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Centre for Agricultural Strategy

# Crisis on the family farm: ethics or economics?

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# Ethics for agriculture

**Mervyn Wilson**

## INTRODUCTION

At a meeting between some family farmers and their local MP, the issue was raised that grants, which being headage, tonnage or acreage based, favoured the larger producer. The MP, in defence, claimed that this was the only just and fair way, because you could count heads, weigh tons and measure acres and it was the same for everyone. He was expounding a sort of mechanical justice which avoids the problems arising from making distinction between persons, between those who would benefit more and those less.

This concept, that justice in the settling of public affairs demands the ignoring of persons, and, as a consequence, that right and wrong can be quantified in terms of products, is a major fault line in our society, and makes any consideration of ethics very difficult. Two 'ethical principles' derived from this concept seem to determine policies:

- (i) 'The greatest good for the greatest number' - but this narrowly confined to the supply of material goods for preferred classes of humans.
- (ii) The mystique of seeking your own to the common benefit (the 'invisible hand').

Actions arising from following these principles are frequently judged wrong, and the principles themselves are declared inadequate. There is, however, no consensus about where to find a more satisfactory grounding. If one can accept that ethics is only concerned with the private and individual areas of life, well and good. Yet honesty, respect for others, good work, or love of friend and neighbour, cannot be confined to the private and the individual except at the cost of schism in the soul.

The problems of ethics in the modern world have arisen from a failure to agree on the criteria by which right and wrong can be decided. Ethics is, by definition, concerned with right and wrong action, and without agreement about the basics, it is pushed out of the field of objectivity and, in practice, is abandoned.

To the Christian 'love God and love your neighbour as yourself' is the basis, and the approved consequence for government is the provision of a 'level playing field' (or, to use another analogy, the exclusion of bullies from the market), and for people it is concern with the wellbeing of their neighbours in all everyday matters. But others take the view that if each (ie the individual and the corporation, large and small) 'seeks his own', the whole nation will benefit. Thus, any inequities are the consequence of the individual failing to assert his rights!

The problem becomes plainer in farming than in industry, since the farmer lives on his farm, works in public view, makes no differences between work place and home, and deals in living resources. Further, given the present uncertainties with different voices coming from interest groups, from government and from his own conscience, the farmer is even more concerned to obtain some guidance as to what is right and what is wrong. For he is concerned about what people think, and the basis upon which government acts.

This is a large problem. In a short piece I can do no more than indicate certain important areas, as they have been discussed by people who are to be respected.

#### OLD TESTAMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Ethics for agriculture concerns both government and the individual and the Old Testament order provides a certain model that encompasses both. Government accepted a responsibility to provide a living for all the people, and so the land was divided between tribes and families. That was the public settlement. Each family was then required to act as a good steward. That was the individual's responsibility.

"The fourth principle of creation economics held that we are also stewards before God of what is produced by the economic process. Our responsibility to him for one another means that we can claim no exclusive or unqualified right of disposal, even over what we have produced ourselves. The claim, 'it is wholly mine for I made it', can be attributed only to God (cf Ps 95:4). In any human mouth such a claim is countered by the fact that both the resource and the power to use it are alike gifts of God" (Wright, 1983).

For there were always some who could not be included in the public settlement. And Wright (1983) goes on to point out that there were many provisions as to how the produce should be shared. For instance:

"There was an annual allowance of gleaning from crops, vineyards and olive trees. The instructions to the farmer in Leviticus 19:19 and

Deuteronomy 24:19-22 not to be zealously thorough in his harvesting sought to ensure that there would be something worth gleaning. Again, such advice runs counter to natural selfishness, and so, again, the motivation of divine redemption is invoked. And at any time a person had the right to satisfy his immediate hunger from a neighbour's produce without transgressing the laws of trespass or theft (Dt 23:24)" (Wright, 1983).

### CONSIDERATION FOR THE INDIVIDUAL

The above brief consideration of the Old Testament model makes the first point: that a satisfactory ethic can only be based on consideration of persons. Actual individual knowledge is required. And it cannot stop with human kind. As A G Street (1936) put it:

"Incidentally, shepherds and huntsmen have one thing in common. It is amazing how both know the idiosyncrasies of every one of the animals under their charge. A shepherd will tell you the private history of any sheep you care to point out; and last Saturday I noticed that our local huntsman knew the habits of one of his hounds to a nicety" (Street, 1936).

On the grand scale, Albert Schweitzer wrote that the key principle at the heart of all human wellbeing, material and spiritual, is reverence for life. This also requires detailed attention.

"Whenever I injure life of any kind I must be quite clear as to whether this is necessary or not. I ought never to pass the limits of the unavoidable, even in apparently insignificant cases. The countryman who has mowed down a thousand blossoms in his meadow for his cows should take care that on the way home he does not, in wanton pastime, switch off the head off a single flower growing on the edge of the road, for in so doing he injures life without being forced to do so by necessity (Schweitzer, 1923).

There is no room here to consider in any detail the arguments and claims of the environmentalists: the farmer has traditionally been aware that his is a living resource which must be treated with great respect, both for his own sake, for the sake of other people, and for all the created orders of plant and insect and Lord and beast.

### CRAFTSMANSHIP

However, the position of the farmer is different in an industrial society. He stands for values and ways of doing things which have passed out of fashion. Here I turn to two witnesses: H J Massingham and Wendell Berry. The former wrote in England between the wars, when mechanisation and industrial method were making advances in agriculture. Massingham put great value on craftsmanship, and he

loved all the rural crafts. The reason for this is clear in the extracts below:

"The judgement of the earth is plain. It will have craftsmanship or nothing and to the predatory man it will refuse its fruits. Its udder will turn sour and then flaccid and sterile. The modern economic system is rejected of the earth because it is false. The earth's answer to it is unequivocal: it is soil-sickness, beast-sickness, man-sickness. A banker's earth is sick at heart. And is there no causation in this triple sickness of soil, beast, man? Vast monies spent on scientific research and public health have not removed this sickness: they have not even discovered its cause, they have not gathered the three sicknesses into one sickness, which is the sickness of the earth.

"But health-wholeness-holiness, only the very rarest man of science is aware of this trinity, a three-in-one. Average science will not stop men from preying on the soil as the plumage-traders preyed on birds in the breeding season for the milliners. An acquisitive society is responsible for the sickness of earth, beasts, plants and society, and such is the answer to Darwinian and company promoter alike. But the craftsman's relation to nature is symbiotic. So the wheel comes full circle and it is possible to claim with some confidence that the human approach to the earth most favours the craftsman" (Massingham, 1942).

Before I read this I had put to a local farmer the suggestion that he might see himself as a master craftsman. He agreed, and went on to complain about the amount of paperwork, returns and so on he was required to do by law. The master craftsman takes pride in the quality of his product and in honest dealing in the market. He does not require constant supervision. When he is a farmer he comes also to grasp, with a sort of intuitive awareness, the balance of nature. Long and close observation and familiarity at work give him this, for which theoretical knowledge is no substitute. This is nothing new. Sir Peter Grant, an improving landowner in 1800 brought cattle from the highlands down to his Hertfordshire estate, but on arrival they were turned into a field bordered by a yew hedge (unfamiliar in Scotland) and most died!

Moreover the craftsman, taking pride in his craft, feels affronted, or at least unhappy, with interference. Yet now to make a profit he must work his farm according to government rules and incentives. A craftsman is a man of judgement who is to be trusted, and who alone has the local knowledge to act for the good of all.

There is in our society a structural problem here. This sort of local attention cannot be determined in detail by any central power. If justice is to do with persons, and the knowledge of them, then it will only be secured by trusting the craftsman locally.

Turning, secondly, to Wendell Berry, who is a contemporary writer and poet, writing in the USA, but not in love with agribusiness. You

could dismiss Massingham as a lover of the past who saw all his values threatened by the march of modernity, but finding another a generation or two later, with longer experience of the effects of agricultural progress, allows one to suppose that they are on to something of permanent importance.

"The industrial revolution has held in contempt not only the 'obsolete skills' of those classes, but the concern for quality, for responsible workmanship and good work, that supported their skills. For the principles of good work it substituted a secularized version of the heroic tradition: the ambition to be a 'pioneer' of science or technology, to make a 'breakthrough' that will 'save the world' from some 'crisis' (which now is usually the result of some previous 'breakthrough').

"The best example we have of this kind of hero, I am afraid, is the fallen Satan of *Paradise Lost*, Milton undoubtedly having observed in his time the prototypes of industrial heroism" (Berry, 1991a).

## TOOLS

Berry has something to say, as did Massingham, about the tools we use, and expressed similar beliefs:-

"And so it becomes clear that, by itself, my rule-of-thumb definition of a good tool (one that permits a worker to work both better and faster) does not go far enough. Even such a tool can cause bad results if its use is not directed by a benign and healthy social purpose. The coming of a tool, then, is not just a cultural event; it is also an historical crossroad - a point at which people must choose between two possibilities: to become more intensive or more extensive; to use the tool for quality or for quantity, for care or for speed" (Berry, 1991b).

Both Berry and Massingham make choice of tools into an ethical decision and this must be right. The choice of tool and method affects employment, the state of the earth, the sort of care and management, the wildlife, natural beauty, one's own lifestyle. If only the bulk of product is taken as providing criteria of value, then a somewhat crass simplification is permitted which causes great damage.

## NATURAL, SOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL

Massingham, in the extract above, wrote of health, wholeness, holiness. Ralph Coward, a farmer in Dorset, was, I suspect, influenced by him. Here his son, Michael Coward (1991), continues the tradition.

"A friend of my father's had a threefold minimum term for a whole and full life:

- (i) Unless you respect nature you cannot live naturally.
- (ii) Unless you respect your neighbour you cannot live socially.

(iii) Unless you respect yourself or your conscience, you cannot live spiritually.

The social and the spiritual are affected by the natural. The natural and the spiritual are affected by the social. The natural and social are affected by the spiritual."

I began with God and the arrangements of the Old Testament. Some will prefer to propose a humanist ethic. I do not, myself, believe that we shall ever make right judgements unless we allow the original Disposer of the created orders His place. This is not, perhaps, a fashionable view, and one with which a secular government does not easily engage. I am impressed by Schweitzer's words:

"To have reverence in the face of life is to be in the grip of the eternal, unoriginated, forward-pushing will, which is the foundation of all being. It raises us above all intellectual knowledge of external objects, and grafts us on to the tree which is assured against drought because it is planted by the rivers of water" (Schweitzer, 1923).

I have for many years been interested in this matter of right and wrong in the way we look after our land, produce food, care for life and beauty and discover a good life, and I cannot think of any writers who have denied the deity a necessary place, who have thought that right action could be achieved without respect for mystery. There are many who blame churches and theologies for sending out the wrong signals, with what justice there is no place here to consider, but that is no argument against the holy.

No one has ever described a full or whole life without reference to the spiritual. The ethical and the cultural as well as the physical fall without it.

All the questions about animal welfare, food quality, care for the environment, use of land, will find satisfactory answers only if the basic principles outlined above are accepted. No group of producers on their own can solve these problems. The individual can work out a *modus vivendi*, but it will always point him beyond himself.

## CONCLUSION

All the persons mentioned above took existential decisions consistent with their ethical stand. That makes my final point. Ethics is not just something to talk or think about; an ethical stand is based on the conviction not so much that some things are right and others wrong, but that there is a single whole viewpoint which requires working through every action. And, further, that the higher is the ultimate determinant. If anyone is convinced, therefore, that people and human beings are more important than products, he will assent to a whole way of life which expresses this conviction; he will also take a stand against those who allow the product priority and will be wary of those

who allow now the product, now the person. This is the field where ethics is important. Today many people will admit only enough of it to satisfy what they consider to be their own needs.

I conclude with a further quotation from H J Massingham.

"We shall not, in fact, begin to understand the meaning of husbandry unless we relate it to the first principles of the natural law, which is an earthly manifestation of the eternal law ...

If we look well into the word 'husbandry', we can risk a definition of it, namely, 'loving management'. It means man the head of nature, but acting towards nature in a family spirit. Nothing could be further from its meaning than the modern and scientific 'conquest of nature' which is not only contrary to the natural law, but an absurdity. Modern secularism debases man by making him purely the creature of earth with no destiny beyond it. At the same time, it elevates this reduced animal beyond his station by making him the conqueror of nature - an altogether childish conception. These illusions of thought come from trying to break through first principles. But loving management exactly defines man's place in nature, and so honours the natural law, which regards man as chief of the creatures of earth, but subject like them to their Creator" (Massingham, 1942).

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