
The quite remarkable spread of advanced agricultural technologies to virtually every corner on earth has been accomplished essentially through the almost universal acceptance, if not comprehension, of the logic of science: Mystery, myth, and some would argue even personal interpretation and intuition about the ‘good’, have been essentially usurped by empirical and rational reason, and the outcomes are clearly evident in the ever-changing face of ‘human-managed nature’ across the globe. The potential of agricultural technologies to greatly amplify and direct changes to the bio-physical environment is now without question, and farmers the world over daily grow in their confidence of knowing what it is that increasingly they are able to do to increase the productivity of their enterprises. But such has been the impact of these global changes, not just on the physical but on the cultural and social dimensions of the environment too, that they have raised very significant concerns for a substantial number of people – rural and urban alike. A changing agenda is beginning to emerge with respect to the process of agricultural development with assertions about what it is that can be done, beginning to be replaced in their primacy, by questions about what it is that should be done. And as we stand now on the threshold of whole new generations of science-based technologies applicable to agriculture, with enormous powers of amplification of biological processes, we are recognising that the matter of their use extends way beyond the mere issue of their efficacy and the contributions they can make to the improved efficiency of crop and livestock production. What once were considered to be but technical issues are now increasingly appreciated also as issues of moral concern.

The ways of science are proving to be quite inadequate in this emergent quest for what really constitutes improvements in the name of the further developments of agriculture, and new worldview perspectives which focus on normative aspects of reason are urgently needed to help guide deliberations about what ought to be done next.
Issues in Agricultural Bioethics, the proceedings of an international conference held at Nottingham in England in September 1993, represents a very significant contribution to this end. As the editors express in their preface, it is their hope ‘that this volume will serve as a valuable catalyst and source of reference for those who are concerned that the powerful new agricultural and food biotechnologies at our disposal will be applied in ways which are both appropriate and sustainable’.

The issues are not confined to biotechnologies, however. Included here are discussions about those ‘big’ issues of moral concern in agriculture which have long created a sense of unease among caring scientists, farmers, consumers, and members of the general citizenry alike: about the fairness or otherwise of ‘disturbing the natural order of things’ in the face of the needs and demands of a human population which presents an extra 2 million or so new mouths to be fed each month to add to the 5 and a half thousand million that already exist on the planet. About the dangers, risks and consequences of such disturbances on that same ‘natural order’. About the ‘rights’ that mankind has to domesticate, confine, surgically manipulate, and intensively house animals to its own ends. About the rights of farm families to feed themselves or earn an income from the fruits of their labour manipulating the natural resources of their local environments and shaping them to meet their own purposes. About the responsibilities that producers have to the health, safety, and autonomy of those that work for them, and with the processors of their products, to those who purchase and consume or otherwise use the commodities they produce. And about the particular significance of the powerful new biotechnologies, with their potential to markedly change the form and dynamics of all of these above relationships, in ways which might, at once, both benefit mankind, and yet concurrently harm the whole global environment in its bio-physical, socio-economic and cultural dimensions.

This book is not, of course, the first publication to address bioethical issues in agriculture, as indeed the various authors throughout the book are quick to acknowledge. Agricultural bioethics has been a focus for serious and critical discourse for a decade or more, especially in the United States of America, and it is good to see Paul Thompson of Texas A&M University, and R.G. Frey from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, two of its earliest protagonists, among the contributors. Neither is it fully comprehensive in its coverage of the domains in which ethical debates are relevant to the further progress of agriculture, but that too is not surprising, given the extraordinary heterogeneity and complexity of agriculture as a human endeavour. Finally this is not a book about the nature of bioethics, but is,