

- They have to settle the societal conflict.
- They have to allow for all the empirical facts.
- They have to be feasible; for this, the solution has to be tailored to fit into the context of the problem.

These requirements can be condensed to three main points: Applied ethics has to produce solutions for concrete moral problems which are at the same time morally right, feasible, and pacifying.

A brief glimpse suffices to understand how complex applied ethics' task is. Of these three points, only the criterion of moral rightness is genuinely ethical in the sense that it requires ethical theory. But at a second look, even moral rightness turns out to require more than only theory. This is due to the well known fact that there is no uncontroversial ethical super-theory but only an adamant pluralism of ethical approaches. Therefore, the criterion of moral rightness in itself contains the seed of conflict and the need for practical conflict resolution; it refers to the criterion of pacification. But feasibility and pacification for their part cannot simply be separated from ethical theory, let alone from theory

altogether. They must themselves be subjected to ethical scrutiny – which requires ethical theory –, because otherwise the morality of the solution as a whole cannot be guaranteed. So what we have in the end when we look at problem solving in applied ethics is an intricate interacting conglomeration of different theories (different ethical theories, theories of conflict resolution, empirical theories etc.) and practices. Consequently, there is not only one theory-practice-gap, and not only one theory-practice-problem, but numerous. All these gaps are inevitable and require more than theory: competent moral judges. Therefore, theories are best understood as practical tools which can be used for problem solving and which are more or less helpful. The dream of the all-encompassing moral theory which inspires many ethical theorists belongs to the *vita contemplativa* which, per definition, has nothing to do with the practical life.

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## **Ethics in the Barn: On the Importance of Practice for Agricultural Ethics**

Clemens Driessen

Why should people interested in the 'ethics' of agriculture (and food) visit farms and talk to farmers? For many it is already obvious to do so. How could you reflect on moral issues in farming without considering the processes at work and listening to experiences of

farmers? Nevertheless, in most understandings of ethics and policy making it can seem difficult to justify spending time on farms. Policy makers – the natural beneficiaries of applied ethicists - tend to work in specialised, functionally differentiated organisations.

Their job is to focus on nature preservation, environmental emissions, food safety, or some other terrain of regulation. The fields of ethics concerned with agricultural practices are in the same way split up in separate objects of moral inquiry: environmental ethics, animal ethics, ethics of nature, the value of landscape, the importance of resource efficiency, acceptable labour conditions, etc. Research in ethics often starts with fleshing out these sources of value, deriving principles from the moral demands upon us from ecosystems, human health, farmed and wild animals or resource scarcity. What farmers actually do is relevant to ethical reasoning only insofar as they do *not* meet ethical standards. If at all, what is going on in the barns and on the fields is interesting just to detect problems and set priorities for things that require change.

Farmers can be relevant as stakeholders in democratic decision making, or for their practical knowledge. But besides that, they occupy a special moral role as they are the ones that somehow integrate the variety of relevant concerns. When a farmer explains his or her practice, a story unfolds in which oil prices, animal feed conversion ratios, housing systems, breeding goals, climate change, and food safety standards are all intricately connected to groundwater levels, investments in machinery, and ways to protect the nests of wild birds. Of course their options in reality are often limited; market conditions and technical possibilities shape their 'ethical room for manoeuvre'. Furthermore, there is huge diversity between farmers, also in their degrees of showing responsible behaviour. But does the alternative to systemic policy making really mean

naively trusting farmers to solve all our concerns on their own? Not necessarily. To take farmers seriously as moral actors does not mean they are always right, nor that each matter of concern in livestock farming should be dealt with on the practical level only. Some practices can be improved by collectively setting and enforcing standards, as (almost) every farmer will agree. But not all can be arranged centrally. Regulations are often open for interpretation. As one farmer put it, discussing the requirement of 1.4 square meter of space for an organic pig: meeting the 'naked norms' does not necessarily mean things have improved.

Meeting farmers will reveal they generally are not evil perpetrators, poisoning our environment and maltreating their animals. Nor are they always and only the passive victims of industry and government, crunched between market prices and EU regulations. Instead of merely alienated parts of derailed agri-food systems, farmers can be a source of renewal and take part in moral inquiry for improvement. For this to happen, farmers are to be challenged to come forward with explanations of their practices. Inviting fresh views on farms can lead to new insights. Like in the case of the dairy farmer selling produce from his farm, whose customers inquired why the calves were after birth taken away from their mothers. This made him reconsider the practice, and search for alternatives. Thereby, he ran into problems with hygiene requirements and increased stress when calves are separated from their mother at a later stage. He joined a network of farmers developing ways to create 'family herds', or using 'foster mothers' to care

for the calves, in that way also saving on 'calf-milk' costs and labour.

What can applied ethicists actually contribute at the farmyard? And what type of theoretical understanding of ethics could help them in this task? Before starting to study practices, the ethics-practitioner has to convince farmers of the relevance of having a philosopher – not an expert in any of the ostensibly relevant fields - being involved. One could claim to be an 'ethics researcher' interested in good farming practices and practical choices. This mostly does not make them 'terribly enthusiastic', as one farmer with typical honesty told me. Besides getting acquainted with farmers and try to spend time as a friend, other options of immersing oneself in practical issues exist: visiting experimental farms, taking a practical training course, taking part in excursions with farming students, joining farmer innovation networks as a researcher, visiting agricultural exhibitions, etc.

Agricultural ethicists can see themselves as translating between farmers and the societal demands of modern day consumer-citizens, which in many cases have grown apart so far they seem to live in separate – but conflicting – worlds. Farmers, valuing their independence, tend to hold on to their own ideas, but many are open to the notion of explaining their motives and difficulties. Ethicists with their focus on conceptual explication can help reflect on arguments and reasons for doing things. For instance, when discussing animal welfare with farming students, it is interesting to make them elaborate the analogies they use to explain existing practices. As they justify practices by

calling cows 'professional athletes', you can hint at the various implicit understandings of health.

The central issues in livestock farming are often addressed in terms of (essentially) contested concepts.: Sustainability, naturalness, robustness are words often used to discuss practices, but are nevertheless experienced as vague. Discussions easily end by concluding there are as much definitions, e.g. of animal welfare, as there are discussants. To stress that these concerns are neither purely objectively resolvable nor entirely subjective, but largely matters of deliberate choice, can make the debate endure and deepen. On some level farmers tend to agree with the importance of these terms for their practices, making it interesting to have them explain how to operationalize them. There it is important for the ethicist not to remain focused on discourse only. Processes under study are foremost concrete and material. For example, the imperative of 'not adjusting the animal to the system, but the system to the animal' is widely shared and often expressed by farmers. The notion of 'intrinsic value' of the animal is illustrated by our hesitations to end feather pecking and cannibalism by breeding blind chickens. In everyday practice, with less extreme cases, a process of mutual adjustment is going on in which it is more difficult to see where the animal ends and its management and housing system begins. The distinction can still play a powerful role, but as a way of directing attention and adding a critical perspective to otherwise inconspicuous developments.

It can be tempting to describe situations on the farm as practical dilemmas.

Giving straw to pigs would make their life a lot more pleasant, as animal scientists have indicated and many farmers would agree with, but this is considered to decrease hygiene. By treating this type of situations as static dilemmas for ethical analysis, the search for systems in which the concerns can be resolved together would be discouraged. Systemic changes – sought perhaps with the help of agricultural researchers, NGOs and companies – require new ways of thinking, both regarding the technological and management systems, as well as new interpretations of ethical norms.

One way of dealing with the tendency of dairy farmers to keep cows indoors all year round would be by improving housing systems in such a way as to mitigate disadvantages to cows' health. As an alternative approach, a network of farmers and agricultural researchers has been working on developing a milking robot that can be operated on pasture. In their discussions, it turned out that the role of the farmer as well as the cow changes. Implicitly, ways of shaping the responsibilities and control by the farmer are also discussed: could one leave the herd with the robot without checking on them for two days? As the practice could be considered a shift on a scale from animal husbandry to nature management, the material sides of the practice are to be made to cohere with a new practice of care: in this case meaning a search for more robust cows, and perhaps leaving the calves or even a bull with the herd. Explicating the implicit concerns in these discussions can help the gradual adjustment process of technology, animals and farm management.

Are critical positions still developed without external norms derived from solid principles? Will spending too much time with farmers make the embedded ethicist 'go native'? Making the time spent on farms worthwhile ethically requires another understanding of ethics than applying principles and formulating rules of prohibition. Ethics there can be an activity, an ongoing learning process. Such an ethical focus on practices means having an eye for the materiality of ethics, of explicating processes of co-evolving norms and technologies, instead of an ethics sought after solely in terms of discourse, values and attitudes. And it stimulates to look for constructive solutions. This type of ethical research is not aptly described by opposing theory and practice. Rather an understanding of theory is required in which practices can be relevant sources of knowledge and ethical norms.

If the substantial moral relevance of ethics as practice has not yet convincingly justified walking into a farm, let it be just for the fun of it; of engaging with an economic activity that is in many ways (hopefully still) not solely about money; of experiencing this curious amalgam of business and home, of animals and machinery, hi-tech and the pre-modern, out there in the fascinating places where our food is produced.

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