IN THE FIELD

EurSafe Congress. Wageningen University, March 4–6, 1999: Summing up and future prospects

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Accepted in revised form January 15, 2000

Abstract. Until recently, ethics was a highly abstruse activity, with little reference to everyday affairs. It dealt largely with what is called metaethics, and was in danger of becoming moribund as an intellectual activity. But for some years, ethics has been undergoing a process of rejuvenation and development. We now seem to be experiencing the birth of this new discipline (or at least in the EU – the US has been engaged in it somewhat longer). The EurSafe Congress held at Wageningen University, March 4–6, 1999 exemplifies this rejuvenation, and it strongly suggests that a new discipline is emerging, that is not only exciting from an intellectual perspective, but also addresses issues of fundamental social and political concern. It can be argued that, in this context, ethicists are in the position of guides. It is not their job to pronounce on what is right and wrong, but having trodden many of the theoretical paths through the forest, they are in a position to advise and facilitate sound ethical decision-making by others. The need for ethical insight in this field is likely to progressively increase over the coming years. Ethicists have a duty to respond to this need.

Key words: Agricultural ethics, Applied ethics, EUR-SAFE congress, Food ethics

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The congress got off to an excellent start with the opening address from Prof. Cees Karsen, Rector of Wageningen University. After welcoming the delegates, and giving a brief introduction to the university and its history, he illustrated the university’s commitment to engaging in ethical discussions concerning agriculture and food. It was clear that this was a highly appropriate venue for the congress and from which to launch the new Society.

The second speech was delivered, on behalf of the Minister of Agriculture, Nature Management, and Fisheries, by the Director General, Mr J. F. de Leeuw. His supportive and frank comments were also very well received, and confirmed that we had chosen a favorable time and place to launch this event. There appeared to be a genuine desire on the part of the Dutch Government to foster ethical initiatives of this type. Stressing the need for the agri-food industry to engage in more discussion and reflection on values and norms, Mr de Leeuw called on the audience for “new ideas, and new frameworks to replace the old.” Biotechnology was a two-edged sword: it had the capacity both to alleviate the world food problem and to accentuate the existing disparities between rich and poor. He discussed the thorny issue of the liberalization of global trade, the increasing power exerted by multinational biotechnology companies – and the potential threats to human and environmental safety, and to national economies. “The challenge to you professionals,” he said, “is to devise procedures which do justice to the principles of respect and tolerance – and which at the same time avoid new trade barriers being erected.” He concluded, “Your discipline is used to handling moral differences in a peaceful way. We need you, especially because of the international dimensions of the problem.”

The first paper of the congress proper was by Michael Korthals on “Ethical dilemmas in sustainable agriculture,” which pointed up a number of inconsistencies attached to the word “sustainability” (as first enunciated by the Bruntland Commission). Prof. Korthals expressed the view that the tension between several objectives in agriculture (such as between local and global orientations and between animal welfare,
sustainability, and liveability) implied that many traditional ways of addressing problems need to be abandoned. Modern technology, he claimed, may create new values. Moreover ethicists were often out of touch with the views of a modern consumer-led society, implying the need to re-orientate ethics to consumer values.

This rather provocative presentation received a powerful response from Prof. Catherine Larrére, who considered that Korthals had polarized the situation unnecessarily. In particular, she disputed the suggestion that ethicists should react to consumer opinion rather than set their own ethical agenda. This was a stimulating exchange – and indicated that business had now begun – this was not to be a congress consisting of bland exchanges of platitudes.

Prof. Peter Sandøe delivered his lecture on “Welfare and Ethical issues in Animal Production” with characteristic flair and humour. His paper addressed the question of the meaning of “animal welfare” – and how definitions that sought to reduce it to quantifiable scientific criteria often failed to capture its true meaning. Referring to Belgian Blue cattle, “nude mice growing tufts of bird feathers” and “congenitally blind hens,” he deduced that scientific criteria were themselves insufficient. His diagnosis of the problem had three components:

• politicians’ reticence to make decisions and their subsequent delegation of the assessment to “experts,” i.e., scientists;
• scientists’ willingness (given the rewards, of funding and prestige) to accept this role; and
• the consequent danger of science falling into disrepute because of the impossibility of reaching solutions through science alone.

Sandøe’s “cures” were to:

• promote explicit discussion on what is acceptable in animal production;
• limit the role of scientists; and
• appeal to professional ethicists to provide some input.

Prof. Frank Odberg, commenting on Sandøe’s lecture, contested that, in principle, welfare can be entirely assessed by scientific criteria – though conceding that it was not always easy to identify what should be measured and how data should be interpreted. “The latter,” he said, “is an ethical decision”; indeed “Everything is an ethical decision.” Odberg was dismissive of the notion of “animal integrity,” which he considered “vague” and something of a “container concept” – “you can throw it into just what you like.”

Prof. Raoul Weiler’s paper, “Biotechnology Shaping a New Agriculture: Societal Aspects,” began by characterizing the nature of the global food problem and the contribution biotechnology (in the form of GM crops) might make to solving it. Most current applications, however, involved herbicides, insecticides, and virus-resistant crops, which were designed for Western markets. Weiler then identified a number of important considerations. Firstly: “who can afford the new biotechnology?” Exploitation of GM crops requires a suitable infrastructure, operators with appropriate technical and managerial skills, and the ability to pay annual licence fees. The lack of all these represents a substantial barrier to the adoption of such technologies by developing world farmers. He stressed the threats to public health and public order that might well arise from the growth of the large city – mega-cities – as a result of mass migration from rural areas of developing countries. “Everything,” he said, “needs to be done to stem the flow.” Amelioration of such practical problems lay in promoting a stable rural society by stimulating agricultural activity – and thus providing work for growing populations, but current GM crops would not assist in this. Other concerns lay in potentially adverse effects of GM crops on the ecosystem and threats to biodiversity – a concept with both biological and cultural significance.

Guido Boeken, of the Monsanto Company, commenting on Weiler’s lecture, conceded that the current biotechnologies were designed for Western markets, but expressed a belief in the, so-called, “trickle-down” theory. “If the rich won’t buy it, the poor won’t get it,” he said. Responding to the claim that efforts should be made to stem the rural exodus into cities, he responded, “Locking a country into a peasant economy is not a course of action to be taken lightly.” The polarization of positions looked set to engender a lively debate – but despite some bold efforts from the audience, the event fizzled out – overtaken by the clock.

The next paper, given by Dr Ben Mepham, was entitled “Ethics and Novel Foods: An Analytical Framework.” He described a framework for ethical analysis that seeks to provide a structure for ethical deliberation by encompassing both utilitarian and deontological criteria. Appealing to a decision procedure first described by Rawls in 1951, and to the principled approach introduced by Beauchamp and Childress, Mepham introduced a scheme he has designated the Ethical Matrix, and illustrated its use by applying it to the case of a form of transgenic maize. Jeroen Bordewijk, of Unilever, commented on the lecture – stressing the need for a responsible attitude on the part of companies and referring to some initiatives of Unilever in this context.

The second day’s session began with a lecture from Dr Beatrix Tappeser on “Biotechnology, Food, Agriculture: Novel Food and Consumer Concerns” –