Ethics & Agricultural Science

Robert L. Zimdahl
Professor Emeritus
Colorado State University
The Conundrum of Consumption

A problem with no satisfactory answer

Limiting the consumer life to those who have it is not Politically possible

Ecologically sufficient

Ethically defensible
The Conundrum of Consumption

Extending the consumer life – style to all

Would hasten destruction of the ecosystem
How do we know what to do?

How do I know what I choose to do is the right thing to do?
How do we know?

Empirical

Pragmatic

Skeptical
How do we know?

Authority

Tradition

The Law

Revealed Truth

Reason
Ethics

What we all have and practice

Societal Principles
Ethics is not
A set of prohibitions
Ethics is not: Do Not Rules
Ideal, but Useless
Relative
Subjective
Ethics and Morality

Ethics
Deals with values - principles & beliefs we use to determine what is right-wrong, good-bad, etc.

Morality
What people believe to be right-wrong.

Often synonyms
Ethics for Weed Science

We use ethical terms all day

good – bad

immoral - moral

right – wrong

just – unjust
Personal Ethics

Marital sex
Voting
Church
Charity
Social ethics

- Murder
- Torture
- Pornography
- Civil rights
- Children
Professional ethics

Don’t fabricate the data
Give proper credit,
Honesty,
Report all results,
Plagiarism
Conflicts of interest
Goals

Justice
Peace
Prosperous
Democratic
Free of Prejudice
Humane
An ethic gone wrong is a prelude to:

- Sweat shops
- Mistreatment of women
- Concentration camps
- Child labor
- Torture
Ethical standards change

Sexual practices
Business hours
Smoking
Animal treatment
Is there an ethical position that characterizes agriculture?
The central norm of agricultural science

Productionism

Producing food and fiber to benefit humanity
Is production a sufficient criterion?

Does it justify everything?
Responsibilities

Sustainability
Pollution
Harm
Habitat
Soil erosion
Water
And he gave it as his opinion, that whoever could make two ears of corn or two blades of grass to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country, than the whole race of politicians put together.

ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

There it is!

Is it adequate?

We have assumed it is!
Agricultural Assumptions

It is a moral good to feed people
“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.”
ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

Societal concern

Pesticide contamination
Soil erosion
Animal treatment
Loss of family farms
Corporate agriculture
ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

Are these just fringe concerns?

If they are societal concerns,

Agriculture has an ethical dilemma
ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

Are there definite answers in ethics?

Common answer -- No!
ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

Why?

Verifiability
ETHICS FOR AGRICULTURE

1. Standard of proof
2. Proving vs. persuading
3. Difficult questions
4. Objective scientific
Agriculture, the essential human activity, must have a firm ethical foundation. It's not just about results.
Three points about agricultural science

1. Those engaged in agriculture are certain about the moral correctness of what they do.

2. The basis of their moral certainty is not obvious to those who have it.

3. Agriculture’s moral certainty is potentially harmful because it is unexamined.
Moral Certainty and Debate

Foundational theories

Guides – not absolute rules

Invisible foundation

No single principle
The benefits and costs of modern agriculture

The greatest story never told.

A productive marvel

More land required
Societal Values

- Public consent
- Food availability and exemption
- Dialog
- Risk
- Listening and understanding
What is the Problem?

Is it food production?

Of Course it is!

But

Distribution

Waste

Poverty
Social goals for Agriculture

Sustainable environmentally safe production –
Contribute to a just social order
Environmental goals for Agriculture

Related to social goals

Sustainability
The land

Values

Science is value laden

In science the best data win.
In ethics the best reasons win.
A Common Defense

First defense

1. Denial

Second defense

1. Expense

2. Trade
Agricultural Scientists

Reluctant revolutionaries

Realists

I want more

Idealists
Assumptions

We do not want our assumptions challenged.

We want to use them.
Leo Tolstoy and Art

I know that most men – not only those considered clever, but even those who are very clever and capable of understanding most difficult scientific, mathematical, or philosophical problems --- can seldom discern even the simplest
Leo Tolstoy and Art

and most obvious truth, if it be such as obliges them to admit the falsity of conclusions of which they are proud, which they have taught to others, and on which they have built their lives.

That this opinion may be false.
Agriculture’s many forms

- Productive
- Scientific
- Environmental
- Economic
- Social
- Political
- Moral
We live in a Post industrial, information age society

We do not, and no one ever will, live in a post agricultural world

Our challenge is to make sure the agricultural foundation is secure.
Agriculture... the largest and most important interaction between humans and the environment.
Questions

D´où Venons Nous?
Que Sommes Nous?
Où Allons Nous?
Where do we come from?
Where are we?
Where are we going?
“Good news—I hear the paradigm is shifting.”
Ethical Criteria for Agriculture

- Equity
- Profit
- Environmental
- Safety and Risk
Ethical Criteria for Agriculture

Quality

Sustainable

Consent

Aesthetics
Agricultural Abundance

When the values of the food production system – ignore –

Protection of the land

Water quality

Biodiversity
Agricultural Abundance

Food as a commodity
Purchased by those with money

Then the ethics of the production system ought to be a matter of societal concern
Two “popular culture” views of ethics.
“Daddy works in a magical, faraway land called Academia.”
ASSUMPTIONS