

Industrial Plant Agriculture: Weighing Values?

1. Terms and Questions

As the textbook suggests, the current state of industrial plant agriculture (IPA) involves:

- Large farms that mainly raise monocultures using methods of highly mechanized production;
- Substantial reliance on synthetic herbicides, fungicides, pesticides, fertilizer, and large irrigation systems;
- Embrace of increasing number of GMOs;
- Long-distance transportation of yield and trade in relatively unregulated global marketplace, i.e., under neo-liberal policies.

Note that industrial plant agriculture may involve more or less of each factor, e.g., plausibly one would still have industrial agriculture without the use of GMOs, or where the global marketplace was highly regulated. So we might want to distinguish: actual IPA, and ideal IPA. In considering ideal IPA, however, we should bear in mind what is actually feasible in the world as it currently exists.

Here are some questions:

- 1) Is actual IPA *morally required* as the primary mode of agricultural production?
- 2) Is actual IPA *morally permissible* as the primary mode of agricultural production?
- 3) Is it morally permissible to include actual IPA as *part of* a global system of food production?
- 4) What would *ideal IPA* look like? Would ideal IPA be morally required/permissible?

Let's begin by brainstorming some of the morally relevant factors answering these questions. To start (let's elaborate each, considering both +/-):

- Global hunger/famine
- Environmental degradation/sustainability
- Health impacts of synthetic pesticides (etc.)
- Economic justice
- Well-being of future generations (imposing risks)
- Regulatory interventions and state responsibilities, e.g., for education, solving coordination problems.
- Human rights to procreate, to engage in local cultural practices and traditions, etc.

As the textbook introduction to the issues makes clear, there are both *empirical* questions and *normative* questions to consider. But even if we can't completely settle the empirical questions, we should also consider the risks involved.

2. Future Generations and the Identity Problem

A major challenge in weighing the factors at stake is how to take risk into account, i.e., how to make a moral decision under conditions of substantial uncertainty. Another is how to consider the impact on future generations. Let's consider the latter in a bit more detail by exploring the non-identity problem. It is usually introduced with a version of this example:

Pregnancy Choice: A couple is deciding whether or not to conceive a child. The doctor tells them that, due to a medication the woman is currently taking, if they conceive now, the child will suffer a medical condition that will sometimes cause a mild discomfort and a premature death at 40. However, if she stops taking the medication and waits a month for it to clear her system before conceiving, she will conceive a healthy child who can be expected to live an average lifespan. Either way, the child's life will (as a whole) be a life worth living.

What should she do? Most people say that she should wait a month. Why?

Note, however, that if the woman had waited a month before conceiving, she would have conceived a different child. In other words, the unhealthy child would not have existed if the woman had waited another month to conceive. So, the two alternatives for the unhealthy child are either (a) a good life that is cut short, or (b) no life at all. Surely a good life that is cut short is better than no life at all. So, it seems that the woman has not harmed the “unhealthy” child by deciding not to wait a month before conceiving.

Notice that a similar argument can be developed regarding environmental degradation (see *FES*, p. 423).¹ Let “Depletion” be a set of policies that “makes our lives better in the present but at the cost of making the lives of future people significantly worse.” (423)

1. Depletion does not make future generations worse off than they otherwise would have been.
2. An act harms someone if and only if it causes them to be worse off than they otherwise would have been.
3. Therefore, depletion does not harm future generations.
4. Depletion benefits presently existing people, and harms no one.
5. Any action that harms no one, and benefits some, is not wrong.
6. Therefore, depletion is not wrong.

Notice the conflicting principles that seem to be at issue here:

- A. An act can be wrong only if it makes someone (presently existing, or someone in the future) worse off.
- B. Making it the case that someone’s life is not ideal, but is still better than not existing at all, is not a way of harming them or making them worse off.
- C. In some cases we do wrong, even if we don’t make someone worse off. More generally, some possible scenarios are morally worse than others, even though there is no one for whom that scenario is worse.

Which principle (A, B, C) would you reject?

¹ See also the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article on the Non-Identity Problem, and Chad Vance’s handout here: <http://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil3140/nonid.pdf>

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