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Bernard E. Rollin

*Colorado State University*, [bernard.rollin@colostate.edu](mailto:bernard.rollin@colostate.edu)

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# Rodeo and Recollection-Applied Ethics and Western Philosophy

Bernard E. Rollin  
*Colorado State University*

## 1.

Like many other sports, rodeo can be understood on a variety of different levels. Although professional rodeos (those sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association) recognize only a limited set of events as part of the sport—bull riding, steer wrestling, saddle bronc riding, bareback bronc riding, calf roping, team roping, and barrel racing—numerous other events are often included. These events are too diverse to list exhaustively but may include goat roping and barrel racing (women's events); wild horse races; wild cow races; chuck wagon races; cowboy bull fighting (in which the animal is not hurt); calf riding for small children; steer riding (less dangerous than bull riding); steer tripping (illegal in most states); rawhide racing; pick-up or rescue races; milk races (where nursing foals are separated from mares, and race back to mama); cow, buffalo, or horse turd throws; greased pig contests; cutting horse exhibitions; competitions involving dressing a wild cow in a negligee. Charro, or Mexican rodeos, which have recently garnered much publicity, featured horse tripping, an event now banned legislatively in most states.

The symbolic dimensions of rodeo are quite varied and many have been well-discussed by Elizabeth Lawrence, a veterinarian and anthropologist, in her *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (1). In my own experience, rodeos express a broad range of western values relevant to our discussion:

1. *Management of Animals*; Historically, rodeo evolved from ranch practices that were commonly employed as a normal part of raising cattle under range conditions. Obviously, calves and steers often needed to be roped, horses broken, and steers sometimes were wrestled to the ground or tripped by solitary cowboys in order to be doctored. In justification of rodeo against attacks from people outside of the culture, participants and defenders often invoke the relevance of these practices to the cattle business. I shall discuss this point more fully later.
2. *Survival and Success in a Harsh Environment*, Western cattle ranching is a hard life, lived in a unforgiving, non-"user friendly" environment. Ranchers may control 250,000 or more acres with little help. The nearest neighbors may be 80 miles away. In the New Mexico desert, each cow-calf unit may require 1,000 acres on which to forage; in Colorado or Wyoming this average can drop to between 20 and 50. Under the best of conditions, the land is harsh, subject to climatic variational extremes of over 100 degrees, seriously deficient in water, and intolerant of human errors. Not far from where I live in Northern Colorado, travelers have been known to leave their cars during wind-whipped ground blizzards and freeze to death, unable to find their cars from 20 feet away. In a symbolic sense, rodeo historically trumpeted (and continues to proclaim) ranchers' success despite nature's stacking the deck considerably against them.
3. *Demonstration and Extolling of Skills and Traits That Made Survival Possible*, Such skills embody primordial masculine virtues—physical strength, courage, quickness, independence (few events

involve teams), and self-sufficiency. With the exception of specific women's events, such as barrel racing, rodeo participation is overwhelmingly male.

4. *The Uniqueness of Western American Culture and the Pride Taken Therein by Western Americans*, It is no secret that the United States has traditionally been politically, socially, and economically dominated by the urban East. In fact, one of the points I make to rancher groups about the need for them to take animal welfare/animal rights social concerns seriously is that "ten square blocks of New York City can outvote all of Wyoming." Westerners and not just ranchers feel an element of being neglected, misunderstood, and caricatured stepchildren. A good deal of these feelings are justified (e.g., vide Saul Steinberg's classic cartoon of the New Yorker's conceptual map of the United States, where the entire West, with the exception of California, is represented by a cactus).

Having been so caricatured is an old story, but until recently, the West was at least distorted from a distance. With the recent massive immigration of Easterners, Californians, and Yuppies into ranch states such as Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah, there is a fear among Westerners of losing their culture-of being "Californicated," as they say. This is compounded by environmentalist attacks on ranching; attempts to raise public land grazing fees or even to remove ranching from public lands; attacks on beef by physicians, feminists, and the Beyond Beef Campaign; attempts at gun control in a culture where gun ownership and handling is traditionally second nature; gobbling up of ranch land by developers; and revisionist accounts of Western American history. Outside attacks on rodeo, often based on urban ignorance, as when cowboys are accused of using leather vises on horses' testicles to make them buck, represent an example directly relevant to the topic at hand.

The result is something of a siege mentality, recently vividly symbolized by the defiant rancher in Nevada who crashed a forest service barrier. And the more they feel besieged, the more Westerners flaunt their uniqueness. Rodeo is probably the strongest symbol of this uniqueness, to no small extent because it is so *prima facie* shocking to the current non-Western, Eastern-urban sensibilities that tend to view nature as good, not adversarial; the pet as the paradigm for all animals; violent sports as abhorrent; and the cowboy as a highly ambivalent figure at best and as an ignorant, know-nothing, brutal red neck shit-kicker at worst.

It is worth pausing here to elaborate on the last point, as it is directly relevant to social ethical concerns about rodeo. There is no cultural icon that is as iridescent as that of the cowboy. On the other hand, the cowboy is John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Jimmy Stewart—a gentleman, a protector of widows and orphans, slow to anger, resistant to authority, a loner, and an irresistible force once aroused. On the other hand, the cowboy is equally the reckless gunfighter, the outlaw who shoots up a town and makes tenderfoot dance, the lyncher of hippies and the shooter of eagles. (During the Vietnam war, I was frequently told by Europeans that the war reflected Americans' "cowboy mentality.") With the advent of the 80s and 90s, it is the latter take on the cowboy that has tended to predominate, and, while the urban public may thrill at bull-riding and bronc-riding, it is the roping of "cute little calves" that leaves the most indelible and negative imprint and feeds the negative image of the cowboy.

It is not therefore surprising that rodeo is a very plausible target for animal advocates. In the 1970s, a group of over 200 animal welfare/animal rights organizations signed a well-publicized document affirming that rodeo was absolutely unacceptable morally because of the pain and fear engendered in animals. Further, the groups claimed that rodeo could not be fixed or improved, it must be abolished. I was puzzled by this document, for it appeared to me that rodeo was amenable to very plausible modifications that would significantly improve the treatment of rodeo animals. To allay my curiosity, I phoned the vice

president of one of the signatory groups, a very powerful organization, and queried him as to the claim that rodeo could not be improved. "Oh that," he said. "That's just fund-raising hype. Of course rodeo can be fixed. But why would we care about fixing it? Rodeo is an insignificant sport, practiced by an insignificant number of people in a few politically insignificant places. If we take a tough line on rodeo, we bring in a lot of contributions, and don't make any powerful enemies!"

## 2.

This, then, is a sketch of the situation I walked into in the 1970s when I first confronted the ethical issues in rodeo as a spin-off from my work in veterinary ethics. My involvement with rodeo issues deepened considerably as I became increasingly occupied with ethical issues in animal agriculture, and particularly with Western ranching. This involvement in turn intensified as I was asked to lecture on the ethics of rodeo to rodeo cowboys, fair and rodeo managers, and others in the rodeo community. In what follows, I hope to show that the issues are far more complex and morally ambiguous than most people realize, and provide some indication of how what is today called "applied ethics" can play a constructive role in social ethics. I speak from a considerable base of experience; between 1980 and the present (1996), I have lectured to somewhere between 5 and 10,000 western ranchers and rodeo people. I have lectured at the Worland Wyoming Bull Test Seminar, the Colorado Cattlemen's Annual Meeting, the Stockmen's Seminar in Kiowa, Colorado, the Houston Livestock show, the Northern Rodeo Association, and dozens of other major and minor forums in Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, New Mexico, Nebraska, Nevada, British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Australia, and New Zealand. I have worked closely with the Colorado Cattlemen's Association on successfully eliminating mandated USDA face-branding of Mexican Cattle-the first time an agricultural group has taken a pure animal welfare stand against practices allegedly implemented for their benefit. I have taught a course in ethics and animal welfare to ranch kids at Colorado State University since 1980, and lectured to animal science departments all over the West. My work has been written up positively in *Beef Today*, *Colorado Farmer and Rancher* and the *Western Livestock Journal*. And, most remarkable to outsiders, I have been able to garner acquiescence to the notion that animals have rights from over 90% of my rancher and rodeo audiences (as opposed to 80% of the general population).

Before discussing my moral-philosophical interactions with members of the Western cattle culture in detail, a basic point about ethical argument needs to be stressed. Plato pointed out long ago that when one is doing ethics with rational adults, one cannot teach, one can only *remind*. In other words, one cannot provide people with a list of ethical answers the way one can teach the state capitols; one can only help them think through ethical issues or their own ethical assumptions in a rational way. (Hence Plato's metaphor of the moral philosopher as midwife.)

An excellent illustration of this point can be found in my veterinary ethics teaching. Like anything else, there are good years and bad years. One particularly bad year, I had spent a great deal of time explaining to the students that I was not there to teach them what was right and wrong-if they didn't know that by the time they reached vet school, they and society were in serious trouble. My job, I insisted, was to teach them how to "think about ethics," how to recognize situations in veterinary medicine in which subtle questions of right and wrong might arise and not be noticed; how to apply their notions of right and wrong to new situations; how to avoid contradicting themselves when doing so, and in short, how to reason about right and wrong. This particular class wouldn't accept this. They wanted me, they said, to tell them exactly what was right and wrong. "We want answers" they whined. "You only give us questions!" Try as I might, I could not get them to see that my job was to help them think about such problems, not to dictate solutions.

One day, I had an inspiration. I came to class early and filled the blackboard with a series of statements: "Never euthanize a healthy animal." "Never crop ears or dock tails." When the students came into class, I pointed to the statements and told them to copy them down and memorize them. "Why?" they asked suspiciously. "Because I'll test you on them," I said. "What are they?" they queried. "These are the answers you've been asking for," I replied. "Who the hell are you to give us answers?" they shouted.

In my own teaching, I employ a different metaphor to make Plato's point. In discussing ethical disagreement, I talk of the need to use judo, not sumo. In other words, one cannot force ethics on someone else—one can only use a person's own ethics to extract the conclusion one wishes. I cannot make you believe what you do not believe, but I can make you realize that what you in fact believe is not what you think you believe. This is equally true whether one is operating on the level of social ethics or personal ethics. To take an example from the former, compare the passage of Prohibition with the passage of the Civil Rights Act. The first was a case of sumo-attempting to force an ethic on people that they did not believe in. The result was a failure; people continued to drink, perhaps even more than they had before. In contradistinction to that situation, Lyndon Johnson, as a Southerner, realized that all Americans—including segregationists—accepted two premises: All humans should be treated equally, and Blacks are human. The problem was, they had never bothered to draw the conclusion! Johnson guessed correctly that if he "wrote the conclusion large" in law, people would "recollect" it. Had he been wrong, the Civil Rights Act would have been as big a failure as Prohibition!

Despite the evident truth of Plato's assertion, people tend to ignore it. Consider how we attempt to force our views on teenagers, succeeding only in reinforcing their commitment to rejecting them! Consider the animal activists who glumly informed me of their disappointment when, after picketing a medical school for two days while carrying signs reading "Stop the Nazi butchery" and "Research is torture," none of the medical researchers had come out to discuss the issues with them.

Given that sumo doesn't work, and given the siege mentality we discussed earlier, coupled with the fact that this mentality is significantly justified, and given further the independence of cowboys, and the ignorance of both rodeo and ranching displayed by many of their critics, it is not surprising that rodeo and ranch people tend to be defensive. It was thus clear to me that if there was ever a situation for judo and recollection, I was facing it when asked to speak before such audiences.

For recollection to work, there must be something to recollect. If the negative stereotype of the cowboy is correct, and cowboys are insensitive, swaggering, redneck bullies, delighting in frightening and hurting animals, attempting to do Socratic dialogue with rodeo people on the ethics of animal use in rodeo would be as useful an exercise as Alan Ginsburg's attempt to levitate the Pentagon during the Vietnam war by chanting mantras. Happily, such a situation does not obtain, and the truth is very far from the stereotype.

In the first place, cowboys and ranchers, as a group, are the most fair-minded people I have ever dealt with. In my speeches and writings, I have often said that, of the almost 700 groups around the world to whom I have lectured on animal ethics and other bioethical issues, the best audience is one made up of Western ranchers, the worst is MD-PhDs in medical schools. The ranchers will hear what you say, the medical research people will tend to hear what they expect you to say. One Denver *Post* reporter, while commenting in the mid-1980s on my history of effecting change in animal use at Colorado State University, pointed out that I had benefited from CSU's *ethos* as a cowboy institution. "You would never have been able to do this at Harvard," he said, speaking as a graduate of Harvard. "There, they would hang you for what they believed you stand for. At CSU, on the other hand, the Western tradition of 'hear em out before you hang em' is still alive and well."

Second, and the importance of this point cannot be overestimated, ranchers and cowboys are in fact the last bastion of the ethic of animal husbandry, which pervaded animal agriculture for all of human history until the advent of revolutionary changes in agriculture that took place in the mid-twentieth century. For all of human history, agriculture has represented the overwhelmingly predominant use of animals in society. The essence of traditional agriculture was husbandry, which meant first-rate care. (*Husband*, etymologically, is "bonded to the house.") Husbandry meant putting the animals one was raising into the most optimal environment possible, the environment in which the animal was best suited to thrive by natural and artificial selection, and augmenting those natural powers with the provision of food during famine, water during drought, protection from predation, medical care, etc. So powerful is the concept of husbandry that it became, for the Psalmist, the metaphor for God's relationships to man: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He leadeth me to green pastures. He maketh me to lie down beside still waters. He restoreth my soul."

Husbandry agriculture was therefore about putting square pegs in square holes, round pegs in round holes, and in doing so, creating as little friction as possible. The result of doing this was a win/win situation for both animal producer and animal. This is what Temple Grandin has called the "ancient contract" in which animals were better off in quality of life than they would have been on their own, and humans in turn harvested the animals' products or lives. Any harm done to the animals would as much harm the producer. This is why a minimalistic anticruelty ethic sufficed for thousands of years as the social consensus ethic for animals. Only a sadist or psychopath would hurt an animal intentionally for no good reason. To be sure, this ideal was clouded by relatively short-term insults such as branding, castration, and occasional rough handling, but wise husbandry people knew that "gentling was best." (Gentle handling has been demonstrated to correlate significantly with both milk production in dairy cattle and reproductive success in swine.)

Western ranchers still adhere to the ethic of husbandry, while the rest of agriculture has changed dramatically in the mid-twentieth century. The use of high technology-intensive agriculture (what the vernacular refers to as "factory farming") has broken the fair contract and turned agriculture into a patently exploitative activity, wherein the values of efficiency and productivity have replaced the values of husbandry. We are no longer constrained in our agricultural practices by the animals' biological natures; we have "technological sanders" that allow us to put square pegs in round holes without affecting bottom-line values. Whereas no nineteenth century agriculturalist would have dreamed of crowding thousands of chickens in one building in cages, if only because they would all have died in a month of disease, we now have antibiotics and vaccines that allow us to effect such crowding, yet make a profit. Technology has, in effect, divorced animal productivity from animal happiness.

However, Western ranchers haven't changed their methods of raising animals. They still practice husbandry agriculture that respects the animals natures. I have only to start the sentence "We take care of the animals . . .," and my rancher audiences chorus ". . . and they take care of us." My cowboy students invariably tell me the only time they ever "got whipped" by their dad was when they went off to a dance or ball game without taking care of the animals first. No one is likelier to report—and testify against—cruelty and neglect of animals than ranchers. At a closed meeting for agriculturalists in Colorado, the president of the Colorado Cattlemen's Association declared decisively that "If I had to raise animals like those veal people do, I'd get the hell out of the business."

This, then, is the ethic that I can get ranchers to recollect. I go on to explain to them that, contrary to the propaganda they often receive from industry sources, the notion of animals having rights that need to be codified in law now that those rights are no longer guaranteed by a husbandry-based agriculture is a widespread social concern, and a conservative rather than a radical view. In fact, I point out, it is high technology agriculture and the attendant ability to respond to only those aspects of an animal's nature

that are relevant to productivity, rather than all of the animal's needs constitutive of its nature, that is radical relative to the history of agriculture. Once I have explained this, over 90% of the ranchers and rodeo people I address affirm that of course animals should have rights that are protected.

### 3.

Since the overwhelming majority of rodeo people come from ranch backgrounds and have thus grown up with the previously described ethic, it is not all that difficult to get them to recollect that ethic, and apply it to rodeo, something they have typically failed to do on their own by compartmentalizing the two domains. Similarly, when I discuss this with ranchers, they often point out that they are reluctant to hire rodeo competitors, whom they see as athletes rather than husbandrymen. As one rancher said to me, "If I need to rope a calf, it is usually because the animal is sick or injured. If that is the case, the last thing I need is some rodeo jock running the animal hell for leather." Indeed I have heard cattlemen seriously discuss the need for distancing beef production from rodeo in the public mind.

In any case, I have enjoyed ample experience using the Socratic recollection approach to get putatively hostile people to begin thinking about the morality of rodeo. One excellent example leaps immediately to mind. Five years ago, I was asked to speak to the Colorado State University Rodeo Club about the new ethic in relation to rodeo. When I entered the room, I found some two dozen cowboys seated as far back as possible, cowboy hats over their eyes, booted feet up, arms folded defiantly, arrogantly smirking at me with what I call the "Shitkicker smirk." With the quick-wittedness for which I am known, I immediately sized up the situation as a hostile one.

"Why am I here?" I began by asking. No response. I repeated the question. "Seriously, why am I here; I'm not asking you in the metaphysical sense, but rather, what do you expect? You ought to know, you invited me!" One brave soul ventured, "You're here to tell us what is wrong with rodeo."

"Would you listen?" said I. "Hell, no!" they chorused. "Well, in that case I would be stupid to try, and I'm not stupid."

A long silence followed. Finally someone suggested, "Are you here to help us think about rodeo?" "Is that what you want?" I asked. "Yes," they said. "Okay," I replied, "I can do that."

For the next hour, without mentioning rodeo, I discussed many aspects of ethics: the nature of social morality and individual morality, the relationship between law and ethics, the need for an ethic for how we treat animals. I queried them as to their position on the latter question. After some dialogue, they all agreed that, as a minimal ethical principle, one should not hurt animals for trivial reasons. "Okay," I said, "In the face of our discussion, take a fifteen-minute break, go out in the hall, talk among yourselves, and come back and tell me what you guys think is wrong with rodeo from the point of view of animal ethics."

Fifteen minutes later they came back. All took seats in the front, not the back. One man, the president of the club, stood nervously in front of the room, hat in hand. "Well," I said, not knowing what to expect, nor what the change in attitude betokened, "What did you guys agree is wrong with rodeo?" The president looked at me and quietly spoke: "Everything, Doc." "Beg your pardon?" I said. "Everything," he repeated. "When we started to think about it, we realized that what we do violates our own ethic about animals." "Okay," I said, "I've done my job. I can go." "Please don't go," he said. "We want to think this through. Rodeo means a lot to us. Will you help us think through how we can hold on to rodeo and yet not violate our ethic?" To me, that incident represents an archetypal example of successful ethical dialogue, using recollection and judo, not sumo!

Now a cynic might suggest that nothing has changed; that these students went back to competitive rodeo, and soon forgot the concerns I had elicited. I do not, however, believe that is so. I believe that they were thinking differently about rodeo, and will be instruments of change as they go on through life. Indeed, if I didn't believe this, I would not teach!

For the cynic, I will relate another instance that did immediately result in practical change. When I began teaching ethics in the CSU veterinary school in 1978, the majority of students were from a ranch background. Correlatively, every spring they held a vet school rodeo. A significant minority of the students, usually those not from ranch backgrounds, were opposed to any activity that could or would cause pain, fear, or stress to animals. I realized that Providence had provided me with a perfect "laboratory exercise" for my ethics course. Could the students reconcile their differences and achieve a consensus resolution? To accomplish this, I engaged the entire class in Socratic dialogue, until each could see the others' points. (I got the cowboys' attention by declaring that, to me, veterinarians engaging in rodeo seemed *prima facie* equivalent to orthopedic surgeons picking fights in bars—that metaphor elicited much response!)

In any case, the dialogue persisted over about 3 weeks. Eventually, representatives from the cowboy contingent came to me and said, "We've thought it through. Would it satisfy you if . . ." "Hold on!" I said. "The issue here is not satisfying me. I don't grade you on how you resolve this. I grade you on your knowledge of Kant. You must satisfy yourselves and your peers, not me."

"Okay," they replied. "We've decided to use breakaway ropes in the calf-roping events—that event seems most morally problematic."

"Explain," I said.

"Jerking a calf to a stop at 20 miles per hour when it is roped doesn't seem right. So we will tie the lariat rope to a string, so that when the calf is roped, instead of being jerked, the string will break. We can still demonstrate skill in roping, without hurting the animal." "Sounds good to me," I said.

One woman from a rodeo background lingered after the other students had left. "I don't know if you fully appreciate what these guys have done. Dr. Rollin," she said. "Enlighten me," I said. "I don't think you realize that in the culture they come from, breakaway ropes are used only in women's events," she said quietly. A chill ran up my spine as I realized the profundity of Socratic recollection. Moral reflection in these highly moral men had trumped even their macho cultural attitudes.

It remains to ask where the animal welfare problems with rodeo really lie. And no one knows the answers to that question better than people who rodeo who have been stimulated to reflect on rodeo in terms of their own ethic for animals. The general consensus among such people I have dealt with is that the rough stock riding events—bull riding, saddle and bareback bronc riding—are not terribly problematic, provided that the animals are not hurt by spurring, and the bulls not agitated by electric shock "hot shooting." (This sometimes occurs before a bullride because the rider is judged by how difficult the bull is, and an angry bull is more difficult to ride.) Steer wrestling may cause some neck injury to steers, but that is probably rare and minimal. Calf roping is highly problematic, and that point is, as I suggested above, easily elicited from ranchers. In fact, even some people in the rodeo community have spoken against jerking calves to a stop and flipping them over. While the current PRCA rules mandate fines for jerking calves, that is largely ineffective. As one champion roper said to me: "The fine is \$100, the purse is \$5,000—you figure it out." A far better approach would be to disqualify any roper that jerked the calf. While it would slow roping times, it would affect everyone equally.



Steer tripping (or steer jerking or steer busting), which involves violently jerking a steer's legs out from under him, is, as mentioned earlier, illegal in all but a few states. In my experience, most rodeo cowboys and managers find it objectionable because of the very real chance of injury to the animals. Very recently, while I was lecturing in Red Deer, Alberta, a group of cowboys, many of them wearing rodeo buckles, approached me to discuss steer tripping. They had attended a rodeo in Oklahoma, one of the few places where steer tripping is still done, and were sickened by a case in which they believed the animal broke its back when it hit the ground. One man told me, "I'll never forget that sound. It was like the crack of a rifle shot." This event should be banned legally, ideally by legislation initiated by the rodeo community.

Many of the non-PRCA sanctioned events are morally problematic, both because they involve animals getting hurt or stressed (e.g., Chuckwagon races or wild horse races) and because they teach young people to take pleasure in an animal's fear (e.g., greased pig contests). Probably the best way to change these is through recollection.

#### 4.

The difference between urban ethical views of animals and the ethics of rodeo practitioners is usually seen by both sides as unbridgeable, and any attempt to bring them together is seen as impossible. The result is a "showdown mentality," with rodeo people unwilling to budge, and critics of rodeo demanding abolition. I hope I have shown that the tradition of husbandry and concern for animals built into Western ranching is in fact a significant potential bridge. But first, rodeo people must be willing to recollect their moral concern for animals, and critics of rodeo must be willing to acknowledge that moral concern, rather than dismissing rodeo people as a bunch of sadistic, redneck, uncaring moral troglodytes. Again, rodeo people must be willing to acknowledge the rational moral basis of social ethical concern for animals even among urban animal advocates, while urban critics must realize the strong symbolic and cultural dimensions of rodeo, and respect the role it plays in people's minds. Above all, moral dialogue should be seen as a creative challenge to achieving consensus through mutually respectful, rationally-based interaction, not, as fruitless quarrels are called in my part of the country, as a "pissing contest."

#### **Bibliography**

Elizabeth Lawrence. *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame*, Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982.