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The Conversation



Talking Between Columns

August 19, 2009, 1:29 pm

Michael Vick's Apology

By [Gail Collins](#) AND [Ross Douhat](#)



Matt Rourke/The Associated Press

People protested outside the Philadelphia Eagles N.F.L. practice facility on August 15. Two days before, Michael Vick had signed a contract with the Eagles after serving 18 months in federal prison for his role in a dogfighting ring.

Gail Collins: Ross, since this is our last week of conversing I wanted to show my appreciation by not making you talk about health care again. So — how about Michael Vick, the dog-abusing football player who was just signed by the Philadelphia Eagles?

A lot of fans are angry that he's being given this chance, because they either A.) feel Vick hasn't proven his remorse or B.) just believe that what he did — underwriting a dog-fighting ring in Virginia — is unforgivable.

(Before we go on, here's a shout-out to whoever made up the T-shirts saying: [“Vick's an Eagle, hide your beagle.”](#))

We seem willing to overlook grisly deaths and extreme suffering when the being in question isn't particularly adorable.

I have seen many, many athletes, politicians and movie stars apologize for bad behavior and when it comes to believability, I'd say Vick is definitely up there in the top 10 percent. When celebrities apologize, you have to watch out for depersonalization ("then, the gun went off and shot her") and attempts to blame the whole thing on the angry public ("if anyone is offended by what I said, then I regret that"). But on "60 Minutes," Vick took responsibility for his behavior and expressed his shame for what he had done so effectively that I wondered if he had hired an apology coach. And he's making anti-dog-fight speeches for the Humane Society of the United States.

What he did was horrible. The dogs weren't only put in a ring to fight; the ones that failed were brutally killed. I'm not clear how much of this he did himself, but he knew what was going on, bet on the games and observed a lot of the sadism. The whole dog-fight spectacle is meant to brutalize the people who watch it, just as it did Vick, who said he began going to fights like that when he was 8.

However, all animals feel pain. But we seem willing to overlook grisly deaths and extreme suffering when the being in question isn't particularly adorable. If we agree that it's immoral — and illegal — for a dog to be made to suffer unnecessarily, shouldn't that rule be applied across the board?

I was struck when Daniel Rubin, a [columnist for The Philadelphia Inquirer asked Peter Singer](#), the bioethicist and author of "Animal Liberation" about the Vick case. Singer said he thought people might have "rushed to judgment because he did something awful to dogs." He pointed out that pigs suffer in the conditions where they're being kept as they're raised and then killed for food. But nobody cares much even though "there's every reason to believe that pigs are as sensitive and intelligent as dogs."

So here's my bottom line:

- Although professional athletes are not universally the smartest or best-educated guys in the universe, they have great sway over kids and should be held to a high standard. So the ones who beat up their wives or get drunk and run people over ought to get the same kind of mass repudiation the animal-abuser got.
- We should channel some of our concern for dogs and cats toward factory farms that keep masses of animals in a state of permanent discomfort until they're slaughtered.
- But you do not have to invite a pig to sleep at the foot of your bed.

Ross Douthat: Gail, you've wrapped an easy question and a hard question together. The easy question is whether Michael Vick should be given a chance to play football this year — for the Eagles, or for any N.F.L. team. My answer is yes, and I would probably say yes even if Vick hadn't demonstrated an impressive-seeming amount of contrition for his sins. (His apology coach, so far as I can tell, seems to have been [Tony Dungy](#), with a possible assist [from God](#).) He's already paid for his crime, with almost two years in jail, and I'm not convinced that we should be in the business of dealing out social and professional punishment to people after they've served time behind bars.

Dogs and pigs may be equally intelligent, but we have a different relationship with dogs, which matters in making moral judgments.

I believe in the power of stigma, don't get me wrong, and I think our society would be better off if there were more severe costs for all kinds of technically legal, deeply immoral misbehavior. Indeed, I think there are many circumstances where we're too quick to use the law to punish sins that ought to be dealt with primarily through public shaming. (So I think Bill Clinton should have resigned in disgrace, but I think it was a mistake

to impeach him.) But once someone has been imprisoned for a crime — assuming, of course, that the sentence seems reasonably just — it's important to give the law the last word.

I might feel differently if Michael Vick had committed a crime against the game of football, a la Pete Rose betting on baseball or the Black Sox fixing games. (Likewise, I wouldn't want a civil servant who'd been imprisoned for accepting bribes to be reappointed to his old job.) But Vick didn't corrupt the integrity of the game. He committed an offense against society, and society has punished him for it. So the National Football League should let him play.

The harder question — besides, of course, whether signing Vick will make the Eagles [any better off](#) next year — is the one you raise about the gap between our revulsion at dogfighting and our tolerance of other forms of cruelty to animals. I don't really have a "bottom line" where the animal-welfare debate is concerned: Instead, I have very strong feelings that run somewhat in tension with one another.

On the one hand, I have an instinctive sympathy for the critique of factory farming that runs through not only the much-read Michael Pollan, but a whole universe (albeit a miniature one) of animal-friendly religious conservatives, from [Matthew Scully](#), the former Bush speechwriter, through writers like [Wendell Berry](#), [Rod Dreher](#), [Mary Eberstadt](#) and others. The "hiddenness" of the violence involved, in particular — the way most meat-eaters, myself included, are completely shielded from the link between the slaughterhouse and the supermarket — seems like it belongs to a larger critique of America's unseemly comfort with semi-invisible forms of brutality, from the violence inherent in our prison system ([this kind](#), especially) to the violence inherent in our abortion rate.

At the same time, though, I'm a unapologetic species-ist: I reject Peter Singer and all his works, I think that the value of animal lives is contingent and the value of human lives absolute, and I would leave a thousand pigs to die in conditions of absolute misery to save a single human infant. All of which makes me susceptible to critiques of Pollanism like [this one](#), from an American farmer, which defends modern agriculture on the grounds of human welfare: "We have to farm 'industrially,'" he writes, if we hope "to feed the world."

While I try to square this circle, I should say that even in my most pro-swine moments, I don't have any difficulty seeing why people are more outraged by cruelty toward dogs than by cruelty toward pigs. Yes, the two species may be equally intelligent, but we have a different relationship with dogs than we do with pigs: we've bred them and trained them, across millenia, to be not only our subjects but our intimates, our partners, our friends. And relationships ought to matter in making moral judgments. Brutus killing Caesar is worse than Brutus killing a stranger, and torturing a dog is worse than torturing a pig. In both cases, it's cruelty to animals. But with the dog, it's also the betrayal of a friend.

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1. 1. August 19, 2009 1:54 pm [Link](#)

Killing a dog serves no purpose, but the pig or chicken can feed a family.

— *johnboy*

2. 2. August 19, 2009 1:54 pm [Link](#)

I can be—and am—outraged by both the mistreatment of dogs and pigs. While most in American society currently recognize the wrongness of the former, they prefer to ignore the latter. I don't feel a conflict in my response to Vick. I can hate what he is without trying to hide the ham sandwich in my lunch bag.

I think anybody who did what Vick was convicted of doing—to any animal—is revealing a profound lack of humanity, a lack that can't be explained away by ignorance ("they did it when I was a kid, I didn't know it was wrong") or fixed by a couple of years in prison.

While the law may choose to regard killing dogs for sport in as being a different category of crime than killing people for sport, I don't believe they're in a different category morally. Causing or requiring the death of another creature for your amusement or gustatory pleasure, let's recognize it for what it is—it is selfishness and it is not ethically defensible.

— *Meghann*

3. 3. August 19, 2009 1:54 pm [Link](#)

"I'm not convinced that we should be in the business of dealing out social and professional punishment to people after they've served time behind bars." Ah, but this is done all the time to those without fame or sports talent - the average Joe or Jane doesn't get their job back after jail for a felony. And, there are those of use who believe the integrity of any sport is disrupted when morally bankrupt behavior is okay as long as it isn't directly connected to the game (kill a pedestrian while drunk and get your multi-million dollar job back a year later? Abuse women and keep getting millions?) Please - we need to stop worshipping at the altar of sports talent.

— *Diane F.*

4. 4. August 19, 2009 1:56 pm [Link](#)

In Vick's televised statement, he said he understood people's concerns about him "to some extent." This is not a full apology.

— *Saladina*

5. 5. August 19, 2009 1:56 pm [Link](#)

Jules:..... A dog's got personality. Personality goes a long way.

Vincent: Ah, so by that rationale, if a pig had a better personality, he would cease to be a filthy animal. Is that true?

Jules: Well, we'd have to be talkin' about one charming ***** pig. I mean, he'd have to be ten times more charming than that Arnold on Green Acres, you know what I'm saying?

(Taken from Dialogue from the movie Pulp Fiction)

— *Science Guy*

6. 6. August 19, 2009 1:57 pm [Link](#)

Why isn't there the same outrage over child abuse and molestation as over dogs. There is a great deal more of it, the perps usually are shielded by mothers or other family members and there isn't the outrage. And its s been happening for centuries.

And forgiveness? The most self-acclaimed religious folk seem to always want blood and vengeance, don't they - particularly in the South, the biggest arena for dogfighting, child molestation, murder and divorce. Ho, ho, ho. Hypocrites, to thine own self be true. .

— *marie*

7. 7. August 19, 2009 1:58 pm [Link](#)

The man did his time.

If you were to ban all the "law breakers" from the NFL it'd be a pretty meager league.

— *P.*

8. 8. August 19, 2009 2:00 pm [Link](#)

Really? You thought his apology was believable? I had the opposite impression-maybe because I had already seen an interview with the PR person who had been planning and plotting Michael Vick's return with his handler's and the Eagles for over a year. The 60 Minutes interview was a big part of that plan, by the way.

— *Scott*

9. 9. August 19, 2009 2:00 pm [Link](#)

Sorry, but I just can't get it up for animal rights. I really, REALLY wish I could... but I can't. I'm not a "pet person", and animals are just, well, ANIMALS.

I say: "If you can't put a harness on 'em, eat 'em!" (it works for Koreans, so it works for me)

As for Michael Vick: Can you say "career change"? If we're willing to allow/set-up professional athletes as role-models for our children/selves, then we should be equally willing to stand-'em-up for ridicule and as lessons-to-be-learned. Without the price of failure, what're the rewards of success

worth?

— *Jonathan B. Horen*

10. 10. August 19, 2009 2:00 pm [Link](#)

I think of the chicken farmer's comment in Paul Watson's new story on antibiotics in the upcoming issue of Miller McCune mag: "They are birds, and this is the way birds live," walking among chickens packed together, living out their six weeks of life on four inches of excrement that is cleaned out only when the current crop goes to slaughter.

But birds DON'T live that way. Human beings make these moral choices based on expediency. Derek Jensen has written perhaps the best book on the subject, "A Language Older than Words." It's a masterwork, though very, very dark.

Our family eats the wild game that America has, right now, in such plenty, following the regulations carefully, honoring the animals, buying the licenses that help pay for habitat and working for conservation as a way to pay back the debt. If we didn't have that option, right now, I'd be a vegetarian. I don't want to be a part of what I know about industrial meat production. The cruelty is too much, and I cannot imagine that the meat produced in this way is healthy.

— *hal herring*

11. 11. August 19, 2009 2:02 pm [Link](#)

If anyone eats meat or otherwise participates tangentially in the slaughter of millions of animals for food, then they have absolutely no moral high ground with which to look down upon Vick and his actions.

— *UCSD Triton*

12. 12. August 19, 2009 2:02 pm [Link](#)

How is what Michael Vick did with dogs any different than bull fighting? In fact, bull fighting is worse because the bull always dies a miserable death.

— *Donald*

13. 13. August 19, 2009 2:04 pm [Link](#)

Diane, there's a rather large pachyderm under the rug of your argument: Morality takes a backseat to the pure economic power of these public figures and what they mean to American society and culture. Not to mention that historically, we have a long record of forgiving important social and political figures their misdeeds in private life.

— *Soren J.*

14. 14. August 19, 2009 2:05 pm [Link](#)

why is it wrong to kill and animal?

— *bob*

15. 15. August 19, 2009 2:05 pm [Link](#)

After reading this I thought to myself, who *is* this guy, and why is he getting all of this attention in the NYTimes?? I googled Ross Douthat and found headlines like this, "Ross Douthat's Abortion Solution: Don't Let Women Have Abortions." I also read that "as an adolescent Douthat converted to Pentecostalism and then, with the rest of his family, to Catholicism." Okay, the picture is coming together here. He's also been called the "best single roadmap of where the [Republican] party should and is likely to head."

Peter Singer has a keener mind than this 30-year-old conservative will ever have. Peter Singer has a wisdom and deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all things in the universe than this 30-year-old conservative wunderkind will ever have.

— *braga*

16. August 19, 2009 2:06 pm [Link](#)

Killing of an animal, whether a dog or a pig or a chicken, or putting it through suffering, has the same moral implications. The chickens that we eat are essentially stacked right next to each other, so that they cannot move, and burn up the least amount of calories. I am sure a lot the pig farmers adopt a similar approach in order to maximize their returns on investment.

I am not saying that what Vik did was right. He put the dogs through torture knowing that there was no other purpose but for perhaps deriving sadistic pleasure. A person who watches such activities are guilty too, maybe to a lesser degree but still guilty. In the same vein, aren't we guilty too of abetting torture when we consume meat products knowing that the animals have suffered tremendously until the point they were slaughtered?

— *Chuck*

17. August 19, 2009 2:07 pm [Link](#)

What Michael Vick did is equal to a sociopath. To do that to any animal - especially man's best friend - has no conscience. I don't care if he saw a thousand dog fights growing up he did this as an adult. One does not change one's true self and his prison sentence was way to short.

It's one thing for him to watch dog fights but to torture these dogs after is equal to a serial killer as far as I am concerned.\

He should be banned for life from the NFL.

— *Layla*

18. August 19, 2009 2:07 pm [Link](#)

'Personality' of course!

(Stepped right into that one).

— *Publius*

19. August 19, 2009 2:09 pm [Link](#)

What has struck me most about the Vick affair is how people seemed more consistently and persistently outraged by his violence against dogs than Chris Brown's violence against a human being, his girlfriend Rhianna. Does anybody think it odd that Vick served two years hard time for his crime, while Chris

Brown seems poised to receive community labor?

— *AG*

20. 20. August 19, 2009 2:09 pm [Link](#)

as a vegetarian, i do not see any moral or logical reason to kill any animal, especially for food or sport.

i suppose in the eyes of those who adhere to a more omnivorous diet, dogs are pets while pig, cows, chickens are animals who purpose is to travel down the human alimentary canal,

what michael vick did was the intention, cruel exploitation of an innocent animal for pecuniary gain. his acts and those of all dog fighting proponents serve no purpose except to sate an ugly blood lu\$t

— *karen lyons kalmenson*

21. 21. August 19, 2009 2:09 pm [Link](#)

We should be ashamed and outraged that we tolerate cruelty to any animals, whether they be domestic pets or raised for food.

— *Francine*

22. 22. August 19, 2009 2:10 pm [Link](#)

Killing an animal for no purpose is silly and childish, and should be punished. For example, hunting deer for sport or dog-fighting. Neither serves any purpose.

Killing an animal for food DOES serve a purpose, which is the survival of humans.

— *Ghost*

23. 23. August 19, 2009 2:10 pm [Link](#)

@ #4 Diane F. "There are those of use who believe the integrity of any sport is disrupted when morally bankrupt behavior is okay"

No one claims it's okay. The man spent two years in prison and was forced to declare bankruptcy. He committed a felony and has been severely punished. Ross is saying it isn't our role to perpetually crucify people after they've done their time. The fact that he was convicted says that society does not find this to be okay. If he's going to be punished in an ongoing fashion, it should take forms that suit the crime such as disallowing him from owning an animal ever again and garnishing his salary for anti-cruelty charities, not disallowing him from being gainfully employed. Yeah, I get it, it's a 7-figure job and that annoys people, but the penal system did what it's designed to do and if a person can't be redeemed and rejoin society then why let anyone out of jail?

Thank you Gail and Ross for an insightful back-and-forth about this story.

— *Scott*

24. 24. August 19, 2009 2:11 pm [Link](#)

Gail,

You are absolutely right. It is rational to compare pig and dogs. Ross's argument that dog and pig should

be treated differently is on flimsy grounds and makes no sense for a rational objective thinker. I am of the opinion that every animal should be humanely treated. Every human being should treat animal with dignity and care they deserve.

Ram

— *ram*

25. August 19, 2009 2:11 pm [Link](#)

I am not sure why Michael Vick has to go to prison. All of the meat eaters in the world cause cruel treatment and ultimately death of countless animals, birds and fish (cows, chicken, pigs, duck and many more). I guess just because we eat them, it makes okay to treat them cruelly and kill them.

Don't know why dogs and cats are any different than cows and pigs. They are all mammals.

People who get outraged over dog fighting while eating a cheeseburger are just plain hypocrites.

— *William*

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Comments of the Moment

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— [Wallstreet Jon](#)

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[“ I appreciate Ted Kennedy for his commitment to improving the lives of those who were vastly less fortunate than he. A flawed man who strove for redemption - that's good enough for me.”](#)

— [JM](#)

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[“ Why isn't there the same outrage over child abuse and molestation as over dogs?”](#)

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[“ Obama is within an inch of failing on his health insurance reform legislation. He had better quickly get a clear message, some better graphics, and a concentrated program for presentations. ”](#)

— [MJones](#)

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– Pragmatist

What's Wrong With a Single-Payer System?

“ The screamingly obvious thing is the need for more than two parties. ”

– Dawn

In Praise of Partisanship

“ The congressional leaders should write in a provision that if a member of Congress votes against a public option, then that member should have their public option taken away from them. If they are not for it, why do they take it for themselves? ”

– Jim McLaughlin

Partisan Health Care Politics

“ The most important characteristic which is woefully lacking in today's elites has nothing to do with the class they came from. It is a sense of stewardship and responsibility afforded because of accumulated family wealth. Where are those who have the wealth to contribute and talent to lead, and desire to do so for a mission, not the accumulation of more wealth? ”

– Melissa Wells

Who's Best? Who's Brightest?

“ If anything, all this bed-hopping just proves that marriage is an outdated social custom that doesn't work. ”

– Kitty in FL

The Good, the Bad, the Ugly

“ Unless there is sufficient reason for America to force the cause of events, which I think is an option, it may be better to walk the diplomatic tight rope. ”

– Pius Okaneme

The Insanity on and in Iran

“ Health care won't be rationed, but third party payers will and have been restricting what they will cover. This is reasonable and necessary, and another example of Republicans trying to scare the public into clinging to the status quo. ”

– Ohio MD

Health Care Follies

“ My daughter Ivy was one of the graduates David addressed last night. As I sat there listening to his brilliant speech I wondered if the graduates really could comprehend the wisdom of his words. I certainly hope so. ”

– Joe Monaco

Advice for High School Graduates

“ The problem with guns reside in the drug and gang culture. Solve those two problems first and you won't have to worry about guns anymore. ”

— Gene Skala

Guns, Gays and Abortion

“ The lack of women judges in most of our nation's high courts severely compromises the quality of justice dispensed in case after case. ”

— JP Gal

Sotomayor's Life Matters

“ If there was a choice between compromising gun control to the Republicans and pushing health care legislation...by all means, Obama should do it!”

— Messerole

Is Obama the 'Boss'?

“ Prosecuting a few who acted in accord with the wishes of the vast majority of the public is not wise. The best thing that we can do is to make sure the bad behavior stops.”

— The Wheel Turns

Coming Clean

“ The problem with the "anti-empathy" argument is that the Constitution is a set of guiding principles, and it leaves application of those principles to modern times. When the text of the law isn't availing, empathy is critical to interpreting the law.”

— Tim O'Shea

Who Will Replace Souter?

“ It is worrisome that the Democrats have no credible opposition to their agenda, something that this country really needs at this moment. ”

— SJ

Specter Survives, at Least for Now

“ I wonder about these shipping companies ready to spend thousands on ransoms and yet we hear nothing about security forces on the ships. ”

— pat driscoll

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“ Postponing a final decision and allowing situations to develop naturally, until a decision is ripened, is a Very Mature and intellectual approach to government which has been sorely lacking at the highest levels for a long time. ”

— Grant Stern

White House Time Bombs

[“ Do health care! When Canadians and Germans lose their jobs, they still have health care. Why can't we?”](#)

– [Louise](#)

[Obama's To-Do List](#)

[“ Thank heaven the discussion has finally turned to the most likely solution to our current financial mess: Consumer spending. Yes, let's be understated, but waiters and arborists need chickens in their pots too. ”](#)

– [Jake Stone](#)

[Let Them Eat a Little Bit of Cake](#)

[“ The economic stimulus package was supposed to be quick, targeted and temporary. Looking at the depth of our economic woes, ... making America work requires more than this stimulus package. ”](#)

– [Lisa Sun](#)

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[“ We are on the verge of a complete economic collapse and have a stimulus package that has yet to be diligently unpacked by the media and we are discussing if we still feel as good about Obama as we did during the inauguration. Didn't I see this on SNL?”](#)

– [Anthony](#)

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[“ It's clear that Barack is already slipping. The only meaningful thing he has done so far is repeat the oath of office, and even that probably wasn't absolutely necessary. ”](#)

– [andrew](#)

[Looking for Change in All the Wrong Places](#)

[“ The meaning of the word 'bipartisan' has reached a low point almost impossible to transcend. The word has not just lost meaning; it has taken on its opposite, and we should quit using it. How about 'harmonious' instead?”](#)

– [Polly Bohmfalk](#)

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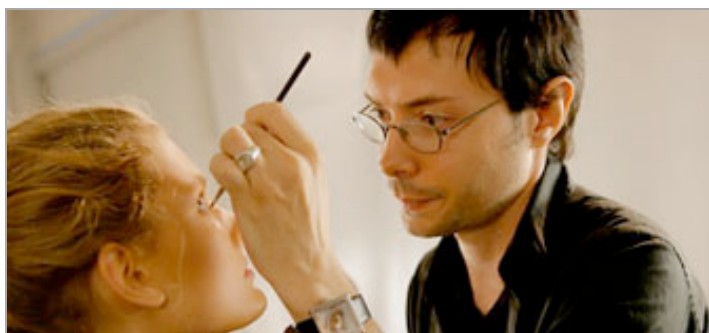
From the Opinion Blogs

[Freakonomics](#)[Call Me Bruce](#)

Women in the legal profession with more masculine-sounding names, like Cameron or Kelly, have better odds of becoming judges than women with feminine names, according to a new study by Bentley Coffey and Patrick McLaughlin (gated; abstract here).

[Paul Krugman](#)[Macro situation notes](#)

A couple of pictures to illustrate just how big the difference is between the technical end of the recession, which has probably happened, and anything resembling a satisfactory performance.



Diversity beyond the runway

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