

Agricultural Ethics and Multifunctionality Are Unavoidable

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My purpose here is to help all agriculturalists, but especially researchers, feel comfortable using ethics in handling the multiple and often conflicting demands that sectors of the public press on agriculture. For three or four decades, pressures have been brought to bear upon farming and those who serve it in any capacity to widen the list of tasks to which agriculture should be devoted. At one time, the role of agriculture was to produce food, but now many people expect agriculture to be carried out in an environmentally friendly way that maintains the rural economy. We now speak of "multifunctional" agriculture. One tool sometimes used to press those demands is an appeal to ethics. This appeal can appear to suggest that agriculturalists have been ethically negligent. Every agricultural ethicist (about a dozen or so) knows by experience how poorly received that suggestion is. Agriculture is a vocation or profession that prides itself on the unquestionable value, even nobility, of its work. Agriculturalists do not need academic ethicists to tell them that it is ethical to work energetically in the pursuit of things of great value to humankind. One readily grants that human medicine and business finance need some sophisticated ethical reasoning, but does agriculture? Given the obvious and urgent natural value of food, fiber, and forest products, if an academic ethicist so much as clears his or her throat while reviewing the basic business of farming and its allied technology and science, the inferred hint of ethical deficiency in the agricultural enterprise causes immediate bristling.

Is it not abundantly clear and simple that the overarching value and purpose of agriculture is to grow things for human use? Who needs ethics to complicate that simplicity? Who needs an ethics concocted by a profession, philosophy, populated with practitioners not especially known for preaching any really self-recommending ethics, let alone practicing them?

This leads to three subpurposes of this essay: to explore whether agriculture should be multifunctional, how and/or when the currently disputatious multifunctionality came into being, and why a new discipline of agricultural ethics got selected to organize if not settle the disputes. My essay will draw on

multifunctional agriculture and its history in the United States to the exclusion of similar developments elsewhere in the world.

A LITTLE HISTORY ALWAYS HELPS

Contemporary neoclassical agricultural economists are exasperated by the so-called Jeffersonian ideal, as if it were an ideal farm. They forget that Jefferson imagined that a principal value of such farms was to underpin an ideal democracy with hard-working, independently minded, and independently supported citizens who would more easily avoid the vices, civic and personal, of an urban laboring class. In other words, agriculture's function was dual: to produce solid citizens as well as food. That Jefferson's own farm laborers were neither citizens nor independent in any sense was a painful irony he was well aware of. That one "externality" or side effect of a farm economy based on slaves would be civic unrest and the near destruction of the nation can serve as a warning to this day: Immunity from ethical scrutiny is not granted to agriculture because of the unquestioned necessity and nobility of its end products, because profound human values may be impacted by the choice of means of production.

An important theme that will emerge from this essay is that "multifunctional" value conflicts within agriculture arise largely out of the means used for agricultural production and not solely out of the ends. Therefore, we can expect that any mature agricultural ethics will have to offer principles that can guide the choice of means and the policies surrounding alternative ways of farming.

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN FARMING

Although the name "agricultural ethics" would have to wait two more centuries, enough ethically complex good and bad multifunctionalities were born the day United States leaders saw farming as a fit topic for deliberate policy. John Adams, on his debt-free but not yet large farm in Braintree in Massachusetts, abhorred the slave-labor and credit-burdened plantation farming of the South. And, in his last Fourth of July speech, written but not delivered, Jefferson showed that he regretted that the ideal of liberty for all had not been achieved on his farms. Paraphrasing Richard Rumbold and putting "sci-

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Figure 1. Small mixed farms, like this one in Mississippi, are being replaced by huge operations that are said to be “efficient.” Yet, the true costs that accrue to the rural areas—such as the healthcare costs of the minimum wage workers—are overlooked when these efficiencies are calculated. Many people support the idea that our meat and dairy animals deserve a more humane treatment than they are now getting on many factory farms. Should we encourage more small farms that support the rural economy even if this makes food more expensive? USDA Photo by Bill Tarpenning



ence” in the place of “Providence” in Rumbold’s original, he wrote:

“The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few, booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately by the grace of God. These are the grounds of hope for others.” (McCullough, 2001).

As a lesson in farm economics, the freeing of Jefferson’s slaves would be a distant hope indeed. At his death, 130 of them had to be sold, freeing only five (Sally Hemings’ relatives), to pay debts totaling \$100,000, more than the net value of his entire estate. Adams died with no debts and an estate worth \$100,000 (McCullough, 2001).

Smaller animal farms and mixed farms that raise animals and crops (Fig. 1) are being displaced by huge pork and poultry operations. The “efficiency” of these operations is due to the labor of the farmer/worker being valued at the level of, and therefore replaceable by, the low wage immigrant worker in the “factory farm” who receives no health benefits or union protection and lives in substandard housing. Having county tax payers pick up the health costs of these workers is one “efficiency” of such operations. Animal welfare, environmental, and community survival advocates wonder whether agricultural economists have given an honest accounting of other such “efficiencies.” Adams and Jefferson would wonder too. Is a socially just farm sector one of agriculture’s functions?

SOIL FERTILITY, SUSTAINABILITY, AND LOCAL FOOD SECURITY

Issues directly related to production arose early in John Adams’ New England and from Virginia further south. Soil exhaustion, from at least a century of

exploitation, was dramatic at the birth of our nation. George Washington experimented with marl, gypsum, and alfalfa in 1760 (Schreiner, 1935). By the 1820s, huge Virginia tracts were reduced to wastelands when Edmund Ruffin began his fertilizer work (Rasmussen, 1960). Although what he sought to remedy was a side effect of production, the values he pursued are, today, due to abundant fertilizers, sometimes viewed as among those fringe functions: sustainability and local food security, with serious economists such as Steven Blank (<http://www.uga.edu/caes/symposium01/sblank.html>) suggesting that the U.S. abandon farming entirely. Guarding the soil’s ability to sustainably secure a local food supply was then a more obviously appropriate function of agriculture so that the earliest Experiment Station scientists were overwhelmed with the task of assuring the value of commercial manures, with some scientists complaining that such pedestrian work was not an appropriate function of science.

SOIL CONSERVATION

Soil erosion concerns and soil conservation arose quite early, with terraces appearing in Virginia in the early 1800s. By 1899, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began issuing reports on soil erosion (Trimble, 1985). There is a logic to the birth of these new functions in agriculture: It is only when a value is being destroyed that a sense of moral urgency to act in defense of the value arises. Many values are implicit and only need to be actively cultivated when their good is positively threatened. So when “dust-bowl” farm soil coated the shiny black cars of congressmen in Washington, D.C. in 1935 and the Soil Conservation Act passed, the Soil Erosion Service changed its name to the Soil Conservation Service (Batie, 1985). A threatened good becomes an explicit urgent function to pursue. Above, I called that ur-

gency “moral.” I could as well have said “urgency derived from practical wisdom.” A formal agricultural ethics had not yet been born, but multifunctionality had been.

Nevertheless, the tensions between soil scientists and production scientists are historic. It is not entirely an accident that in many agriculture schools, early soil scientists, who originally, because of Justus Liebig¹, referred to themselves as chemists, were housed with their laboratories among the nonagriculture science faculty.

A second theme emerges from this history: Multiple values with the multiple functions they command always have a potential for conflict, no matter how deeply connected and interdependent they are.

RURAL LIVING CONDITIONS

Following the logic that threats to implicit values will beget new explicit functions, agriculturalists were well aware of the nearly primitive conditions of rural life and its frequent grinding poverty. The 1887 amendments to the Hatch Act explicitly allowed research into the social aspect of agriculture beyond its concern for plant and animal production (Pinkett, 1984). However, it was a largely nonrural and religiously motivated compassionate Country Life movement that concerned itself with the arduous character of farm and rural life at the turn of the century (Kirkendall, 1987). President Theodore Roosevelt was inspired by this movement to establish the County Life Commission in August of 1908. The Commission lacked the time and the courage to look at the peonage system in the South as suggested by the African-American leader W.E.B. DuBois (Pinkett, 1984), but nevertheless its report at the end of January of the following year was, in the words of Clayton Ellsworth, the “first recognition by a federal agency that the production of more excellent citizens on the farm was at least as important as the production of more, bigger and better hogs and cotton, and that the current emphasis upon more scientific production would not solve a host of farm problems” (Ellsworth, 1960; Pinkett, 1984).

Of course what the “do-gooders” saw was not an absence of research but a starkly distressing rural life only short buggy rides from their homes, where the lack of indoor plumbing and electric lights and very little money and health care were the rule. What motivated them was also what inspired many of the founders of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in the USDA, a mix of genuine religious motivation to alleviate human suffering with a social Darwinist

view that only improved conditions of rural life and farming could keep the best racial and cultural types on the land (McDean, 1983, 1984). Henry C. Taylor took over the Office of Farm Management in April of 1919 and by 1922 had formed the new Bureau of Agricultural Economics, a process that involved replacing all the old agronomists with top flight academic economists (McDean, 1983). What was desired was not just new tools and new credentials, but a more vigorous and embracing social/economic agenda. Today, we might find this agenda offensive in its goal of recasting rural America in the image of a Lutheran town in Wisconsin, with beautiful farms where the music of Bach could be heard in the evenings. But as a native Wisconsinian, it pleased me to see that agriculturalists were trying to use the tools of economics to support a decent life for farmers. It is multifunctionalism at its best, whatever its weakness from elitist and ethnic biases.

The rural crises brought on by falling farm prices in the 1920s and by the depression made this concern for farm life a permanent feature of our national consciousness and popular with legislators who still had significant farm populations. The Purnell Act of 1925 explicitly included research to improve farm homes and rural life. Farm population actually grew from 1930 to 1933, but then a steady decline set in. The New Deal’s Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) device of production controls as well as the conservation set-asides of the Soil Conservation Service were aimed at preserving family farms. Other agencies, such as the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration used other devices to help farmers with too little land or who did not own their land to improve their lot and stay on the land.

DECLINING FERVOR FOR THE LITTLE FARMER

But then, perhaps because farm population became a smaller proportion of the U.S. population, other justifications for continued public support of the farm sector began to be heard. During World War II, job opportunities in the city began to open up, and Henry A. Wallace was heard to speak of “surplus farm population.” Purely economic justifications for an expensive farm policy were heard. The appropriateness of the function of reducing rural poverty was questioned by the Farm Bureau and some of its congressional allies. Mechanization, higher yielding crops, better poultry lines, and pesticides and affordable fertilizers made large farms attractive. The irony of AAA funds going disproportionately to large farms, to landlords instead of tenants or sharecroppers, and providing capital for further modernization meant that appeals to the quality of rural life as a function of agriculture were muted or resisted.

One Bureau of Agricultural Economics effort to point out the harm of AAA policies to sharecroppers by chance included Congressman Jamie Whitten’s

¹ Liebig was an early German expert on plant nutrition who determined the needs of plants by chemical analysis of their tissues. For a long while, this approach offered the seductive hope that agricultural soil science could become a white-smock laboratory science appropriate even to Harvard dons and rarely requiring trips to muddy fields.



Figure 2. Two views of farming in the United States circa 1940. Government policies were (and are) generally aimed at supporting the prosperous farmers (top) rather than the improving the lives of the poor farmers (bottom). USDA Photo by DL Taylor.

district. Whitten was an extremely powerful congressman who entered the House in 1941. His poverty-stricken district was largely agricultural and typified the peonage system of the South. He soon took the chair of the agricultural appropriations committee and held it for decades. He could decide the fate of almost any federal agricultural policy, and, in rage at the exposure of AAA abuses in his district, he simply abolished the Bureau. Chastened economists who reestablished it years later were instructed by

the nearly eternal Whitten to leave policy to Congress and simply provide the facts, the subtext being “not facts showing that policy is hurting poor sharecroppers in Mississippi—or anywhere else” (Fig. 2). A similar fate awaited the discipline of Rural Sociology in California where the Farm Bureau’s unhappiness over Goldschmidt’s discussion of plantation farming’s harmful effects on rural towns led to their obtaining the nonexistence of the discipline at California’s burgeoning agricultural school (Goldschmidt, 1947; Kirkendall, 1964, 1966; Gregor, 1965).

So how did agricultural ethics arise from amid all this? It was not yet ready to appear. Undoubtedly, agricultural economics ought to have functioned as the “bridging” discipline in agriculture among its unavoidable multiple functions and disciplines. It alone possessed the tools, the traditions, and the motivations to arbitrate conflicts and seek outcomes for the human good. It was too obvious to everyone that overproduction was a constant threat, exacerbated by modernization. Agricultural economics ought to have led the way in designing new policies that could protect the rural sector, ease the transition to modernity, preserve what could survive in the agrarian ideal, and resist policies that resulted in artificial “pecuniary efficiency” (efficiencies based solely on monetary/tax policies and not on any actual farming resource efficiency) for the already huge farm operations. The harm to smaller farmers, especially black farmers, was clear (Brown, 1986). The shift toward larger and fewer farms became dramatic and received an antiseptic name: “the structural problem.” Of the two values (goals) that Henry Taylor had laid out for agricultural economics, the well being of the farm population and the efficient use of America’s agricultural resources, only the latter was left. Agricultural economics became mainly a commentator rather than a guide to agriculture, and soon the neoclassicists among its ranks began to provide rationalizations for some pretty inhumane policies and premises. As one economist whose own father had lost his farm due to a dam building quipped to me: “We assume the infinite mobility of labor.” Critiques of agricultural policy for various reasons continued, but did not coalesce into any “movement.” Scarcely any voice for a balanced multifunctionalism remained within the agricultural establishment, except rural sociology.

FAMINE AND ENVIRONMENTALISM

But things were happening. Farm population dropped dramatically to around 4% of the nation’s total population by the 1970s, down from 23% in 1940. The need for farm kids to stay on the farm disappeared with the introduction of mechanization and so did the need for these kids to go to agricultural schools. City kids were getting interested in agriculture in the 1960s and 1970s partly because

major famines were occurring around of the world, which, along with a devout Vice President Hubert Humphrey, they hoped American agriculture could cure. The schools were happy to accept these new students. Meanwhile, in 1962, Rachel Carson had begun serializing in *The New Yorker* what was to become *Silent Spring*. This famous attack on the side effects of modern agriculture in its use of pesticides and herbicides was not well received by agricultural academia, which tried to suppress essentially the same information by one of its own wildlife biologists, Robert L. Rudd (1964) in his *Pesticides and the Living Landscape*. Carson's first installment made some insightful administrative reader in the University of California nervous who then called the university's *Science Guide* and instructed its editor to omit further references to Carson's series. But when Rudd's work finally was published by the University of Wisconsin Press in 1964, after much review and resistance, he immediately lost his post with the California's Agricultural Experiment Station system where he had worked for five years on vertebrate pest control. He was hardly an enemy of agricultural production, but in the late 1950s, he began to see evidence of the harmful side effects of persistent agricultural biocides in the environment, and a process we have seen before began. An agriculturally connected value, environmental health or ecosystem stability, which scarcely had a name, was clearly being damaged, and a new function—an active pursuit of environmental values—became a candidate function for agriculture. In spite of Rudd's experience of "publish and perish," the evidence was too hard to deny. Just three years later in 1967, *BioScience* published an article "Pesticides and the Environment" by Louis McLean of the Velsicol Chemical Corporation that contained an uproarious attack on the environmental consciousness growing within agricultural academia. Five years earlier, McLean had attempted to stop the publication of *Silent Spring*. Now it was too late. Scientists thought McLean's piece was a spoof (Graham, 1970). Rudd's university renamed its agriculture school "Agriculture and Environmental Sciences" that same year. Similar hyphenated names appeared on agriculture schools around the country. Multifunctionalism had raised its head again. And the city kids filling the empty desks loved it.

And so did some farmers, who found the costs of pesticides and herbicides skyrocketing. There must be some way of farming that can reduce those costs, and because production is not the true economic goal, but rather net income, some reduction in yield is bearable. Pressure from legislatures had to be brought to bear on some agriculture schools to find ways to reduce toxic chemical applications through a more scientifically informed approach that received the name "integrated pest management." Early integrated pest management programs were no more

easily accepted than soil science was before, and constant accusations of the work as being "soft science" were heard.

HEALTHY FOOD MEANS NONTOXIC FOOD

Environmental values, like other values, require a strong constituency to flourish and, in short order, the nature lovers were joined by consumers as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandated animal feeding tests of popular biocides. These tests showed considerable chronic as well as acute toxicity for vertebrates. The EPA set up the Office of Pesticide Programs in 1970 to oversee the safety evaluation of agricultural chemicals. The short story is that most of the chemicals are not safe—they are toxic and therefore risky to use and to have in the environment or on our food. So, as the National Research Council (NRC) summary, *Regulating Pesticides* (National Research Council, 1980) puts it, the issue is one of weighing those risks against the benefits. Economists at the time were drafting some rather unconvincing formats for risk/benefit analysis and evaluation. To be fair, it is hard to imagine how any format would have been workable even if a convincing one were found. As the NRC described the issue: "The benefits are largely, but not entirely, an increase in the availability of foods and natural fibers and a reduction in the amounts of resources needed to produce them. . . . The benefits, for the most part, are the monetary equivalent of economic resources." These benefits are to be weighed against the risks of pesticides, which include "increases in [human] mortality and morbidity and impairment of environmental vitality and amenities of all kinds." Wisely, this NRC report recognized that this would not really be an "economic" calculation, as it goes on to say, "The risks concern depends partly on the [EPA] Administrator's personal scale of values and partly on his or her perception of the values held by the society in whose behalf he or she acts. *That is to say, it is partly a moral and partly a political judgment*" (emphasis added; National Research Council, 1980). More than one reader would summarize this as: "They are asking us to accept small amounts of poison in our foods to save themselves production costs." And to admit to such thoughts is to be identified as an "activist."

Without needing any ethicist to point it out, agriculturalists always knew that their moral, i.e. ethical, responsibility in their vocation was the production of healthy (nutritious and not poisonous) food, in the same way that doctors knew they should not cause sickness in curing disease. But now, like doctors who knew that clean-looking hands could carry deadly infections and needed careful washing between each patient, agriculturalists had a new explicit value to pursue: food cleanliness. However, unlike medicine's decision to avoid any and all known sources of infection danger, agriculture was allowed a different

standard. Any effort to measure benefits was dropped and agriculture was allowed to simply minimize risk by a system of tolerated levels of toxicity on foods. The benefits, successful suppression of pests, were assumed to exist, and to be known by farmers. Among the benefits was not seriously included any social need for increased production, but only reduced production management/costs.

That the food safety issue is a kind of uncomfortable multifunctionality (which is not to suggest that farmers do not care whether their food is safe) is illustrated by how the benefits to farmers were treated. EPA abandoned fairly early on any mandatory reporting of the "efficacy" (whether it killed the pests) of compounds, and when, in testing for safety under EPA contracts, university researchers who discovered little or no efficacy, these researchers found no ear at EPA. The EPA was not interested in benefits, which left economists nothing to calculate and ethicists much to wonder about (National Research Council, 1987). Meanwhile, the foundations for organic agriculture had been laid.

SUFFICIENT FOOD MEANS AFFORDABLE FOOD

As early as the mid-sixties, agricultural school administrators became aware that the noble task of the United States Agency for Agricultural Development (USAID) to bring about agricultural development in developing countries sometimes resulted in increased production by means which increased rural poverty, so no one was able to buy the food. A little history would have helped avoid this problem. Hilgard in California and Henry in Wisconsin who, at the turn of the century (1898), started Agricultural Extension Programs stated that there was little that they could do to help the poor farmers. The problem with USAID's task is that the poor farmers they impacted were *the people* in a way that was not true in California or Wisconsin. It became fairly common for political scientists to assist or even lead the international agricultural development programs in agricultural schools. No one really liked the idea of agriculture causing hunger, but the changes needed to produce an agriculture that could really relieve poverty and hunger were often beyond the capacity of our land-grant universities. This is not merely due to their being familiar only with capital and energy intensive agriculture, but also because the kind of learning required was not something land-grant university faculty had time for. Peace Corps volunteers had more time, greater insights and freedom from publish-or-perish pressures. However, there were many other obstacles, in the way the big foundations worked and in the way USAID justified its expenditures to Congress, that threw up barriers to really effective development assistance. Perfectly rational bureaucratic structures in foundations (Korten, 1982) and perfectly rational structures of "accountability"

in government foreign aid projects (Tendler, 1975) were demonstrably (and demonstrated) destined to cause development projects to fail in reducing local hunger or increasing "effective demand" (the ability to buy) for food. Given the human suffering at stake, it became impossible not to judge in stark moral terms the need for agriculture to innovate far beyond mere production goals (Dundon, 1991b). Agriculture without social science was positively dangerous to the hungry of the Third World.

FANTASY OF "VALUE-NEUTRAL" PROGRESS

One way to excise multifunctionality from the soul of agriculture would be to declare its tools and policies "value neutral." The value neutral approach was common, as noted above, by economists. Dealing with the issue of farm size, the literature on new farm technologies and policies contained claims to "scale neutrality," i.e. not favoring large farms over smaller farms. Family farmers did not see it that way. In domestic agriculture, the "structural" shift continued unabated. Eventually, small farmers and farm workers sued the University of California's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources in the early 1980s to restore some attention to their needs. Agricultural engineers that produced the famed tomato harvester knew it would eliminate farmers on rolling land (in fact, ending nine out of 10 tomato operations) and they worried about whose responsibility that was. To which the Vice President for Agriculture of the University of California would answer in court that no one within the public agriculture system had that responsibility and that to assign such a responsibility would "stifle creativity and innovation" (Madden, 1991).

This struggle was clearly an effort to shake off nagging demands for greater multifunctionality in agriculture. However, the effort was not totally successful even in California, where small farms are far more numerous than large farms, even if cumulatively their product is only about 15% of the state's total. A thriving statewide "Small Farm Center" exists within the structure of the University of California to serve this added function. However, as evidence of the theme of resistance to such broadening, it was only by legislative mandate that it came into existence in 1979. A similar profile fits the legislatively mandated creation of a state-wide "Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program" at the University of California in 1986, which is a veritable hornets' nest of multifunctionality. Rumor had it that recent efforts to (re)move the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education Program to a non-agricultural school campus where agricultural products are as commonly smoked as eaten were due to its distracting advocacy of multifunctionality. As one respected agronomist put it to me: "Sustainability is a fraud invented to ensure the jobs of rural sociologists."



Figure 3. Should we save family farms? Industrialized countries spend US \$ 1 billion per day supporting their farmers. The legislation that authorizes such payments is promoted on the basis that this “will save the family farm.” Nevertheless, family farms like this one in Whitman County, Washington, have declined dramatically in the past 50 years as people moved from rural areas to cities. Yields on closely managed family farms are often higher than on large “factory” farms. Does society have an obligation to save family farms and at what cost? What is the rationale for doing so? USDA Photo by Tim McCabe.

What this history reveals is that values implicit in agriculture or impacted by its tools become “new” values to be positively pursued as explicit functions of the agricultural enterprise when those values are clearly endangered, or at least clearly obvious to some adequately vocal constituency. Such multifunctionality would produce tensions and conflicts in any profession or vocation, so it is not surprising that annoyance and nostalgic desires for greater simplicity are expressed in agriculture (Fig. 3). Current events mirror this historic pattern, as consumer constituencies oppose genetically modified foods and/or seek their labeling, environmental constituencies press agriculture to protect clean air, animal welfare interests press for more humane living conditions for meat animals and poultry, or, on the other hand, corporate constituencies enlist the USDA in producing genetic infertility in farmers’ seeds in the pursuit of the value of “intellectual property.” In one way or another, exquisite reasoning will find infertility of a food crop an agricultural value. See, for example, <http://www.etcgroup.org/article.asp?newsid=389> where terminating the fertility of seeds is presented as a way of preventing the spread of transgenic traits. Like the earlier capturing of agricultural biotechnology research by corporations interested in enhancing their pesticide market, detailed by Martin Kenney (1988), “terminator technologies” simply reveal what can hardly be considered a scandal, namely that new functions are effectively introduced by new (or old) constituencies who have means and motives to make those functions congruent with the institutional or personal needs of those who will have to work at those functions. And, as we have seen, the *motives* can range from the common sense of maintaining the soil and keeping food clean to deeply religious convictions about social justice, environmental integrity, and animal welfare. All too often, though, the only effective *means* to increase or decrease multifunction-

ality is politics resulting in legislation or financial incentives that promote or sustain research and development in certain directions.

WHAT DOES ETHICS HAVE TO DO WITH THIS?

This essay is not aimed at a cynical acceptance of policy chaos in agriculture but rather to finally raise the point of whether there are tools to introduce some reasoned order into this chaos. Astute social scientists warned me, in the early 1980s, not to become co-opted by those who hoped to construct the perfect risk/benefit analysis into the toxics issue, and cost/benefit analysis into the “structural” (family farm) question. Such schemes were efforts to resolve serious social conflicts with “bureaucratic rationality,” which too often meant simply arbitrary removals of the losers from the debate. Others, like Lawrence Busch and William Lacy, went in a more humane direction of full negotiations concerning conflicting values with the broadest representation of truly impacted parties. Agricultural economics needed to play a role, but “efficient use of resources” is much too limited because it ignores “flesh and blood” as Patrick Madden liked to point out (Madden, 1991). That “negotiations” could fail, I realized when I worked in the U.S. Congress in 1981 as I and some idealistic lawyers stood with dropped jaws as a representative of a pesticide lobby argued with a congressman over whether it was fair to legislate for a full medical investigation in a pesticide incident where only one farm worker went “down.” He proposed instead that six “downs” was more fair, and called the lawyers’ shock simply evidence that they had not been out of law school long enough and did not know how “democracy” worked.

In this story, you see the birth of an agricultural ethicist. Negotiations are critical in a civil society, but are there not some universal principles about what is

right or at least what is least harmful? Ethics does not create values, nor does it mandate the priorities among them. But one of many "definitions" of ethics, "the science of those actions that tend toward human happiness," indicates that ethics does recognize values and proposes norms to secure them. Clearly, an agricultural ethics will not normally be so broadly conceived as to take on the responsibility of leading a society toward happiness. Its ethics will deal with *its* defining values: food and the means of production. But if someone proposes that the convenient use and regulation of agriculture requires that we treat seriously substantial harm to and death of farm workers only when six have been harmed in a single incident, an unacceptable norm will have been established. Denying any formal status to the investigation and systematic application of norms in agriculture, such as that invoked by the Supreme Court in 1980 in its Benzene Case: "Part of the cost of doing business is the cost of doing business safely," suggests some sort of moral inferiority in agriculture. When an agriculture dean came to review an agriculture ethics course we were building in the mid 1980s he asked: "Why agriculture? Why now? Is there some special scandal you and your colleagues are focusing on?" I answered truthfully "Any mature discipline or enterprise has its professional ethics." I spoke somewhat disingenuously because agriculture is the most mature profession/vocation and it has wended its way through a myriad of value conflicts without an explicit ethics until now. The problem is that the religious norms that worked powerfully in the past were felt by many as ill suited to the "pluralism" of public education. Furthermore, economists seemed to claim access to a neutral, "objective" norm not requiring ethics.

About that time, Glenn Johnson, an agricultural economist, called to our attention that all our "factual" and quantitative arguments contain at least one normative ("ought," "should," and "must") premise if there are any policy recommendations in the conclusion. He emphasized that there is certainly no self-evident reason why all those normative premises should be trumped by considerations of efficiency. This insight into the structure of policy argumentation was remarkable and disturbing to those of us who were not wedded to neoclassical economics and had some experience in applied ethics. Glenn Johnson was not a left-wing liberal or an environmentalist. He just wanted to end the pretense that anything significant is accomplished in agricultural policy argument without some normative justification. Unspoken and therefore unexamined premises, especially normative ones, will come back and bite you. Apart from any human kindness, "A living wage for full-time agricultural workers is not obligatory" will lead to counties burdened with a huge poverty class, costly public health problems, and a generally depressed local economy, all in the form of a subsidy of

slightly cheaper food in some distant city. But human kindness counts as well. Or does it? As Cesar Chavez's successful grape boycott in the mid 1960s revealed, long before there was an "agricultural ethics," significant portions of the U.S. population held to the normative premise: "Agriculture should organize itself so that it can pay its workers decently." Liberal atheists and very conservative churches could find that premise among their principles. It is interesting to review Chavez's intellectual history and realize how multifaceted it was. The motivation was love of his people and workers and the spiritual example of St. Francis, but the basic middle level and strategic principles came from Papal Encyclicals on labor, from secular sources (Saul Alinsky's writings), and from Gandhi.

The situation in the 1970s and 1980s was one of a profusion of values being recommended to agriculture and being injured by it. Rural churches were convening regional and national convocations to state solid consensus theological and scriptural principles for maintaining family farms and rural community life (Dundon, 1991a). The Kellogg Foundation leadership also felt that the urbanization of America endangered public support for agriculture and hit on the idea that if liberal arts programs taught more about the history and multiple values that agriculture provides to society, a serious political neglect of agriculture could be averted. Somewhat dangerously, they chose philosophy departments to spearhead this effort to teach city kids about the wonderful values of agriculture. "Dangerously" because, for all their faults, philosophers who were sensitive to the values of agriculture were too often aware that establishment agriculture was as much a threat to some of those values as a tepid political devotion to agriculture. When the Agriculture, Food, and Human Values Society and its journal *Agriculture and Human Values* were formed in the early 1980s with Kellogg Foundation help, there were already a small number of philosophers, and not a few rural sociologists, prepared to help the agricultural establishment engage itself in a little self-reflection.

None of these sources of the ferment was in the possession of an organized treatise on the applied ethics of agriculture. To be effective, they needed no more foundations in ethical theory than medicine did. The values involved were all that mattered. Public university philosophy departments, it was said, had killed God and anything else humanly relevant in philosophy, including ethics. "Applied philosophy" was like a "square circle." And about ethics the question was whether it exists, given that no sensory experience corresponds to the word "should" or "ought." At least one prominent American philosopher considered the ability of philosophers to convince trustees of major universities to fund philosophy departments one of the best evidences of their intellectual agility, given that no sensory experience

corresponds to or results from the word "philosophy." This was not a group likely to mine church documents for some ethical principles on the defense of family farming, yet only the churches had a credible voice in the countryside on normative matters.

DOING AGRICULTURAL ETHICS TODAY

If truth be told, there was not then and is not now much in agricultural ethics that gives a philosopher center stage for his/her philosophic agility. The philosophers who first began to engage in agricultural issues seemed not the slightest interested in choosing between varieties of ethical systems, varieties of utilitarianism, deontology, or rights theories. They were moved by the values they saw threatened or in conflict with other values of importance in agriculture. They worked from the values out. One can find an occasional effort to find a system, e.g. utilitarianism with Tweeten (1987), and some innovative uses of other systems included in Charles Blatz's anthology *Ethics in Agriculture* (1991), including his own. Those systems are frequently aimed at the somewhat intellectualized goals of philosophers such as simplicity, unity, and consistency, and, for some, quantitative measurability. The early agricultural ethicists were intensely pragmatic, meaning they were committed to saving what they regarded as the most critical values impacted by agriculture. Ethics would be subservient to the preservation of those values. Hardly a debasement of ethics, this pragmatism is a recapturing of the medieval first principle of ethics that can be stated as: "The good is to be done" or "Harm is to be avoided." Good or harm are not moral good or moral evil but some kind of natural good/harm, including physical, social, psychological, emotional, or economic. Policies are morally good because they protect or create what is physically good. Jeff Burkhardt, in struggling with the warring values of an agricultural clientele that now includes chemical companies and machinery manufacturers, makes one of these pragmatic efforts in saying that everywhere (and a fortiori in agriculture), the first criterion of the [physical, nonmoral] good is serious human need. All other human pursuits presuppose that needs fundamental to human life have been met. Therefore, those fundamental needs are the first in the order of urgency:

"Such needs include adequate, affordable . . . nutritionally adequate food; adequate, affordable, or at least available, clothing and shelter; a livable environment; secure means to provide one's livelihood; and accessible educational opportunities (Burkhardt, 1986)."

An intensely pragmatic agricultural ethics writes, endorses, or advocates those normative principles that protect those values, principally the ones listed in Burkhardt's list. Each profession/vocation dealing with basic needs has a conventionally assigned por-

tion of human needs as its basic goal values for which it is responsible. No one professional enterprise is responsible for the whole of the human good. However, other ethical norms arise, as we have seen, when the means by which the profession attains its goal values begin to impact on important other values. Farmers, farm workers and their families, and the conditions in which they live and work because of their involvement in agriculture are among the principal values that arise with production values and conflict with them. The "rural life" values are equally urgent with production goals, as we discover in any other profession when the rewards are so bad that the professionals leave the profession in large numbers. It would have been impossible to find a philosopher in those days whose eyes would not have opened rather wide upon hearing the principle of "the infinite mobility of labor." It struck me at the time that many agricultural economists were like doctors all of whose patients were dead or dying and who then decided they were not doctors after all. With the exception of a few mavericks, the profession was of little help to the philosophers. And it was not as if they did not care about multiple values in farming. It was simply that the idea that a distinctly ethical set of norms might direct them that seemed odd. When I would announce to my agricultural economist colleagues that I had received an National Science Foundation fellowship to study the ethics of agricultural economics, slow, gentle smiles would spread over their faces as they would ask: "What ethics?"

Burkhardt's pragmatic focus on basic needs values is one of the things that makes doing agricultural ethics easy because those needs are so obvious and basic that there is not a lot of debate about them. A realization that the "Golden Rule" includes people who are distant from us in time as well in space gives us a way to call for sustainability in food supplies as well as in our choice of agricultural tools. However, it was not as if reflective agriculturalists did not intuit the moral wrongness of wanton destruction of nonrenewable agricultural resources.

BASIC STRUCTURE AND TOOLS OF AN AGRICULTURAL ETHICS

The basics of ethics cannot be so complex as to make it an esoteric discipline. You have all been making reasoned ethical judgments for years, even if Aristotle feels that the empirical grounds for making them well are not assembled until one is at least 30 years old! Of course, you did this with largely implicit principles and innate reasoning structures. What follows is a simple organization of those practices: Remember the purpose is to protect values (expressed as nouns, e.g. food, good nutrition, and security) with appropriate principles (expressed as statements, e.g. local food security should be protected where possible).

Be governed by the human needs that agriculture has to satisfy: sufficient, healthy, and sustainable food (fiber) supplies. Then, incorporate all the legitimate multifunctional elements under the rubric: "by means that respect the rights and dignity of all the participants." Then express normative, ethical principles that protect and provide a reasonable prioritization among those values, keeping in mind that absolute priority and priority due to urgency in point of time are separate issues. You can see some of this done at <http://www.soulofag.org> where the process is used in the defense of family-managed farming. Industrial agriculture that could satisfy the norms there would be much more ethically defensible.

Do not hesitate to use traditional Judeo-Christian normative principles regarding farming, land use, the dignity of labor, and care for animals because those can be stated without appeal to religious authority and because they are principles that are culturally strong in the countryside (Dundon, 1991a).

Do not hesitate to use the "Golden Rule." It is hardly sectarian. Or Kant's "Treat all persons as if they are also ends, not as if they are purely means to your ends." Or be really daring and use "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Respect, while using them, the inherent goodness of animals and the environment.

Consult trained ethicists when dealing with complicated conflict issues involving "middle level principles." One example is the "precautionary principle." A not very significant elaboration of "look before you leap," it is astonishing to see serious players in agriculture maintaining that one does not need to look before leaping unless one has solid demonstration that a cost effective looking is called for. If someone wishes to impose a risk on me for his benefit, it is his task to demonstrate that the risk is minimal in the risked harm or minimally likely to happen. And then the choice is still mine. What part of that is hard to understand? Some common sense ethics is called for if someone proposes a substitute "principle" such as: "If delay for looking is costly, leaping without looking is o.k. because risk-taking is the price of progress."

Do not be afraid of funny-sounding but effective principles like "If you don't want to see it in the newspapers after some suitable time, don't do it."

Avoid ethical bad habits by, for example, a comparison with medical ethics principles of informed consent when dealing with the issue of labeling genetically modified foods. Informed consent is treated with great care in medical experiments where the benefit is usually the patient who bears the risk or to those the patient cares for, so why not in agriculture where it is not clear that I as a consumer, or my children will benefit from the genetically modified products and where no one has even suggested such a benefit? A label allows for informed consent. Its absence does not. If something goes wrong and the

public is hurt, what will it sound like in the newspapers to read: "I didn't want them to know because I thought they might misuse the information"?

Become acquainted with the history and philosophy of the sciences involved in any question. The less mature the science and the more astonishing the dreams of future novel products and methods, the more risk is likely to reside in regions "not sufficiently understood" where all risk resides.

Note the potentially corrosive character of the claim "There is no other way." An adequate search for alternatives to costly or risky technologies is of the essence of good ethical policy making.

Be wary of the tendency of institutions and agencies to sanctify the means over the ends. The ethical agent allows the ends to determine the means, provided these means are not inherently objectionable, however much that may mean that his/her professional toolbox may not be needed in this case or must be loaded with new or different tools.

Your conviction that the best science available must guide our practical decisions should be shored up with wariness about today's world where speedy action and "proprietary" knowledge are often involved. It must be kept in mind that there is no a priori quality that assigns the name "good science" or "junk science" to any proposition. It is only patient, thorough, and carefully replicated testing by many parties, and open debate of all the results by objective critics that leads to science. And therefore if it is secret, it is *not* science, no matter how true and well established it seems to be to the holders of the secrets.

CONCLUSION

Debate is as essential to good applied ethics as is vigorous peer review and critique to good science. The problem is that such debate is likely to be endless wrangling when there is no agreement on basic values and the basic principles that form the normative premises in policy arguments. The problem in the history that I have reviewed above is that frequently key parties to the debate were impatient with the work of making those values and principles explicit. Everyone needs to do this work. It is not a work that can be left, as one wag put it, to the best ethicists money can buy.

Unfortunately, today, the technical premises rather than the normative premises in ethical policy debate are the most contentious because the term "science," which properly used should designate one main source of these premises, is itself being abused to apply to secret, unreviewable, and often vested-interest research and conclusions. It will be one of the great ironies of our civilization if it suffers great harms because the pursuers and custodians of knowledge chose to avoid admissions of uncertainty when the modesty of science would recommend cau-

tion. Without honest technical information, no agricultural ethics is possible. And public support of agricultural sciences may be damaged for many years should some harm come to the public due to exaggerations of scientific certainty.

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