback: 9781800642799

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800642805

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800642812

ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 9781800642829

ISBN XML: 9781800642836

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0268

Cover photo by Fiorella Lavado, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Cover design by Anna Gatti.



6. Counsel

Count your Blessings

Be grateful. Count your blessings. It's not so bad—there is much to be thankful for. This is what we tell people who feel down about their situation in life. How are we to understand this counsel?

Let's think about a standard case of being grateful. Your car breaks down, and you find yourself stranded in the middle of nowhere. Someone stops their car and gives you a ride to the next town. Naturally, you are grateful. You were in dire straits, and they didn't have to do that. Gratitude makes perfect sense in this case: We are grateful to other people for doing us a favor.

But if this is the model for being grateful, then why would it be good counsel to tell people who are down that they should be grateful? Gratitude is supposed to be a virtue that lifts us up. How does it do this? Cicero in *For Plancius* tells us that it is not only the greatest of all virtues but also the parent of all others. So, what virtues does gratitude spawn?

Thanksgiving originated as a harvest festival. Think of a farming family who are grateful for the harvest at Thanksgiving time. For a theist, this gratitude can be modeled on being grateful for getting a ride when one's car breaks down. Without God's loving care, we would be nothing. God looked down kindly on us and, even though nothing was owed to us, granted us an abundant harvest. So, our gratitude is due. And, for a religious person, to be reminded that one's life is in God's hand may indeed be a source of strength.

But the charm of Thanksgiving is that it is a holiday for the religious and secular alike. How is it that being grateful for the harvest makes sense in a secular context? Why would it be uplifting? What virtues does gratitude for the harvest carry in its wake?

First, when we are grateful, we are grateful for everyone's contribution to the success of the harvest. It corrects for the illusion of self-sufficiency. It is a reminder of the old line by John Donne: 'No man is an island, / Entire of itself.' Even if you did all the sowing and reaping yourself, there would have been no sowing without the seed house and no reaping without the dealership that sold you the combine. There would be no sowing and reaping without those who came before you and taught you how to sow and reap. One is not alone. This feeling of connectedness is uplifting and a source of empathy and caring.

Second, a good harvest requires not only a village of people playing their parts; the weather also has to cooperate. And this is also what my Thanksgiving table is thankful for. A theist is thankful to God for rain and shine happening—exactly when they needed them. But if there is no God to thank, is there room for this kind of gratitude? Is it fitting to be thankful for rain and shine when we do not believe that there exists a rain- and shine-maker to thank?

This kind of gratitude has a secular analog in the awareness that success in life is fragile. It is contingent not only on the cooperation of others but also on so many other factors falling into place. Things are very much outside of our control. It teaches us humility. It is an antidote to smugness—the self-righteous attitude that good things come to us because they are owed to us, and they are owed to us because of the excellent work that we have put in. The realization that there is little that we have in hand, that chance plays a large role in our lives, is liberating. We can do our part but need to take things as they come.

And finally, one may be grateful for witnessing the sheer beauty of the harvest and for being part of the cycle of life. As the combines come in, one whispers a quiet *thanks*, as one does upon seeing a sunrise or a breath-taking landscape. Again, if one believes that there is a God to offer us these joyful experiences, it makes sense to be grateful to this God. But what form is gratitude to take in the absence of anyone doing the offering? Is this a type of gratitude that is lost once we shift into secular gear?

I used to live in a mountain town. Some people get used to the scenery—it just gets old and hardly registers anymore. Others continue being appreciative of the majestic beauty. This appreciation hinges on an attitude of not taking things for granted, retaining a sense of wonder,

and taking the time to stop and smell the roses. And, of course, what holds for mountain towns also holds for downtown Manhattan. Just as one can count oneself lucky for living in nature, one can count oneself lucky for living in downtown Manhattan. This aspect of gratitude urges us to be mindful of what is around us here and now. In E.E. Cummings' 'i thank you God for most this amazing,' it is through gratitude that 'the ears of my ears awake [...] the eyes of my eyes are opened.'

Hence gratitude is a fine thing. It saves us from egotism. It saves us from smugness. And it saves us from letting life pass us by while we forget to listen and watch. It may be the finest of all virtues, and it carries empathy, humility, and mindfulness in its wake.

Can gratitude become too much of a good thing? Friedrich Nietzsche thought so in *Human, All Too Human* (§550): 'There are slavish souls who carry their appreciation for benefits received so far that they strangle themselves with the tie of gratitude.' Though we sing the praises of gratitude, can one be grateful to a fault? And, if so, how?

Our standard case of gratitude pictured a stranded motorist who was vulnerable, nothing was owed to them, and a kind passer-by went over and above the call of duty to offer help. The motorist wouldn't be strangling themselves with any rope of gratitude in this case.

What is problematic is when gratitude is expected from us, yet what we are supposed to be grateful for is *much less* than what is owed. When cars are stolen in Beirut, the thieves bring them to a central place. You can retrieve your car from there for a handsome sum. When you do so, you are expected to thank the person who is running the lot. Now, this is madness. The man who sells your car back to you is part of the racket. He is a crook who is in cahoots with the gang of car thieves. Nietzsche is right in this case: Gratitude has no place here and the expectation of gratitude indeed strangles one's pride.

There is a similar argument coming from voices from minority groups who suffer from structural injustice. There is no place for gratitude for government aid programs, reparation payment or policies that aim to rectify the injustice. What is offered is most often much less and certainly no more than what is owed. They may appreciate that some progress is being made toward greater equality, but they strongly resist any political request for gratitude.

Help Your Neighbor

Wounded animals lash out. The human animal is no different. Homer's *Iliad* reports that Achilles went on a killing spree on the Trojan plains after Hector slew his friend Patrocles. Causing suffering seems to be a natural reaction to hardship and loss, but does it relieve one's suffering? Wisdom has it that we should try to do something meaningful with our lives in the face of adversity, rather than cause more hardship: Help your neighbor, visit a lonely elderly family member, volunteer in a local soup kitchen. Why would this be good counsel? Why is there consolation to be found in doing acts of kindness?

Many people search for solace by caring for those who are less fortunate. Soup kitchens in metropolitan areas tend to have a steady supply of volunteers, at least before COVID times. Why is this the case? I will present some explanations why there might be solace in volunteering, whether in a local soup kitchen or in any other capacity where one is directly helping the needy in a hands-on way.

Warm Glow. The simplest answer is that helping others generates a warm glow, at least in some people, and it's this warm glow that people are after. People say that it's intrinsically rewarding and the best thing they have ever done in their life.

Channeling. Loss embitters. It breeds negativity. It comes with the destructive energy of Achilles. We can let our anger get the upper hand. Or we can try to channel that very energy into something constructive. This is where the proverbial soup kitchen provides a positive outlet. It offers a mission that transforms what is eating the soul into something that lifts the soul.

Focus. Hardship may also be paralyzing. We can't get anything done. Our work piles up. When line managers know that an employee is battling depression, they often suggest a more structured task load—a set of hands-on jobs with clear results and boxes to tick off—rather than projects that require blue-sky thinking. Hands-on tasks provide focus and immediate reward. Soup kitchens provide the same kind of promise.

Meaning. Being down in the dumps feels like wasted time. Life passes us by, and we have nothing to show for it. One does not want to stand there empty-handed—better to put a ladle in those empty hands. If we have fed a few hungry people, then at least there was something that made those darker days worthwhile. And it may also chase the clouds away: Helping one's neighbor distracts and engages us and provides a sense of purpose in life.

Empathy. Hardship, it is said, will make one into a kinder and more caring person. And like often breeds like: Empathy tends to be directed toward people facing the same predicament that we found ourselves in. Recovering alcoholics will volunteer as mentors in Alcoholics Anonymous. Students who have struggled with anorexia will become active in the campus self-help group for eating disorders. And servers in soup kitchens have often known poverty firsthand.

Shelter. Soup kitchens are places where good will reigns. People come together to help their neighbor in need and form community. And this may be precisely what we need when we are seeking shelter from a dark and hostile world. There is consolation in surrounding oneself with a spirit of caring—a reminder that there is still some goodness in this world.

Opportunity Cost. The opportunity cost of volunteering is what makes it worthwhile. Instead of volunteering, we could join the country-club and enjoy a good game of tennis. Or we could work an evening shift and treat ourselves to that trip to Barbados we always wanted to take. There is a kind of magical thinking that enters in. Costlier medication has a greater placebo effect. The greater the opportunity cost, the better we feel about volunteering.

These are seven explanations of what could make sense of the counsel to go work in the proverbial soup kitchen and why so many people take this path. This is not an exhaustive set. And not every soup-kitchen volunteer will recognize themselves in every single one of these explanations. Different strokes for different folks, as they say. Also, one hardship is not like another, and one proverbial soup kitchen is not like

another either. But I hope that I have captured some aspects of what drives people to take up hands-on work with immediate and tangible benefits when life is not treating them kindly.

Don't Cry over Spilled Milk

Don't cry over spilled milk! What's done is done! It's all water under the bridge! This is all perfectly reasonable counsel, but it is easier said than done. The pull towards reassessing the past—how things might have been much better than they are—can be persistent and crippling. 'Footfalls echo in the memory/ Down the passage which we did not take/ Towards the door we never opened/ Into the rose-garden,' T.S. Eliot writes in 'Burnt Norton' in *Four Quartets*. Indeed, there is always the lure of looking back, saying, 'Darn it! Why didn't things work out? Should have, would have, could have ...!'

A crucial distinction in this backward-looking attitude is the distinction between *disappointment* and *regret*. Disappointment is about how things turned out. Regret is about the choices that you made. Let me explain. Suppose you are torn between going on a vacation to Xanadu or to Shangri-La. You decide for Xanadu. The service in your hotel turns out to be dismal. You are disappointed. The weather in Xanadu turned out to be much worse than in Shangri-La. You regret that you did not choose to go to Shangri-La.

How can we help people quit crying over spilled milk when their ailment is disappointment? We can try to show that there never was a genuine possibility. It's not that things turned out poorly. It just wasn't in the cards. The service in Xanadu hotels is notoriously terrible.

How can we help people quit crying over spilled milk when their ailment is regret? We can try to show that the chance of success on the unchosen alternative was not any better. We point out that the weather in Shangri-La tends to be worse than in Xanadu during that time of year. There is nothing to regret. The weather did not turn out right for you in Xanadu. But it would not have been any smarter to have chosen Shangri-La.

Counseling against disappointment and against regret are orthogonal. When counseling against disappointment, *we talk down the chance of*

success on the chosen path. Success was never a genuine possibility on the chosen path. When counseling against regret, *we talk up the comparative chance of success on the chosen path relative to the unchosen path.* You chose the better path.

If you cure my disappointment by showing me that the chosen path had low chances of success, you feed my regret: I should have chosen some other option that had better chances of success. If you cure my regret by telling me that the chosen path had greater chances of success than the unchosen path, you feed my disappointment: So why didn't success materialize then on the chosen path? It's not that easy to mop up spilled milk. Spilled milk covers disappointment and regret. The cure for disappointment feeds regret. The cure for regret feeds disappointment.

Here is an example. I was torn between marrying Frankie or Johnny. I married Frankie. Things did not work out. I am disappointed. You console me by telling me that Frankie was just not a good match for me, and it just couldn't have worked out. But now you are feeding my regret: I should have married Johnny! You then point to the comparative virtues of Frankie: Frankie really was the better bet of the two, and I made the right choice. But wait, if Frankie was the better bet, then success was genuinely possible, and so now I am disappointed again that things did not work out!

The late Cambridge philosopher D. Hugh Mellor once visited in Boulder, Colorado. It had been raining cats and dogs all day long, and I remarked that this was truly unusual. He responded by saying that when one is hosting a guest from out of town and there is inclement weather, then one is prone to say one of two things: Either one says that the weather is always like this at this time of year; or one says that this kind of weather is very unusual—it is never like this at this time of year. Why do hosts choose to say this? Most of the time, the stats would probably support a more nuanced answer.

Here is an attempt at a response. The host notices that the guest is unhappy and tries to offer consolation. They may try to dispel disappointment: It's always like this here—there is nothing to be disappointed about. Or they may try to counteract regret: Don't regret having come here rather than somewhere else. You made the right choice. The chance of rain here this time of year is very low relative to other places you might have considered visiting.

The host can't say just anything—meteorology poses constraints. In England's Lake District, you can only cure disappointment. It always rains, so you can hardly be disappointed when you meet with rainy weather. In Utah's Canyon Lands, you can only cure regret. Rain is truly unusual, and you really can't regret going there even if you are unlucky with the weather. Just about any other place on earth has higher average rainfall.

Here is a case in which disappointment and regret are improperly mixed. Sally undertook a two-day bike ride from Portland to Seattle. She had a bike accident three-quarters of the way through. Luckily, she was wearing a helmet and survived without serious injury. Here is an absurd thing for Sally to say: 'I regret having put on my helmet: If I had not taken the time to put on my helmet, I would have been at the intersection a few seconds earlier, and I would not have had an accident at all.' That's true, but it's no ground for regret. It's ground for being disappointed that things turned out the way they did. Sally could have made it to Seattle, and it was a bummer that a car just had to make an unexpected turn right in front of her. But she can't take this bad luck to be a reason for regretting her choice of putting on a helmet. The fact of the matter is that the chances of survival without serious injury on a bike per mile traveled are greater with than without a helmet. And so, there is no reason for regret. When she got onto that bike, she chose the safer option.

Express Yourself

It's a good thing in life to dabble a bit in some art form or other. When the road is bumpy, you can sing your blues away, throw a pot on a pottery wheel, put some paint on canvas, or dance to 'Singing in the Rain.' I want to give some thought to the art of writing. 'I was raised by the cold that, to warm my palm,/ gathered my fingers around a pen,' writes the Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky in the poem 'A Part of Speech.' (*Collected Poems in English*, p. 102) People find solace in expressing themselves through writing, ranging from entries in a diary, posts on social media, emails to friends, columns in newspapers, or penning their very own *War and Peace*.

Writing is an art form that has an intriguing relationship with mental health. I was once chairing a session with migrant writers. They spoke

about the hardships of being uprooted from their native communities. An audience member asked them why they write. What was striking was how every single one of them wholeheartedly agreed that, in their own words, they write *out of pain*.

Agathon, in Plato's *Symposium*, tells us that romance is what inspires—at the touch of love, everyone becomes a poet. But seemingly, it is not only feelings of love but also plain suffering that makes writers clasp their pens. Why is it that pain compels us to write? What promises of solace does writing hold out? It is somewhat bizarre because writing itself can be agony. If you don't have to write, why would you? So how can agony shield from agony? Not everyone reaches for a pen when hardship strikes. But it is a curious response—sufficiently curious, well, to put a few words on paper about it.

Writing is a solitary activity. One can create a space of tranquillity far away from the troubled world outside. Everything is beautiful at the ballet. And so it is in our coffee-stained work corners—they are places to create, places to forget.

Writing can also be like talking to a friend. One comes to see things clearer. A jumble of feelings, memories, and conversations is clouding up one's head. Writing helps place things in pigeonholes so that one can remember without obsessing. And even if one's inner goings-on don't gain clarity, there is at least displacement. What ails cannot be both in our heads and on the paper—or so it seems.

'We read to know we are not alone,' says the character of C.S. Lewis in William Nicholson's play *Shadowlands* and Richard Attenborough's movie by the same name. This is also why people reach for a pen. Writing is rebellion against being singled out by misfortune. Why me? In reaching out to others, one learns that nobody is spared.

Writing helps break through a vicious cycle. Being focused on the futility of life feeds self-centeredness. Self-centeredness stands in the way of contributing. And being unable to contribute reinforces the belief that life is indeed futile. And so the wheel turns. But writing is contributing—it is letting other people know that they are not alone. In the song 'The Competition' the singer-songwriter Kimya Dawson sings of people being grateful to her for saying what they don't have the words to say and how there is an art to feeling down which is what keeps her on the stage.

'Life being what it is, one dreams of revenge,' writes Gauguin in *Avant et Après*, a collection of autobiographical notes, translated under the title *Gauguin's Intimate Journals* (p. 2) Was painting a form of revenge for him? Clearly, writing, being a narrative art, can be a form of revenge. Memoirs often take this form, and this is what gets their authors in trouble—as when Thomas Wolfe wrote about people in his native Asheville, North Carolina in *Look Homeward, Angel*. Or, more recently, Karl Ove Knausgård had to contend with the fallout from *My Struggle*, which depicted family members in unflattering ways.

And finally, there is writing as social activism. Journalists and non-fiction writers bear witness to how political conditions are ruining lives. Each story may just be a drop of cold water on a hot plate—but enough drops may lead to much desired social change. And once we start writing, the anger is enlisted in a cause and is transformed. It is good for something, and, as such, no longer drags us down.

There are many forms of pain, many kinds of writings, and many therapeutic routes. Some of these benefits also come with other art forms—there is a sense of seclusion in the pottery studio as well. Some of them are specific to the narrative arts—one finds solace in sharing one's story, but of course, music and painting also have narrative elements. For some people it is sufficient to write—their diary is a private matter, not to be shared. For others, being read, being heard, being seen is crucial—it is the sharing itself that is healing.

Eat Well

Approaching food in some way or other is often recommended as an answer to life's problems or a route to happiness—but the recommendations could not be any less varied. There is one group that recommends eating whatever you darn well please. Let's call them gourmands. The other group swears by regimenting food consumption in one way or another. Let's call them abstinents. Both the gourmands and the abstinents see their relationship with food as a route toward happiness.

Virginia Woolf is with the gourmands. 'One cannot think well, love well, sleep well unless one has dined well,' she writes in *A Room of One's Own*, and she is a master at describing tables decked with luscious food.

There are lots of tongue-in-cheek cards in praise of eating to your heart's delight. You can eat your way to happiness: 'You can't buy happiness, but you can buy ice cream, and that's kind of the same thing.' Sweets relieve stress: 'Stressed spelled backward is desserts.' And there is the Italian delicacy *Tiramisu*—meaning 'Pick me up'—with its power inscribed in its very name.

There is little surprise in this recommendation. It is no secret that getting what you want can contribute to happiness. So why shouldn't eating to your heart's delight not help in the pursuit of happiness, provided that the heart delights in the right measure? Certainly, the desire for luscious food can become obsessive and turn into gluttony. But any desire can turn into a desire for excess. Remember William Blake's poem '*Eternity*': 'He who binds to himself a joy/ Does the winged life destroy/ But he who kisses the joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity's sunrise.' So long as we keep a healthy appreciation for chateaubriand, cheese soufflé, and crème brûlée, we can indulge and be merry.

The abstinents pose more of a challenge. What is curious is that, rather than consuming less fattening or unhealthy food, there is a tendency to ax complete food categories. Meat is off the menu for vegetarians, animal products for vegans, and all but nuts and fruits for the fruitarians. Atkins dieters cut out just about all carbohydrates. Paleo dieters stick to all and only those food items that our cave-dwelling ancestors gnawed on. Allergies to cow's milk, eggs, peanuts, soy, and so on are a reason to carefully check ingredient lists. And supermarkets stack just about anything in gluten-free format for the gluten sensitive.

Now people have various reasons for adjusting their diets. There are moral reasons, cultural reasons, and health reasons. As for health reasons, there is physical and mental health. If you have celiac disease, strict gluten avoidance is essential for physical survival. But axing food categories is also a means of addressing mental health issues. Psychiatrists, therapists, and life coaches recommend that we cut out food categories that might affect moods. And there is no shortage of dietary fads trending on social networks.

Axing food categories is a coping strategy. But how could it possibly make us feel better not to eat this or that? It's easy to understand that chocolate can be a mood enhancer, but how can abstention from food categories be a mood enhancer?

There can be a strictly physiological explanation. Coffee may make you jittery. Milk may make you feel blue. If you are drinking coffee and consuming milk products from morning until night, you may not know that the coffee and the milk are the culprits. Cut the coffee, and you will relax. Cut the milk, and you will cross over to the sunny side of the street. Abstinence can lead to mood enhancement via a strictly physiological route.

But how the physiology works is for others to figure out. We are interested here in psychological explanations. There are multiple paths from food to mood. Without trying to be exhaustive, I will distinguish between six such paths: *focus*, *displacement*, *control*, *pretense*, *belonging*, and *purity*.

Focus. Working around dietary constraints requires research and dedication. As the mind is engaged in checking ingredient lists for traces of allergens or working out how to increase calcium intake after cutting out dairy products, it is not obsessing or in the grip of its sorrows. A busy mind is a happy mind.

Displacement. If you cannot solve the issues that underlie your sorrows, why not designate a dietary problem as its cause and then solve the dietary problem instead? Diagnose what ails you as something that you have control over and then undertake to correct it. If you can convince yourself that there is a causal link between some food item and mood, then your mood will clear as you ax the food item. It may sound a bit like the drunk who is looking for their wallet under the streetlight, not because they lost it there, but because that's where the light is. But the drunk is sure not to find their wallet, whereas displacement may just work.

Control. You may find yourself powerless in life. In response, you import a set of dietary rules into your life that you can autonomously accept and live by. You answer the lack of control by constructing a world that you do control. Control differs from displacement in that you do not presume that following some diet will solve your problems. Instead, what you crave is control—and you welcome a set of dietary rules because they are something you can control.

Pretense. Mental health messes with dietary habits. There is compulsive eating, addictions, loss of appetite, and more. Remember Pascal: If you find yourself unable to have religious belief, then bless yourself with holy water and attend Mass—that is, act as if you already have faith, and faith will follow. Similarly, if you force yourself to mimic healthy eating habits, then this may improve your mental health issue.

Belonging. It is good not to be alone. There are a host of support groups for various allergies, gluten sensitivity, and lactose intolerance. There are coffee shops and restaurants that cater to fruitarians, vegans, and Atkins dieters. Community has multiple purposes. It fosters a social context that combats loneliness. There are people to talk to about something of common interest, be it in support groups or online communities. It provides an identity. You don't just have this annoying sensitivity to gluten—you have joined the ranks of the gluten insensitive. This, in turn, reinforces the belief that the axed food category is what caused lethargy, lack of focus, depression, or what have you. It's not just you who are affected—others report the very same symptoms. And it provides a sense of common purpose. As a vegan, you want to put an end to animal suffering and mitigate climate change. The gluten insensitive are battling a food industry that has been increasing the gluten content of food for commercial purposes, leaving many to pay the price. You are fighting for proper labeling of allergens, and so on.

Purity. There is a good deal of analogical reasoning in health food recommendations. Walnuts look like brains, so they must be good for brain function. Smiley bananas improve mood. Grapes aid lung function. Celery increases potency. This kind of analogical reasoning has a bad rap, and we are supposed to have outgrown it in this age of science and enlightenment.

But there is something to all this when it comes to mental health. Think of decluttering. If you declutter your attic, it may do some good for decluttering your head. 'Declutter, Organize, Live Joyfully' is the epigraph of a minimalist-living website.

Something similar is going on with food. We are what we eat. Look at the ingredient list on a candy bar and count the number of food additives and preservatives it contains. There is a messiness to it—food

should be food, not some processed amalgamation of substances that do not belong. The quality of our food reflects the quality of our lives. Modulate what you eat, and you will modulate how you live. Eat messy food, live a messy life. Choose to eat food that is simple and pure, and thereby force your life to become simple and pure.

There are critics. The Intuitive Eating movement sees axing food categories as a route to failed diets, leading to overeating and eating disorders. Instead, we should make peace with food and not let the food police dictate what foods to eat and not to eat. Without rules, there is nothing to fret about, and there are no rules to be broken. Eating should be a source of joy. Worrying about what you eat is stressful, and all the frustration and guilt induced by self-imposed dietary rules are counterproductive.

There are cynics. A *New Yorker* cartoon makes fun of the craze for gluten-free diets with a woman in a restaurant saying to a friend: 'She thinks she's so great 'cause she has real celiac disease.' There are indeed many unsympathetic voices dissing health foods, dieting, and food allergies. They say that it's all just a fad, that most followers do not have a problem with gluten, lactose, or any other allergens and that what is driving all this is the desire for attention. Food restrictions can place us on the social map. Do people remember my allergy? Do they make accommodations? Self-imposed food restrictions are an easy tool to test for respect.

So, what is the bottom line: To ax or not to ax? It's complicated. I trust the experts telling us that eating disorders often start with self-imposed dietary restrictions. But I have also known people who have successfully built dietary restrictions into their lives to provide focus, a sense of community, and the illusion of control. It is like rhyme and meter in poetry. For some people such constraints kindle creativity. For others, they kill the joy of self-expression. The path of abstinence is interesting, but it may lead to peril, and one should be careful where one treads.