

CHAPTER 1

TO LOVE OR TO EAT?

We don't see things as they are; we see them as we are.

—Anais Nin

Imagine, for a moment, the following scenario: You are a guest at an elegant dinner party. You're seated with the other guests at an ornately set table. The room is warm, candlelight flickers across crystal wineglasses, and the conversation is flowing freely. Mouthwatering smells of rich foods emanate from the kitchen. You haven't eaten all day, and your stomach is growling.

At last, after what feels like hours, your friend who is hosting the party emerges from the kitchen with a steaming pot of savory stew. The aromas of meat, seasonings, and vegetables fill the room. You serve yourself a generous portion, and after eating several mouthfuls of tender meat, you ask your friend for the recipe.

"I'd be happy to tell you," she replies. "You begin with five pounds of golden retriever meat, well marinated, and then . . ." *Golden retriever?* You probably freeze midbite as you consider her words: the meat in your mouth is from a *dog*.

What now? Do you continue eating? Or are you revolted by the fact that there's golden retriever on your plate, and you've just eaten some? Do you pick out the meat and eat the vegetables around it? If you are like most Americans, when you hear that you've been eating dog, your feelings would automatically change from pleasure to some

degree of revulsion.* You might also become turned off by the vegetables in the stew, as if they were somehow tainted by the meat.

But let's suppose that your friend laughs and says she was playing a practical joke. The meat isn't golden retriever, after all, but beef. How do you feel about your food now? Is your appetite fully restored? Do you resume eating with the same enthusiasm you had when you first began your meal? Chances are, even though you know that the stew on your plate is exactly the same food you were savoring just moments earlier, you would have some residual emotional discomfort, discomfort that might continue to affect you the next time you sit down to beef stew.

What's going on here? Why is it that certain foods cause such emotional reactions? How can a food, given one label, be considered highly palatable and that same food, given another, become virtually inedible? The stew's main ingredient—meat—didn't really change at all. It was animal flesh to begin with, and it remained that way. It just became—or seemed to, for a moment—meat from a different animal. Why is it that we have such radically different reactions to beef and dog meat?

The answer to these questions can be summed up by a single word: *perception*. We react differently to different types of meat not because there is a physical difference between them, but because our perception of them is different.

The Problem with Eating Dogs

Such a shift in perception can feel like a shift in lanes on a two-lane road: crossing the yellow line radically alters our experience. The reason we can have such a powerful response to a shift in perception

*Although some individuals might be intrigued rather than repulsed at the idea of eating dogs, in the United States these people represent a minority, and this book describes the experience of Americans in general.

is because our perceptions determine, in large part, our reality; how we perceive a situation—the meaning we make of it—determines what we think and how we feel about it. In turn, our thoughts and feelings often determine how we will act. Most Americans perceive dog meat very differently than they do beef; therefore, dog meat evokes very different mental, emotional, and behavioral responses.*

One reason we have such different perceptions of beef and dog meat is because we view cows** and dogs very differently. The most frequent—and often the only—contact we have with cows is when we eat (or wear) them. But for a large number of Americans, our relationship with dogs is, in many ways, not terribly different from our relationship with people: We call them by their names. We say goodbye when we leave and greet them when we return. We share our beds with them. We play with them. We buy them gifts. We carry their pictures in our wallets. We take them to the doctor when they're sick and may spend thousands of dollars on their treatment. We bury them when they pass away. They make us laugh; they make us cry. They are our helpers, our friends, our family. We love them. We love dogs and eat cows not because dogs and cows are fundamentally different—cows, like dogs, have feelings, preferences, and consciousness—but because our *perception* of them is different. And, consequently, our perception of their meat is different as well.

*In cultures around the world, it is common to reject the meat of certain animal species. And taboos regarding the consumption of meat are far more common than those regarding any other foods. Moreover, violations of meat taboos cause the strongest emotional reactions—generally, disgust—and are accompanied by the most severe sanctions. Consider the dietary prohibitions put forth by the major religions of the world, whether the restriction is temporary (as when Christians avoid meat during Lent) or permanent (as with some Buddhists who maintain a vegetarian lifestyle), meat is almost always the object of the taboo.

**Though beef comes from both cows and steers, for simplicity and style I use "cows" throughout this chapter to refer to all bovines.

Not only do our perceptions of meat vary based on the species of animal it came from, but different humans may also perceive the same meat differently. For example, a Hindu might have the same response to beef as an American Christian would to dog meat. These variations in our perceptions are due to our *schema*. A schema is a psychological framework that shapes—and is shaped by—our beliefs, ideas, perceptions, and experiences, and it automatically organizes and interprets incoming information. For example, when you hear the word “nurse,” you probably envision a woman who wears a medical uniform and works in a hospital. Even though a number of nurses are male, dress nontraditionally, or work outside of a hospital, unless you are frequently exposed to nurses in a variety of settings, your schema will maintain this generalized image. Generalizations are the result of schemas doing what they’re supposed to: sorting through and interpreting the vast amount of stimuli we’re constantly exposed to and then putting it into general categories. Schemas act as mental classification systems.

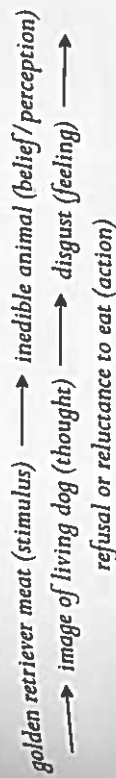
We have a schema for every subject, including animals. An animal can be classified, for instance, as prey, predator, pest, pet, or food. How we classify an animal, in turn, determines how we relate to it—whether we hunt it, flee from it, exterminate it, love it, or eat it. Some overlap can occur between categories (an animal can be prey *and* food), but when it comes to meat, most animals are either food, or not food. In other words, we have a schema that classifies animals as edible or inedible.**

*I realize that some readers may be uncomfortable with my use of language in reference to nonhuman animals. I have chosen to use speciesist terms such as “it” simply to keep the text colloquial and to avoid distracting readers from its content.

**Schemas can be hierarchically structured, with sub-schemas embedded in more complex or general schemas. For example, we have a general schema for “animal” and within this are sub-schemas of “edible” and “inedible.” These sub-schemas, in turn, can be broken down into further sub-schemas; for instance “edible” animals may consist of “wild game,” and “domesticated” or “farm” animals.

This doesn't happen for cows or pigs

And something interesting happens when we are confronted with the meat from an animal we've classified as inedible: we automatically picture the living animal from which it came, and we tend to feel disgusted at the notion of eating it. The perceptual process follows this sequence:



Let's go back to our imagined dinner party, when you were told you were eating golden retriever. Had such a situation actually occurred, you would have smelled the same smells and tasted the same flavors as you had just moments before. But now your mind probably would have formed a picture of a golden retriever, perhaps bounding across a yard chasing a ball, curled up next to a fire, or running alongside a jogger. And with these images would likely come emotions such as empathy or concern for the dog that had been killed and thus disgust at the thought of eating that animal.

In contrast, if you are like most people, when you sit down to eat beef you don't envision the animal from which the meat was derived. Instead, you simply see “food,” and you focus on its flavor, aroma, and texture. When confronted with beef, we generally skip the part of the perceptual process that makes the mental connection between meat and the living animal. Sure, we all know that beef comes from an animal, but when we eat it, we tend to avoid thinking about this fact. Literally thousands of people with whom I have spoken, both through my professional work and personally, have admitted that if they actually thought about a living cow while eating beef they would feel uneasy—and sometimes even unable to eat it. This is why many people avoid eating meat that resembles the animal from which it

was procured; rarely is our meat served with the head or other body parts intact. In one interesting study, for instance, Danish researchers found that people were uncomfortable eating meat that resembled its animal source, preferring to eat minced meat rather than whole cuts of meat.¹ Yet even if we do make the conscious connection between beef and cows, we still feel less disturbed eating beef than we would eating golden retriever, since typically in American culture, dogs are not meant to be eaten.

How we feel about an animal and how we treat it, it turns out, has much less to do with what kind of animal it is than about what our perception of it is. We believe it's appropriate to eat cows but not dogs, so we perceive cows as edible and dogs as inedible and act accordingly. And this process is cyclical; not only do our beliefs ultimately lead to our actions, but our actions also reinforce our beliefs. The more we don't eat dogs and do eat cows, the more we reinforce the belief that dogs are inedible and cows are edible.

Acquired Taste

While human beings may have an innate tendency to favor sweet flavors (sugar having been a useful source of calories) and to avoid those that are bitter and sour (such flavors often indicate a poisonous substance), most of our taste is, in fact, made up. In other words, within the broad repertoire of the human palate, we like the foods we've learned we're supposed to like. Food, particularly animal food, is highly symbolic, and it is this symbolism, coupled with and reinforced by tradition, that is largely responsible for our food preferences. For example, few people enjoy eating caviar until they're old enough to realize that liking caviar means they're sophisticated and refined; and in China, people eat animals' penises because they believe these organs affect sexual function.

we don't see the role of culture

Despite the fact that taste is largely acquired through culture, people around the world tend to view their preferences as rational and any deviation as offensive and disgusting. For instance, many people are disgusted at the thought of drinking milk that's been extracted from cows' udders. Others cannot fathom eating bacon, ham, beef, or chicken. Some view the consumption of eggs as akin to the consumption of fetuses (which, technically, it is). And consider how you might feel at the notion of eating deep-fried tarantula (hair, fangs, and all), as they do in Cambodia; sour, pickled ram's testicle pâté, as some do in Iceland; or duck embryos—eggs that have been fertilized and contain partially formed birds with feathers, bones, and incipient wings—as they do in some parts of Asia. When it comes to animal foods, all taste may be acquired taste.²

The Missing Link

It is an odd phenomenon, the way we react to the idea of eating dogs and other inedible animals. Even stranger, though, is the way we don't react to the idea of eating cows and other edible animals. There is an unexplained gap, a missing link, in our perceptual process when it comes to edible species; we fail to make the connection between meat and its animal source. Have you ever wondered why, out of tens of thousands of animal species, you probably feel disgusted at the idea of eating all but a tiny handful of them? What is most striking about our selection of edible and inedible animals is not the presence of disgust, but the absence of it. Why are we not averse to eating the very small selection of animals we have deemed edible?³

The evidence strongly suggests that our lack of disgust is largely, if not entirely, learned. We aren't born with our schemas; they are constructed. Our schemas have evolved out of a highly structured

belief system. This system dictates which animals are edible, and it enables us to consume them by protecting us from feeling any emotional or psychological discomfort when doing so. The system teaches us how to *not feel*. The most obvious feeling we lose is disgust, yet beneath our disgust lies an emotion much more integral to our sense of self: our empathy.

From Empathy to Apathy

But why must the system go to such lengths to block our empathy? Why all the psychological acrobatics? The answer is simple: because we care about animals, and we don't want them to suffer. And because we eat them. Our values and behaviors are incongruent, and this incongruence causes us a certain degree of moral discomfort. In order to alleviate this discomfort, we have three choices: we can change our values to match our behaviors, we can change our behaviors to match our values, or we can change our *perception* of our behaviors so that they *appear* to match our values. It is around this third option that our schema of meat is shaped. As long as we neither value unnecessary animal suffering nor stop eating animals, our schema will distort our perceptions of animals and the meat we eat, so that we can feel comfortable enough to consume them. And the system that constructs our schema of meat equips us with the means by which to do this.

The primary tool of the system is *psychic numbing*. *Psychic numbing* is a psychological process by which we disconnect, mentally and emotionally, from our experience; we "numb" ourselves. In and of itself, *psychic numbing* is not evil; it is a normal, inevitable part of daily life, enabling us to function in a violent and unpredictable world and to cope with our pain if we do fall prey to violence. For instance, you would likely be hard-pressed to drive on the highway if you were

fully cognizant of the fact that you were speeding down the road in a small metal vehicle, surrounded by thousands of other speeding metal vehicles. And if you should be so unfortunate as to become a victim of a crash, you would probably go into shock and remain in that state until you were psychologically capable of handling the reality of what had happened. *Psychic numbing* is adaptive, or beneficial, when it helps us to *cope* with violence. But it becomes maladaptive, or destructive, when it is used to *enable* violence, even if that violence is as far away as the factories in which animals are turned into meat.

Psychic numbing is made up of a complex array of defenses and other mechanisms, mechanisms which are pervasive, powerful, and invisible and which operate on both social and psychological levels. These mechanisms distort our perceptions and distance us from our feelings, transforming our empathy into apathy—indeed, it is the process of learning to not feel that is the focus of this book. The mechanisms of *psychic numbing* include: denial, avoidance, routinization, justification, objectification, deindividualization, dichotomization, rationalization, and dissociation. In the upcoming chapters, we will examine each of these aspects of *psychic numbing* and deconstruct the system that turns animals into meat, and meat into food. In so doing, we will examine the characteristics of this system and the ways in which it ensures our continued support.

Numbing Across Cultures and History: Variations on a Theme

One question I'm often asked is whether people from different cultures and times also have used *psychic numbing* in order to kill and consume animals. Do tribal hunters, for instance, need to numb themselves when securing their

prey? Before the Industrial Revolution, when many Americans procured their own meat, did they have to emotionally distance themselves from the animals?

It would be impossible to argue that persons from all cultures, in all eras, have employed the same psychic numbing as those of us living in contemporary industrialized societies and who don't need meat to survive. Context determines, in large part, how a person will react to eating meat. One's values, shaped largely by broader social and cultural structures, help determine how much psychological effort must go into distancing oneself from the reality of eating an animal. In societies where meat has been necessary for survival, people haven't had the luxury of reflecting on the ethics of their choices; their values must support eating animals, and they would likely be less distressed at the notion of eating meat. How animals are killed, too, affects our psychological reaction. Cruelty is often more disturbing than killing.

Yet even in instances where eating meat has been a necessity, and the animals have been killed without the gratuitous violence that marks today's slaughterhouses, people have always avoided eating certain types of animals and have consistently striven to reconcile the killing and consumption of those they do consume. Examples abound of rites, rituals, and belief systems that assuage the meat consumer's conscience: the butcher and/or meat eater may perform purification ceremonies after the taking of a life; or an animal may be viewed as "sacrificed" for human consumption, a perspective that imbues the act with spiritual meaning and implies some choice on the part of the prey. Furthermore, as far back as 600 BCE, individuals have chosen to eschew the consumption of meat on ethical grounds, demonstrat-

ing a long-standing psychological and moral tension around meat eating. It is certainly possible that psychic numbing has played a role—albeit to varying degrees and in different forms—across cultures and throughout history.

The primary defense of the system is invisibility; invisibility reflects the defenses *avoidance* and *denial* and is the foundation on which all other mechanisms stand. Invisibility enables us, for example, to consume beef without envisioning the animal we're eating; it cloaks our thoughts from ourselves. Invisibility also keeps us safely insulated from the unpleasant process of raising and killing animals for our food. The first step in deconstructing meat, then, is deconstructing the invisibility of the system, exposing the principles and practices of a system that has since its inception been in hiding.