

## ARTICLES

## Rorty on Pre-Linguistic Awareness in Pigs

Richard Rorty's book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*<sup>1</sup> has been one of the most important works in philosophy in the last decade; in one chapter on "Pre-Linguistic Awareness" (pp. 182-192) Rorty holds that we ought to abandon the "Platonic urge" to ground our moral prohibitions on an ontology of nature. This claim is important in its own right and as an instance of Rorty's defense of hermeneutics. Apparently, Rorty's discussion is not so much intended to be a justification of a position as a diagnosis of how we think about and deal with pre-linguistic beings, especially non-human animals. But eventually this diagnosis reaches a conclusion which needs justification, that "we send pigs to slaughter with equanimity. . . this is not 'irrational'" (p. 190). In this paper I claim that Rorty's treatment of non-human animals is not sufficient to establish the case for meat-eating, as Rorty seems to think. Although Rorty never treats meat-eating explicitly, I assume that pigs are primarily slaughtered in order to be eaten.

Rorty, in an analysis of Sellars, admits that some non-human beings (e.g., rats, amoebas, computers - p. 182) are capable of awareness, and some human beings without language can experience pain e.g., infants - p. 183). But language for Rorty (contra Sellars), although it does not change the quality of our experience, does let us enter a community whose members can exchange justifications of assertions (p. 185). This is not a community of feeling, but a linguistic community in which rights are dependent on a person's relations with others to whom (or to which) he can speak (p. 187). That is, moral prohibitions

against hurting others, the nature of a moral community, and the grounds for ascribing rights are not dependent on facts of nature, like sentience; to believe in a community of feeling as the basis for moral prohibitions is to fall victim to the dreaded "Platonic urge" (p. 191). Rather, moral prohibitions and rights are attributed on the basis of a being's membership in a linguistic community.

For Rorty, the non-conceptual, non-linguistic knowledge of what a raw feel (e.g., pain) is like is attributed on the basis of a being's potential membership in the social practice of a linguistic community (pp. 188-189). "Babies and the more attractive sorts of animal," like bats (?) and koala bears, are credited with "having feelings" whereas photoelectric cells, pigs, spiders, and amoebas are not so credited. This "community feeling" (in Rorty's linguistic sense) unites us with anything humanoid. To be humanoid "is to have a human face, and the most important part of that face is a mouth which we can imagine uttering sentences." That is, we can imagine babies opening their mouths and speaking about the presence of pain, but we cannot imagine spiders or pigs doing so.

The point that Rorty wants to make is that moral prohibitions against hurting babies are not "ontologically grounded" (p. 190) in their possession of feeling. In fact, it is the other way around. We do not move from an awareness of feelings in others to moral prohibitions designed to protect these others, but rather from moral prohibitions to an attribution of feeling:

The moral prohibitions are

expressions of a sense of community based on the imagined possibility of conversation, and the attribution of feelings is little more than a reminder of these prohibitions (p. 190).

Rorty's account seems to be that:

- (1) If X is an actual or potential member of a linguistic community, or if we attribute language to X, then it is wrong to hurt X.
- (2) If it is wrong to hurt X, then X is an actual or potential member of a community of feeling, or we attribute feelings to X.
- (3) To attribute feelings to X is only to remind ourselves that it is wrong to hurt X.

Since Rorty is as important a philosopher as there is in America today, he merits attention, no matter how implausible some of his accounts are. The following five points should be sufficient to cast doubt on his view of pigs and to support my claim.

A. The first difficulty with Rorty's account arises when he admits that pigs do much better on intelligence tests than koalas (p. 190). Why, then, do we attribute having feelings to koalas but not to pigs?<sup>2</sup> Because "pigs don't writhe in quite the right humanoid way, and the pig's face is the wrong shape for the facial expressions which go with ordinary conversation" (p. 190). One suspects that the "attractive" humanoid features of koalas are arbitrary grounds for attributing feelings to them but not to pigs. I for one, and I am not alone, do not find koalas (or bats!) more "attractive" than pigs; nor can I more easily imagine them speaking than pigs.<sup>3</sup> Rorty's description of

the way in which "we" care about koalas but not pigs amounts to a factual empirical claim that is not universally true.

B. On Rorty's grounds one wonders how he can legitimately say that pigs "writhe." If to writhe means, as the OED suggests, "a twinge of *pain*" or "to contort the body, limbs, etc., as from *agony, emotion*" (my emphasis), then how can Rorty say pigs writhe? Since they lack attractive humanoid features, or mouths that we can imagine speaking, we should not, on Rorty's account, be able to attribute pain, agony, or emotion to them.

C. Rorty may try to escape objection (B) by appealing to his two different senses of awareness. Awareness-1 is manifested by rats, amoebas, computers, and presumably pigs, and consists merely in "reliable signaling" (p. 182). Awareness-2 is:

...manifested only by beings whose behavior we construe as the utterance of sentences with the intention of justifying the utterance of other sentences. In this later sense awareness is justified true belief - knowledge - but in the former sense it is ability to respond to stimuli (pp. 182-183).

If Rorty is suggesting that a pig's writhing is only awareness-1, then his attribution of feelings to koalas, bats, and babies (not pigs) must mean that koalas, bats, and babies are capable of, or we can imagine them capable of, awareness-2. Once again, this seems arbitrary, especially when Rorty's use of the term "behavior" is noticed in the above quote. As far as I know, koalas and bats exhibit no behavior that pigs do not exhibit that can be construed "as the utterance of sentences with the intention of justifying the utterance of other sentences." Nor is it clear that infants

exhibit such behavior. Therefore, Rorty's imagined possibility of conversation with bats and koalas would be based *solely* on the shape of their mouths. Further, to lump rats and pigs, on the one hand, together with amoebas and computers, on the other, is misleading. One finds it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine what it would mean to say that a computer writhed, and hence had pain, agony, or emotion. Yet it is so easy to say that a pig can writhe that even Rorty says so.

D. I have twice accused Rorty of arbitrariness, to which he might respond that the charge of arbitrariness is irrelevant since *any* distinction regarding who should have rights is somewhat arbitrary. The case of animals is similar, he might say, to his example of adult rights descending on a person on his eighteenth birthday (p. 187). There is nothing that is clear-cut about this date, but after the eighteenth birthday there *is* a shift in a person's relations with others. Line-drawing may be "injudicious," but it is neither a mistake nor irrational. What might be unfair, for Rorty, would be to give adult rights to all eighteen year olds, except for some chosen people, who would have to wait until they were thirty. He might analogously argue that it would be fair, though arbitrary, to slaughter pigs, but unfair to make exceptions for some pigs.

This stance is troublesome for several reasons. While picking the eighteenth birthday as the date for acquisition of adult rights is arbitrary, because there is no precise time at which people, in general, become suited for the possession of such rights, it is *not* arbitrary to say that most people should not be given them at age five and should already have been given them by the age of forty. There is no reason to pick the day a person becomes eighteen rather

than the day before or the day after his birthday, but any of the three would obviously be far better than the fifth birthday or the fortieth birthday. So also, shrimp and oysters, as Singer notices,<sup>4</sup> are in a grey area where our decision as to whether or not they have pain is concerned; and if they do have pain, whether it is wrong to hurt them. But pigs are not in such a grey area, as Rorty unwittingly admits when he notices their writhing.

E. To send a being to slaughter involves a decision, which Rorty not only makes, but makes in the case of pigs with "equanimity." This might imply only that the person who sends pigs to slaughter is calm and composed, and is not irrational. The word equanimity, however, as defined by the OED, carries with it the notion of "*fairness of judgement, impartiality, equity*" (my emphasis), which indicates anything but arbitrariness since fairness and equity are, by definition, opposed to arbitrariness. If it is *fair* to slaughter a pig, or a matter of *equity*, then Rorty must do two things. First, he must avoid the charge of arbitrariness, and not just in the minimal sense of slaughtering some pigs but making exceptions for others, i.e., he must find a non-arbitrary basis for slaughtering pigs at all. And second, he must at the same time avoid the "Platonic urge" to make his position non-arbitrary by an appeal to some fact of nature. It is hard to see how Rorty can accomplish either one of these tasks, much less both. Or, he might try to avoid objection (E) altogether by refraining from the use of the term "equanimity."

Although I will not offer anything like an adequate alternative to Rorty's account of pre-linguistic awareness in pigs, I would like briefly to suggest how one might give in to the "Platonic urge" without building moral

prohibitions on "old style" metaphysics. Rorty's own noticing of pigs' writhing indicates that pigs *do* communicate in their own way. Although Rorty may be right, along with Hegel (p. 192), that the individual human being apart from society (and especially, for Rorty, its linguistic conventions) "is just one more animal," it does not follow that it is legitimate to inflict unnecessary suffering on "just one more animal." Pigs and other animals indicate to us through writhing that they are not capable only of awareness-1, even if they fall short of awareness-2. Pigs are also capable of experiencing pain, as Rorty might have to reluctantly admit. It is just not true that human language is the only (or at times, the most reliable) guide to the feelings, interests, or pains of other beings. In the case of human beings language can disguise facts as well as communicate them. If a dog's whimpering and clawing at the door cannot inform one of the animal's need to go out then neither can the student's verbal and plaintive request that he has to go to the bathroom. In fact, the student may be lying. Rorty seems to have fallen victim to the dogma that there is a vast gulf between natural and conventional (humanoid) bearers of meaning, giving rise to the gulf between the ways we treat (non-humanoid) animals and men. At best this gulf is a difference in degree.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps he should consider that many, if not most, of the attributions of pain we make to other human beings are *not* based on articulated evidence, but on writhings, moans, the sight of blood, etc., all of

which are exhibited by pigs. In the meantime, it seems that Rorty has not so much destroyed the mirror of nature as clouded it.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> I am not assuming a necessary connection between intelligence and feeling; I am only searching for Rorty's criteria for the attribution of feeling.

<sup>3</sup> Even on an imaginative level Rorty's account seems defective; note the popularity of the cartoon character Porky Pig, or of Miss Piggy, who talks incessantly.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (N.Y.: N.Y. Review, 1975), p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> I am relying here on the work of Bernard Rollin and Peter Singer. Especially see Rollin's "Beast and Men: The Scope of Moral Concern," *Modern Schoolman* 55 (March, 1978). Also, I would like to thank the readers of an earlier version of this article.