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In vitro meat – some moral issues

Tissue engineering plays a large role in the endeavour to find remedies for many medical problems. At present there are for example tissue engineered skin available. In the future it may be possible to tissue engineer new organs but it is still some way to go. There have been some important steps taken however.

If one will be able to engineer new organs for transplantation, it will obviously be possible to engineer an animal tissue or organs for eating. Such an organ need not be functional; it need just be edible. There are laboratories engaged in developing the technique of growing animal cells in bioreactors in order to produce edible meat products. The work is still in an early stage but there is a patent covering such in vitro meat production. At present, the nearest realistic task is perhaps to produce minced meat.

One hope of the in vitro meat endeavour is to be able to reduce environmental load by replacing intensive, mainly indoor, meat production, where the animals live in unnatural and crowded circumstances, by in vitro meat bioreactors. Hence, such a technology will give environmental benefits as well as reducing animal suffering. However, there are still problems to be overcome in relation to the cell culturing but also in relation to public scepticism. (It is still not known what the price of a kilo in vitro meat beef would be compared to conventional meat.)

This new emerging technology poses some moral challenges and questions which will be discussed in my presentation. Here are some questions.

If we take animal suffering seriously, how much of present day meat production should be phased out? What about happy free grazing animals? Can killing be allowed in such cases?

Can hunting for fun be defended? Hunting for meat? How does hunting stand morally in relation to indoor intensive meat production?

Should we feed the wild Nordic wolves with in vitro meat in order to let the sheep survive? (Wolves like to eat sheep.)

Is it a loss that there will be fewer animals around in the in vitro meat regime? (Or will it be fewer? There have never been more horses in Sweden than at present when they are kept for fun.)