Critical Thinking about Belief and Social Systems

The primary defense of a structured belief system is invisibility. If we can’t see it, we can’t talk about it, and we can’t think about it. If we are going to be free thinkers and have freedom of choice, then applying our critical thinking to invisible systems is of highest importance.

The production, distribution, and consumption of food is the particular system of invisibility we will examine, and many, many others exist.

Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows
An examination guided by Melanie Joy, Ph.D.

Why do some Americans eat king crab but not tarantulas? They are both arachnids. Why do some Americans eat lobster but not grasshoppers? Why do some Americans eat pigs but not dogs?

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“A schema is a psychological framework that shapes—and is shaped by—our beliefs, ideas, perceptions, and experiences, and it automatically interprets incoming information…we have a schema for everything” (Joy 14).

Nurse  Astronaut

Doctor  Teacher

**Our schemas have evolved out of a highly structured belief system.**

How we feel about an animal, and how we treat it has much less do to with the kind of animal it is than about our perception. Have you ever wondered why, out of tens of thousands of animal species, you probably feel disgusted at the idea of eating all but a tiny handful of them? What is most striking about our selection of edible and inedible animals is not the presence of disgust, but the absence of it. Why are we not averse to eating the very small selection of animals we have deemed edible?

We recognize that a system might be at work when we question, and the answer is “that is just the way it is,” or “it has always been that way.”

“Evidence strongly suggests that our lack of disgust is largely, if not entirely learned. **We are not born with our schemas. They are constructed.** The system teaches us which animals are food and which are not. The system teaches us show not to feel. The most obvious feeling we lose is disgust, yet beneath our disgust lies an emotion much more integral to our sense of self: our empathy” (Joy 18).

Why must a system block our empathy? Our values and behaviors are incongruent, and this incongruence causes us a certain degree of moral discomfort.

Again, we are reading and writing and thinking about food, but understanding invisible systems extends throughout the fabric of society.

Example: If we believe that killing another human is wrong, even a sin, then how can we fight in a war? Answer: we make the enemy less than human so we can block our empathy.

In order to alleviate our moral discomfort when values and behaviors contradict, we have 3 choices: We can change our values to match our behaviors, we can change our behaviors to match our values, or we change our perception of our behaviors so that they appear to match our values e.g. anti-choice people who believe all life is sacred and who also support capital punishment (and kill doctors). When closely examined, we see that these are incongruent. We block empathy with words like monster.

**Values:** We care about animals and we don’t want them to suffer.  **Action:** Eating animals

As long as we neither value unnecessary animal suffering nor stop eating animals, our schema will distort our perception of animals and the meat we eat so that we can feel comfortable enough to consume them. And the system that constructs our schema of meat equips us with the means by which to do this.
Logical Fallacies We Tell Ourselves

• But humans are meant to eat meat.
  There is a difference between meant to and can. We can eat meat, and we can also eat Twinkies. If we examine the physiology of carnivores and herbivores and humans, we find that humans do not have the physiology to efficiently digest flesh. Humans, except where no vegetation grows, do not need any meat for a long, healthy life.

• But eating meat is natural.
  It is true that humans have been eating meat as part of an omnivorous diet for at least 2 million years (though for the majority of this time our diet was still primarily vegetarian), but to be fair, we must acknowledge that infanticide, murder, rape, and cannibalism are at least as old as meat eating. As with other acts of violence, we must differentiate between natural and justifiable.

• But the animals were raised to be eaten.
  Pit bulls were and are raised to fight; however, this is now illegal in the United States because we recognize it as cruel. Cocks too, as well as mongoose, bears, and even kangaroos were also raised for sport fighting. All over the world, Blacks were raised to be slaves, and women were raised to be housewives with no more legal rights than property. Considering the advances in selective genetic engineering, parents may one day breed and raise children for the occupation of the parents’ choice: football player, doctor, scientist. If we raise a living animal, do we get to decide its purpose? If we raise an animal with a specific purpose in mind, does that justify the purpose?

• Our economy depends on meat production jobs.
  Really? Once we thought that if women entered the work force, it would destroy the economy and put men out of work. We hear similar arguments about immigrants.

• But that’s the way it’s always been.
  How do you know? Investigate.

• There is nothing I can do about it.
  Bologna. Maybe there is nothing you are willing to do about it. All major change in the past 100 years has been about by consumers e.g. boycotts during the Civil Rights Movement.

Invisibility
The primary defense of any system is invisibility. Invisibility enables us to consume beef without envisioning the animal we’re eating. Language plays a roll here. Beef vs. cow, pork vs. pig, light meat, dark meat, veal vs. baby cow etc. Vegetarian = choice. Meat eater equals “normal.”

In the U.S. alone, ten billion land animals (almost twice the Earth’s human population) a year are slaughtered. Where are they? They have to be raised, transported, and slaughtered. Trucks are sealed an unmarked. Slaughterhouses don’t have windows on the front or architectural clues to what is happening inside. In a number of states it is actually illegal to take photos or videos inside “animal enterprises” (Joy 41).

“We want and deserve the freedom to make informed decisions, to be free thinkers and active consumers. Such freedom is obviously impossible if we aren’t even aware that we are making choices in the first place. When an invisible ideology guides our beliefs and our behaviors, we become casualties of a system that has stolen our freedom to think for ourselves and to act accordingly” (Joy 71).