

A BENIGN INVASION-PART II

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Some philosophers were the first to observe that not all the moral merit belonged to those who were appalled at the prospect of human babies being bred to be eaten by aliens. The “human husbandry” proposed by the Centaurians did have uncanny parallels to long practiced “animal husbandry” on the part of human beings. And if our practices were justified because of our superior knowledge, abilities, power, etc., why would the Centaurians, as superior to us as perhaps we are to cattle, not be warranted in treating us as we treat cattle? The moral differences, however, between what the Centaurians proposed doing to humans and what we do to virtually all other earthly creatures were in large measure to the credit of the Centaurians. They had proposed much more, if the term could be used, “humane” cultivation of humans as food than humans practice on other animals, and further, they had even asked consent and cooperation in implementing their plan.

As if this were not enough by way of possible merits in the Centaurian Proposal (CP), these philosophers went on to point out that no present human beings would be harmed in any way-neither physically nor morally-and that all future humans, at least those not bred by the Centaurians who in any case were never integrated into human communities-would be greatly benefitted by the elimination of cancer, neurological disease, and who knows what other medical progress. Then, too, there was the prospect of becoming space travelers, of colonizing other planets, of spreading humanity throughout the universe, of...There really was no end of possible benefit from cooperating with the Centaurians.

This provoked still other philosophers to raise the issue of whether the Centaurian proposal should be regarded as a serious one. Perhaps, they reasoned, its point was to provoke us into some searching, collective self-examination. If we are appalled at superior beings treating us as food, should we be treating those creatures judged to be our inferiors as food? The Centaurians proposed “husbandry” practices far more benign than

those humans practiced, and if their proposals were outrageous, were our practices any less so? Further, these skeptics latched on to the final lines in the Centaurian communication: “we wish you to know that ... we were offered such a choice by the “peoples” of a still more advanced civilization....What our ancestors decided we will keep to ourselves....We will simply say that what our ancestors chose very much shaped who and what we are today.”

It is entirely possible, the skeptics maintained, that the Centaurians became who they are today-honest, truth telling, beneficent, highly accomplished, etc., etc.-because they refused, rather than complied, with a morally compromising request from superior beings. Perhaps the real benefit that humans might derive from the Centaurians would be to improve their own dubious treatment of other creatures and improve their characters.

Still more possibilities and positions were elaborated in the ensuing debates that went on for some time without any consensus being reached. The Centaurians had never given any indication that they came from a planet with different races of people, different cultures, histories and traditions. They gave every appearance of a hegemony of views unlike anything achieved on Earth. After 3 months of ferocious discussion, debate, politicking and threats of never reaching consensus, the Centaurians intervened once again. They simply said that while they appreciated the momentous nature of the decision they had demanded of human beings, they really did need an answer lest they be forced to consider other options. What these “other options” might be was left unspecified.

With this further goad from the Centaurians, the first point on which consensus was reached was, of course, the easiest. There was universal recognition that the Centaurians had already provided immeasurable value to humankind, indeed, to nearly all “Earthlings” (cockroaches and their ilk being a notable exception, as they had been larger and more numerous as the planet warmed). The provision of such a great benefit does create a reciprocal obligation, so when the Centaurians ask us to reciprocate, promising no harm but further benefit to all existing humans, we should carefully consider their proposal. What they say they want for themselves, longer lives, is what most of us wanted for ourselves as well.

The second point agreed upon was the significance of the Centaurians having requested our cooperation in devising a scheme to meet their nutritional needs. However much anyone objected to that scheme, it was

appreciated that human beings had not been threatened with having harm done them, but instead offered further, substantial, benefit for cooperation, including cures for cancer and neurological disease, space travel, and more. Had the Centaurians threatened the annihilation of all of humanity, or the planet itself, for failure on our part to agree to provide them a steady supply of young human flesh for consumption, however horrifying doing this might be, it would have been morally necessary to comply. Only a very few dogmatic absolutists of any stripe believed, in the face of what could have been a most credible threat, that the right course would have been the extinction of humanity or the whole planet rather than yielding to such coercion. A few die hard Utilitarians maintained that cooperation with the CP would be right whether we were offered beneficial incentives or threatened with annihilation since cooperation produced the best consequences in both cases. Most everyone else was satisfied that cooperation would be the least wrong thing to do (there was no good choice) and we would be morally blameless, but only if we were to avoid extinction rather than to gain some benefit. To avoid an ultimate harm, much that would otherwise be forbidden needed to be accommodated. Such coercion as imagined would, if not justify, at least excuse from moral blame, human beings acceding to the CP.

But of course we hadn't been threatened, and recognition grew that there were better grounds for rejecting the CP than that it was "repulsive." As sophistication in moral argumentation increased, more people saw that the basic problem with the CP was not that it provoked outrage and abhorrence, but that it required simply using the most vulnerable human beings-human beings deserving of a moral status that required their interests be given full consideration-as if they were mere objects. The balance of persuasive argument was increasingly tilting towards rejecting the CP. When the philosophers who had been skeptical about the sincerity of the Centaurians firmed up their arguments, the case against cooperation was secured. But at a price.

The perception grew on Earth that the Centaurians were not as truthful as they alleged themselves to be. They had promised to do us no harm if we did not cooperate with the CP, and also alleged that such cooperation would do existing humans no harm. But this is clearly not true: great moral harm would be done by turning human infants into meat, first to the children themselves, and secondly, to those who cooperated in such an endeavor. The corruption of character and abandoning of moral respect for fully considerable beings constitute very

great moral harm to those who would cooperate with the Centaurians. How could this not be harmful to us, whatever other benefits might ensue?

Further, few believed that the Centaurians could be so naïve as to suppose the CP would not shock and outrage humankind, and if not naïve, perhaps this is just what it was intended to do, notwithstanding their claim of having no such desire. This suspicion reinforced skepticism that the CP was a sincere proposal at all. Perhaps it, too-like the claim we would suffer no harm, or the claim that they did not wish to shock us-was less than true. But if so, what was its purpose?

This is where the philosophers who first raised skeptical questions about the motives of the Centaurians found the greatest purchase for their more developed arguments. Looking carefully at all the Centaurians had said in their second major communiqué, the skeptics pointed out that the Centaurians had proposed far more than that they would eat human babies: they also promised to use some as experimental subjects, some to teach anatomy to young Centaurians, some to be used as domestic servants, others to become “pets,” and still others to be hunted by “sportsmen.” This elaboration was hardly necessary if the basic program was to produce consumable protein. The way these practices parallel human treatment of non-human animals suggested that the real motive of the Centaurians was to have us learn a moral lesson. We needed to learn, it was suggested, that sentient beings should not simply be used for the benefit of those with greater power. Humankind have long professed that might does not make right, but we have acted quite otherwise, and nowhere more evidently so than in our relations to less powerful animals.

If this analysis of Centaurian motives is correct, then the biggest lie told by the Centaurians was the claim that they wanted to eat, and would benefit by eating, human babies. This could not be the point of the CP at all. Rather, its point must be to test our worthiness to become more serious collaborators with the Centaurians, and the way we would prove that worthiness would be by rejecting the morally outrageous CP. But it would not suffice simply to say that we would not compromise our respect for human life and our own moral integrity by cooperating in the proposed scheme. We would have to go further, and show that we had learned something more from the many months of searching inquiry leading up to the rejection of the CP. We would have to significantly change the many ways in which we exploitatively related to other sentient beings on Earth; we would have to recognize that their interests deserved

a greater measure of moral respect, that their suffering morally mattered, that many of our traditional practices-beginning with diet but extending much further-needed radical change. And we would have to commit to making those changes.

The philosophical skeptics- no longer really properly identified as “skeptics” since their view now had such growing influence- had one more argument to make, and it was the clincher. They maintained that whether the CP was a sincere proposal or a test of our moral sensibilities and commitments, it made no difference to what we should do. If it was a sincere proposal, it would be wrong-absent overwhelming threat and coercion-to cooperate with a scheme so disrespectful of the interests of persons who mattered, who mattered a great deal. And if it was not a sincere proposal, then acceding to it would not get us the benefits promised (that was another lie); it would rather prove us unworthy of further Centaurian beneficence. So whether sincere or insincere, the right thing to do-both right and in our interest-would be to let the Centaurians know that we reject their scheme. At this point, even the hard core Utilitarians came around.