

Edibility and In Vitro Meat: Ethical Considerations

RACHEL ROBISON-GREENE, 2022

Lanham, Lexington Books

x + 150 pp, £73.00 (hb)

In Vitro meat (otherwise known as clean, cultivated, cultured, or lab-grown meat) has attracted a lot of attention in recent years, and for good reason. Meat obtained by culturing animal cells, rather than by raising animals for slaughter, promises to respect animals' rights and dramatically reduce the harm our food systems do to the environment and human health. What's more, given the high level of interest, it seems increasingly likely that in vitro meat will soon be available for sale in many countries around the world. Indeed, meat grown from chicken cells was approved for sale in the United States a few days before I began writing this article.

Rachel Robison-Greene's *Edibility and In Vitro Meat: Ethical Considerations* (henceforth referred to as EIVM) is a welcome addition to the literature on in vitro meat. Though academic books tend to be written in a dry, technical manner, Robison-Greene's work is accessible and engaging. She's also managed to produce a fairly unique book. So far, most of the books on in vitro meat have been trade rather than academic publications. And though some academic books have discussed in vitro meat, Robison-Greene's is, to my knowledge, the first moral philosophy monograph that's entirely devoted to this subject.

EIVM's main conclusion is that we should collectively replace the production of factory-farmed meat with the production of in vitro meat. Three main premises are offered in support of this conclusion, each of which is the conclusion of its own respective sub-argument.

Robison-Greene's first sub-argument provides a consequentialist case against factory farming, and it's made over the course of Chapters 2, 3, and 9. Among other things, Robison-

Greene explains the significant harm factory farming does to farmed animals, the environment, and to human health. With respect to human health specifically, Chapter 9 pays particular attention to the ways in which factory farming increases the likelihood of pandemics.

Robison-Greene's second sub-argument argues that there's nothing morally wrong with in vitro meat, so long as it's produced in a manner that's respectful of animals, e.g., so long as animals' cells are collected in a manner that isn't very painful, so long as the animals involved are provided with the conditions needed to live a flourishing life, etc. In particular: Chapter 4 argues that producing in vitro meat needn't violate animals' rights; Chapter 7 argues that there's nothing intrinsically wrong with eating flesh (including flesh grown in vitro); and Chapter 8 argues that producing, and consuming, in vitro meat is consistent with respecting the relationship animals have with their own body. Though these chapters contain much of interest, Chapter 7's discussion of human flesh is especially fascinating. If flesh, in general, is not intrinsically 'inedible' (in the sense of morally impermissible to eat), then even human flesh is 'edible' so long as the right conditions are met. Robison-Greene argues that consuming in vitro human meat is permissible so long as consent is obtained from the person whose cells are used, and so long as the reason for consuming is not a vicious one (pp. 100-106).

Robison-Greene's third sub-argument argues that replacing the production of factory-farmed meat with the production of in vitro meat is more feasible than abolishing animal agriculture. More specifically, Chapter 5 argues that due to various barriers, abolition is not very feasible. Particular attention is paid to the ways in which group identities, such as one's gender identity or political identity, make it psychologically implausible that certain people will stop eating meat (pp. 63-68). Chapter 6 compliments Chapter 5 by, among other things, addressing various worries about the feasibility of transitioning to in vitro meat production.

To frame her thesis, Robison-Greene uses political philosophy's distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal theory, or in other words, theory about what a perfectly just society would be vs. theory about what can feasibly be done, here and now, to make our society more just. She maintains that although it would be wonderful to abolish animal agriculture, doing so is not particularly feasible, and thus abolition is best understood as belonging to ideal theory. By contrast, the proposal that we should transition to in vitro meat is much more feasible to implement, and so it's best understood as belonging to non-ideal theory (pp. 61-63).

One question Robison-Greene's framing raises is: In what sense is transitioning to in vitro meat non-ideal? To be part of non-ideal theory, a proposal must be more than just attentive to feasibility: it should also fall short of ideal justice. As we noted earlier, though, Robison-Greene argues that there's nothing wrong with (or that there needn't be anything wrong with) producing and consuming in vitro meat. If there's nothing wrong with it, then perhaps in vitro meat production could be part of a fully just food system? In fact, Josh Milburn argues as much in his recent book *Food, Justice, and Animals: Feeding the World Respectfully* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023). On the assumption that in vitro meat production is non-ideal, though, specifying how it's non-ideal is more than merely an academic issue. Doing so would help to explain why transitioning to in vitro meat, though arguably justified, seems somehow regrettable. Perhaps the reason some vegans and animal activists are wary of advocating for in vitro meat is that they're focusing too much on what's regrettable about it, and not enough on the considerations that arguably, all things considered, justify it. I haven't the space to definitively 'flesh out' why in vitro meat is regrettable, but it may be that there's something importantly wrong about a society whose willingness to do the right thing is contingent upon whether the right thing is easy to do. A society that collectively stops producing factory-farmed meat only once in vitro meat is cheap and readily available is presumably less virtuous than one which, for

the sake of morality, simply chooses to stop. If virtue is what's at stake, though, then perhaps in vitro meat actually is ideal from the standpoint of justice. It just isn't ideal from the standpoint of morality, since a society can be just without being morally perfect.

Notwithstanding the above, EIVM is an excellent book that successfully combines readability with academic rigor. I highly recommend it.

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