

There has been a wide public outcry about the Vick dog fighting case, and animal rights/welfare groups have been leading the charge. When you read about the details of the case, it's easy to see why. Vick and his accomplices are being charged with heinous acts, including electrocuting losing dogs, and killing others by smashing them on the ground repeatedly. 50+ animals were seized from his property, and at least 8 others were found buried, having been killed in April of this year (execution methods included hanging and drowning). Many more poor dogs were killed or abused over a six year period, by Vick's "Bad Newz Kennel."

I watched some clips of the Nancy Grace show on CNN, and she was near tears as she expressed her outrage, and questioned how any human being could torture and murder such innocent, trusting creatures. Robert Byrd made an angry speech on the floor of the Senate, saying that the "hottest places in hell are reserved for the souls of sick and brutal people who hold God's creatures in such brutal and cruel contempt." And a San Diego Union Tribune columnist suggested that "boiling [dog fighters] in oil" would be an appropriate punishment if the charges against Vick were true.

I won't disagree with any of these reactions at a visceral level. It angers me more than most people when I hear about animal abuse. And I am certainly happy that we live in a world where such reprehensible acts toward dogs are condemned so vigorously. What I would like to question, however, is whether our society's reaction to dog fighting is justified: (1) on fairness grounds; or (2) because of its contribution to the animal rights movement. My conclusion is that it is NOT justified, on either of those grounds.

Now when I say "fairness", I don't mean that I think that Vick or other dog-fighters are picked out because of their celebrity or race (though I will touch on the latter issue in a bit). I mean, very simply, whether similar cases of wrongful conduct are treated similarly.

There is an obvious argument that dog fighters are treated unfairly, on these grounds, because other cases of even more extreme animal abuse, far from being felonies, are treated with utter indifference. The most obvious "other case" is abuse of animals in food production, which 99+% of the population partakes in. If, as Byrd suggests, the "hottest places in hell are reserved for the souls of sick and brutal people who hold God's creatures in such brutal and cruel contempt," then many people will be feeling the heat in the afterlife. Yet there are no fiery Robert Byrds standing up for the chickens and cows lying on the plates of people all around us, who have often been eviscerated alive to serve our palates.

Of course, it's understandable, if not justified, that animal abusers and speciesists are not willing to condemn other forms of animal abuse with similar vigor. They draw arbitrary lines between species, and privilege some species' interests over others, much as racists once privileged whites over non-whites. What is more puzzling is the disparate reaction by those who are nominally part of the animal rights movement. For example, if you go to PETA's site and look for its discussions of people who eat animals, you will see plenty of happy discussion of vegetarian alternatives, but not much of the outrage and criticism you see in its press releases about Michael Vick. Similarly, while the HSUS is calling

Vick's alleged behavior monstrous, demanding that he be suspended immediately by the NFL, and punished to the full extent that the law allows, their website treats people who hurt animals in food production with velvet gloves -- flowery pictures, yummy recipes, and zero moral criticism.

How can we, as animal activists, possibly justify treating dog fighters with such enmity, when we offer at best friendly vegan entreaties to animal eaters, as they chew on the flesh of tortured creatures all around us?

One way to rationalize this seeming contradiction is to argue that there is, in fact, no contradiction. There might be significant differences between those who eat animals, on the one hand, and people who fight dogs, on the other.

What differences? The most obvious one is that dog fighting is not acceptable under conventional social norms; animal eating, in contrast, is not only accepted but glorified. This does not seem a particularly persuasive distinction; the existence of a social convention (e.g. the convention of eating animals) is not a good reason to adopt that convention. And if we do not unthinkingly conform to the culture in our diets, then, why conform to it in our moral rhetoric and activism?

Another possible distinction is that animal eating, while concededly as bad as dog fighting, is a product of our culture and upbringing. Those who engage in animal eating are thus less culpable for the misery and death of the animals they are harming. In contrast, dog fighting is widely decried -- indeed, illegal -- and there is thus no excuse for those who partake in it. People "should know better" than to dog fight. While this distinction might seem superficially plausible, it fails because it ignores the fact that in certain communities and subcultures, dog-fighting IS part of the conventional upbringing. This is certainly true of the Newport News community that Vick grew up in, for example. And you can see the same cultural effect in other NFL players; consider, for example, Clinton Portis, a star RB for the Washington Redskins, and his laughing reaction to the charges against Vick. Indeed, one can defensibly argue that our society's disparate reaction to dog fighting is racist, in that it specifically targets bad conduct more common in minority communities, while ignoring similarly wrongful conduct engaged in by whites (e.g. abuse of animals in food production, abuse of dogs in labs).

A third and final possible distinction is that dog fighting is more sadistic. While people who eat animals enjoy the taste of flesh, people who fight animals are taking intrinsic pleasure in their suffering. Moreover, eating animals is more removed from the suffering and violence. Fighters, in contrast, are right in the thick of things as the animals suffer and die. However, this distinction also does not stand up to closer scrutiny. First, dog fighters are taking no more intrinsic pleasure in suffering than animal eaters. They are there for the sport and competition, not for the pain itself. And while their sport and competition are invariably linked to suffering and death, this is just as true of raising and killing a creature for food.

Second, while not physically present at the time of slaughter, animal eaters are also "in the thick of things" -- indeed, they are literally grinding the bones and flesh of animals in their mouths. We certainly do not draw such finely grained distinctions between cannibalistic and non-cannibalistic murderers when it comes to HUMAN violence. Indeed, if anything, those who eat their (human) victims are deemed ESPECIALLY monstrous -- compare Jeffrey Dahmer, on the one hand, and the run-of-the-mill murderer, on the other. We only consider people who chew on the tortured flesh of animals "removed from the violence", then, because our speciesist culture does not consider mutilating and masticating the body of a tortured animal an act of violence. How different things are when the flesh in question is that of a tortured human.

In summary, it seems that the reaction against Vick by activists cannot be justified on fairness grounds. We are arbitrarily choosing species favored by some cultures and races rather than others, and disproportionately punishing dog fighters for harming our favored species, while ignoring the equivalent abuse of creatures that humans (in particular, the white/male humans who control our political institutions) care less about, such as pigs or cows.

We might nonetheless try to justify the disparate response, however, if there is some long-run value for the movement. Perhaps by solidifying our society's outrage against dog fighting, we can move down a slippery slope toward outrage about the abuse of other animals.

The facts, however, seem to suggest that the slippery slope is, if anything, slipping in the other direction. Laws against dog fighting have existed in the US for ~150 years <http://www.peoriahs.org/dogfighthistory.htm>. In that time period, the world has become a much more brutal place for animals, on qualitative and quantitative (absolute AND per capita) measures.

Moreover, on a logical basis, it is hard to see how the slope can slip in the direction we desire, when we are conveying an essentially status quo message. No one in the mainstream will publicly challenge the notion that dog abuse is wrong. Indeed, that is precisely why dog fighting has been outlawed for ~150 years. Joining the bandwagon against Vick, then, is not sending a message of change; far from it, it is a conservative message that simply reinforces existing speciesist norms.

If we are against animal abuse, as such, and not against animal abuse of a particular species, or in a particular way, then our message and behavior needs to reflect that principle. Shouting from the mountaintops about Vick, while saying nothing about the even more disgusting animal abuse all around us in refrigerators and restaurants, does not serve us well, if our goal is to send a coherent message to society. It did not make sense for civil rights activists to work on a race by race basis because it would have been utterly contradictory to argue for Asian rights, while ignoring the rights of blacks. And it makes no sense to condemn a practice in one context, and ignore or acquiesce to it in another equally abhorrent context. Even a young child can recognize this inconsistency and ignore a message on those grounds. ("But mom, it's not fair!")

Suppose you are with me that it is completely contradictory for society and activists to be condemning Vick, and demanding that he be placed in jail (or boiled alive) while simultaneously saying nothing about the animal corpses lying in plates and refrigerators in every home. What's the solution? One possible way to maintain consistency and coherence is for activists to treat ALL animal abusers more gingerly, stop the torrent of criticism against Vick, and use friendly entreaties and positive examples as a strategy for stopping dog-fighting AND other animal abuse. Proponents of this strategy might suggest that Vick and other dog fighters will simply feel angry and judged, if we criticize them or demand that they be thrown in prison. So instead of directly confronting their wrongful acts, we should do our best to never say a harsh word about their abusive practices, but instead suggest alternative forms of entertainment to our dog fighting friends, while we happily watch along as they tear their dogs to pieces.

This is somewhat similar to the rhetorical strategy suggested by James LaVeck, the producer of *The Witness and Peaceable Kingdom*, after an abhorrent case of dog abuse a few months ago. A video was released online showing a poor crippled dog in Iraq. A number of soldiers found this poor creature, and began to viciously throw rocks at her. The poor girl yelped in terror and pain, as the fusillade of rocks smashed into her face and body; the soldiers, in turn, laughed and joked about her incredible suffering, and considered shooting her for fun, until she managed to drag herself away from her tormenters.

Unsurprisingly, there was a rather angry response to this video by dog and animal lovers online. Laveck, however, chastised those who condemned the abusers, and said that activists needed to better empathize with the soldiers. He said that the soldiers were likely caught up in a culture that promoted violence and domination, and thus could not be blamed for their actions or choices. And he suggested that activists should transform their anger and disgust into patience and understanding. How could we possibly hope to change these soldiers' behavior, if we did not show them that we cared about them?

Whatever one might say about this sort of strategy, it IS a consistent one. Animal eaters, like dog fighters in a culture of dog fighting, or soldiers in a culture of ritualized violence and dominance, are products of their socialization. The friendly approach to animal activism recognizes this socialization and adopts two principles of effective activism: (1) we cannot judge actions as wrongful, either because such judgment is ineffective or itself immoral (or both); and (2) we must empathize as much with abusers as with the victims, in order to build mutual understanding between abuser and activist.

Presumably, to avoid speciesism, Laveck and others would also extend this strategy to cases of human abuse, and suggest that we should refrain from condemnation, much less incarceration, of (human) murderers, rapists, or torturers -- who, like animal eaters, are typically products of a particular social context.

Another way to resolve the contradiction I describe above (between our reactions to dog fighting, and animal eating), however, is to more aggressively criticize the abuse of other

animals. The theory here is that there is absolutely nothing wrong with the outrage directed at dog fighters. Rather, what is perverse is that OTHER animal abusers, such as animal eaters, face no outrage at all. Instead of absolving all animal abusers for their conduct, then, and trying to build mutual understanding and affection between activist and abuser, this approach would demand that activists stand up as vigorously for pigs and cows, as they do for dogs and cats. Instead of more UNDERSTANDING between activist and abuser, then, this approach demand more CONFRONTATION and CRITICISM.

Granted, standing up for less-loved animals will generate far less public support, and will be deemed extremist by the mainstream. But this is PRECISELY because the message sent is one that actually challenges conventional norms about the use of animals, and pushes for genuine CHANGES to the status quo, on an individual and (more importantly) social level. The handful of people who are willing to listen to the message will find it coherent rather than self-contradictory. And those that are convinced that our message is just, will have a solid and autonomous moral foundation to stand and grow on, rather than a sentimental, speciesist, and socially-contingent preference for a particular species or race.

This post is already getting incredibly long, so let me just conclude by making two points: First, if it wasn't obvious already, I think the latter approach -- that of direct criticism and confrontation of ALL animal abuse -- is the one that can and will be effective in achieving animal rights and animal liberation. I have written extensively elsewhere, on why I think this is the case. The very simple intuition behind my argument is that human psychology and morality are both HEAVILY status quo oriented, and human actions are invariably self-centered. It thus takes more than a simple friendly request to transform a fundamentally exploitative set of institutions and norms. As Martin Luther King Jr said, "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

Second, regardless of one's views on the proper strategy for the movement, it is utterly contradictory for us to treat one form of animal abuse with outrage, and another equally bad (or even worse) form of animal abuse with pleasant smiles. If we are outraged about animal abuse, we should be outraged about ALL animal abuse. And if we have not marshaled up the courage or conviction to be outraged about all animal abuse, then we should work harder to build it up, rather than jump on the bandwagon to condemn Michael Vick and other dog fighters.