In H. C. Wells’ classic novel *The War of the Worlds* the Martians invade the Earth with a similar intent, but do so without first helping humans achieve a better society. The Martians objective is to first wreck the structure of civilization and then, once humans have been subdued, to place them in large farms that would probably be similar to what the Centaurians would have used. In Wells’ story the humans had little choice but to become agricultural products for the Martians, whereas in our case there is a decision to be made.

In the War of the Worlds the narrator describes how, while avoiding the clutches of the Martians, he meets an artillery officer who offers an assessment of what is going on. First, the officer sizes up the situation:

“Here’s intelligent things,…and it seems that they want us for food. First, they’ll smash us up - ships, machines, guns, cities, all the order and organization. All that will go. If we were the size of ants we might pull through. But we’re not. It’s all too bulky to stop. That’s the first certainty. Eh? … So soon as they’ve settled all our guns and ships, and smashed our railways, and done all the things they are doing over there, they will begin catching us systematic, picking the best and storing us in cages and things. That’s what they will start doing in a bit. Lord! They haven’t begun on us yet. Don’t you see that?”

Then he predicts how the humans will react:

“All these - the sort of people that lived in these houses, and those damn little clerks that used to live down that way - … They just used to skedaddle off to work - I’ve seen hundreds of ‘em, bit of breakfast in hand, running wild and shining to catch their little season-ticket train, for fear they’d get dismissed if they didn’t; working at businesses they were afraid to take the trouble to understand; skedaddling back for fear they wouldn’t be in time for dinner; keeping indoors after dinner for fear of
the back streets, and sleeping with the wives they married, not because they wanted them, but because they had a bit of money that would make for safety in their one little miserable skedaddle through the world. Lives insured and a bit invested for fear of accidents. And on Sunday - fear of the hereafter. As if hell was build for rabbits! Well, Martians will just be a godsend to these. Nice roomy cages, fattening food, careful breeding, no worry. After a week or so chasing about the fields and lands on empty stomachs, they'll come and be caught cheerful. They'll be quite glad after a bit. They'll wonder what people did before there were Martians to take care of them.... There's lots will take things as they are - fat and stupid; and lots will be worried by a sort of feeling that it's all wrong, and that they ought to be doing something. Now wherever things are so that a lot of people feel they ought to be doing something, the weak, and those who go weak with a lot of complicated thinking, always make for a sort of do-nothing religion, very pious and superior, and submit to persecution and the will of the Lord.”

He suggests that the Martians may have some human feelings toward us much as we care about our domesticated pets:

“Very likely these Martians will make pets out of some of them; train them to do tricks - who knows? - get sentimental over the pet boy who grew up and had to be killed.”

And finally the crushing blow to the narrator:

“And some, maybe, they will train to hunt us.”

No, no, protests the narrator. We will never hunt ourselves. We are not made like that. We are humans who care about each other. He tries to convince the artillery officer that he has it all wrong.

This book of course was written 40 years before the start of the Second World War. If it had been written afterwards, following the gruesome stories of the Nazi concentration camps and the Soviet Gulag, then nobody would have argued with the artillery officer. We would have known that indeed, people can not only learn to hunt and kill each other, but they will do it happily and with enthusiasm.

Given human nature, such as it is, what would be the decision by the Earthlings to the Centaurians? The analysis invites a distinction between utilitarian consequentialist thought and deontological human values. A utilitarian would argue that if the children “born” in the incubators do
not suffer (except perhaps the unruly teenagers who are hunted for sport) and if they experience a quick, painless death, there is nothing immoral about creating them in the first place. If they do suffer, however, then creating humans that suffer would be considered immoral. Deontological thinking would, however, place intrinsic value on all humans, including those “born” in the Centaurians’ incubators. They would be considered humans, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, and would have moral rights and deserve moral consideration. It would be our duty to prevent them from ever being created. [Does this then also suggest that we should prevent human pregnancies in circumstances where the parent(s) will not be able to care for the children?]

But this is not how the decision will be made. We humans do not say a priori that we are adherents to some moral theory and then make the decision according to the arguments of that theory. “I am a utilitarian, therefore I vote to allow the incubators,” makes no sense. We first should consider the circumstances of the case and then make the best decision we know how.

In this situation, the argument should start with the premise that it is immoral to cause pain and suffering, irrespective of who is suffering. Then we need to ask if anyone will experience suffering if this scheme is implemented. There is a possibility that the children “born” in the incubators will suffer, but this is not clear. If the Centurians treat the children the same way we treat laboratory animals then there will certainly be suffering. On the other hand, it is unlikely that being pets for the Centaurians will cause much suffering. The difference in intelligence between a human and dog is perhaps the same as between a Centaurian and a human child. We like to think that our pets do not suffer by being our pets and the Centaurians will most likely do the same.

If the amount of suffering is our unit of currency, it might also be interesting to ask if the suffering of the Centaurians should be included in the analysis. Even though they do not claim to be “people,” they certainly seem to have human attributes. Do they then not deserve moral consideration? If we on Earth do not agree to their scheme and they cannot find another protein source then they will starve, and this would certainly not be a good thing for them.

On balance, most humans will agree that the right thing to do is to stand up for human dignity and prevent suffering by the babies born to be a food supply. They will conclude that a “no” answer is the morally correct one.
Choosing a morally acceptable alternative, in this case rejecting the offer from the Centaurians, is in the realm of moral philosophy. A more interesting decision, in the realm of moral psychology, is what humans would actually do in this case. We already know that the Germans who lived around the Auschwitz and Buchenwald extermination camps did nothing to stop the gruesome extermination of humans, even though it was painfully evident to them what was going on behind the barbed wire. I believe that the humans of the world will similarly trade some unborn babies for the “good life” offered by the Centaurians, even though many might agree that it is the wrong thing to do.