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# COMMENTARY

## Institutionalizing Agricultural Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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We can, of course, be deceived in many ways.  
We can be deceived by believing what is not true;  
but we certainly are also deceived by not believing what  
is true.

- Kierkegaard, *Works of Love* (1847)

**W**hen something is institutionalized, it is established as a convention or norm of an organization or culture. Most professional disciplines have institutionalized and published their professional ethical expectations. Universities routinely include ethical study in the curriculum for medicine, law, business, and the environment. The agricultural science curriculum lacks consideration and study of the effects of agriculture's ethical dilemmas on society. Moreover, agriculture, the essential human activity and the most widespread human interaction with the environment, needs a defined moral foundation. Ethics has not been institutionalized in US land-grant universities with agricultural colleges,<sup>2</sup> colleges of agriculture in other countries, agricultural professional organizations, or the agribusiness industry. That is not to say there are no professional ethical standards.

Examining agriculture's ethical base and the reasons for it is an exercise in reason to find where the weight of reason rests (Rachels and Rachels 2007).

1 This is a partial revision of the author's "Institutionalizing Agricultural Ethics in US Land-Grant Universities," Chapter 3 in *Key Issues in Agricultural Ethics*, Burleigh-Dodds Science Publishing Series in Agricultural Science - number 140.

2 US land-grant universities were created by the federal Morrill Acts of 1862 that gave each US state a grant of land that could be sold to endow a college of agriculture.

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Commentary:  
Institutionalizing  
Agricultural Ethics  
R.L. Zimdahl

Many assume agriculture has had an adequate ethical foundation. The assumption is not questioned. There has been too little investigation and too little critical thinking about the lack of and need for an explicit ethical foundation.

Agriculture has scientific challenges: achieving sustainability, maintaining production, pesticide and antibiotic resistance, invasive species, loss of biodiversity, biotech/GMOs, and pollution. Many involved in agriculture appear to believe that development and use of more energy-dependent technology is always good, and more will be better. It will address the need for production, solve the problems caused by the unintended consequences of present technology, and alleviate public concern.

I do not mean to imply that we should abandon science and technology. We humans, the earth's dominant species, are not just figures in the landscape—we are shapers of the landscape (Bronowski 1973, 19). Having achieved this power, we should think carefully about whether what we do is desirable and sustainable. Although all involved in agriculture know what they are doing, they should think about and consider what they may be undoing.

The central, indeed often the only norm in agriculture is productionism. The moral imperative is to produce food and fiber to benefit all humanity. It is what must be sustained. Those involved in agriculture, whether they are producers, suppliers, or researchers, and regardless of their employer, should ask and debate if production is a sufficient criterion for judging the consequences of all agricultural activities. Does increasing production justify everything agriculture does? Does it achieve sustainable production practices? Does the quest to increase production solve or even address agriculture's moral dilemmas?

Agricultural scientists have taken it for granted that as long as their research and the resultant technology increased food production and availability, they and the end users were somehow exempt from negotiating the moral bargain that is the foundation of the modern democratic state (Thompson 1989). It is unquestionably a moral good to feed people. Therefore, it is assumed, anyone who questions agriculture's morality

or the results of its technology simply does not understand the importance of what is done and how it is done. It is assumed that agricultural practitioners are technically capable and that the good results of their technology will make them morally astute. We ought to consider Berry's (1977) assumption:

*We have lived by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.*

When those involved in agriculture claim credit for improving production and keeping food cost low, they must also accept society's right to hold them responsible for problems often regarded as externalities. They need to ask and be prepared to respond to what has not been asked often enough: What could go wrong? What has gone wrong? What are the appropriate responses?

We live in a post-industrial, information age society. No one will ever live in a post-agricultural society. Continuing to justify all agricultural activities and technology by the necessity of achieving the moral obligation and production challenge of feeding a growing world population has not been and will not be a sufficient defense for agriculture's negative environmental and human effects. Humans, as a force of nature, are disturbing and changing the climate and our planet's ecosystems at a pace and scope never seen in human history (Friedman 2016).

What is the problem? Feeding the 11 billion expected to be on the planet at the end of this century is undeniably a good thing. Is it a production problem? Of course, it is. But enough food is produced to feed the global population.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as many as 810+ million people still

3 <https://www.worldhunger.org/world-hunger-and-poverty-facts-and-statistics/> (accessed May 2020). Also see <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/10/1048452> and <https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/world-hunger-facts-statistics> (accessed September 2023).

go hungry every day.<sup>4</sup> After steadily declining for a decade, world hunger is on the rise, affecting one of nine of the world's people. From 2019 to 2020, the number of undernourished people grew by as many as 150 million, a crisis driven largely by conflict, climate change, and the COVID-19 pandemic. In spite of the abundance of food, people are hungry because of inadequate food distribution, inadequate infrastructure that delays or prevents food distribution, food storage waste, waste by consumers, government policies, and poverty. More production will not solve the hunger problem (Sen 1999).

It is obvious to anyone who listens to, reads, or watches the news that citizens of democratic societies are becoming increasingly reluctant to entrust their water, their diets, and their natural resources blindly into the hands of farmers, agribusiness firms, and agricultural scientists. Ethicists and agricultural practitioners must initiate and participate in a dialog that leads to social consensus about the effects of agriculture's technology, its risks, and reasonable solutions. In the past, most risk was borne by users of the technology. Now there is widespread concern that the risks and short- and long-term consequences of agricultural technology are borne by others. There is important, rational concern about pesticides in our food and the environment, the role and future effects of genetic modification, deforestation of the Amazon to grow soybeans and pasture cattle, cruelty to animals, and harm to migrant labor. Agriculturalists must begin to contribute the time and resources needed to listen and explain their positions and understand those of their fellow citizens. All involved in agriculture and those who enjoy abundant societies must recognize that they are dealing with how we ought to live. For most non-agricultural segments of society, these are not new demands. For agriculture, they are.

The way agriculture is taught and practiced, and research projects are chosen and conducted, involves scientific and ethical values. Feeding the

growing world population is clearly a very good thing, but it does not absolve the agricultural community from critical, ethical examination of the totality of agriculture's effects.

Many people throughout the world, in both developed and developing countries, have concerns about the ethical dimensions of agriculture and our food system that go beyond the central need to feed humanity. Each of agriculture's multiple responsibilities includes an ethical dimension:

- Achieving sustainability
- Pollution of water, soil, and humans
- Harm to other species and cruelty to animals
- Habitat destruction
- Availability of surface and ground water
- Exploitation and inhumane treatment of farm labor
- Loss of small farms and rural communities
- The power of corporate farming and its lack of transparency
- Treatment of animals
- Biotechnology/GMOs
- Loss of crop genetic diversity
- The nutritional value of foods provided to consumers by the food system

These are not just scientific problems. We should not expect scientists alone to solve them. Some segments of the agricultural enterprise should work together with others to identify and discuss agriculture's ethical dilemmas. Collective action will diminish the problems and achieve worthy, morally good goals. Agriculture will gain little if it wins the production battle and loses the moral battle.

Agricultural education has given too much emphasis to what to think rather than how to think. Universities have traditionally been places where different opinions were welcomed and encouraged. The present trend toward specifying what controversial topics may or may not be welcome is disturbing. It stands in sharp contrast to the role of teaching: to lead out, to educate. Encouraging students and the general public to be aware of and discuss difficult controversial issues is an important role of education and those who teach.

4 Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdg2>. Accessed June 2022

The typical agricultural curriculum lacks courses in agricultural ethics that focus on general ethical principles and their application to agricultural issues. In 1999, such courses were available at 15 US land-grant universities with agricultural colleges (Zimdahl 2000). By 2012, the number had declined to nine. A 2022 survey of all 50 US land-grant universities with agricultural colleges showed 46 offered a class on environmental ethics in the Department of Philosophy. Agricultural ethics was offered by only six universities (Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Pennsylvania, and Vermont). I suggest the paucity and steady decline of university courses on agricultural ethics is because the faculty who teach, plan the curriculum, and advise undergraduate and graduate students do not regard studying the ethical values of agriculture as important preparation for agricultural professionals. When I was a student, I was never advised to enroll in any classes in philosophy, and I believe many professors and their mentors were, likewise, not so advised. Present faculty are probably not interested in or do not care to cooperate with a colleague in the department of philosophy to create a class on agricultural ethics and encourage students to enroll.

Encouraging students to enroll in such classes will not in itself quickly increase the emphasis on agricultural ethics. It will, however, be a recognition of the need to acknowledge and discuss agriculture's ethical dimensions. Agriculture has problems that have focused attention on production and profit (Zimdahl and Holtzer 2016), while education and practice have ignored agriculture's human and ethical dilemmas (Damasio 1999).

Professors, department heads, and deans of colleges of agriculture who have not chosen to address agriculture's ethical dilemmas are probably contributing to the problems. There is a clash between the environmental and human harm of modern agricultural production and the values held by the general society and those who practice agriculture in different ways. The risk of ignoring the value conflicts and societal concerns could lead to a loss of public support and trust in agriculture.

Our technology may outweigh our character. We do not rise to the level of our aspirations, we hold at the level of our training—our education. We risk approaching what Niebuhr (1932) meant when he accused his colleagues of being moral people in an immoral profession. Mill (1859, Chapter 2) warned us, “He who knows only his side of the case knows little of that.” We must begin to interact with and listen to people who do not share our beliefs and who confront us with evidence and counterarguments (Haidt 2022). What we resist pursues us. What we accept transforms us. We are a mass audience consuming the same content while looking in a mirror reflecting the view we have (Haidt 2022). My experience has shown that students may be more willing than the faculty to question and explore outside the agricultural curriculum.

Science cannot answer the inevitable questions when two or more opposing moral questions arise. When the morally good goal of feeding a growing world population bumps up against the morally good goal of protecting the environment, one is confronted with value questions that science is not designed to and cannot answer. When the environment's natural objects are valued only in terms of their worth to humans, they can be and are legally destroyed or modified. Now it seems normal to send in the bulldozers, chainsaws, and backhoes to cut down the trees, fill the wetlands and “develop” the land.

For most of history, people saw themselves as dependent on the environment (Kolbert 2022). We have changed the climate and acidified the oceans. Little, if any, attention is paid to the inevitable environmental consequences: ocean hypoxic areas, soil erosion, melting ice, species extinction, invasive species. Our predatory self-interest dominates our environmental concern. Until something or someone receives a right granted by law or public pressure, we often see them only as things for our use. The objection that streams and forests cannot speak has been addressed. Neither corporations, states, estates, infants, incompetents, municipalities, or universities can speak. These entities are amply represented—some might even say over-represented—in the courts. We decide on behalf

of and in the purported interest of others every day. The other creatures (e.g., soil microorganisms, pollinating insects) whose wants are far less verifiable may be more important. They are more metaphysical (the fundamental nature of reality) in conception than the wants of rivers, trees, and land and the human obligation to them.

Niebuhr (1932) asked if it is possible for human intelligence to increase the range of benevolent impulses and encourage us to consider the needs and rights of other humans and other creatures including trees (Stone 1972) and rocks (Nash 1977) in addition to the things to which we are bound by organic and physical relationships. Can we transcend our own interest to grant rights to the interests of our fellow humans and the many creatures in the environment? If agriculture's practitioners continue to ignore agriculture's moral dilemmas because we must produce, they may lose the right to determine agriculture's future and jeopardize our chances of surviving on this planet (Berry 1977). If we fail to institutionalize the study of the ethics of agriculture, we will not learn how to ask and discuss moral questions. We should not continue to defend only the interests of agriculture when there are obviously unjust effects on the interests of the social community. Human ingenuity has increased the treasures nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs; it will never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Prediction of the future is always tempting, often successful, and usually hazardous. If all elements of the agricultural enterprise including professors, farmer/rancher producers, agribusiness firms, and food processors and sellers do not begin to recognize and address agriculture's ethical dilemmas, three unwelcome outcomes may follow. **First.** Agriculture practitioners may find their arguments and justifications for their technology and production practices ignored. **Second.** Public unease and dissatisfaction with the known or perceived effects of agricultural technology (e.g., pesticides) and its adverse

implications (cruelty to animals, farm labor, food quality) will result in increasing societal unrest and pressure for political action. Decisions on how agriculture can be practiced and how land is to be treated will ultimately be made by society and government.

**Third.** The increasing concentration of food production in the hands of agribusiness companies will continue. Small farms, farmers, and rural communities will continue to gradually disappear.

Rather than wait to see if appropriate levels of sustainability and resilience can be achieved by the present capital, chemical, and energy intensive agricultural system, agricultural people could begin to learn how to impose ethical standards on themselves. Because agriculture is a diverse widespread enterprise, reaching agreement will be difficult but not impossible. Recognizing the possible undesirable outcomes and choosing to act wisely will help maintain this industry so essential to human existence.

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