

‘YOU ARE TURNING THE PIG INTO A SOURCE OF SPARE PARTS’

For the first time, surgeons have managed to successfully transplant a pig’s kidney into a human. A medical breakthrough or a step too far in the use of genetically modified animal organs? *Resource* put the question to animal ethics specialist Bernice Bovenkerk.

How do you see this?

‘The ethical debate is not so much about animal welfare as whether you, as a human, want an animal’s organ in your body. That is something animal ethics specialists are less worried about, though, because we don’t see a sharp dividing line between humans and other animals. From an animal ethics perspective, I have problems with the way animals are instrumentalized. You’re turning them into objects, created to serve our needs. The pig is simply a source of donor organs, spare parts. That ignores the fact that an animal is a living, sensate creature with its own interests and goals in life.’

But we eat pork, so what’s the difference?

‘I understand this argument, especially given that donor organs can save lives. In fact, raising pigs for organ donation is perhaps easier to justify than raising them for meat. What is more, we use technology to adapt the animal to suit our purposes in livestock farming too. I see some overlap, but this goes one step further because we are genetically modifying an animal specifically so that it can serve as a donor. That might be a minor genetic modification from a medical perspective, but in animal ethics it is the intention that matters. Moreover, these pigs have to live completely sterile



Surgeons examine the pig's kidney that will be used as a donor organ • ANP Joe Carrotta

lives to make sure they are not exposed to pathogens. That raises the question of whether they can still exhibit natural behaviour and what it means for their welfare, an aspect that I think is paid more attention in livestock farming.’

Aren’t the interests of humans more important than of pigs?

‘People take an anthropocentric view of the world. That means we set the standard based on what we think is important. That standard is fairly arbitrary. If we

were to measure moral status based on swimming speed, for example, things would

‘You can’t say from a neutral standpoint that a pig’s life is worth less’

look very different. Animal ethics works on the assumption that species characteristics should not be the determining factor for moral status. Some people are cleverer than others but we don’t think

that means clever people should be allowed to do what they want with stupid people. Babies can’t talk yet, but we don’t believe we should experiment on them. We’re trapped in our ideas of what we find important in our lives and that is why we attach more value to human lives. That is wrong. From a neutral point of view, you can’t say a human life is more valuable than a pig’s. Ironically, pigs can act as donors precisely because they are so similar to us. The question is also whether animals should be used to solve our shortage of donor organs. It’s our problem. We have this idea that we should do anything we can to live as long as possible, but death is part of life. Perhaps we should accept that. At any rate, I hope the position of the animal is considered in the ethical debate. But I fear ethics will be overtaken by technology, as so often happens.’ TL

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