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SYMPOSIA: Bioethics-Livestock and Poultry: The Ethics of Food

The Ethics of Semantics: Do We Clarify or Obfuscate Reality to Influence Perceptions of Farm Animal Production?

C. C. Croney^{*,1} and R. D. Reynnells[†]

^{*} Department of Animal Sciences, Withycombe Hall 112, Oregon State University, Corvallis 97331; and [†] USDA/Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service/Plant and Animal Systems, 800 9th Street SW, Room 3140 Waterfront Centre, Washington, DC 20250-2220

¹ Corresponding author: Candace.croney@oregonstate.edu

According to linguists, the discourse of animal production uses metaphors, pronouns, and definitions that consistently represent animals as objects, machines, and resources instead of as distinct, unique individuals. Thus, it is argued that genuine concern for animal welfare is either obscured by financial concerns or circumvented entirely, which permits animals to be kept and treated in ways many people would otherwise find objectionable. Substituting euphemisms like crops, units, and harvest for herds, animals, and slaughter, respectively, which are more likely to evoke images of grape plucking than of killing animals for food, might indeed seem disingenuous, especially given the common industry refrain that the public needs to be better educated about food production. However, the implication that the animal industries deliberately use such techniques is debatable. What is clear is that the semantic obfuscations rampant in the language of modern farm animal production reflect underlying ambivalence about transparency relative to many standard industry practices. First, consumers are unlikely to want full disclosure of all aspects of animal production. Second, there is real risk that certain realities of animal production would be aversive to consumers, who might consequently refuse (as is their right) to purchase particular products, thus potentially causing significant short-term industry losses. Yet, the reluctance of animal industries to come clean in public education efforts raises another problem—that adopting innocuous terminology and withholding information deemed likely to be unpalatable to the public may be morally questionable in itself. Moreover, this provides an avenue for opponents of animal agriculture to exploit, because it may appear that the industry is hiding something. In truth, animal extremists are

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currently in a position to reveal facts about livestock production that might not only disturb consumers but also cause speculation about the failure of the industries to be forthcoming. As a matter of professional ethics and viability, animal industry members should objectively and aggressively evaluate the discourse of farm animal production to ensure that what is conveyed is accurate and intended.

Key Words: ethics • semantics • discourse • animal production