Welcome to another episode of Breakthrough Dialogues, the podcasts for pragmatists and problem solvers, brought to you by the Breakthrough Institute. I'm Alex Trembath, deputy director at Breakthrough, and your host. I am really excited for you to hear this episode in which we talked to Marta Zaraska. Marta is a science journalist who has been published at Washington Post, Scientific American and elsewhere. Most recently she wrote an essay for our journal, the Breakthrough Journal, called Meeting Meat-Eaters Halfway. In the essay she talks about reducetarianism, flexitarianism, and other ways that meat-eaters can lower the environmental impact of their meat consumption, and ways that different approaches to vegetarianism, veganism, lowering your meat consumption can all actually work together, instead of being thought of as starkly different ways to reduce our environmental impacts. Marta, thanks for joining us.

Marta Zaraska: Thanks for having me.

Alex Trembath: You're welcome. So your book, Meathooked, examines the cultural obsession with meat. And your essay for the Breakthrough Journal makes the case for what you write as a quote, "strong reducetarian identity." So before we get to the cultural obsession, I wanted to define some terms first. Terms you drop in the book and in the essay: reducetarianism, flexitarianism, pescatarianism, ovo-lacto vegetarianism. So what do all these things mean, just for our listeners' context?

Marta Zaraska: Yes, it can get quite confusing. So, they don't all mean the same thing. Flexitarian and reducetarian are very close to each other, and you can basically argue that they mean the same thing. But there are slight nuances in the language. Basically both flexitarians and reducetarians eat meat, but they eat less than, let's say average, or less than they used to eat before. And the slight difference in language you could say is that reducetarians are people who are more conscious making a decision. So they are making a decision to reduce, either compared to national average, or to their previous diet. And flexitarians are more kind of on the fence. So they are eating, they're not eating. It's kind of undecided you could say. There is less decision making in flexitarianism than reducetarianism.

Marta Zaraska: Although you could also probably argue that they are one and the same thing. When it comes to pescatarians, these are people who eat fish but don't eat meat in general. So that's a very different story here, because both
reducetarians and flexitarians will eat meat. It can be pork. It can be beef and fish. But pescatarians say no to meats and eat just fish and seafood. And then you have lacto-ovo vegetarians. So these are the vegetarians, the classic vegetarians, who will not eat any meat or fish, but will eat cheese, milk, dairy, eggs, all this kind of things. Of course there are vegans. So people who don't eat any animal products whatsoever. So they also exclude dairy and eggs from their diets.

Alex Trembath: Thank you. I think that's helpful. I think I consider myself something of a flexitarian over the past few years, mostly for environmental reasons. I've been trying to eat less meat and in particular eat less red meat. So sort of, not quite pescatarian, but shifting more towards chicken and pork. I'm curious what your path has been. What you grew up eating and what your diet is now? And sort of what you consider yourself.

Marta Zaraska: I grew up in Poland, so I grew up eating tremendous amounts of meat and also very unhealthy kinds of meats. So for example, lard. I loved lard sandwich, which what it basically meant bread with a big part of lard on it. I ate lots of chicken liver. I ate beef. I ate pork. I love lots of kielbasa. I ate everything. And so usually, the pressure in the family on children was, at least eat the meats. So that was the most important.

Marta Zaraska: And then, I moved to Canada as a young adult and I lived in Calgary. So the place where the AAA Alberta beef originates. And on my way to work, I often saw this big trucks full of cows on their way to slaughterhouses. And it kind of started bugging me. I would be stuck in traffic and surrounded by those trucks full of cows. It had me rethink my eating. I made the decision to stop eating red meat. So, again, reducetarians, flexitarian, because I wanted to still continue eating chicken. I guess I just didn't see the trucks full of chicken on my way to work.

Marta Zaraska: But then once I stopped eating red meats, somehow my tastes changed. And I stopped liking chicken and I just didn't crave it anymore. But I continued eating fish for many, many years. Now, I mostly don't eat fish. And I don't really eat meat, although sometimes I crave it so much that I will break my rules and I will eat a little bit. So, for example, a little piece of bacon, once every few months and so on.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. And we'll get to this I think later in the conversation. But that's quite common among all forms of reducetarian, flexitarians, vegetarians that most people aren't consistent in dietary practices, right?

Marta Zaraska: Yes, it's actually correct. One thing that's surprising in one study, actually in several studies, the numbers were similar, that about 60% of self-proclaimed vegetarians actually have had some animal flesh in the last 24 hours. So when they are actually asked to, they will admit that they had nibbled on something. And this same findings came out of US and Canada. So, there is something that was very deep craving that even people who proclaimed to be vegetarians still have.
Alex Trembath: Yeah. That really is remarkable, and really speaks to the fact that this isn't a binary, or even very sort of discrete set of different dietary preferences. There's a lot more in common among these different groups that you define for us at the beginning, than we might know. But again, before we get to that, I do want to sort of ask you to make your case. You said, you started to have some sort of personal awakening, seeing cattle in trucks being shipped around in Canada. And that led you to change the way you think about animal agriculture, and your meat-eating diet. So can you just take a few minutes to make the case of basically, why is animal agriculture bad?

Marta Zaraska: So, I mean there are three different reasons why people go vegetarian, and why we can argue that animal agriculture is bad for us and for the planet. I started off as, you could say, ethical vegetarian. Meaning I basically stopped eating red meat because of those cows in trucks. So I just felt bad about eating an animal. Although over the years my major concern actually switched. And so although I still care of course about animals, but my major concern right now is about the planet and the environment. And especially climate change. I'm a mother now, and I really worry about the future of the planet, and the state of the planet we are leaving for our children.

Marta Zaraska: As you may know, more and more children and young people are starting to protest around the planets for what we're doing with earth that we are leaving to them. There were some protests of Belgian students recently, just few days ago surrounding that. And so the impact of animal agriculture on climate change is tremendous. We worry so much about transportation and about cars and airplanes, and how much it messes up our climate change goals. But on the other hands, animal agriculture has exactly the same impact as the whole transportation combined. So if tomorrow, every human on the planet Earth committed not to eat meat anymore or animal products, that would have the same impact as if all transportation just disappears off the planet. So there'll be no cars, no trucks, no scooters, no airplanes, no ships, nothing at all.

Marta Zaraska: So just imagine what the tremendous impact that is. And yet we mostly ignore the role of meats in climate change, even though in theory it's quite an easy solution. You just decide not to have the ham sandwich. You go for avocado sandwich. So there is no really much technology involved here. And yet we prefer to try to invent electric airplanes or new electric cars and so on and so on, than to make a simple switch to vegetarian diets.

Marta Zaraska: But the impact on environment are that big. And of course there is also the land issue. Already, two thirds of agricultural land is taken by our production of animal agriculture. Then there is the water issues, pollution, antibiotics, antibiotic resistance. There are so many problems with animal agriculture that's really for the sake of our planet, we should do something about it.

Marta Zaraska: And also we are talking about planet and the land shortage. We simply do not even have enough planets for the meat appetites that we have. Because if you do a simple calculation of where the growing appetites for meat are leading us,
you will soon discover that by about 2050, we'll simply not have enough area to grow all the feed for the animals that we want us to eat. So it's simply not possible. We will need an extra planet.

Alex Trembath: And can you tell us a little bit more about what the particular health problems that arise from our meat consumption are?

Marta Zaraska: Yes of course. Then there is the whole health issue. By now we have piles and piles of scientific reports, connecting meat-heavy diets with health problems such as diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular problems. Studies show that, for example, vegetarian Seventh-day Adventists in California, live on average nine and a half years longer, that's men, and six years longer, that's women, than other Seventh-day Adventists in California, those who eat meat. So that's almost an extra 10 years of life. That's quite a lot. Then you have all those numbers on the cancer and heart disease. Few years ago, WHO announced that processed meat products are in the same category of carcinogenic products as asbestos. So these are some really serious health issues here.

Alex Trembath: You make this pretty strong case that meat consumption, at least at the levels that we're eating today, particularly in the rich world, is harming our health, harming our bodies, especially in the long term. But we're omnivores. We evolved to eat meat. So, is there a contradiction there?

Marta Zaraska: No, there isn't really any contradiction. Although it is true that meat was an amazing food for our ancestors. It helped even our brains grow. It was such a calorie loaded, vitamin-loaded food for our ancestors. Such a great food that some anthropologists even argued that meat has made us human. And yet, the very same food is causing all these health issues. So the reason for that is that for our ancestors, first of all, they had very poor diets. They ate things like grasses. They ate tree bark even. They had foods that were very poor in calories, poor in nutrients, and poor in protein. So they didn't have the abundance of choices of foods that we have these days. That's the first thing.

Marta Zaraska: And the second thing is that for them the priority was to stay alive, and have stomachs that was full of food, and survive until the next day without hunger. That was their major priority. They really didn't worry about living to be 70 or 80 or 100 years old. And the problems, the health problems that meat causes, they only tends to come out later in life. So when you were in your 50s and your 60s who started having cardiovascular problems. You may get cancer. These were not things that our ancestors were concerned because they mostly didn't live that long. And even if they did get cancer, hunger was still a priority. And this is why, in this kind of survivalist culture, meat was good. But it's not anymore if you just want to live long and healthy, not have diabetes. And if you have an abundance of choices that we have these days.

Alex Trembath: Yeah, I was actually talking about this with some folks on Twitter yesterday. What I find so interesting about the shift away from meat that you see in the modern era, is that yes, our bodies did evolve to eat meat, to eat animal
protein. But our society and our population at least is a little bit, and certainly could evolve away from that. And even if our bodies can still process animal meat, then we might make a evolutionary choice, whether that's a moral one or whether that's from an environmental ethic, to not eat meat. In fact, people do it already. And I think that's just as relevant to the conversation about the evolution of human beings, as sort of our stomach and our digestive system.

Marta Zaraska: You know we have made choices like this before as well. In the medieval Japan, for example, meat eating was banned for quite a long time, precisely because they didn't have enough of it. So humanity has been doing choices like this before as well. But it's definitely sure that meat eating is very deeply ingrained in our culture. The roots of it go so far into the past, basically two and a half million years into the past, to the very first days when we started eating meat. And the reason for that is that meat is a very special food. It's a food that is on one hand, very nutritious, very calorie-dense, very protein-dense. But on the other hands, something that's very hard to obtain. It's rare. It's comes in a big package. It spoils fast. And if you have the goods, if you have that meat, something that everybody craves, you have power, because you can decide who will get the best pieces, who will get nothing.

Marta Zaraska: So for ages, for centuries, meats started to symbolize wealth and power. And also masculinity, because it was usually men who are the hunter. They were the ones who were bringing the food to the tribe. Actually the power of meat, its symbolism is so strong, that in many hunter gatherer tribes, there exists special words for meat hunger. For example, in some tribes in Bolivia, they call it [inaudible]. I'm probably pronouncing it wrong. And then in central Africa they talk about [inaudible], and it basically means meat hunger, which most likely is just psychological. The very deeply engraved cravings for something that symbolizes wealth and that everything is fine in the tribe.

Marta Zaraska: So there are very powerful forces behind meats that don't apply to other foods. It's not the same with berries or nuts. We can just gather, you know, and eat by yourself. And they usually can be stored and so on so on. So meat was always very, very special. And even in medieval Europe also, most people saw very little meats. We barely ate anything, the peasants. Only aristocracy had plenty of meat. It was also used as a symbol of wealth and power. All this kind of aristocratic tables heavy with wild game and so on and so on. And peasants basically just craving it and being jealous.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. So you talk, I think really convincingly, in the essay. One of the parts of your essay for our journal that I found most interesting, this conversation about the cultural and emotional forces that compel us to eat meat. Power over nonhuman life. Wealth. Masculinity. Sort of celebration, sharing special occasions. I want to quote one short piece of your essay here. You write, quote, since meat is so powerfully linked with identity, giving it up means renouncing membership in the meat eating group. That's one reason vegetarians and vegans might rub people the wrong way. It's as though they were rejecting the tribe itself. End quote. So you talked a moment ago about all of this historical
reasons that have compounded to make meat so culturally and emotionally important. But how does that identity play out today? In modern society, the identity of being a meat eater versus the identity of being a vegetarian or a vegan?

Marta Zaraska: I mean definitely, the food as part of culture is one of the forces that changes the slowest. You can really see it, for example, when people move to a different country. Usually food is something that is the last to go. The food of their home country. They can change the language, they can change lots of different habits. The way they dress. But usually, the cravings for the foods of home stay with them the longest. And so food as part of culture changes particularly slowly. So even though now we have abundance of meats, the symbolism and this kind of culture cravings are changing is very slow.

Marta Zaraska: And when you think about it, it hasn't been that long ago when our society, the western societies, were very short on meats. During Second World War for example, there were tremendous shortages of meat, and people were really craving as something luxurious, something symbolizing wealth and that everything's based on the fine in the world. And so it's only really been very, very recently for the western areas that we have such an abundance. So there was not enough time for the culture to change.

Marta Zaraska: And this is especially true for men, because of the links between meat and masculinity I've mentioned before. If you are a man, and you want to reject eating meat, you are also rejecting belonging in this kind of manly masculine tribe. So this is why men find it the hardest to go vegetarian, because they are kind of rejecting this whole culture of standing around barbecue and having some kind of burgers with the buddies.

Marta Zaraska: You can still see this cultural myth propagated. In media, in newspaper articles when you see recipes for the foods for the real guys. And there are advertisements for many different products, not only food products, that play on this tune. That a real guy should be eating red meat. So we are still, even though, meat is no longer this kind of rare special food, we are still propagating the culture, subconsciously most likely, through media, through advertising and so on and so on.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. So, I want you to make your case for why these sort of sharp division of identities isn't necessary. So what do you mean when you say that a affirmative, reducetarian identity could diffuse the clear tension that there is culturally between meat eaters and non meat eaters?

Marta Zaraska: Yeah, so basically the problem is that, because meat is such an unusual food, that it involves killing living animals, it's food that plays on something very powerful in our psychology. And by that I mean cognitive dissonance. So cognitive dissonance, this unpleasant feeling you have when your actions don't really match your beliefs, or when you hold two different beliefs that's basically don't go together. You may for example, be driving an SUV and at the same time
saying that's climate change and fighting climate change is very important. That can create some internal cognitive dissonance. And it's the same thing with meat. So if you love animals, and most people do at least like animals a lot, and you love meat at the same time, it creates some deeply hidden cognitive dissonance.

Marta Zaraska: And when you are faced by reminders of this cognitive dissonance, and that can be for example, a vegan telling you that eating meat is wrong, this cognitive dissonance surfaces. And you basically start feeling it, start experiencing it. This is unpleasant because people don't like to be put in this kind of position when they don't feel that they are ethically or morally following their own beliefs. And this is why meat is so special, and this is why discussions about meat are so difficult. We employ plenty of different strategies, we as humans, to minimize this cognitive dissonances.

Marta Zaraska: For example, for this reason we tend to call meat... We don't say for example, let's have pig for lunch today. We say let's have pork for lunch. We don't say let's have a cow for dinner. We have beef for dinner. This kind of language games are also employed to reduce this cognitive dissonance. So another way to basically make the meat not look like the animal as much as possible. So hence, when you to to a supermarket, and buy a tray of chicken, it's really doesn't always look like the animal. Because seeing the animal again reminds us that it is actually used to be a living creature, and the cognitive dissonance comes up.

Marta Zaraska: So we have plenty of strategies to reduce it. And if people pressure you, or start talking about not eating meat because it's wrong and so on, you start having all those difficult thoughts and feelings, and it's just unpleasant. So to protect yourself, you become defensive. This is why people will very often starts fighting with vegans or pointing to them like, oh, you have leather shoes, or things like that. Or does vegetables also can feel, and so on and so on, precisely to protect your own ego from the cognitive dissonance.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. I gotta tell you, when I was reading your book and preparing for this conversation, I was suddenly reminded of this thing that happened to me a few years ago in San Francisco. I was at a barbecue festival in San Francisco, and I'm sitting there eating pork ribs at the table. And this crowd of hundreds of vegetarian activists is at the festival, to protest it. And they're walking around and they're putting flowers on everyone's plate. Everyone who's eating meats. And I found that sort of a little annoying because they're putting a flower on the plate that I'm eating. But fine, they're there for a reason. But then, what really shocked me was the response of the crowd, who is sitting there eating meat, just eating barbecue. And they were just, a bunch of them were, mostly men, would walk up to the protesters and just sort of eat meat aggressively in their faces.

Alex Trembath: And I felt myself both a little put off by the protesters, but also very put off by the people who are eating the same things I was, these two very sharp groups of people. I was sort of feeling cognitive dissonance in both directions, which I
think is what you described in essay, that there's sort of a backlash against both
groups in those directions that makes it hard to form coalitions.

Marta Zaraska: And this is exactly why this kind of very aggressive campaigns are often
ineffective, precisely because people start experiencing cognitive dissonance,
and is trying to protect themselves, and they may become aggressively even
more committed to eating meat. That's something that psychologist calls
spreading of alternatives. Basically when you have to pick sides, you pick the
side, and you really, really stick to it.

Marta Zaraska: So forcing people to think about those things, make them entrench themselves
even more into the original choice, in this case eating meats, and protected
even more fiercely than they normally would. And this is why, for example, if as
a vegetarian or even vegan, you admit that you have let's say meat cravings, or
that you know that you are imperfect. Then this opens conversation. And this
lets people, meat eaters, not feel threatened. And very often actually they start
talking, and they start thinking about their choices because they are not
threatened. So this is what I'm trying to often point out, that it's important to
start the conversation. And being very black and white does not start a
conversation. It only creates more entrenchments in the original faults and
ideas.

Alex Trembath: Right, so given that rates of pure vegetarian and veganism remain low and
unreliable, and given this backlash that you see to a lot of aggressive
campaigning, that is sort of your solution, is some form of reducetarianism,
some form of being more open minded about different ways to reduce or shift
or eliminate meat consumption?

Marta Zaraska: I mean it was not just reducetarianism. This is something we hear a lot these
days already, and so lots of NGOs, environmental NGOs are actually
incorporating the strategy already. But what I'm also arguing for is something
more. To create some kind of strong reducetarian identity. So we can have a
reducetarian tribe of people who are actually proud of doing this. To make
people feel that it's really cool to be a reducetarian. It's not something that you
are an imperfect vegan or imperfect vegetarian. That you are great in your own
way. And that you can actually come out and say, hey, it's really cool to be
reducetarian. Because I am doing something. I'm thinking about it. And even if I
reduce just a little bit, I am doing something. And I want people to be rewarded
for that. And also for vegetarians and vegans, if they even once every 10 years,
break their rules and eat something they're not supposed to, admit that.
Because this opens conversation and makes you more human. Again,
encourages people to feel included. Perfectionism just doesn't work very well.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. I really like this. And something else you said earlier in the conversation
really strikes me. That all of a sudden in human history, we have this enormous
bounty of meat. Sort of way too much, even for what we evolved to eat. And it
just happened too fast. It happened faster than cultural transitions tend to take.
And so I really like this thinking around a non black and white transition away
from eating so much meat. Because it seems to take seriously the fact that cultural transitions are a generation or generations affair. And being open to a conversation about eating less or shifting down, is probably actually a lot more effective in the long term, than a black and white conversation.

Marta Zaraska: You know it's much easier to convince hundred thousand people to cut down one meat eating day a week, than to make hundreds of people go completely vegan, in my opinion. And still, the impact of the first option will be much, much greater than exactly having a hundred people go vegan. It's just a matter of numbers.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. And it's a very acumenical approach too. Obviously you can stop eating meat or you can go Meatless Mondays. But there are so many more alternatives available today than there used to as well. There's fake meat, clean meat. There's obviously reducetarianism, flexitarianism, pescatarianism. There's actually a bunch of these sort of like little identities that could, as you say, sort of unite into a more positive, pretty large affirmative identity.

Marta Zaraska: Yeah. So what I would really like to see, for example, would be some kind of public campaigns, either run by environmental organizations or other NGOs or governments, I have no idea. Basically showing that it's really cool to be reducetarian. Be proud to be reducetarian, something like that, you know.

Alex Trembath: Well, given the state of the world today, given where vegetarianism and veganism and reducetarianism are, are you optimistic?

Marta Zaraska: I mean, I have to be optimistic. I start thinking about climate change, sometimes I can drive myself into very dark moods. So I really am trying to stay optimistic. And definitely the fact that clean meat's also developing very fast. I'm hoping to try some myself already in May. Then this could really keep a great boost to the whole switch to something more environmentally friendly.

Alex Trembath: Yeah. Yeah. Again, the sort of proliferation of alternatives that has just cropped up in the last few years is giving me quite a bit more optimism than I might've had a while ago. Marta, I want to thank you so much for joining us today.

Marta Zaraska: Thank you so much for inviting me.

Alex Trembath: Thanks again for listening to Breakthrough Dialogues. If you liked the show, rate us on iTunes and subscribe on whatever platform you get your podcasts. I want to again, thank our guest, Marta, and our producers, Alyssa Codamon and Tali Perelman. Catch you next time.