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SOCIAL AND ETHICAL NORMS

Appropriate Subjects in Universities, Too

— by Otto Doering —

"Values are the emotional rules by which a nation governs itself. Values summarize the accumulated folk wisdom by which a society organizes and disciplines itself. And values are the precious reminders that individuals obey to bring order and meaning into their personal lives. Without values, nations, societies and individuals can pitch straight to hell." So argues James Michener in a plea for the teaching of family and community values, which appeared in a recent magazine article. Michener sees such values as distinct to each group in society and critical to the working of any society—with each group or family having something unique to convey to its next generation.

Agricultural Values

People in agriculture can relate to Michener. Many still think that agriculture is unique. This notion rests on the recollection of Jefferson's concerns for a yeoman class to preserve democracy and on the continuation of agrarian beliefs from the era of populist fervor in America. Today's myth of agricultural uniqueness includes the notion that agriculture has a unique social setting and ethical norms, particularly that agriculture has a special relationship with the natural world. Other aspects of agriculture's uniqueness involve the importance of labor, the place of community, and the inherent goodness of rural life.

But the uniqueness of agriculture is gone. We all need to face that fact. Other social systems and ethical norms have overtaken

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those of agriculture—if not by force of virtue, then by force of swamping the agricultural population with an industrial and service-oriented society.

Industrial, social, and ethical norms first swamped agriculture's. The dynamism of the industrial context is superbly reflected by Carl Sandburg's poem "Chicago." Chicago is not only "Hog Butcher for the World" and "Stacker of Wheat," but also "Tool Maker...Player with Railroads...Stormy, husky, brawling...Flinging magnetic curses amid the toil of piling job on job,...Bareheaded, Shoveling, Wrecking, Planning, Building, Breaking, Rebuilding." Chicago was the new American industrial city. Yet this poem was written in 1916, written at a time when half of the nation was still agrarian and only a decade after the Country Life Commission. We are well beyond the era depicted

Otto Doering is a Professor in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University.

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by Sandberg in "Chicago" and now into a post-industrial age. To believe that agriculture still has its own unique social and ethical norms is to be two revolutions out-of-date.

Perhaps basic ethical norms are actually more universal than Michener believes and each group does not have a unique ethical sense. Aristotle's belief was that some basic values are inherent in humans. His illustration of this is that each of us knows cruelty when we see it, just as we know a triangle when we see it. We do not need to prove the cruelty wrong any more than we need to prove a triangle a triangle. This should enable us to expect some ethical sense of everyone.

The Land Grant Record

There have been touchstone agricultural social and ethical issues over the years. In a sense, the responses of the land-grants to these are barometers of our social and ethical sensibilities. Migrant labor is one. We have dealt with this issue, by eliminating it—eliminating it without compensating the displaced; eliminating it without retraining the redundant; eliminating it because it was so socially embarrassing that we were unwilling to apply good management science to a quality labor force to make them more productive. Church groups might give money to migrant labor organizing efforts, but in the same diocese might not minister to the spiritual, let alone, social needs of the migrants. Few universities applied good science to this issue in order to make viable employment—instead, we applied technological displacement. In spite of (or maybe because of) harping criticism from the outside, agriculture was unwilling to tackle this issue constructively. It seems ironic that agriculture, after avoiding dealing directly with its treatment of farm laborers, now must respond to society's concerns about battery chickens and animal rights and welfare.

Another Response from Agriculture

Unfortunately, many staff members in our agricultural schools have had a single response to the chemical issues like the "Big Green" in California that could have banned a number of agricultural chemicals. The response of some was, "If the public were only adequately trained in science, they would recognize the need for these chemicals and the inherent safety of their use." This response indicates several tragic flaws in the way that agriculture, a minority, approaches the rest of society!

First, a member of the general public with the same scientific

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knowledge as a scientist might still have a different risk preference and different values regarding human health or environmental damage.

Second, in the eyes of some scientists, the general public will never be adequately trained. Third, we are dealing with public perceptions—which may or may not correspond to scientific facts, but may correspond more closely to information from a source believed to be trustworthy. Being considered “trustworthy” is a value judgment involving social and ethical norms rather than scientific accuracy. Finally, my fellow scientists missed some of the major trade-offs and potential problems of “Big Green” by being concerned about the scientific facts only. Some of those trade-offs were social and ethical, and neither side in the debate had all the angels on its side. By failing to take on the social and ethical arguments central to major public issues, we forfeit the game.

Being more wholistic is not easy. Aside from social and ethical

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norms, considerations of indirect effects are important. For example, one of the impacts of “Big Green” would have been to move the production of a number of specialty vegetables and fruits to other states or countries. As a consumer, I know that California has the most stringent pesticide and fungicide use regulations in the United States. California also has the highest standards for safety and economic protection of its agricultural labor force of any state or country, for that matter.

If production moves out of California in response to legislation, I am likely to be less well protected from excess chemicals or more risky chemicals. Certain foods might be more expensive or less available to low income consumers. The labor employed to grow and harvest the product outside California is also less likely to have good working conditions and adequate wages and benefits (according to my standards as an urban consumer). Those of us outside of agriculture know about these things—after all, we boycotted grapes! All of these secondary impacts involve social and ethical considerations that should be important to society.

The “Circle of Poison” issue is another example. Again, science appears to be on one side, pitted against social and ethical con-

cerns on the other side, which argues that the U.S. should stop exporting unregistered chemicals. However, even social and ethical norms can be of widely different scope and context. There are ethical, as well as, good scientific arguments on both sides. Having worked in developing countries for a number of years, I do not feel that I have the right to tell subsistence farmers that they should not be allowed to use a chemical that is not registered when the use of that chemical would help them feed their children now, but could increase the incidence of cancer later. It would be arrogant for me to do so, maybe unethical, but I'm uncertain. The wealthy are more able to worry about the long run than the very poor. Do the wealthy have the ethical responsibility to force the long-term view on the poor? I do not find this an easy question to answer. Those on both extremes in the debate are more comfortable than I am in dealing with such questions.

Preparing Students

Current students in colleges of agriculture come without a sense of agriculture. In fact, they exhibit a very limited set of any strong social and ethical norms. Neither their families nor their communities inculcate strong norms in their young as did families and communities generations ago. As these under-normed students approach the universities or colleges they are confronted by modern science which tries, as much as possible, to ignore or avoid dealing with social or ethical norms. Schools of agriculture are disinterested in social and ethical norms. In this respect, they are no different from other “scientific” parts of the university. They have little interest, nor are they willing to deal with social and ethical norms unless the norms happen to reinforce science or production.

How should we prepare students of agriculture to deal with such normative issues? My goal would be to produce students who are able to recognize when social and ethical norms are as important as production and efficiency. It is not satisfactory to tell students to ignore the social and ethical aspects of these issues. True, it is not appropriate for universities to indoctrinate. However, it is appropriate for science to study social norms and systems of ethical thought. For example, students should recognize that issues like the “Big Green” referendum in California involve conflicting social and ethical norms as well as conflicting facts.

Can and should we teach our students to embrace certain ethical and social norms? We could, but we probably shouldn't. Should we teach about social and ethical norms? This perspective approach is better and we should try to do it so that they can analyze problems within some framework of ethical systems.

What I am saying is: (1) Our society does not inculcate social and ethical norms in its young. Few parents teach and convey either and public, pre-college schools believe that they are not

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allowed to teach them; (2) If we try to teach the norms at the college level, we might end up conveying sets of personal, professorial beliefs. However, I am less concerned about a strong viewpoint like a Marxist in the classroom than I am about a half-baked Marxist in the classroom whose only appeal is to the heart, not the mind.

Students need to be able to recognize and then analyze the social and ethical trade-offs inherent in any important decision. Then, they can apply their own developing values and their knowledge of scientific facts. Churchill's quip that, "If a young student is not at first a Socialist he does not have a heart, but if he does not later become a Conservative he does not have a brain," is about more than politics. It says something about learning, exploring values, and balancing these with facts when making decisions.

At the college level we cannot impose social and ethical norms. We can broaden the knowledge base in which an individual deals with questions, and we can demonstrate an approach by example. Exposing undergraduates to teachers who are good in their disciplines, have broad experience, and have their own well developed social and ethical norms is one of the best learning experiences.

If you want students to appreciate social and ethical norms, put teachers in the classroom for whom such norms pervade the learning experience. Students then see what they do for one's ability to analyze difficult value-laden issues and make critical decisions.

On a curriculum level, students need background information,

as well as personal experience to provide a basis for making comparisons and choices. This means taking a good class in American government, some history, English that facilitates better reading and writing (allowing the student to enter the world of ideas), ethics, cultural anthropology, applied sociology, etc. Without such background, a student has no context for social and ethical issues—no broad standards for comparison and discrimination other than personal emotions and experiences.

We might ask ourselves these questions when setting a goal to equip our students to integrate social and ethical factors in decisionmaking:

- Do our students understand the difference between (a) scientific or factual information, and (b) information about or from ethics and values? Are they equally comfortable dealing with each, and do they recognize the role of each in decision making?
- Do our students have a broad understanding of social and ethical norms held by others that may be different from their own personal beliefs, values, and experiences?
- Are our students able to identify and assess trade-offs that involve both efficiency values, science and social/ethical norms?
- Have our students been sufficiently exposed to teachers who convey experience in dealing with social and ethical issues in a non-advocacy, non-proselytizing way?

If we can answer yes to each of the above, we are turning out an individual ready to deal with the social and ethical questions of the post-industrial world. If not, ...