

Carnism

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Introduction

Carnism refers to the ideology conditioning people to consume certain animals products. It is essentially the opposite of veganism. The term was coined by social psychologist Melanie Joy (Joy, 2001). She has fully developed the concept in further papers and in her book *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism* (Joy 2010). As the title of Joy's book suggest, people's relation to animals depends crucially on the species to which they belong: "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." (Joy 2010, p. 12)

1- A descriptive concept with a normative import

The primary goal of the concept of carnism is to describe a psychological fact: the perception of animal products as food is highly cultural. Indeed, different cultures categorize species differently: contrary to occidental habits, some Koreans regularly eat dogs while in India, cattle who till soil and produce milk are perceived as inedible. In this basic sense carnism is the generic name, which gathers all of the different ways people attribute edibility. Of course there is a gap between real edibility and perceived edibility: human beings are omnivores--they can eat the flesh of almost all animals (including human flesh). But they don't. In fact, the eaten species appear to be very few when compared with all the species living on earth. Westerners, for instance, eat - on a regular basis - only a dozen species (mainly herbivores) among the millions of species of mammals, birds, fish, reptiles, and amphibians on the planet.

While recalling the gap between perceived and real edibility, the concept of carnism also suggests that there is nothing inevitable about Koreans eating dogs, Indians not eating cows or westerners eating pigs but not dogs. Here begins the normative use of carnism. Indeed, being largely unaware of the inherent cultural influence on perceived edibility prevents people from changing their food habits. This is why Joy considers that carnism is an exemplification of an ideology, i.e. a "shared set of beliefs, as well as the practices that reflects these beliefs" (Joy 2010, p. 29).

In this sense, veganism is also an ideology. Ethical vegans, for instance, believe that it is unethical to consume animal products (usually for animal welfare/rights or environmental concerns) and follow the particular practice associated with theses beliefs: in restaurant they will chose the veggie burger instead of the beef burger. So, they chose not to eat meat. Joy formulated the idea of the concept of carnism when she noticed that there was no word to name the opposite ideology: people who choose to consume animal products and believe that it is the right thing to do. The best candidate,

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“omnivore”, was not an option because it denotes a biological disposition but not a set of beliefs. Moreover, vegans are not different from omnivores in the biological sense, so Joy thought a neologism was needed. She coined “carnism” from the latin radical “carn” meaning “flesh” or “of the flesh” (carnism includes the consumption of eggs/dairy).

If veganism and carnism are both ideologies, they are, however, opposed in important ways. People who endorse veganism do so knowingly; people who endorse carnism are usually unaware of doing so. Indeed, an ideology is not always visible -- the ideology of patriarchy is a prominent example. For thousands of years, men and women believed that masculinity was somehow “better” than femininity. It followed from this that men had more social power than women. It was an invisible ideology, and one that still exists. A great achievement of the feminist movement is having brought attention to the existence of patriarchy and making its effects visible. Prior to the efforts of the feminist movement, patriarchy's existence in society was the status quo, rarely questioned and almost never challenged. The same can be said for carnism: this ideology is so entrenched, it is so pervasively widespread in human societies, that it is largely ignored.

Social norms favor and reinforce the consumption of animal products and this is the mainstream way of life. By contrast, vegetarians and vegans are sometimes stereotyped as hippies or people with eating disorders, and they often trigger defensive reactions: “they are called hypocrites if they wear leather, purists or extremists if they don’t” (Joy 2010, p. 105). Consuming animal products is also valued because it is supposedly “natural” (which is a naturalistic fallacy because the fact that humans are omnivores is not a justification to any normative claim) and necessary for good health (despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary). As in the case of patriarchy, all of these justifications concur to present carnism as normal, natural and necessary. It appears to be an inevitable system and not a challengeable ideology.

For Joy, there is another important opposition between carnism and veganism. It is a normative one. Carnism - like patriarchy - is a violent and oppressive ideology; veganism is not. Indeed, this has been the basis of the animal rights movement for the last 40 years. Even if there are differing views in animal ethics, the fact that animal agriculture and slaughtering are violent practices is usually not controversy. “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.” (Joy 2010, p. 32).

Hence, it could be said that carnism is a descriptive concept with a normative import. By naming a psychological fact - the perception of meat and animal products depends on a pervasive ideology - the concept of carnism makes people aware of it and allows them to challenge their perceptions, and therefore move away from the violence in their lives that had before seemed inevitable. To say otherwise, showing that edibility depends on culture sheds light on an additional point: perception of edibility is morally arbitrary. Pigs deserve no more than dogs to be eaten. (For a similar view stressing the analogy between puppies and pigs, see Norcross 2004).

Thus, the concept of carnism allows to change perspective. Beside the question “Why are some people vegan?” appears this new one “Why some people are not?”

2- How carnism works : explaining the moral inconsistency

The title of Melanie Joy’s book exposes a kind of inconsistency: people care for dogs and empathize with them while ignoring the suffering of pigs and cows. Putting aside some psychiatric disorders like psychopathy, empathy is a widespread human faculty, and there is neurological evidence that people feel empathy toward animals (Filippi et al. 2011). So, the question is not why people empathise with dogs, but rather, why they don’t express empathy towards pigs and cows. In a certain

sense, understanding how carnism “works” consists of understanding this lack of empathy toward certain animals.

Omission is probably the central explanation: “The ten billion animals that are killed every year for meat and the virulent consequences of contemporary animal agricultural practices remain conspicuously absent from public discourse.” (Joy 2010, p. 102). But this omission does not mean that people are completely ignorant of the reality of factory farming and violence toward animals. “Common to all violent ideologies is this phenomenon of knowing without knowing. And it’s the essence of carnism.” (Joy 2010, p. 70).

According to Joy, there are several psychological mechanisms, which she identifies as psychic numbing (Slovic 2007) or “primary defenses” of carnism (the secondary defenses are justifications, like those described in part 4). They come in several ways. Objectification consists of viewing animals as things: for instance in calling a chicken, a broiler or steers, beef. Deindividuation consists of viewing animals as abstraction. Finally, dichotomization allows people to put animals in categories like pets and farmed animal, or cute and ugly.

However, all those interested in moral inconsistencies do not arrive at the same conclusions as Joy. Studying the animal-human interactions (or “anthrozoology”), the psychologist Hal Herzog considers that contrasting attitudes toward animals reflect merely different moral intuitions that may be triggered by different moral heuristics (Herzog & Burghardt 2005). They are not anomalies or hypocrisies, nor are they caused by an invisible ideology or a lack of empathy. Rather, they are part of human nature, and somewhat inevitable. They are an “unavoidable result of the perennial tug of war between the rational part of us and the yahoo within.” (Herzog 2010, p. 239) Herzog even acknowledges these inconsistencies in his own behaviors: “The yahoo [My intuition] tells me that the exquisite taste of slow-cooked pit barbecue somehow justifies the death of the hog whose loin I am going to slather with a pepper-based dry rub.” (Herzog 2010, p. 255-256).

Working from Herzog’s theory that empathy is not the default attitude towards animals, the question of why people love pets must then be addressed. A possible explanation comes from the “cute response” which could trigger parental instincts (Sherpell 2002). Indeed, pets often share features with human infants: large foreheads and craniums, big eyes, bulging chicks, and soft contours. Animals that are eaten, on the other hand, often lack this cute factor. Another interesting explanation of inconsistent empathy responses could derive from disgust (Ruby & Heine 2012) or food taboo (Fessler & Navarrete 2003)

However, recent experimental studies tend to confirm Joy’s view. For instance, it has been shown that categorizing an animal as ‘food’ may diminish their perceived capacity to suffer, which in turn dampens moral concern (Bratanova et al. 2011). When people are asked to eat dried beef instead of dried nuts, they show less moral concern for cows and animals in general (Longman et al 2010). This can be analysed in terms of cognitive dissonance. Indeed, people do care for animal but they also enjoy their meat. One way to reduce this dissonance is to deny that animals suffer and are sentient. Thus, in an insightful study, Brock Bastian and his colleagues showed that people attribute less mental capacity to a cow (or a sheep) when the animal was described as being bred for meat consumption as opposed to having been bred for a different purpose (Bastian et al. 2012).

Finally, a link between racism on one hand, and speciesism or carnism on the other, has been experimentally established. For instance, children’s human–animal divide beliefs predicted greater racial prejudice, an effect explained by heightened racial dehumanization (Costello & Hodson 2012). The study of people’s relationship with animals, and especially the ones chosen to like and to eat, is still fairly new. But it appears to be a fascinating and blossoming field, which will surely also be improved by the new understanding of the psychology of vegans and vegetarians (Ruby 2012).

3- Origin and debates

The name “carnism” is a neologism, but the ideas behind the word are not brand new. As early as the first century BC, the greek essayist Plutarch tried to shift the perspective on vegetarianism in his “De esu carnium” (On Eating Meat): “Can you really ask what reason Pythagoras had for abstaining from flesh? For my part I rather wonder both by what accident and in what state of soul or mind the first man who did so, touched his mouth to gore and brought his lips to the flesh of a dead creature, he who set forth tables of dead, stale bodies and ventured to call food and nourishment the parts that had a little before bellowed and cried, moved and lived.” (Plutarch 1957, p. 541)

So, for Plutarch, what is really surprising is not why some people don't eat flesh but why so many do. He also sheds light on many inconsistencies and false beliefs surrounding animals used for food; for him, eating flesh is no longer a necessity and is not natural for human beings. Indeed, in a remote past, our ancestors may have had no choice but to eat flesh, but the progress of agriculture now makes it superfluous. People also think that they are naturally designed to eat meat. But this is false, replies Plutarch in this oft-cited excerpt: “If you declare that you are naturally designed for such a diet, then first kill for yourself what you want to eat. Do it, however, only through your own resources, unaided by cleaver or cudgel or any kind of axe.” (Plutarch 1957, p. 553) Of course, Plutarch could not use the modern concept of ideology. But his identification of false beliefs and his attempt to understand their origin and the ways in which people endorse them, surely makes him one of the main precursors of the concept of carnism.

More recently, many authors in the field of animal ethics have raised similar concerns. Already in the 1975 preface of his work *Animal Liberation*, Peter Singer noticed the importance of mental habits, which slow down the moral progress for animals. “Habit. This is the final barrier that the Animal Liberation movement faces. Habits not only of diets but also of thoughts and language must be challenged and altered.” (Singer 2009, p.13)

Singer is well known for having brought the term “speciesism”, a concept close to carnism and coined by the psychologist Richard D. Ryder, to the fore. Speciesism - analogous with racism or sexism - means an assignment of moral considerability to individuals solely on the basis of their species. For Singer, this is the basis of a discrimination which is morally arbitrary - just like discriminations based on race or sex are morally arbitrary. (Singer, following the preference utilitarianism, considers that interests of individuals should be the only basis for moral discrimination).

How then, are speciesism and carnism to be distinguished? First, speciesism is broader than carnism. For instance, you can be vegan and consider that no animals deserve to be exploited for food or leather, but still morally value the life of a horse more than that of a cow because of their belonging to a hierarchically lower ranked species. In this case, you are probably not a carnist but, in a sense, you are still a speciesist.

Theoretically, it is possible to be speciesist in according more value to a given species than to the human one, but, most of the time, it means to place humans at the top of the hierarchy and use this first place to justify using other animals for food and to continue exploiting them. So a carnist is a speciesist who focuses his attention on certain species (like pigs or cows), assigns them less value than to other species (like humans or dogs) and acts accordingly (eats pigs and wears cows). Carnism is a kind of applied speciesism - and much more easy to identify. Joy puts the distinction this way: “Carnism is the ideology in which it's considered appropriate to eat some of the animals on the lower rungs of the speciesist hierarchy. Carnism is a “sub-ideology” of speciesism, just as anti-Semitism, for instance, is a sub-ideology of racism.” (“Carnism Frequently Asked Questions”)

But it seems that there is also a more subtle or connotative difference between the two concepts. Carnism describes an ideology: it is something entrenched and embodied which affects the way people perceive animals and food in practice. Speciesism refers to a normative theory: it is a

justification of certain value assignments. So, carnism can be interpreted more as a psychological concept and speciesism as a philosophical one. It also seems possible to consider the two concepts as the two sides of the same coin: the descriptive and the normative. In the latter sense, one could perceive and behave as a carnist, but think and conceptualise as a speciesist.

Some have criticised the concept of carnism because it could be confusing, etymologically and ethically. Indeed, even if Joy defines carnism explicitly as the opposite ideology to veganism, the latin radical “carn” draws attention to flesh. But people who don’t eat flesh are vegetarian, not vegan. However, for Joy, people who believe that consuming animal products (like milk or leather) but not meat is okay are - at least to a certain degree - carnists. It is also true that to illustrate carnism, Joy examines food questions (including milk and eggs) or animal product consumption (like leather), but no other forms of animal exploitation such as animal experiments or animals used in entertainment. Ethical vegans, therefore, can reject the concept of carnism on the basis that it is misleading because it is not the exact negative of their view - for which they still have no name.

This kind of critique comes mainly from the abolitionist approach in animal ethics. Indeed, this approach claims that all animal exploitation should be abolished (focusing especially on the current acceptance of animals being considered property) and recognizes some basic rights for animals. It is classically opposed to the welfarist approach, the focus of which is on animal welfare rather than rights. Now, some abolitionists tend to consider carnism as a welfarist tool or concept. For instance, the leading abolitionist advocate Gary Francione, denounces what he calls the “invisibility” position, that is to say the “claim that the ideology that supports animal exploitation is “invisible.”” (Francione 2012). He reproaches this position to “relieve us from moral responsibility for our conduct, claiming that if we participate in animal exploitation, it’s because we are being “victimized” by the “invisible” ideology.” (ibid)

It should also be noticed that Francione talks about “moral schizophrenia” to qualify the fact that people can condemn dog fighting while eating meat or that hunters can rescue a deer but kill the same one a month later when the hunting season is opened. Thus, moral schizophrenia points out that “we do not think clearly about our moral obligations to animals.” (Francione 2007). Francione appears to criticize less the descriptive dimension of carnism than its normative import. It is not clear, however, why reasoning in ideological terms rather than in terms of moral schizophrenia should lead to welfarist rather than abolitionist positions.

4- Neocarnism: a new wave of justifications

Neocarnism refers to a new wave of pro-meat and anti-vegan arguments (Joy 2011). Thanks to the ease of accessing information on the internet and the growing public awareness of the way consumed animals are treated, it is less easy to deny the harm that is caused to them. The first defense of the carnistic ideology, invisibility, therefore leaves room to justifications as secondary defenses. The neocarnistic arguments allow conscientious consumers, who begin to question their carnistic habits, to refrain from abandoning altogether their omnivore practice and to find reasons to feel good about maintaining it.

Joy identifies, among others, three neocarnistic discourses aimed at responding to animal welfare/rights, environmental and human health arguments. The first discourse holds that veganism is too extreme and that people would be better off consuming “humane” or “happy” meat. In this sense, this discourse tries to conciliate compassion toward animals with carnistic practices. A second line of defense, “ecocarnism”, addresses environmental concerns by praising small scale farms producing local and “sustainable” meat. Joy notices that it is also argued “that people’s aversion to killing animals is a modern aberration; veganism is seen as a contemporary movement of upper-middleclass urbanites and suburbanites who have become “soft” and disconnected from nature.” (Joy

2011). The third discourse stresses (against a wealth of strong evidence) that consuming animal products is a necessity for health reasons and that this overrides any moral reasons not to consume animal products. In the end, these discourses remain carnistic, because they do not truly challenge the cultural perception of animal products as food - they simply provide new justifications.

This is why Joy also describes neocarnism as a backlash against veganism; neocarnistic arguments “are signs of society’s willingness to examine the ethics of eating meat, eggs, and dairy, and they reflect people’s genuine concern for animals (and the environment and health). But they also reflect the resistance of the dominant, meat-eating culture to truly embracing a vegan ethic.” (Joy 2011)

5- Summary: carnism and moral perception

To conclude, it should be recalled that carnism does not refer to a clear-cut and monolithic ideology. American carnism is not the same as the French or Chinese manifestations of this ideology. Moreover, if carnism and veganism are opposite ideologies, they also stand on a continuum with neocarnism and vegetarianism between the two ends. Therefore, it is possible to be more or less carnist. Or, in a slightly different way, it can also be said that there are some prototypical and atypical instances of carnistic practices and beliefs. In this regard, the fact that the etymology (pointing to flesh) does not extensively define the concept, reflects merely this kind of radial structure.

Carnism has been presented as a descriptive concept with a normative import. Naming and describing an ideology allows people to contest it. Thus, from a meta-ethical perspective, the concept of carnism could be interpreted as a tool for moral knowledge. So, how does this work? If moral knowledge is defined as the set of morally relevant beliefs about a situation, mastering the concept of carnism may surely improve moral knowledge because it makes people aware of many false beliefs (for instance, that eating meat would be natural, normal and necessary). This is why a descriptive concept, like carnism, can possess a normative import: by improving moral knowledge.

More precisely, and from a moral psychological perspective, it may be said that a large part of this improvement operates through moral perception. This step of cognitive moral process, often overshadowed by the next step of moral judgment, is still crucial, as explains Lawrence Blum:

“An agent may reason well in moral situations, uphold the strictest standards of impartiality for testing her maxims and moral principles, and be adept at deliberation. Yet unless she perceives moral situations as moral situations, and unless she perceives their moral character accurately, her moral principles and skill at deliberation will be for nought and may even lead her astray. In fact one of the most important moral differences between people is between those who miss and those who see various moral features of situations confronting them.” (Blum 1991, p. 701)

Now, carnism as ideology may succinctly explain this kind of difference in moral perception of animals. For instance, seeing a cow as something rather than as someone could carry important moral significance. Further to this, considering carnism leads people to question their moral perception and to pay attention to moral psychology. This is certainly an interesting aspects of this concept, which is less a philosophical one (like speciesism) than a moral psychological one.

Finally, and from a normative theories perspective, the concept of carnism could be related to virtue ethics. Of course, deontologists and consequentialists may be interested by questions of moral knowledge, but by focusing their attention on the agent (rather than on the action or on the consequences of the action), virtue ethicists seem more concerned with understanding, promoting and discouraging certain kinds of moral perceptions. To that extent, Joy’s work may be interpreted as an insightful and useful contribution to a neglected area of animal ethics.

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