

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 descriptives. 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.

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(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?

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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 unexamined, 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, 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

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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 in which eating certain animals is considered ethical and appropriate. Carnists—people who eat meat—are not the same as carnivores. Carnivores are animals that are dependent on meat to survive. Carnists are also not merely omnivores. An omnivore is an animal—human or nonhuman—that has the physiological ability to ingest both plants and meat. But, like “carnivore,” “omnivore” is a term that describes one’s biological constitution, not one’s philosophical choice. Carnists 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

*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.