



Why We Eat Meat

Are we hardwired for eating animals? Writer **Marla Rose** explores the stories we tell ourselves about who we view as food, why we eat the way we do, and the factors at play in determining what it means to dine in alignment with our ethics.

There are certain things that are so automated within us that we barely think about them, if at all.

Take breathing, for example. Unless one's respiration is challenged, it's just something the human body does without much awareness. Similarly, the need for food is also hardwired into us as an indisputable requirement for survival. For the most part, when we get hungry, we simply eat. The question of *why* we eat what we eat, however, is somewhat cloaked in mystery. The food choices we make are developed and reinforced by socialization, habit, and the messages we've internalized—often without much, or any, awareness. Whether we're standing in line at a crowded food court, eating at home with the family, or seated at a see-and-be-seen restaurant, what we choose to eat is rooted in opaque and mystifying psychological processes, tightly braided with ideas about who we are as individuals.

When it comes to pointing to food as emblematic of personal or cultural identities—what we eat, how much, and how often—few things are more contentious than eating animals. What is and is not considered appropriate to consume varies around the world, but most cultures consider animals and their byproducts to be acceptable, even ideal, nourishment for humans. From the domestication of the first land animals for food 9,000 years ago to the explosion of fast-food culture around the globe,

humans have a history of eating animals that is so deeply entrenched that the vast majority of us consider the practice as natural and necessary as breathing. Given that many of our earliest memories are so entangled with habit, self-identity, family, tradition, and culture, it's nearly impossible to see meat-eating as evidence of a destructive system.

Yet this system continues to run rampant, as animal consumption soars worldwide. It is certainly no secret that governments and big business work together to make meat and animal products widely available, convenient, and inexpensive. In addition to these powerful unions, there are well-funded offshoot branches dedicated exclusively to buttressing the products of animal agribusiness, while marketers spend millions to boost brand loyalty in sleek board rooms. It's no wonder why this mega-industry is so effortlessly placing its products in our refrigerators and swiftly removing the reality behind them from our collective consciousness.

Underneath this juggernaut of animal agribusiness are consumers as individuals—parents and children, neighbors and peers—who keep the machine well-oiled and fully operational. As consumers, we are the hand that cranks the machine that turns more than 30 billion land animals a year worldwide

into consumable, often unrecognizable, products. The machine depends on our participation, and—with a world population expected to surpass 9.8 billion by 2050, plus a growing body of evidence linking animal agriculture to massive environmental strain—every effort to examine, unpack, and leave behind the diet that is creating so much suffering must be made.

Eating animals

Despite the near-universal presence of animal products in diets around the globe, most people disapprove of unnecessary violence, with 81 percent of US adults going so far as to say they support the goal to eventually eliminate all forms of animal cruelty and suffering. It's the tension of this incongruity that has given rise to a growing area of research studying what is known as "the meat paradox," which explores how people are able to simultaneously care about animals, and also eat them.

The cognitive dissonance that comes from holding such conflicting beliefs helps us to create mental distance from the behavior. Eating bodies that have been so altered that we don't recognize them as bodies anymore is one way of assuaging our discomfort; the industry's push to refer to slaughter euphemistically as "harvesting" is a nod to this growing unease. These

Meat the Numbers

If you don't eat meat, you're not alone. Here are some key insights that prove that veganism is experiencing an undeniable uptick.

\$35 billion

The projected value of the worldwide dairy-free market by 2024

33%

The projected percentage of the world's protein market that meat alternatives will claim by 2054.

79%

The percentage of vegans who identify as women

42%

The percentage of vegans who cite an influential film as their reason for going vegan

69%

The percentage of vegans and vegetarians motivated by health concerns

68%

The percentage of vegans and vegetarians motivated by animal protection

are two small examples of how the meat paradox is neutralized by industry and culture; how we mitigate our internal conflict is a whole other animal.

A pioneering expert on this disconnect is Harvard-educated social psychologist Melanie Joy PhD, author of *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows*. In her groundbreaking book, Joy explains that "carnism"—a concept she developed through her research—is the invisible belief system that habituates people to eating certain species of animals. "When we understand how carnism is structured and how it influences people," she says, "we can appreciate that good people can participate in harmful practices, and this doesn't make them 'bad' people."

The assignment of animals into "food" or "not food" categories is entirely subjective and culturally driven.

According to Joy, part of why carnism is able to take root is because of what she calls the "three Ns of justification." Eating animals is accepted by most of the population as "normal, natural, and necessary"—rationales that are rarely challenged but very deeply ingrained. Not only is the practice of eating animals girded by these powerful forces of justification, but this rationalization is embedded into our very psychological nature, which skews heavily toward assimilation. As Joy further points out, the assignment of animals into "food" or "not food" categories is entirely subjective and culturally driven.

"Carnism causes people to distort their perceptions, and to disconnect from their natural empathy for farmed animals so

they can, indeed, feel love for animals while also eating them," explains Joy. "Carnism is irrational, and it causes people to engage in irrational attitudes and behavior without realizing what they're doing."

According to research from the University of British Columbia, among Western test subjects, it is perceived animal intelligence—not sentience—that is the greatest deterrent. Simply stated, people are the most unsettled by the idea of eating species deemed to be of higher intelligence. This same study showed that subjects were more disgusted by eating animals they perceived to be too ugly or too cute, preferring to eat animals they considered relatively neutral in appearance. Some people are so ambivalent about eating

meat that research published in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* found that omnivorous participants given beef as a snack rated cows as less capable of suffering than fellow meat-eaters who'd been given nuts to feast upon.

Cutting to the bone

In nations like the United States, where government checkoff programs promote meat and dairy to consumers to the tune of \$557 million each year—and where \$38 billion in subsidies makes these agricultural commodities artificially cheap and widely available—the influence on eating habits may be impossible to determine because of the convoluted nature of our food system. But this federal



interference ripples, affecting everything from school lunches to hospital food, and results in a profound impact on how we make sense of what we eat.

For those who eschew meat, untangling the practice of eating animals is necessary to make inroads with naysayers, but this can sometimes come with more than a little defensiveness. Just by living as a vegetarian, for example, one could be perceived as judging another's family, heritage, or moral compass. Casey Taft, PhD, Professor of Psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine, feels that focusing on our own experience helps us navigate a conversation about eating animals without coming off as accusatory. "If we simply and clearly describe our own evolution in our thinking about what we do to non-human animals, it will bring about less defensiveness than if we tell others what they should or should not be doing," he says.

Taft, whose professional expertise is focused on violence prevention among trauma survivors, has particular insight into avoiding triggers. In his book, *Motivational Methods for Vegan Advocacy: A Clinical Psychology Perspective*, he outlines his research-based strategies for getting past the prickliness of those who not only don't want to consider the vegan message, but who feel resentment or anger toward those who bring it up. "We can unapologetically talk about why we are vegan in a matter-of-fact way that will be less likely to increase someone's 'shame response,'" he says. "We should, however, always be mindful that we are not responsible for their reaction."

Perhaps the biggest influence on our attitudes toward eating habits is having friends who confidently model the new behaviors. As a species built for conformity, this may be how we can leverage our societal wiring. With more and more mouthwatering, accessible, and familiar-tasting vegan options on mainstream menus, it won't be long before what is normal, natural, and necessary is a choice that will come without justification or remorse. **VN**

Marla Rose is co-founder of *Vegan Street Media* (veganstreetmedia.com) and loves to write, read, cook, and build vegan culture from her little home office in the Chicago area.

The Animals We Eat

Animal consumption is rampant around the globe, with 56 billion land animals alone slaughtered each year for food. Here is a glimpse into some of the figures on the animals we call food.



Chickens

These birds comprise a staggering 95 percent of the land animals raised and killed for food in the United States, amounting to 9 billion chickens a year.



Goats

Greece is the largest producer in the European Union of these ruminant animals, making up 47 percent of all Europe's output.



Pigs

Spain kills the largest number of pigs in Europe, with 29 million recorded in 2016.



Dogs

Dog meat is traditionally consumed in South Korea, with an estimated 17,000 farms in operation.



Cows

The largest consumer of beef in the world is Uruguay, with 124 pounds consumed per capita.



Crickets

In rural Ghana, bugs can account for up to 60 percent of an individual's dietary protein.



Ducks

China is the world's top producer of ducks, accounting for three-fifths of total global production each year.



Tuna

Japan consumes a quarter of the tuna caught worldwide, mostly for consumption as sashimi.



Sheep

New Zealanders eat more mutton—44 pounds per person every year—than any other population on the planet.



Rabbits

Rabbits are the second-most farmed species in Europe, with more than 12 million pounds exported annually in France alone.