The astonishing thing about our deepened [scientific] understanding of reality over the last four or five decades is the degree to which it confirms and reinforces so many of the older insights of humanity. The philosophers told us we were one, part of a greater unity that transcends our local drives and needs. They told us that all living things are held together in a most intricate web of inter-dependence... These were, if you like, intuitions drawn in the main from the study of human societies and behavior. What we now learn is that they are factual descriptions of the way in which our universe actually works.

—Rene Dubos and Barbara Ward

That we failed to learn from them [Native Americans] how to live in this land is a stupidity... they had a responsible sense of living within the creation—which is to say that they had, among much else, an ecological morality...

—Wendell Berry

Had they [European immigrants] been other than they were, they might have written a new mythology here. As it was they took inventory...

—Frederick Turner

History presents us with a curious paradox concerning ethics in agriculture. On one hand, philosophers, sages, and shamans have promoted the idea that humans are part of a web of life on which our survival absolutely depends and which we ignore at our peril. On the other hand, human actions have, more often than not, contradicted that wise advice. Certainly the “failures are more numerous than the successes, as told by the ruins and wrecks...” (Lowdermilk, 1953). The unraveling of that mysterious contradiction has, of course, preoccupied philosophers and theologians for millennia.

Any effort to formulate an appropriate ethic for agriculture will need to recognize the complexity of this fundamental human paradox. While this chapter does not finally unveil the core mystery of the paradox, it does attempt to recognize and honor it. Any attempt to propose an ethical blueprint for agriculture that does not take into consideration this fundamental paradox will, at best, be an abstraction that will have little to contribute to the real world of farming.

It is important to acknowledge that the culture that informed our farming practices for most of agriculture’s 12 000-yr history was wedded to a story of the uni-