Francione: We're all Michael Vick

UPDATE 8/16/09: Michael Vick was released from prison in May, and on July 27, NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell bound him to a probation-restricted work program. The Philadelphia Eagles have given him a one-year deal with an option for a second year.

In a conversation yesterday, someone said to me, "You're never going to watch an Eagles game and say that you're eating chicken while they're playing." "Why not?" I asked. "Because it's cruel." "No way," they said. "How can you enjoy an Eagles game while you're eating a hamburger or a hot dog made from animals who had a life and death every bit as horrible and unnecessary as Vick's?"

Michael Vick has, according to his lawyer, agreed to plead guilty to federal dogfighting charges against him. Over past weeks, there's been enormous amount of coverage of the dogfighting operation sponsored by artefacts of the Vick family. There are, with all three other men, has been identified in federal charging documents. The details of the charges claim that Vick sponsored illegal dog fighting, gambling on dog fights and permitted acts of cruelty, causing some community condemning dog fighting and calling for Vick to be punished. Nike and Reebok have suspended their endorsement contracts.

Please let me be very clear from the outset: I think that dog fighting is a terrible thing. But I must say that the Vick case rather dramatically demonstrates what I call our "normal schizophrenia" about animals.

This is, I think, the case, in that we do not think deeply about our most obvious obligations to animals. In this country alone, we kill more than 10 billion land animals annually for food. The animals we eat suffer as much as the dogs are used in dog-fighting. There is no "weird" for us to eat meat, dairy or eggs. Indeed, these foods are increasingly linked to human diseases and animal agriculture is an environmental disaster for the planet. We impose pain, suffering and death on these billions of nonhumans because we enjoy eating their flesh and the products that we make from them. That's just how it works.

There is something bizarre about condemning Michael Vick for using dogs in a hideous form of entertainment when we kill sentient beings (although we may pay others to do the dirty work) because we derive enjoyment from it. But then I asked the further question: How are those of us who eat animal flesh and animal products any different from blowtorching dogs. We would all regard such conduct as monstrous because we all agree that it is wrong to inflict "unnecessary" suffering on animals - and pleasure, amusement and convenience cannot count as satisfying the "necessity" requirement. Whether or not we agree that we are all Michael Vick.

In a conversation yesterday, someone said to me, "how am I ever going to watch an Eagles game and see that guy every week?"

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We are troubled - when a cow is involved, we derive enjoyment from blowtorching dogs. We would all regard such conduct as monstrous because we all agree that it is wrong to inflict "unnecessary" suffering on animals - and pleasure, amusement and convenience cannot count as satisfying the "necessity" requirement. Whether or not we agree that we are all Michael Vick.

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