

## Ethics and making connections among class topics

Ethics materials based on "Agricultural Ethics" by Burkhardt et al. 2005, CAST Issue Paper 29, February 2005"

<http://www.cof.orst.edu/cof/teach/agbio2009/Readings%202009/CASST%20Ag%20Ethics%202005.pdf>

Steve Strauss, BI/FS 435/535 (H)  
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## What is ethics?

## What is ethics?

- "Way of life" (Burkhardt et al. 2005)
  - Dictionary.com, American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition, Copyright © 2009 by Houghton Mifflin Company.
    - Middle English *ethik*, from Old French *ethique* (from Late Latin *ēthica*, from Greek *ēthika*, *ethics*) and from Latin *ēthicē* (from Greek *ēthikē*), both from Greek *ēthikos*, *ethical*, from *ēthos*, *character*; see s(w)e- in Indo-European roots.
- The rightness or wrongness of actions, policies
- Standards by which to make judgments
  - Ethical criteria, dimensions
- Research vs. broader social ethics
- Laws vs. religions vs. ethics – are they the same?

## Laws, religions vs. ethics

- Cannot legislate nor enforce all aspects of good human behavior
  - Spreading rumors that may be damaging
- Following laws may be unethical
  - Never exceeding the speed limit, even in an emergency
  - Failing to act against serious abuses of power by persons in positions of authority
- Following religions may cause unethical actions
  - Preventing abortion in case of risk of death to mother
  - Reproduction where it harms families, communities, environment
  - Religious systems often with large conflicts over what is appropriate behavior

### Agricultural ethics a subset of broader field

- Agricultural ethics: Systematic thinking about the values and norms associated with the entire food system
  - Farming, resource management, food processing, distribution, trade, consumption, environment, labor
  - Concerns about particular issue areas often bring about explicit consideration of ethics

### Ethical issues in ag

- Use of corn hybrids and associated consequences, early 1900s
- Use of semi-dwarfs and associated consequences (green revolution), post WWII
- Farm worker rights, benefits, and safety
- Agrichemicals and environment, human safety
- GMOs

### Ethical issues in ag

- Agribusiness vs. small farms
- Subsidies
- Land conservation / conservation reserve
- Non-point source pollution
- Animal rights and welfare
- Intellectual property protection

### Ethics and harms

- Ethics often centered on “harms” to others
  - Can do what you want but if it harms others, ethical issues come to the fore
- How large are the harms?
- Who are being harmed (people, animals, economies)?
- Distribution of harm? To the poor, vulnerable?
- Are the harms irreversible?
- Dread and poorly understood harms?

## Ethics and harms

- Can the harms be mitigated, managed, avoided by individuals or groups? (Labeling)
- What types of harms (psychological, economic, health, environment)?
- Are there benefits, to who, of what nature?
- Are there alternatives that would avoid harm?
- Is there scientific or other expert support for claims of harm or benefit?
  - Says who? Are they credible?
  - Are there conflicts of interest? How much and how managed?

## Basic ethical approaches

- Need for criteria to make ethical assessments – often called “theories”
- **Rights theory** – individuals should not be harmed against their will, no benefits elsewhere can override this principle
- **Utilitarian theory** – maximize net benefits, greatest good for greatest number
- **Virtue theory** – Act in accord with a set of ideals, desired traits that are just, fair, good

## Making ethical decisions

- Do the criteria make it easier to make ethical judgments? Why or why not?

## Making ethical decisions

- Do the criteria make it easier to make ethical judgments? Why or why not?
  - The results often conflict: Formally, this is called an “issue”
  - This class (biotech/tox issues) is basically an exploration of an area rife with ethical conflicts
- “It is accurate to say that many of the real ethical issues [of GMOs in agriculture] have little to do with the use of transgenic technologies” (Burkhardt et al. 2005)
- What are examples?

## Examples of ethical conflicts and issues

- Consumption of GMO or pesticide tainted food without choice
  - Rights vs. utilitarian vs. virtue
  - Labels help to manage conflict
- Cheap food vs. agribusiness (utilitarian vs. virtue?)
- Agricultural intensification vs. “extensification” (social, environmental, human welfare; utilitarian vs. virtue?)
- Contamination of nature with transgenes (utilitarian vs. virtue?)
- Animal production efficiency vs. animal welfare (utilitarian vs. rights vs. virtue)
- Patents vs. open source biotechnologies (utilitarian vs. virtue vs. rights)

## Discussion questions

- Is use of transgenic biotechnology or synthetic chemicals in the environment ethically wrong?
- If you disagree, what do you say to a thoughtful person who thinks it is?

## Discussion questions

- How can you tell attempts at honest, unbiased, balanced information from highly ideological information?

## Discussion questions

- Does biotechnology connect to sustainability? Can it help with the large issues of sustainability? Why or why not?

### Discussion questions

- What parts of the class don't connect well? How might we help you connect them better?

### Discussion questions

- What was the weakest outside lecturer or lecture topic? What was the best? What other topic or lecturer would you like to hear?