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AGRICULTURAL and ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: A PRAGMATIC VIEW

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1. Environmental Issues

The list of environmental conflicts is familiar to all and little purpose is served by repeating it. There are trade-offs between the production of food, fiber and mineral materials and other uses of our natural resources which are more passive and directly utilized. One role for scientific inquiry is to clarify these trade-offs (indicate the marginal rate of substitution of one product for another). I suspect there is general agreement on this role. Some of the initial conflicts may disappear in the process, but some new one may develop as people become more aware of who is doing it to them.

The only variation on this that I want to add at this point is to emphasize that values are learned. This means that information is part of the evolution of values that a particular individual may hold as well as part of the input into individuals reaching compromises and accommodations with each other. This may be a process of person A persuading B to change her mind or to engage is some compromising give and take. My hunch is that the majority is going to learn to derive sufficient satisfaction from less material goods throughput than the average American now consumes. We will decide that more material throughput creates more stress than pleasure and we will place more emphasis on being rather than having (using the terms of the psychologists Erich Fromm (1976) and Ivan Illich (1973). But, this may be wishful thinking on my part. If it does come about, it will be accompanied by greater equality than we now have. It will be difficult for the have-nots to learn to do with less materials. Even where there is general willingness to trade off some materials for on-site environmental uses, it will be unacceptable to the person who loses his entire income in the process. This explains why labor unions have opposed bans on construction of nuclear power plants. When a polluting chemical or steel plant closes, it employees are not making a marginal trade-off and their willingness to go along depends on how the costs of change are shared.

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The above discussion is illustrative of some of the ways in which analysis of values proceeds. Some testable propositions can be formulated about how values are learned and evolve (knowledge about values). At the same time this information can be used in persuasion and preference formation itself.

2. Truth is Social

My experience suggests that truth is a social phenomenon. As Glenn Johnson puts it, "Science itself, is a social phenomena and hence scientific truth is a function of the state of science as a social activity." What we mean by some thing being objective is that everyone gets the same answer--or nearly everyone and most of the time. When we accept a relationship as being true after statistical analysis, it always is relative to some level of significance. That threshold is a value judgment and social construct (Rudner, 1953). The explanatory significance of an independent variable in explaining a dependent variable is often affected by what other independent variables are included in the analysis. When models are sensitive to variable specification there are judgments to be made which are conventions and are matters determined by the prevailing prior knowledge and theories of the leaders in the field. These matters are settled (to the extent that they are settled) by social persuasion (see Leamer, 1983). This is not to say that after further experience most observors will not change their minds. The point is just that social observation is all we have to work with. As Paul Feyerabend (1978) puts it, "science knows no 'bare' facts at all but that the 'facts' that enter our knowledge are already viewed in a certain way and are, therefore, essentially ideational". Other implications and applications of the idea that truth is social will be discussed below in the section on the relation of experts to the public.

3. Experts and Trade-offs

Some economists nominally deny any competence to rate values, yet they support particular policies under the guise of increased efficiency, welfare, productivity, and freedom. These values are formulated in such a way as to command universal adherence. Who after all wants to be inefficient, wasteful and unproductive? This formulation allows a stance toward the public and its political representatives which is policy perscriptive and which if rejected bears the label "irrational" or just plain stupid. In this formulation, it is necesssary to split resource allocation to maximize production from the admittedly value laden questions of

income distribution (who has ownership of resources with which to enter into market or political transactions). The usual approach pretends to be value neutral, when in fact it is value presumptive. For a critique of this position see Joan Robinson (1962). This formulation pretends harmony when in fact people are in conflict, and in doing so it supports the status quo distribution of power. Supporters of this approach claim to be objective positivists but are really only deceptive. I think that students should be taught to be aware of these deceptions.

I do not know how other disciplines present their expertise. It would be interesting to me to compare notes. I am aware, for example that some soil scientists utilize soil capability classifications. Certain types of soils and topography are appropriate for certain uses. What does that term appropriate mean? Is the farmer who makes a use at odds with the soil capability class irrational? He may be perfectly aware of the long term soil erosion, but needs to trade it off to personally survive. Both the soil scientist and the farmer may agree on the character of the production function and that erosion is bad. The farmer makes an explicit value judgment as to what is the right action involving the tradeoffs, while the scientist's recommendation following the soil capability classification may involve tradeoffs of which he is unaware or which are hidden.

Various professions have widely adhered to performance standards. One hears park and recreation specialists speak of the desirability of so many acres of parkland per capita. Outside of agriculture, we are aware of such medical standards as so many hospital beds per capita. In education, teachers recommend a certain teacher-student ratio. These standards are presented not just as something that the speaker likes, but as coming somehow from the depths of one's professional learning. Most professionals would probably be offended if their recommendations were regarded as only equal to that of any person in the street.

Engineers use a number of conventions in construction designs, such as flood control dams. Extra strenght to reduce the probability of failure or of not containing the "Moses Flood" costs money. If anyone objects, the design for the "standard project flood" is justified as being worth it to save lives. Yes, lives may be saved at the given location, but a super dam at one site plus limited budgets means that no dam and lives saved at the site that didn't get built. Design standards treated as technical matters often hide value judgments.

There is a raging debate now among bio-technologists and some members of the public over when a new micro-organism is safe to release to the environment. Many

scientists dismiss their critics as being ill-informed. Do any of them simply admit to differences in values in the same way that they might admit to the reasonableness of how each person decides to spend their income for consumer goods? I try to teach students not to be embarrassed by such an admission.

Another heated debate in progress is over animal rights. Again scientists find it hard to understand why everyone is not willing to make the same trade-off between scientific discovery and the pain that some feel when they perceive animals to be in pain.

In all of these cases there are trade-offs being made between competing ends. The scientists may rhetorically ask who is better able to make a choice than the person who is best informed. But, this is a contradiction in the implications of trade-offs. Most specialists are by definition expert in one side of the thing being traded off. There are no specialists in general trade-offs. There are just people trying to do their best. This is not to say that there are not some members of some professions which are very useful because of their interactive modes of operation. For example, architects, farm managers, and extension workers ask a lot of questions of their clients and put them in touch with a wide range of knowledge.

There is an alternative to the deceptive invocation of the cloak of scientism. This is a person who recognizes conflict and makes a personal moral choice, and makes no extra claim for it that could not be claimed by any one proposing an alternative value also based on experience and reason.

Before closing this section, note should be taken of the demand for scientific authority to which many are willing suppliers. When the course of events interrupts our habits at a rapid rate we become unsure of ourselves. When we feel at sea we are in the market for relief from the agony of choice. Erich Fromm (1941) calls it the "Escape From Freedom".

4. Professional Ethics

How do I treat ethical issues in the classroom? I would make some of the above points at various places in an undergraduate course in "Community Economics" which trains people to be public policy analysts for state and local governments. I do not devote any time asking students to compare their value judgments (with the exception noted below). I am not against it philosophically but I have other things to do.

I do spend one class period discussing a set of cases that I provide students which ask what they would do as analysts working for government in specified situations. For example, suppose that information which you have just developed is expected to affect the outcome of something in a way contrary to your own values. Would you sit on the information until the issue is decided. Or suppose that you are working for a politician whose values you generally agree with. You discover that the politician has committed a small illegality and if it is made public it may hurt the politician's chances for re-election. We just kick these dilemmas around and compare notes on what we would do and the consequences we would expect. After the students have had their say, I tell them what I would do in each of the situations, but claim no special authority for my position.

I acknowledge that "speaking truth to power" can create risks to one's job (Wildavsky, 1979). I judge that it is important for students to begin thinking about such issues before they are on the job and are faced with real choices.

5. Pragmatism

The simple text book definition of pragmatism emphasizes means-ends interdependence and that truth is determined by its consequences. This means that problems are not defined in terms of gaps between what is desired and what exists (Bogholt). Rather, habits of behavior are interrupted by events. At that time one formulates ends in view which do not remain fixed and antecedent but are examined in the same light as the means. As the means are explored, the end in view may change. New modes of behavior are tried and the person finds them workable or continues inquiry. Workability is decided in the mind of the individual in the problem situation and not in the mind of the external scientist (see, Kuhn, 1962).

Workability is not determined by the expert who compares what is to some ideal, but is experienced by the participants. The scientist may adopt a pragmatic approach for him/herself, but this is non-authoritative for others.

What then is the role of information in helping people involved in value conflicts where part of the interruption of habitual behavior is clash with others? The role of democratic discussion can't be overemphasized. John Dewey in his book, The Public and Its Problems, spends the last chapter which is entitled "The Problem of Method" talking of democracy and how the sense of community is created. This is the real stuff of what it means to say that truth, whether in so-called facts or values is social and experiential.

Consider the following paired attitudes and behaviors which may be involved in value studies:

Collectivist	Individualist
Man-made law	Natural law
Historical and evolutionary	Subject matter isolated from its connections
Experimental	Absolutist
Democratic	Elitist, authoritative

My definition of pragmatism involves the interaction of the terms on the left, in contrast to those in the right column. The pragmatist sees mankind as functioning as part of culture (affecting and being affected by social interaction). There is no presumption that laws nominally deduced from nature are good while man's attempts to interfere are not only stupid, but doomed. There is a strong attention to history. At the moment, I am afraid that many economists give little attention to history which led Thorstein Veblen to write the article, "Why Economics Is Not An Evolutionary Science." This also explains why one of the heterodox professional groups in economics is called the Association of Evolutionary Economics.

A key element of pragmatism is its interest in experimentation. Remember, the test of workability is action. Many mainstream journals have precious little data in them and even less where the author was involved in an experiment. The few working pragmatists are called extension personnel and they have a hard time getting their stuff in the journals. Pragmatists are willing to admit they do not have the answer and encourage their clientele and students to try different things and learn from the experience. The essence is the democratic process and persuasion among equals.

The role of an experimental, participatory learning process defies quick summary, but we must come back again to the proposition that values are objective and amenable to the methods of science in the same way as facts. Does this mean that values are pre-existing and waiting to be discovered in the same way as a star or an atomic particle? No, values are to be created, not discovered. Science is applicable to values and facts in the sense that the process involves experience, reason, publicity, discussion, trial and experiment (rather than trial by combat), learning and action. Values are not something for the detached scientist to discover and bring to sinners for their redemption, but something which the scientist can help people create and experience for themselves. There is something fundamentally different about the scientist who says to conflicting parties:

1. Here, do this on pain of being labeled irrational.
or 2. Hey, try this on for size.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would consider myself as an aspiring pragmatist as a result of the character of my job. Let me explain. I was once engaged to make a study of the jurisdiction and organization of the Federal water resources agencies. There is a continual cycle of proposals for consolidation or subdivision. The sponsor of the study wanted me to make a single recommendation . I refused. Philosophically, I could not pretend that there were no conflicting interests and make an argument for a general welfare maximizing relationship between the agencies. I would have to presume whose interests count to make such a recommendation. Instead, I tried to talk to the interested parties to determine who they were and their ends in view. Then from observation of institutional performance, I suggested what type of organization would serve each of the various interest groups. End of report (Schmid, 1971).

This is considerably short of pragmatism. I stopped there not because of philosophic judgement, but from lack of opportunity. If I had been invited (paid) to a meeting of the conflicting parties and asked for a suggestion to resolve their stalemate, I would try. I would probably have needed more information and it would have taken longer. But, I am willing to play the role of mediator. I use this term to portray the pragmatic scientist because when a labor mediator for example is called in, the mediator does not say "do this on pain of being labeled irrational", but rather, "try this for size". If the science is good, the parties will find the compromise workable more times than not.

In conclusion, this is a rather personal statement of how one social scientist and teacher acts. I hope by exposing it to the analysis of others, that it can be improved.

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