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The Practical Importance of Water Ethics

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Using water is a necessity for our survival, but the details about exactly how we make use of water is full of choices at individual and societal levels. Polluted lakes and rivers, and dramatic rates of extinction among freshwater species are clear signs that we need to make different choices, but the "correct" choices are not always obvious. The challenge is not only to identify the problems, but to formulate new solutions: What new behaviors should we adopt? Even then we face the further challenge of how to transition into those new, desirable behaviors. What new technologies can be applied, and even more importantly, what are the supporting ethical and organizational principles that can help operationalize those new behaviors and how can we bring those principles into practice?

Our ethical precepts about water are difficult to identify but we can see changing trends. Over the past 50 years there has been a growing recognition that water is too important to remain unprotected. Today most countries have laws aimed at safeguarding water quality and controlling water abstractions. An international consensus has emerged about what constitutes fair and just water governance, and recently (2010) a human right to safe water and sanitation was endorsed by the United Nations.

Practical decisions about water use, however, are only partially guided by environmental laws or declarations of human rights. In the "real" world of manipulating, diverting, polluting, or protecting our lakes, rivers, aquifers, and wetlands, decisions are motivated by a complex dynamic of largely unexamined values. We are not totally blind, but our ethical vision is certainly blurred, as we make irreparable choices affecting our water future.

The short answer to "How should we use water?" is "very deliberately." The long answer is one that dissects the notion of "deliberately" to explore not just the science, economics, and politics of decisions about water, but the values and ethical assumptions implicitly attached to those decisions. Our sick lakes and rivers have not come about because we lack ethics, but rather because we as a society have failed to apply the ethics we already have (e.g., about sustainable resource use) to the seemingly technical tasks of water management and governance. We have "backed into" water behaviors without adequate thought and debate about the "why" of our policies and the "what" of the ethics we wish to manifest. In the absence of deep examination of water policies as ethical choices, the dominant societal values of materialism continue to operate by default, and are slowly but surely degrading the water ecosystems on which we all depend.

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How can we apply ethical deliberation to water decisions that are the purview of technical specialists and government policy makers? We need to do two things at once. First we need to learn to recognize, identify, and articulate the ethical dimensions of water decisions. The seemingly technical, legal, or economic problematics of water decisions need to be reframed to reveal the tacit ethical content. Secondly, armed with an understanding of the ethical implications of alternative choices, we need to engage in constructive dialogue with fellow stakeholders and decision makers. These two sets of tasks can be glossed as (1) *learning* about water ethics and (2) *sharing* that knowledge in a strategic way to effect change.

An ethical perspective on water management and policy decisions joins a very large chorus of voices questioning, analyzing, and suggesting alternative governance arrangements, infrastructure and investment strategies, water information systems, and a host of other topics which inspire symposia, international conferences, books, journal articles, and media attention. There are many well-informed opinions about how water can best be used in specific contexts, how it can be financed, managed, monitored, evaluated, etc. There is a correspondingly rich and complex support system of institutes, think-tanks, government and UN agencies, and NGOs, not to mention the countless corporations, consulting firms and universities, who provide expertise.

It is probably safe to say that no water topic has escaped notice by researchers and policy analysts. Even the topic of water ethics has attracted a modest literature of reports, articles, and books over the past 15 years. Is there really a need to learn something new about either water or ethics? Don't we already suffer from information overload, and shouldn't our focus be on applying the knowledge already at our disposal?

The missing piece that needs to be filled is not the data so much as the frame within which the data can be interpreted. What does it mean that groundwater is unfit for human consumption because of nitrate contamination from dairy farms? An ethics frame would suggest that the root problem is neither the farming practices nor regulatory failure, but an agricultural strategy that has become disconnected from the environment, and an environmental strategy that is treated as a discrete sector rather than the fundamental context within which we live our lives. When agriculture is conceptualized as an industrial process with inputs and outputs, contaminated groundwater can too easily be seen as an unfortunate but acceptable byproduct. But when farming is seen as a cooperative venture with Nature, contaminated water indicates a problem in the farming system which needs to be corrected.

The physical problem of contaminated groundwater is a symptom of a deeper ethical problem, and a sustainable solution will need to address the ethical issues. Once the ethics are clarified, it will be relatively easy to identify technical, regulatory, or economic solutions. Jumping directly to physical problem-solving when the real problem lies at a deeper level, however, is going to be a waste of time and money. In this sense, water ethics is eminently practical.

The knowledge needed to guide us toward truly sustainable use of water lies in the arena of frames, concepts, and fundamentally, ethics. We already know the technical part; indeed, we already know almost all the parts: legal frameworks, financing mechanisms, design standards, etc. Moreover, we are gathering ever more practical experience about the effects of new policies through institutional innovations at local, regional, and even global scales. The EU Water Framework Directive unveiled in 2000 has had enormous impact on the water environment of Europe, and through example, the world. The UN designation of access to safe water as a human right has reframed domestic water supply projects from the status of luxury to necessity.

The over-riding imperative of environmental sustainability and social justice is now generally accepted in water policy discourse whether at the level of local communities or international negotiations, but the very acceptance of these broad principles poses a new type of challenge. Labeling water investments as part of the new "green economy", and thereby sustainable by association, avoids the societal debates that are needed in forging deliberate and resilient policies. Our rapidly accumulating knowledge and experience need to be harnessed for an expanded understanding of, and debate about, our water options, rather than used to justify the ideologies of the status quo.

How can we make use of the depth and breadth of our water knowledge to help us imagine a new relationship with water? Let's return to the two tasks identified above: (1) learning about the dynamics of water ethics and (2) applying that knowledge to formulating new strategies and policies.

What We Still Need to Know about Water Ethics

The role of ethics in motivating new water policies is camouflaged by the easy explanation that the new policies are a response to advances in the fields of ecology and economics. A competing, and in my view far more convincing explanation is that society's normative ethics have shifted. It's no longer acceptable to dam a river just because you want to produce electricity. Alternatives now need to be considered and environmental costs factored in. But by attributing new policies to new knowledge, rather than to changing ethics, we fail to learn the ethical lessons of our own recent history. We need to explore the ethical content of both the new and the old policies to appreciate the actual and potential role of ethics. In order to make more deliberate decisions about water options, we need to become aware of the role of values in influencing those decisions.

In addition to discerning the operative values and ethics, we also need to decide which ethical principles we wish to promote as a basis for water decisions: What are we aiming for? This implies the need for an explicit water ethics charter to serve not only as a guide for behavior, but as a reference for policy debate. By making the ethical goals explicit, we have a clear focus for dialogue about those principles. The process of developing a water ethics charter would be as valuable as the product. The process would stimulate analysis of progressive water policies already adopted by cities, corporations, or countries to deduce underlying principles and to understand the dynamics of how ethics change.

How to Promote a New Water Ethic

The purpose of learning more about water ethics is to promote behavioral changes in the way we relate to and use water. Part of the ethics message is simply that "Ethics exist!" and that ethics influence practical behavior. Another part of the message is that some ethics are preferable and the process of finding the best ethics involves broad participation of all stakeholders, including Nature. A third part of the message is that a new water ethic has already emerged, or is in the process of emerging. It can be seen in the plethora of declarations and statements about social justice and balancing the water needs of people and the planet.

With so many ingredients in place, with so much knowledge and experience at our disposal, what more is needed to bring the new water ethic into the mainstream, and to shift the assumptions about our relationship with water? There is still a need for new knowledge about what the ethics are and how ethics change, but the greater need is for awareness and appreciation about the role of values in shaping our water behavior. The water crisis we perceive is only partly a crisis about water; it is also a crisis of values and ethics, which can, and inevitably do, change.

How should we use water? Ethically. We should use water according to ethical principles that respect people and nature. We already have good examples of these new ethics, but we need to raise the profile of ethics as a concept and promote ethical principles that can save us from ourselves. What can we do, practically, to raise the profile of water ethics? What would a campaign for water ethics look like? It will involve talks and books and documentaries and websites and social media. It will involve research reports and presentations and articles in professional journals and mainstream media. It will involve networking informally and formally, e.g., through the Water Ethics Network (waterethics.org), and it will involve active participation in water meetings and conferences and other venues where decisions about water are made.

Most importantly, a campaign for water ethics will involve everybody, all of society, because we all have an interest in how water is used. Water is simply too important to be left to the water experts. We need them, of course, but we also need other experts, and other non-experts. When water decisions are perceived as having intrinsic ethical content, the door is opened for broad participation from society including (by proxy) nature. An appreciation for ethics begets participation which begets ethical behavior. That is the general theory which needs to become more general practice.