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Ethics and Agriculture: A Teaching Perspective

Penelope L. Diebel

Ethics and agriculture is a complex debate, but one in which agricultural economics students must be prepared to participate. There are many links between economics and ethic or moral philosophy. Classroom teaching tends to focus on discussion of issues involving behavioral ethics and disregards the teaching of philosophical ethics and its application in agricultural economics. A discussion is presented regarding the ethical context we have inherited in agricultural economics. I offer some broad moral philosophy concepts and an argument for providing students with tools to develop a philosophical ethics perspective of agricultural economics.

Key words: agriculture, economics, ethics, philosophy, teaching

Introduction

“First grub, then ethics”
— Bertolt Brecht, German Dramatist (1898–1956)

Recently I was asked by the Oregon Council of Humanities to provide its summer teachers’ workshop with a presentation on agriculture and ethics. Not being an expert in the field and noting the workshop was filled with philosophers, sociologists, and political scientists, I decided to do my homework. My thoughts were focused on understanding a broad concept of ethics in agriculture.

Initially, the term “ethics” evoked a diverse set of possible topics. A quick survey of colleagues resulted in a list of topics from cheating and plagiarism to the philosophical studies of Amartya Sen (Alvey, 2005). Another quick search using *AgEcon Search* yielded 95 documents from the keyword “ethics.” However, I found most of these used the term as an adjective (“ethical”) related to right and wrong, while few defined “ethical” or “ethics.” Two articles from a very interesting series of essays on agricultural ethics published in *Plant Physiology* offered inspiration. Dundon (2003, p. 434) provides an anthropocentric definition of ethics as “the science of those actions that tend toward human happiness.” Chrispeels and Mandoli (2003, p. 4) assert that ethics is the adherence to one or multiple ideals, including the spirit and letter of the law, a religious belief, standards, and “my ideas.” I think it is fair to state that ethics is about the process of making choices, both individually and collectively (Johnson, 1982).

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As this lecture developed, I began to reflect on how agricultural ethics is presented in the classroom. Many agricultural classes focus on current “ethical” issues, but few venture to define ethics or its role in the development of agriculture or economics. Dundon (2003) states that the “multifunctionality” of agriculture (soil fertility, rural living conditions, famine, environmentalism, food safety, etc.) is a complex ethics arena, where agricultural scientists must be able to apply well-developed ethical tools and thinking. In the classroom, student discussions of agricultural “ethics” issues are often defensive and dismissive. As a teacher, I am good at moving students through the typical sides of the debate, but I was beginning to suspect I was not giving them the tools with which to understand or develop a broader perspective of ethics as related to moral philosophy.

My purpose is to present arguments on why and how we should provide tools for our students to understand philosophical ethics. I will describe the ethical context I believe we inherited in agriculture; provide basic ethic or moral philosophical concepts; and conclude with my thoughts about learning and teaching ethics in agricultural curriculums, specifically agricultural economics.

Historical Context of Ethics and Agriculture

Several authors discuss the historical context of ethics inherited by those intimately involved in agriculture, whether they are producer, scientist, or educator. Generally, the presumption is that those who “feed the world” do so from high moral ground or, in other words, with moral confidence. Chrispeels and Mandoli (2003), Thompson (2007), and Zimdahl (2000) all provide historical examples and reasoning about why this moral confidence exists. It is easy to find examples of moral confidence in agricultural history and policy. In my agricultural policy class, we discuss the idea of “Jeffersonian Agrarianism,” in which agriculture is the noblest of human endeavors and the basis of democracy. We also reflect on the historical significance of slogans like “Food Will Win the War,” “Feed the World,” and the “Green Revolution.” Together they sound a call to arms in the defense of the moral integrity of food production. Another example of this moral confidence would be the highway signs throughout Kansas which read something like “One Kansas farmer feeds 128 people; and YOU.” How could anyone not believe in the ethical righteousness of these ideas? Zimdahl (2000) discusses how not just agricultural producers, but attitudes of students and faculty as well, often reflect this notion of agriculture’s “intrinsically ethical” purpose. Thompson (1998) claims agriculturalists have been “seduced” (p. 13) into the idealism of a social contract based on increased food production.

The social contract Thompson refers to is our first link to the language of moral and ethics philosophy. A social contract is one of many tools used to create social ethics. It implies the coming together of all philosophical theories to a single conclusion and agreement to accept a set of principles and rules that facilitate cooperation among members of society. This agreement is implied rather than actual (Thompson, Mathews, and van Ravenswaay, 1994). Thompson (2007) and Dundon (2003), among others, note that the social contract of agriculture as a provider of abundant food alone is out of date. The development of a new social contract is underway and is at the center of the unease that exists among agriculturalists when presented with ethical questions.

Agriculturalists face the growing complexity of agriculture, the inherent frustration of a new social contract being developed, and unfamiliarity with the philosophical language of social consensus. As a result, many are unable to fully participate in or lead this ethical discussion. The evidence of this changing social contract surrounds us. Consider the changes in your own college of agriculture (if indeed it is still called that), department names, majors, fields of research, and the backgrounds of undergraduate students.

A Few Moral Philosophy Principles

I would not dare to declare myself to be a moral philosopher; therefore, I claim responsibility for any inaccuracies, inconsistencies, or insults to moral philosophy contained within my discussion, despite the attempts of several gracious philosophical experts to set me right.

I borrowed a conceptual diagram developed by Pearce and Turner (1990) to create my own spatial diagram of moral philosophy (figure 1). Horizontally there is a continuum between anthropocentric (human-based) and ecocentric (ecological-based) values. Vertically is another continuum of more traditional social views to less traditional social views. Within the diagram there are two broad moral schools of thought: consequentialism (shown in italics) and non-consequentialism (shown in boldface). The consequentialism (teology) thread connects ethical decision theories based on expected outcome or consequences of action. The non-consequentialism (deontology) thread differs in that the inputs of a decision are more than or at least as important as the outcomes.

In figure 1, consequentialist theories move from anthropocentric utilitarianism to expanded and non-anthropocentric utilitarianism. Utilitarianism as described is often associated with Jeremy Bentham's theory of pleasure (good) versus pain (evil) and John Stuart Mills' "Greatest Happiness Principle." Utilitarianism is the philosophical basis of agriculture's moral confidence in "feeding the world" because the outcome serves the greater good. It is also the philosophical concept often related to the economics of consumer utility and cost-benefit analysis.

Hausman and McPherson (1993) compile an extensive set of essays which expand on this relationship between utilitarianism theory and economics. The anthropocentric prefix indicates that this approach is concerned with pleasure and pain outcomes as they relate to humans. Bentham noted that an expanded utilitarianism could be applied to animals if their pleasure or pain outcomes could be recognized. Thus, expanded utilitarianism moves beyond the greatest good for the greatest number of humans to the inclusion of all sentient creatures. Peter Singer's bioethics work—such as *Animal Liberation* (2002) and *In Defense of Animals* (2006)—fits in this region of the continuum. I have also categorized a less traditional definition of sentience, where existence is the only requirement for moral significance, as non-anthropocentric utilitarianism.

The traditional non-consequentialist theory is derived from Immanuel Kant's duty-based ethics which examines morality by the nature of actions and the will of agents (inputs of the decision) rather than goals achieved. Other non-consequentialist approaches include John Rawls' "Theory of Justice" and his proposal that ethical decisions be made from behind a "veil of ignorance." Behind this veil we can imagine all people are equal, respected, and compensated for any recognized social and economic inequalities. Egalitarians and libertarians disagree on the application of the theory of justice. Egalitarians promote supplementing or compensating personal rights by the provision of equalizing opportunities, such as funding public education or health care with taxes.

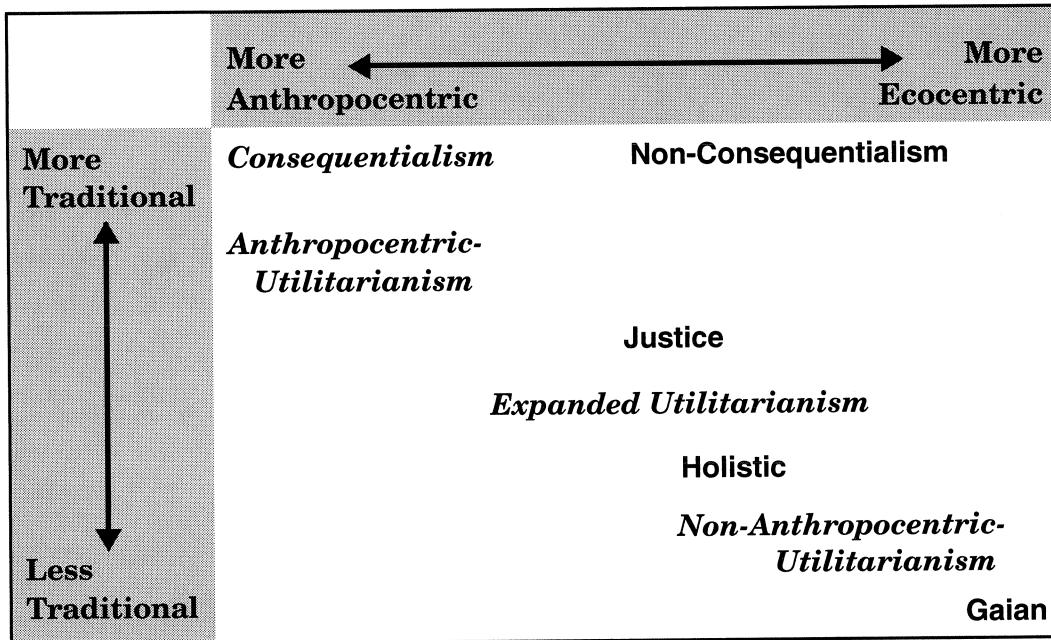


Figure 1. A possible framework for philosophical threads of Consequentialism (italics) and Non-Consequentialism (boldface)

These opportunities would not be provided under the libertarian philosophy of rights of non-interference, which protect equality but do not require beneficial opportunities to be provided by persons within society. Expansion of Rawls' concept of fairness leads to a sustainability ethic which considers both current and future generations. The Holistic approach is associated with a stronger sustainability philosophy, more closely aligned with the strong conservation or preservation focus of Aldo Leopold. Finally, within Gaian theory, ethical decisions must relate to a much larger picture of fairness and justice that includes the organism called Earth.

Few personal ethics philosophies can be pigeon-holed in just one philosophical theory. Thus, I have attempted to show these philosophical threads as part of a continuum rather than discrete categories. The categorization of moral philosophies assists us in understanding the breadth of the ethics continuum. In applying these philosophies to decision-making issues there is another categorization which helps to define the level of ethics debate involved.

James (2003) discusses two types of ethical issues and their separate solutions. According to James, type I or philosophical issues occur between or within major lines of philosophical thinking, as depicted by conflicts which may occur between the approaches presented in figure 1. Behavioral issues, type II, are violations of recognized norms of behavior at the individual or institutional level or, more specifically, the rules and standards created to uphold a social contract.

Philosophical issues are conflicts based on philosophically reasonable but incompatible threads of moral philosophy. Arguments must therefore be developed using several different philosophical constructs in order to come to social consensus. It is a natural progression of society and its social contract that these issues are discussed, resolved,

and accepted into or rejected from the social contract (James, 2003). The debate surrounding slavery is a historical example of a new social contract being formed. Current philosophical issues in agriculture might include world hunger, environmental integrity, consolidation of farms, use of genetically modified seed, and the use of animals for research or for food. According to James, the resolution of these conflicts is a necessarily lengthy process and is often stalled at an impasse. Therefore, it is critical to have institutions, processes, and professional ethics guidelines which allow for this type of discussion.

Resolution of behavioral issues may include the removal of incentives to violate the contract or enforcement of the rules. These ethical issues are addressed in business law and ethics courses in which case studies of noncompliance or the motives of unethical people are studied. In particular, these issues involve people purposefully misleading others into making unethical decisions. Agricultural examples include the known shipping of tainted food, improper disposal of waste, and mislabeling or misrepresentation of losses for compensation.

Agriculture's Social Contract

If changes in the social contract are a natural progression, the intensity of current agricultural discussions leads me to conclude that we are indeed in the middle of developing a new social contract for agriculture. The myriad of popular literature that critique and defend agricultural practices supports this conclusion. Only a few titles are necessary to exemplify this: *Beyond Beef* (Rifkin, 1993), *Fast Food Nation* (Schlosser, 2002), *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan, 2007), *Dinner at the New Gene Café* (Lambrecht, 2002), *Dominion* (Scully, 2002).

If successful participation in ethical discussions of a new social contract requires the use and comprehension of many different philosophical languages, then I am not preparing my students for their roles in this conversation. Discussions that result in a defensive call to arms rather than a conversation which recognizes the complexity of the philosophies and values behind the issues are incomplete and unusable in the broader context of the debate. As teachers, we provide students with the tools to successfully and fully participate in the world's discussion of agriculture. Have we given them the critical tool of recognizing and appreciating the ethical foundations of these moral arguments?

Thoughts on Learning and Teaching Ethics in Agriculture

A brief request to several Western region agricultural economics department heads inquiring as to whether they had an "Ethics in Agriculture" course in their curriculum revealed that few had such a course. Several thought other departments in their college had a course and many mentioned a business ethics course requirement. A simple internet search for syllabi containing those terms resulted in seven syllabi. Several more syllabi were collected if I included the terms "natural resources" or "environment." This evidence is similar to that collected by Zimdahl (2000), who surveyed land grant universities. He found few agricultural ethics courses existed, and among these the classroom topics vary widely. Despite the existence of few courses, there are a number of published

articles addressing the teaching of ethics within an agricultural context (Thompson, 2007; Sagoff, 1988a,b) and others that present the linkages between economics and ethic philosophies (Hausman and McPherson, 1993). Notwithstanding the idealism of my approach, I am a pragmatist and I know that resources are stretched. Finding room for additional content or courses in an existing curriculum is difficult. I propose to adopt (loosely based on my opening quote) not a “First content, then ethics” approach, but a less costly “Content with ethics” approach.

This can be accomplished by identifying missing linkages and teaching opportunities. Across the agricultural economics/business curriculum there are many links between economic theory and ethics philosophy that we let slip by in our courses, including but not limited to utilitarianism (Sagoff, 1988a,b; Hausman and McPherson, 1993). Courses which deal with policy making, conflict management, and negotiation without providing the ethics and moral philosophy underpinnings have missed an important teaching opportunity. Agricultural policy classes, including mine, often spend time defining values and addressing contemporary issues, but we leave out the deeper discussion of ethics philosophy and its language.

Thompson (2007) presents a usable framework called the “philosophical depth chart” in which he connects the politics, economics, and moral philosophies of creating policy. Identified within this chart is a single issue, interested parties, the moral constructs and interpretations used by each party, and specific philosophers who are most closely identified with each construct. Although this chart is certainly a simplification of the connection between policy development and moral philosophy, it does serve to help students begin to identify the important moral philosophies in a policy debate.

If these concepts are to be interwoven with a plethora of existing learning concepts, we should carefully consider the extent of our expected outcomes. While I would expect one outcome would be a level of familiarity with moral philosophy concepts and terminology, I feel the most important outcome is the creation of neutral ground where discussion incorporates both philosophical and behavioral ethics issues. This type of discussion may reduce some of the emotional content of “us versus them,” although certainly strong philosophical debates may ensue. I expect these concepts may develop into a more interesting arena for students who have little first-hand “worldly” experience to discuss the diversity of global perspectives. As in the example of Thompson’s “philosophical depth chart,” another outcome would be creating and understanding the linkages between politics, policy decision making, and philosophy. A final learning outcome may be providing a tool to challenge the idea of “value-neutral” science, a discussion closely tied to the principles of economics.

Using moral philosophy in our classroom will not be easy or comfortable, nor will it be the answer to defensive classroom discussions. I have already developed a list of complications associated with my pragmatic plan. First, and perhaps foremost, I cannot create a diverse student body through the introduction of this topic in class. My fairly homogeneous student body comes from a fairly homogeneous set of political views. On the other hand, perhaps the use of ethics terminology will reveal philosophical diversity as students reflect on which philosophical threads they would use to achieve consensus. Secondly, moral philosophy is complex and student skill levels in reading, writing, and comprehension are certainly not equal. Finding or developing tools that challenge but do not overwhelm students and do not consume too much valuable class time may be difficult.

Among my set of selected teaching tools are readings, books (fiction or nonfiction), case analyses, student-led discussions, and guest philosophers. The prospect of student-led discussions can be intimidating, but I have found that the structure provided by requiring the use of moral philosophy constructs can improve classroom discussions and student debate skills. Students spend more time working through their arguments when required to link them to a specific moral philosophy. Access to guest philosophers is a must for those of us not trained in this area or not yet comfortable with our own knowledge. To enhance the use of a guest philosopher, a colleague and I are developing the concept of "The Philosopher's Podium." During class, a guest philosopher will have 15 to 20 minutes to present a moral philosophy construct applied to a specific course topic. Students submit a written reply using a different moral philosophy construct. Eventually students could take their place at "The Philosopher's Podium" with a guest philosopher submitting a reply.

Conclusion

Ethics and agriculture is a topic of multiple dimensions. I have chosen to focus on one small aspect of the topic which I feel can be easily integrated, useful, and appropriate in an undergraduate education in agricultural economics or business. I have done a great injustice to the depth of moral philosophy and economics in this presentation, but I hope it encourages faculty to develop an interest in ethics and moral philosophy and to watch for linkages with course content and teaching opportunities which will enrich our students' education.

If education does not teach us these things, then what is education for?
— Aldo Leopold, *Natural History—The Forgotten Science* (1938)

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