What a delightful dilemma Rick Momeyer has provided to us. Like most good puzzles, it is illusionary, changing shape depending on how it is observed. What looks, at first, like a classical conflict between Kantian respect for humanity vs. consequentialism, becomes a test of moral development when viewed from a slightly different angle. Instead of looking at the puzzle as a question of whether it is okay to sacrifice a certain number of human children for the benefit of humanity as a whole, the dilemma can be read as whether human beings have progressed to a level of moral sophistication necessary to respond appropriately to the problem.

Indeed, I’m wondering if the Centaurians posed the “human protein” problem specifically as a test of moral growth and development. Of course, the human population must politely decline the Centaurians’ request to eat, experiment upon, enslave, and hunt our young. But, the Centaurians would measure our level of moral sophistication on the basis of why we chose to say no. Reflexive speciesism is not a good reason to object. As the Centaurians pointed out, many humans have been treating other sentient, self-reflective, conscious and empathic beings this way and less ‘humanely’ than the Centaurians propose. I hope that after 10 years of Human-Centaurian interaction, these unethical behaviors would have ceased. If not, the Centaurian proposition would put such behaviors under long overdue scrutiny. If humans have been capable of solving the global warming problem, they will certainly have embraced food production practices that sustain reasonable levels of human population as well as the world upon which we live. The focus on collaboration built over the decade would have led to deeper respect for humanity in both our similarities and differences. Collaboration requires empathy and caring for all that would be inconsistent with the notion of any child being sacrificed for the good of the whole.
Yet, it is not surprising, from a moral development perspective, that humans would have regressed when presented with such a horrifying proposition. Rioting in the streets as well as sneaky attempts to make backroom deals to benefit one’s own while sacrificing others are morally primitive ways to respond to the Centaurians’ proposal. But, moral development theorists taught us long ago that operating at higher levels of moral development is an expression of an individual’s potential, rather than a static state of being. It is efficient, as well as morally acceptable, to spend most of our time simply following the rules, or seeking to avoid punishment, as long as one can rise to the occasion when ethical consideration is really needed. Research over the years has shown that people tend to regress, at least briefly, when faced with new work environments or technological advances. When old assumptions and beliefs fail to cover the new challenges, it is natural to first look around to see what kinds of behaviors are punished and rewarded, then to see how peers handle the challenges and to learn the rules, and then to become autonomous in making the right choices. So, over time, I would expect that human leaders who learned to collaborate in global groups, would indeed rise to the occasion of the Centaurians’ challenge.

Our leaders would reach consensus to tell the Centaurians, thank you for all of the assistance, but it is time for humans to take new and better responsibility for ourselves without the mentors. This is doubtlessly what the Centaurians had told their own alien mentors when presented with the same proposition.

Someone might disagree with this argument by pointing out that humans have had children for less than logical or ethical reasons since we’ve been having children, and that producing children on the Centaurian plan is no less ethical than how we have had or treated children in the past. Certainly, the desire to produce heirs, farm workers, playmates for siblings, bone marrow donors, or designer children through manipulated conception do not place intrinsic value on the new life. And, of course, for all of human history, we have created new life as simply the outcome of double effect, with no intention at all. One might argue that substituting the Centaurian instrumental use of our children is not ethically or logically different from our own.

As sorry as our past practices with producing and rearing children have been, creating a sustainable world would require attention to population control. Sacrificing liberty for the good of the whole might be a new concept for many human cultures, but not unknown even in our own time. I hope that humans are capable of learning from our history,
as well as from our mentors. As developmental theorists have pointed out, the best way to encourage moral growth is to create a just community and have expectations of participants that are higher than what is reflected in current behavior. It sounds as though the Centaurians gave us that learning environment and have provided the evaluation technique as well.