

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.

CHAPTER 2

CARNISM:

**"IT'S JUST THE WAY THINGS ARE"**

*The invisible and the nonexistent look very much alike.*

—Delos B. McKown

*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

In chapter 1, we did a thought experiment. We imagined that you were at a dinner party, eating a delicious meal, when your friend told you the stew contained dog meat. We explored your reactions to that, and then to the fact that your friend said she'd been joking and you were, in fact, eating beef.

Let's try another exercise. Take a moment to think, without self-censoring, of all the words that come to mind when you envision a dog. Next, do the same thing, but this time picture a pig. Now pause and compare your descriptions of these animals. What do you notice? When you thought of a dog, did you think "cute"? "Loyal"? And when you imagined a pig, did you think of the word "mud" or "sweat"? Did you think "dirty"? If your responses were similar to the ones here, you are in the majority.

I teach psychology and sociology at a local university, and each semester I dedicate one class session to attitudes toward animals. I have taught literally thousands of students over the years, but every

time we do this exercise, the conversation proceeds in essentially the same way, with similar responses.

First, as I just had you do, I ask the students to list the characteristics of dogs, and then the characteristics of pigs, and I write each list on the board as it's generated. For dogs, the usual adjectives include those we've already covered, as well as "friendly," "intelligent," "fun," "loving," "protective," and sometimes "dangerous." Not surprisingly, pigs get a much less flattering list of descriptors. They are "sweaty" and "dirty," as well as "stupid," "lazy," "fat," and "ugly." Next, I have the students explain how they feel toward each of these species. Again, it should come as no surprise that, generally, they at least like—and often love—dogs, and are "grossed out" by pigs. Finally, I ask them to describe their relationship to dogs and to pigs. Dogs, of course, are our friends and family members, and pigs are food.

At this point the students start to look perplexed, wondering where our conversation is heading. I then pose a series of questions in response to their previous statements, and the dialogue goes something like this:

So, why do you say pigs are lazy?

*Because they just lie around all day.*

Do pigs in the wild do this, or only pigs raised for their meat?

*I don't know. Maybe when they're on a farm.*

Why do you think pigs on a farm—or in a factory farm, to be more accurate—lie around?

*Probably because they're in a pen or cage.*

What makes pigs stupid?

*They just are.*

Actually, pigs are considered to be even more intelligent than dogs.

(Sometimes a student chimes in, claiming to have met a pig or to have known someone who had a pig as a pet, and corroborates this with a story or two.)

Why do you say pigs sweat?

*No answer.*

Did you know that, in fact, pigs don't even have sweat glands?

Are all pigs ugly?

*Yes.*

What about piglets?

*Piglets are cute, but pigs are gross.*

Why do you say pigs are dirty?

*They roll in mud.*

Why do they roll in mud?

*Because they like dirt. They're dirty.*

Actually, they roll in dirt to cool off when it's hot, since they don't sweat.

Are dogs dirty?

*Yeah, sometimes. Dogs can do really disgusting things.*

Why didn't you include "dirty" in your list for dogs?

*Because they're not always dirty. Only sometimes.*

Are pigs always dirty?

*Yeah, they are.*

How do you know this?

*Because they always look dirty.*

When do you see them?

*I don't know. In pictures, I guess.*

And they're always dirty in pictures?

*No, not always. Pigs aren't always dirty.*

You said dogs are loyal, intelligent, and cute. Why do you say this? How do you know?

*I've seen them.*

*I've lived with dogs.*

*I've met lots of dogs.*

(Inevitably, one or more students share a story about a dog who did something particularly heroic, clever, or adorable.)

What about dogs' feelings? How can you know that they actually feel emotions?

*I swear my dog gets depressed when I'm down.*

*My dog always got this guilty look and hid under the bed when she knew she did something wrong.*

*Whenever we take my dog to the vet he shakes, he's so scared.*

*Our dog used to cry and stop eating when he saw us packing to get ready to leave for vacation.*

Does anybody here think it's possible that dogs don't have feelings?

(No hands are raised.)

What about pigs? Do you think pigs have emotions?  
*Sure.*

Do you think they have the same emotions as dogs?  
*Maybe. Yeah, I guess.*

Actually, most people don't know this, but pigs are so sensitive that they develop neurotic behaviors, such as self-mutilation, when in captivity.

Do you think pigs feel pain?  
*Of course. All animals feel pain.*

So why do we eat pigs and not dogs?

*Because bacon tastes good (laughter).*

*Because dogs have personalities. You can't eat something that has a personality. They have names; they're individuals.*

Do you think pigs have personalities? Are they individuals, like dogs?

*Yeah, I guess if you get to know them they probably do.*

Have you ever met a pig?

(Except for an exceptional student, the majority has not.)

So where did you get your information about pigs from?

*Books.*

*Television.*

*Ads.*

*Movies.*

*I don't know. Society, I guess.*

How might you feel about pigs if you thought of them as intelligent, sensitive individuals who are perhaps not sweaty, lazy, and greedy? If you got to know them firsthand, like you know dogs?

*I'd feel weird eating them. I'd probably feel kind of guilty.*

So why do we eat pigs and not dogs?

*Because pigs are bred to be eaten.*

Why do we breed pigs to eat them?

*I don't know. I never thought about it. I guess, because it's just the way things are.*

It's just the way things are. Take a moment to consider this statement. Really think about it. We send one species to the butcher and give our love and kindness to another apparently for no reason other than because it's the way things are. When our attitudes and behaviors toward animals are so inconsistent, and this inconsistency is so unex-

amined, we can safely say we have been fed absurdities. It is absurd that we eat pigs and love dogs and don't even know why. Many of us spend long minutes in the aisle of the drugstore mulling over what toothpaste to buy. Yet most of us don't spend any time at all thinking about what species of animal we eat and why. Our choices as consumers drive an industry that kills ten billion\* animals per year in the United States alone. If we choose to support this industry and the best reason we can come up with is because it's the way things are, clearly something is amiss. What could cause an entire society of people to check their thinking caps at the door—and to not even realize they're doing so? Though this question is quite complex, the answer is quite simple: carnism.

## Carnism

We all know what a vegetarian is—a person who doesn't eat meat. Though some people may choose to become vegetarian to improve their health, many vegetarians stop eating meat because they don't believe it's ethical to eat animals. Most of us realize that vegetarianism is an expression of one's ethical orientation, so when we think of a vegetarian, we don't simply think of a person who's just like everyone else except that he or she doesn't eat meat. We think of a person who has a certain philosophical outlook, whose choice not to eat meat is a reflection of a deeper belief system in which killing animals for human ends is considered unethical. We understand that vegetarianism reflects not merely a dietary orientation, but a way of life. This is why, for instance, when there's a vegetarian character in a movie, he or she is depicted not simply as a person who avoids meat,

\*Though billions of sea creatures are also slaughtered annually in the United States, unless otherwise noted, the "food" animals I refer to are land animals.

but as someone who has a certain set of qualities that we associate with vegetarians, such as being a nature lover or having unconventional values.

If a vegetarian is someone who believes that it's unethical to eat meat, what, then, do we call a person who believes that it's ethical to eat meat? If a vegetarian is a person who chooses not to eat meat, what is a person who chooses to eat meat?

Currently, we use the term "meat eater" to describe anyone who is not vegetarian. But how accurate is this? As we established, a vegetarian is not simply a "plant eater." Eating plants is a behavior that stems from a belief system. "Vegetarian" accurately reflects that a core belief system is at work: the suffix "arian" denotes a person who advocates, supports, or practices a doctrine or set of principles.

In contrast, the term "meat eater" isolates the practice of consuming meat, as though it were divorced from a person's beliefs and values. It implies that the person who eats meat is acting outside of a belief system. But is eating meat truly a behavior that exists independent of a belief system? Do we eat pigs and not dogs because we don't have a belief system when it comes to eating animals?

In much of the industrialized world, we eat meat not because we have to; we eat meat because we choose to. We don't need meat to survive or even to be healthy; millions of healthy and long-lived vegetarians have proven this point. We eat animals simply because it's what we've always done, and because we like the way they taste. Most of us eat animals because it's just the way things are.

We don't see meat eating as we do vegetarianism—as a choice, based on a set of assumptions about animals, our world, and ourselves. Rather, we see it as a given, the "natural" thing to do, the way things have always been and the way things will always be. We eat animals without thinking about what we are doing and why because the belief system that underlies this behavior is invisible. This invisible belief system is what I call *carnism*.

Carnism is the belief system that conditions us to eat certain animals. We sometimes think of those who eat meat as carnivores. But carnivores are, by definition, animals that are dependent on meat to survive. Meat consumers are also not merely omnivores. An omnivore is an animal—human or nonhuman—that has the physiological ability to ingest both plants and meat. Both “carnivore,” “omnivore” are terms that describe one’s biological constitution, not one’s philosophical choice. In much of the world today people eat meat not because they need to, but because they choose to, and choices always stem from beliefs.

Carnism’s invisibility accounts for why choices appear not to be choices at all. But why has carnism remained invisible in the first place? Why haven’t we named it? There’s a very good reason for this. It’s because carnism is a particular type of belief system, an *ideology*; and it’s also a particular type of ideology, one that is especially resistant to scrutiny. Let’s look at each of these features of carnism in turn.

*If the problem is invisible . . .  
then there will be ethical invisibility.*

—Carol J. Adams

## Carnism, Ideology, and the Status Quo

An ideology is a shared set of beliefs, as well as the practices that reflect these beliefs. For instance, feminism is an ideology. Feminists are men and women who believe that women deserve to be viewed and treated as equals to men. Because men make up the dominant social group—the group that holds power in society—feminists challenge male dominance on every front, from the home to the political arena. Feminist ideology forms the basis of feminist beliefs and practices.

It’s fairly easy to recognize feminism as an ideology, just as it’s easy to understand that vegetarianism isn’t simply about not eating meat.

Both “feminist” and “vegetarian” conjure up images of a person who has a certain set of beliefs, someone who isn’t just like everybody else.

So what about “everybody else”? What about the majority, the mainstream, all the “normal” people? Where do their beliefs come from?

We tend to view the mainstream way of life as a reflection of universal values. Yet what we consider normal is, in fact, nothing more than the beliefs and behaviors of the majority. Before the scientific revolution, for example, mainstream European beliefs held that the sky was made up of heavenly spheres that revolved around the earth, that the earth was the exalted center of the universe. This belief was so ingrained that to proclaim otherwise, as did Copernicus, and later Galileo, was to risk death. So what we refer to as mainstream is simply another way to describe an ideology that is so widespread—so *entrenched*—that its assumptions and practices are seen as simply common sense. It is considered fact rather than opinion, its practices a given rather than a choice. It’s the norm. It’s the way things are. And it’s the reason carnism has not been named until now.

When an ideology is entrenched, it is essentially invisible. An example of an invisible ideology is *patriarchy*, the ideology in which masculinity is valued over femininity and where men therefore have more social power than women. Consider, for instance, which of the following qualities are most likely to make someone socially and financially successful: assertiveness, passivity, competitiveness, sharing, control, authority, power, rationality, emotionality, independence, dependence, nurturance, vulnerability. Chances are you chose the qualities that are masculine, and you didn’t realize that your choices reflect patriarchal values; most of us don’t see patriarchy as an ideology that teaches us to think and act a certain way. Men and women alike simply accept that it’s better to be, for example, more rational and less emotional, even though both of these qualities are equally necessary for our well-being.

Patriarchy existed for thousands of years before feminists named this ideology. So, too, has been the case with carnism. Interestingly, the ideology of vegetarianism was named more than 2,500 years ago; those who chose not to eat meat were called "Pythagoreans," because they followed the dietary philosophy of the ancient Greek philosopher and mathematician, Pythagoras. Later, in the nineteenth century, the term "vegetarian" was coined. But only now, centuries after labeling those who don't eat meat, has the ideology of meat eating been named.

In some ways it only makes sense that vegetarianism was named before carnism. It's easier to recognize those ideologies that fall outside the mainstream. But there is another, more important, reason that vegetarianism has been labeled while carnism has not. The primary way entrenched ideologies stay entrenched is by remaining invisible. And the primary way they stay invisible is by remaining unnamed. If we don't name it, we can't talk about it, and if we can't talk about it, we can't question it.

*Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images ... whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language—this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.*

—Adrienne Rich

## Carnism, Ideology, and Violence

While it is difficult, if not impossible, to question an ideology that we don't even know exists, it's even more difficult when that ideology

actively works to keep itself hidden. This is the case with ideologies such as carnism. I refer to this particular type of ideology as a *violent ideology*, because it is literally organized around physical violence. In other words, if we were to remove the violence from the system—to stop killing animals—the system would cease to exist. Meat cannot be procured without slaughter.

Contemporary carnism is organized around extensive violence. This level of violence is necessary in order to slaughter enough animals for the meat industry to maintain its current profit margin. The violence of carnism is such that most people are unwilling to witness it, and those who do can become seriously distraught. In my classes, when I show a film on meat production, I have to take a number of measures to ensure that the psychological environment is safe enough to expose students to footage that inevitably causes them distress. And I have personally worked with numerous vegetarian advocates who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as the result of prolonged exposure to the slaughter process; they have intrusive thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks, difficulty concentrating, anxiety, insomnia, and a host of other symptoms. In close to two decades of speaking and teaching about meat production, I have yet to see a person who doesn't cringe when faced with images of slaughter. People generally hate to see animals suffer.

Why do we hate to see animals in pain? Because we feel for other sentient beings. Most of us, even those who are not "animal lovers" per se, don't want to cause anyone—human or animal—to suffer, especially if that suffering is intensive and unnecessary. It is for this reason that violent ideologies have a special set of defenses that enable humane people to support inhumane practices and to not even realize what they're doing.

## Unnatural Born Killers

There is a substantial body of evidence demonstrating humans' seemingly natural aversion to killing. Much of the research in this area has been conducted by the military; analysts have found that soldiers tend to intentionally fire over the enemy's head, or not to fire at all.

Studies of combat activity during the Napoleonic and Civil Wars revealed striking statistics. Given the ability of the men, their proximity to the enemy, and the capacity of their weapons, the number of enemy soldiers hit should have been well over 50 percent, resulting in a killing rate of hundreds per minute. Instead, however, the hit rate was only one or two per minute. And a similar phenomenon occurred during World War I: according to British lieutenant George Roupell, the only way he could get his men to stop firing into the air was by drawing his sword, walking down the trench, "beating [them] on the backside and . . . telling them to fire low."<sup>4</sup> World War II fire rates were also remarkably low: historian and U.S. Army brigadier general S. L. A. Marshall reported that, during battle, the firing rate was a mere 15 to 20 percent; in other words, out of every hundred men engaged in a firefight, only fifteen to twenty actually used their weapons. And in Vietnam, for every enemy soldier killed, more than fifty thousand bullets were fired.<sup>5</sup>

What these studies have taught the military is that in order to get soldiers to shoot to kill, to actively participate in violence, the soldiers must be sufficiently desensitized to the act of killing. In other words, they have to *learn to not feel*—

and to not feel responsible—for their actions. They must be taught to override their own conscience. Yet these studies also demonstrate that even in the face of immediate danger, in situations of extreme violence, most people are averse to killing. In other words, as Marshall concludes, "the vast majority of combatants throughout history, at the moment of truth when they could and should kill the enemy, have found themselves to be 'conscientious objectors.'"<sup>6</sup>

As I mentioned in chapter 1, the primary defense of the system is invisibility. We've already discussed how carnism is socially and psychologically invisible. But violent ideologies also depend on physical invisibility; their violence is well hidden from public scrutiny. Have you ever noticed that, though we breed, raise, and kill ten billion animals per year, most of us never see even a single part of the process of meat production?

Once we genuinely think about the meat we eat, once we realize that there is much more to our culinary tastes than our own natural, unadulterated preferences, then "it's just the way things are" is simply not a good enough explanation for why we eat pigs but not dogs. Let's turn now and have a look at the way things really are.