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Agricultural ethics – a role in animal production

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ABSTRACT

Science and farming benefit society in innumerable ways, but like other human activities, are subject to value judgements of what is and is not acceptable. In addition to traditional measures of efficiency and profitability, the acceptability of agricultural practices is also determined by requirements of food safety, resource use, environmental and animal welfare criteria, and by social and philosophical views.

Since moral issues may be difficult to deal with, and are determined by a wide array of influences ranging from philosophers to the media, it is important that we establish a means of clarifying them. Agricultural ethics provides such a common framework or language. This includes tradition and common sense (our common morality), and consideration of the rights of individuals and of the consequences of our actions. In addition, the role that virtues and myths play in determining the acceptability of agricultural practices can be incorporated.

Keywords: farming; animal welfare; biotechnology; morality.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of agriculture, perhaps one of mankind’s most decisive steps, has had many positive features, including the provision of food (one of our most basic needs), a source of employment, and even as a way of life. However, along with the benefits of farming, we are now realising that many of the costs which have been unforeseen, unacknowledged or hidden, must be borne. For instance, for every dollar of agricultural pesticides used, it has been estimated that the environmental and public health impacts total more than two dollars (Pimentel and Lehman, 1993). Deciding whether or not an agricultural practice is acceptable or unacceptable is a community-based ethical process, and this is evident in the public scrutiny of proposals to introduce rabbit calicivirus and transgenic sheep. Agricultural ethics provides a framework or language for clarifying the issues, taking into account the interests and influences of all those affected (animals, farmers, consumers etc.).

Methods for determining the morality of agriculture

In determining “rights” and “wrongs” it is important to begin with common sense. For example, our general view, representing the views of most members of society and the culmination of a long tradition of moral reflection, is that it is acceptable to use animals (for farming, science, recreation etc.), provided it is undertaken humanely. So a number of common sense maxims characterise our actions and are reflected in our laws. These include the views that you should not harm animals unless it is absolutely necessary; any harm to an animal must be outweighed by the benefit likely to ensue; if there are less harmful ways of treating animals they should be used; and some harms should be prohibited, regardless of their benefits. Applying these ideals to a controversial practice such as mulesing (the “surgical” removal of skin folds to reduce the incidence of flystrike) raises the following questions: does the protection from flystrike outweigh the harm from mulesing; are there alternative ways of reducing flystrike; can the harms associated with mulesing be minimised; and is mulesing an appropriate way to treat animals (if we have to treat animals in this way, should we be farming them at all)?

However, the adoption of common-sense need not mean animal welfare is optimal, for example until relatively recently a common-sense view of some scientists was that animals did not feel pain (see Rollin, 1989). Common-sense can be improved upon by reflecting on its foundations in philosophy and ethical theory. Generally speaking, two broad theories inform our judgements. An action may be judged as right or wrong based on its consequences (the benefits outweigh the costs), or alternatively morality may be based on rights or duties, independent of the benefits. For instance, with animal experiments we may induce harm provided that harm is outweighed by the benefits to humans or other animals. In contrast, we ourselves have the right not to be subjected to medical or scientific experimentation, no matter what benefits might accrue. These aspects of our common morality (the rules we learn as infants, and the social and legal rules we learn in later life) form part of the four moral principles developed in medical ethics to deal with aspects of health care. These four principles are: (1) beneficence (an obligation to provide benefits and balance benefits against risks); (2) non-maleficence (an obligation to avoid causing harm); (3) respect for autonomy (an obligation to respect the decision-making capacities of free-willed beings); and (4) justice (an obligation to be fair in distributing benefits and risks).
These principles have been adapted to determine the impacts of agricultural practices, by including the differing perspectives of interested groups (Table 1).

These principles can be used to identify the issues, but the way we interpret or choose between conflicting viewpoints is determined by how we see ourselves within the world, the historical and day-to-day influences which affect our reasoning. These may include the “story” or narrative behind the issue being considered, and our community myths, the cultural stories that tell both what we think is real and what ought to be real. For instance, according to the agrarian myth, agriculture fulfils one of our most basic needs and is therefore a particular virtue. The virtues often associated with farming include those of independence and ingenuity, that farming is natural and good and that the good farmer understands and works with nature to feed a hungry world. Therefore, agricultural practices should also be determined by what it means to be a good farmer or consumer etc. However, while myths help shape the way we see the world and guide our activities, they can also misinform when based on untrue or outdated assumptions. For example, Browne et al. (1992) suggested that US agricultural policy could be best determined by, among others: never confusing farm prices with farm income; never equating good farming with a healthy environment; never assuming that a government programme will do what it says; and never confusing production with productivity. Similarly, Krimsky (1995) describes a number of socio-scientific myths and antmyths, which may ultimately determine the public acceptability of developments such as genetic engineering. These include the views that biotechnology provides natural (unnatural) products; will contribute to greater (less) biodiversity; will be friendly (unfriendly) to the environment; and will (will not) feed the world’s hungry people. By recognising and acknowledging how our views are based on narratives and myths, sound agricultural practices can be developed and implemented.

Who should determine the morality of agricultural practices?

Traditionally, a diverse array of influences may help shape the public acceptability of various agricultural practices.

Individuals may have a great impact, as for example, Rachel Carson (1962) and Ruth Harrison (1964) have had, through their books. Silent Spring alerted us to the dangers of persistent chemicals such as DDT, and Animal Machines dealt with the cruelty of intensive methods of raising poultry, pigs and veal calves.

Experts traditionally have a fairly influential role in determining society’s acceptance of, or attitudes to, subjects such as animal welfare and genetic engineering. However, it is worth remembering that such individuals may have different values from our own. For instance, in one survey nearly all scientists rated the manipulation of crop genes as very important, whereas less than half of the public did so (Shibata, 1996). Whilst one response might be to educate the public, this may result in a less supportive public, at least when morally contentious issues are concerned (Evans and Durant, 1995). Furthermore, experts may not present a united front. For example, philosophers present diverse justifications both for and against the use of animals, but those most widely read (e.g. Singer, 1990) are those that present alternative views to our traditional values. Experts, such as scientists, may also impart subtle influences. For instance, an analysis of the literature surrounding vegetarian diets (Varner, 1994) suggests significantly more emphasis is placed on the risks than the benefits of a vegan diet, a trend also reflected in the language used (risks are “suggested” but benefits are “not well supported”). Finally, use of experts may result in over emphasis of objective or technical views when issues such as animal welfare are best determined using both objective and subjective views (Midgley, 1994).

Consumers also have the potential to induce significant changes in some aspects of farming. For instance, consumer demand for pale veal arguably reinforced the intensive methods of veal production. There are now several food labelling schemes, such as the UK RSPCA’s Freedom Food label, which aim to ensure better farm animal welfare.

Since a variety of interested groups can shape the acceptability of our agricultural practices, it follows that the morality of these practices can only really be achieved by making provision for all those interested parties, in other words taking an interdisciplinary approach. One such US group is the Center for Science and Technology Policy and Ethics at Texas A & M University. Collaboration involves interests as diverse as philosophy, history, political science, English, speech communications, journalism, agricultural economics and geography, and this enables the group to critique subjects from many viewpoints. One of their more comprehensive and well-known

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1: Using the principles of ethics to identify some of the impacts of biotechnology on dairying (from Mepham, 1996).</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Well-being</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dairy animals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Producers (dairy farmers)</td>
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<td>Consumers of dairy products</td>
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<td>Biota</td>
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* Comprising the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence
undertakings has been a study of the ethical issues in agricultural research and planning, culminating in the publication of Beyond the Large Farm (Thompson and Stout, 1991).

CONCLUSIONS

Agricultural ethics provides an opportunity or framework for investigating values associated with agricultural practices by considering the diverse array of arguments raised by different people with their different views. This framework can be used to help determine the implications of our farming (and science) practices, and to raise an awareness of the true costs of farming and of the specific nature of New Zealand’s farming systems.

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REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


