



Understanding Neocarnism: How Vegan Advocates Can Appreciate and Respond to “Happy Meat,” “Locavorism,” and “Paleo Dieting”

By Melanie Joy, PhD, EdM
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These days, few commentaries cause vegans more despair than those proclaiming the virtues of eating “humane” meat, those promoting the ethics of eating “sustainable” meat, or those insisting on the nutritional necessity of eating any meat. Exasperated vegans wonder why, despite years of seemingly successful campaigning to raise awareness about the impact of animal agriculture on animals, the environment, and human health, these same concerns would actually be used to *defend* meat eating.

Yet it is not *despite* vegan advocacy, but largely *because of it* that such defensiveness has made its way into public discourse. The new wave of pro-meat arguments is in part an attempt to defend the weakened meat-eating establishment against the very real threat posed by an increasingly powerful vegan movement. “Happy meat,” locavorism, and “paleo dieting” 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. The new pro-meat arguments are part of a carnistic backlash against the growing popularity of veganism, and vegans and non-vegans alike must understand and appreciate them in order to move toward a more humane and just society.

Carnistic Backlash

A backlash is a defensive, often unconscious response by dominant interests to threats against their power. The carnistic backlash is the reaction of producers and consumers of meat, eggs, and dairy to the destabilization of *carnism*.

In other writing, I have described carnism as the invisible belief system or ideology that conditions us to

eat certain animals. When eating animals is not a necessity for survival, it is a choice, and choices always stem from beliefs. Therefore, it is not only vegans and vegetarians who bring their beliefs to the dinner table. And because ideologies such as carnism are organized around violence and their tenets run counter to core human values, they must use a set of social and psychological defenses mechanisms to ensure the participation of people who would likely otherwise not support them. Most people care about animals and don’t want to cause them harm, and yet it is impossible to eat animals without harming them. So carnism essentially teaches people how not to feel.

The primary defense of carnism is *denial*; if we deny there is a problem in the first place then we don’t have to do anything about it. Denial is expressed through invisibility; the victims of the system are kept out of sight and therefore conveniently out of public consciousness. And the victims of carnism include not only the animals and the environment, but also human meat consumers whose physical and psychological wellbeing may be compromised by enabling the gratuitous violence that marks carnism.

Thanks to the advent of the Internet and the success of vegan advocates, carnistic invisibility has been sufficiently weakened. Therefore, the system has begun to rely more heavily on its secondary defense: *justification*. There are many carnistic justifications by they all fall under the *Three Ns of Justification*: eating animals is *normal*, *natural*, and *necessary*. Part of the carnistic backlash, then, can be understood as the system shifting the burden of defending itself from denial to justification. Most people can no longer deny the truth about animal agriculture, so the meat, egg, and dairy industries now must provide consumers with reasons to continue eating animals despite such a truth.

Neocarnism

Though various carnistic justifications continue to thrive, three currently dominate public discourse and reflect broader social agendas and consumer trends.

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These dominant justifications have morphed into new ideologies which, not coincidentally, are organized around each of the Three Ns. The new ideologies are what I call *neocarnism*, and their main purpose is to provide rational arguments (carnistic justifications) to invalidate veganism—primarily by invalidating the three pillars of the vegan argument: animal welfare/rights, the environment, and human health.

Like traditional carnism, the neocarnisms derive much of their power from appearing as though their tenets are objective truths rather than ideologically constructed opinions. But unlike traditional carnism, in which the ethics and practices of animal agriculture remain largely unexamined, the neocarnisms incorporate an examination of eating animals into their very analysis. It is as if they say, yes, we have reflected on the ethical implications of eating animals, and we have come to the (rational) conclusion that the solution is not to *stop* eating animals, but to change the way we eat them. The neocarnisms seek to invalidate each of the vegan pillars by arguing that eating animals is *normal*, *natural*, and *necessary*—and they appeal in particular to conscientious consumers who have begun truly question the validity of eating animals.

Compassionate Carnism: Eating Animals is Normal

Compassionate carnism addresses animal welfare concerns. It holds that, while animal welfare is a concern, veganism is extreme and therefore impractical, and thus it's more practical to eat “humane” (“happy”) meat than to eat no meat. So the solution to the moral dilemma of caring about animals and also eating them is *moderation*—not straying too far outside the carnistic norm—and eating meat, eggs, and dairy from animals who have supposedly been treated well.

The problem, however, is that although in some cases compassionate carnism is a step toward veganism, often the opposite is the case: eating “happy meat” assuages one's conscience such that veganism is no longer considered a meaningful alternative. Moreover, compassionate carnism exists largely in philosophy; given that over 99 percent of the meat consumed in the U.S. comes from CAFOs, it is likely more difficult (and thus more “extreme”) for most people to avoid “unhappy meat” with any real consistency than it is to simply stop eating meat. Compassionate carnism essentially suggests that a willingness to eat “humane meat” when readily available condones the consumption of “inhumane meat”

in all other situations.

Ecocarnism: Eating Animals is Natural

Ecocarnism is organized around environmental concerns. Ecocarnism holds that the problem is not *animal* agriculture, but *industrial* agriculture. The ecocarnism solution, then, is not to stop eating animals, but to eat animals who have been raised and killed “sustainably.” This means patronizing small-scale, local farms and—when one can sufficiently desensitize oneself—killing the animals her- or himself.

Ecocarnism seeks to invalidate veganism in several ways. First, it portrays veganism as unnatural and unsustainable. It focuses on vegans who consume (unnatural) processed specialty foods that depend on ecologically irresponsible (unsustainable) production methods. Moreover, ecocarnism argues 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. The solution is to get back to our roots and closer to the source of our food.

Ecocarnism has some fundamental inconsistencies in its arguments which raise critical questions. First, many vegans *do* support a whole foods, sustainable diet. And why, one might wonder, are alternatives to killing not genuinely considered? Why is the goal of ecocarnism not sustainability, period? More importantly, why not view human sensitivity to killing as a sign of moral evolution and integrity rather than weakness? Given that those of us in the industrialized world no longer need to kill other humans or nonhumans to survive, killing has taken on an ethical dimension. It is likely that our increasing sensitivity to harming others is not because we are *dis* connected, but because we are *more* connected—with our ethics and with others. In the ecocarnism frame, empathy and compassion—which numerous psychological and spiritual traditions teach are fundamental to healthy mental and moral development—are viewed as qualities to be *transcended* rather than cultivated. Such derision of empathy is reminiscent of the military's attitude toward veterans of war before post-traumatic stress disorder was recognized; soldiers distressed by killing were viewed as having weak moral character, and the psychiatric protocol was to “toughen them up” so they could return to the killing fields and do their jobs.

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Biocarnism: Eating Animals is Necessary

Biocarnism, the ideology in which eating animals is considered necessary, overlaps with ecocarnism except that biocarnism focuses on human rather than environmental survival. The proponents of biocarnism are often former vegans or vegetarians, who have switched back to eating animals after developing health problems. The message of biocarnism is that there's no point reflecting on the ethics of veganism since eating animals is a necessity, and as such is exempt from ethical consideration; veganism as a widespread philosophy and practice is simply impossible. The popularity of books such as *The Vegetarian Myth* are an ironic example of the backlash against veganism and vegetarianism, the very movements that have challenged the myths of meat.

Biocarnism relies on medical claims to validate it by demonstrating that veganism is unhealthy. (It is not uncommon to pathologize those who challenge the status quo; for instance, women who challenged male dominance were once diagnosed with “hysteria.”) The case against veganism is based on the argument that “man the omnivorous hunter” is the prototype of human consumption patterns. Yet biocarnism looks not to *human* history, but to *carnistic* history, for evidence of human physiology. Why not use as reference our fruitarian ancestors rather than their hunting descendants? Moreover, biocarnism disregards the official statement of the American Dietetic Association, which holds that vegetarian diets are nutritionally complete and may be even *more* healthful than animal-based diets—and that the USDA, recognizing the validity of a vegan diet, has replaced the term “meat” with “protein” in the latest version of the food guide pyramid.

Variations on a Theme

The danger of the neocarnisms is that they offer themselves as a solution to a problem that they *cannot solve*—and they therefore become attractive alternatives to those who might otherwise support veganism. The neocarnisms act as a carnistic safety net: those who seek to step outside of carnism land in another version of the system, thinking that they've reconciled the irreconcilable conflict between caring about and harming other beings.

But the neocarnisms are simply variations on a theme,

relying on the same paradoxical mentality that enables traditional carnism. For instance, most proponents of compassionate carnism would not advocate slaughtering a perfectly healthy six-month-old golden retriever simply because her thighs taste good, just as ecocarnism proponents do not suggest consuming locally bred and slaughtered horses. And proponents of biocarnism insist not on the nutritional necessity of *all* meat, but only of meat procured from “edible” animals, such as pigs, chickens, cows, and fish. (Though the type of animals consumed changes from culture to culture, in meat-eating societies around the world, typically only select animals are classified as edible. The flesh of other species is experienced as taboo, disgusting, or offensive.) So while the ideologies may change, the carnistic mentality remains largely the same.

Ideas or Ideologies?

How do we know that the neocarnisms are not simply ideas about how to eat but defensive ideologies erected to maintain carnism? The answer lies in both the *content*—the ideas themselves—and the *process*—the way the ideas are related to. The content of the neocarnisms reveals an irrational argument for eating animals, and the process of the neocarnisms reveals a defensive transmission of those ideas.

The neocarnisms are justifications in the guise of rationality: they provide what appears to be a *plausible* reason for eating animals, rather than the *actual* reason for eating animals. And the actual reason is that a violent ideology informs people's attitudes and behaviors toward the beings they learn to think of as food, so that they unknowingly make exception to what they would ordinarily consider unethical. *The vast majority of people today believe that animals have interests and deserve protection from harm; given this attitude, killing animals for any reason other than bona fide self-defense is neither justifiable nor rational.* (Even in the case of biocarnism there is no exploration of alternatives to killing, or at least of harm reduction.)

The process of the neocarnisms can be seen through their purpose: the purpose of each argument is not to *engage with* the issue of veganism but to *defend against* it. The arguments do not reflect openness to further exploration of the issue or a desire to seek alternatives to killing. They do not serve to invite dialogue but rather to shut down the conversation by invalidating veganism as *abnormal, unnatural, and unnecessary*. The process

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reflects a black-and-white, rigid reactivity rather than a nuanced and flexible responsiveness—a healthy process encourages true examination of one’s own assumptions as well as witnessing and validation of different perspectives. (Ideologies whose tenets run *counter* to core human values depend on defensive processes to prevent their proponents from acknowledging the inconsistencies in their values and practices. Ideologies that are in *alignment* with core human values are not structured around a defensive process; if they are expressed defensively it is due to individual, rather than ideological, defensiveness.)

Shooting the (Vegan) Messenger and Message

Invalidating proponents of a social movement is a hallmark of a backlash: if we shoot the messenger we don’t have to take seriously the implications of her or his message. In the neocarnism backlash, vegans are held responsible for the very problems they are seeking to solve: “radical” vegans who demand an end to animal agriculture are seen as perpetuating the problem by not supporting “humane” farming methods, environmentally concerned vegans are accused of an unsustainable lifestyle, and vegans promoting health are portrayed as sickly.

And because veganism is seen as a (subjective) ideology while the neocarnisms are considered (objective) ideas, vegan arguments are discredited as biased. Vegans “propagandize,” while others “inform.” Vegans “proselytize;” others “discuss.” This unbalanced representation of veganism and pro-meat arguments robs vegans and non-vegans alike of the opportunity to have rational and productive conversations about the issue of eating animals.

Appreciating the Neocarnisms

Though the neocarnisms are defensive ideologies, each of them nevertheless presents ideas worthy of consideration: How *do* we attend to animal welfare issues within the massive carnistic-industrial complex, even as we fight to abolish such a complex? Are there ways vegans can eat more sustainably? What are some of the health challenges for new vegans, and how can we raise awareness of these issues so that, for instance, medical professionals are more supportive of veganism?

Moreover, it is essential that vegans differentiate the *proponents* of neocarnism from the ideologies

themselves. Those who support neocarnism are no doubt truly concerned with the issues the ideologies purport to address. They are human beings grappling with complicated choices in a complicated system. Vegans should commend many neocarnism proponents’ willingness to “do less harm,” as they continue to challenge such proponents to reflect more deeply on their choices.

Neocarnism and Social Progress

Social movements do not grow along a straight trajectory; social change is slow, unpredictable, and erratic. Veganism is a revolutionary movement that demands a profound shift in social consciousness and a radical transformation in the way we relate to ourselves, other beings, and the planet. This kind of change will not happen without great resistance. Such resistance will manifest in a variety of ways: increasingly repressive laws protecting animal exploiters, the intensification of carnist propaganda, and the emergence of new ideologies that claim to offer attractive solutions to unpleasant realities.

Vegans must recognize and illuminate the neocarnisms to create a more authentic dialogue about the issue of eating animals. Such dialogue depends in large part on those of us who are vegans to model the qualities and behaviors we are asking for—avoiding defensiveness and instead appreciating and validating the concerns of the proponents of neocarnism. Neocarnism proponents are vegans’ allies, not our enemies; they have taken a step along the carnistic continuum, and their willingness to reflect on their food choices and their desire to do less harm should be applauded. Ultimately, vegans should celebrate the neocarnisms as testament to a shift in social consciousness and as harbingers of a better world to come.