Symposium on Animal Disenhancement: Introduction

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In the 2008 issue of this journal Paul Thompson [4] argued that animal disenhancement presented something of a conundrum. On the one hand there seems to be something wrong with it but on the other it is difficult to find good arguments against it. Clare Palmer argued in a later issue [3] that the problem was even worse than that set out by Thompson. The current symposium is a response to those two papers, all of the authors arguing that strong arguments can be made against animal disenhancement.

None of these current papers focus on nanotechnology as such but all are concerned about uses of new technologies. More importantly perhaps, together with the two earlier papers, they point to a central issue in the ethics of technology, that is the relationship between technology and the good life, or well-being. Should the focus of technological research and development be on the individual or on the environment of that individual? This is a big issue and animal disenhancement is just one part of this larger question. If an individual, whether it be a human or a non-human animal, is not coping well or is not happy in its environment, two basic approaches are possible. Change the individual or change the environment.

Obviously it is not so simple and frequently it will not be an either/or but rather a bit of both. And sometimes too it will clearly be one or the other. In humans this issue is manifested in the discussion of the medicalization of health, taken here to mean that the scope of medical treatments is expanding (see [2], for a discussion of the term). The problem of a stressful environment, for example, is often approached, not by changing the environment but by helping the person to cope with the stress through the use of drugs. Medical technology to improve life of course has always been used on the individual but its scope now is being extended as more is learnt about the brain and how it affects moods and psychological states. In a sense this is nothing very new. We do not always try to change our environment in order to overcome our difficulties with coping. The use of alcohol and other drugs for this purpose is certainly not new. References to “Dutch courage”, the use of alcohol to engender courage, go back to at least 1665 [1]. Nevertheless, with the emphasis on the individual that there is in contemporary Western society, it does seem that modifying the individual is often the first and unquestioned option. In this environment the disenhancement of animals makes sense. If animals suffer and if it is too difficult or expensive to change their surroundings, we change them. Given that the alleviation of suffering is good, disenhancement must be good. As we saw a minute ago however, intuitively there *seems* to be something wrong with it. We will not always let a

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good argument trump our intuitions. This raises two questions; how much weight should be given to our intuitions in this case and are the arguments for disenchantment good? First, we must be wary of placing too much weight on our intuitions. Different people have different intuitions and our intuitions change over time. They need to be taken into account but are not “knock down” arguments. Second, it is the strength of the arguments that is challenged by the papers in this section. It must be noted that Thompson and Palmer do not argue for disenchantment. They argue rather that it presents a genuine conundrum. The papers here argue that disenchantment is wrong and that no such conundrum exists.

In the first contribution John Hadley takes head on the claim that disenchanting an animal to reduce its suffering is enough to justify the practice. Animals can have preferences, he argues, for example for freedom of movement, so even if their disenchantment stops their suffering, they can still have unfulfilled preferences. While this may not provide a moral reason as strong as suffering for refraining from treating them in certain ways, it still does provide a reason against disenchantment, so the conundrum is avoided.

Soraj Hongladarom takes a different line and argues that the opposing positions on animal enhancement are based on different metaphysics. One metaphysical position entails that the main purpose of a chicken is to provide meat for humans and here the conundrum does arise. If the purpose of a chicken is to provide meat then obviously if this can be done through minimising suffering through disenchantment, then so much the better. On the other hand, from a different metaphysics where a chicken has other ends apart from meat production, the conundrum does not arise. Other ways of giving the chicken a life without unnecessary suffering should and can be found.

In the third paper, Adam Henschke takes yet a different approach. He argues that if the full action that involves disenchantment is considered, then the action is really one of producing as much meat as possible and as cheaply as possible, without raising the ire of those concerned about animal welfare. Looked at in this way, disenchantment loses much of its attraction and the arguments for it seem much weaker. Intensive production of meat has serious problems apart from animal welfare. It is bad environmentally and poses dangers for human health.

Finally, Arianna Ferarri takes issue with what she calls the “speculative ethics” in which she believes both Thompson and Palmer engage. She particularly questions Palmer’s argument regarding the creation of disenchanted animals that would not have existed without the disenchantment. A detailed look at new molecular technologies show, she argues, that “already formed identities” are being modified. She concludes by arguing, in a similar vein to Hongladarom and Henschke, that the conundrum only arises in a context where the use of animals for human benefit is assumed to be justified without question.

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