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Water ethics. Foundational readings for students and professionals. Island Press.

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BOOK REVIEW

Brown, P. and Schmidt, J. (Eds). 2010. Water ethics. Foundational readings for students and professionals. Washington, DC: Island Press. ISBN-13: 978-1-59726-565-2, 320 pages, US\$35.

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This is an important and timely book as water professionals, as well as the many more non-professionals concerned about water sustainability, search for an elusive new paradigm for water management. Peter Brown and Jeremy Schmidt provide three valuable services in this book. First, they make available an excellent set of papers drawn from a variety of disciplines, but all having something important to say about water ethics. Second, they provide a framework for thinking about water ethics, through their five topical sections; (1) *Dominion and the Human Claim to Water*, (2) *Utilitarianism*, (3) *Water as a Community Resource*, (4) *Water: Life's Common Wealth*, and (5) *Ethics in Complex Systems*. Third, they offer suggestions for applying ethics to sustainable water resources management. Clearly, they are not just concocting a book of readings for their students, though the book serves this purpose as well. As philosophers, they are trying to engage water managers, researchers, policymakers and activists to understand the role of ethics, and to use that understanding "to curtail the global water crisis" (p.3).

In the introductory chapter, Schmidt presents the topic of ethics to an audience more familiar with water policies than with philosophy. He defines a water ethic as, "a normative framework guiding actions that affect water" (p.4). One cannot have a water policy without a water ethic because "... any decision-making framework requires value judgments regarding how to define and resolve problems" (p.6). He illustrates this claim by looking at how ethical factors influence water management in practice, a theme that both editors return to in the concluding chapter of the book.

The first section of the book, entitled *Dominion and the Human Claim to Water*, presents religious and legal perspectives. Two essays, one by an Orthodox Christian Patriarch and the other by three Muslim water professionals, offer similar views that humans have a religious duty to care for God's creation. "Indifference toward the vitality of [the Danube River]... could be described as a blasphemy against God the Creator and a crime against humanity" (pp.26-27). From the Muslim perspective, IWRM needs to be adapted to Islamic rules, such as recognising the human right to water and enhancing equity among water users. The essay, *Water Rights, Culture, and Underlying Values* by R. Pradhan and R. Meinzen-Dick, addresses legal (and by implication, ethical) pluralism around water. Recognising the legitimacy of sometimes conflicting value systems can stimulate a negotiating process resulting in better projects, better stewardship of water resources, and empowerment of marginalised groups. The concluding essay of this section presents an eco-feminist perspective. Greta Gaard argues that belief in the sacredness of springs and rivers, which characterised pre-modern 'partnership' cultures, gave way to male-dominated perspectives that viewed women, and by extension Nature, as unclean and dangerous.

From describing religious perspectives in the first section, the editors take on the topic of utilitarianism in the second section of the book. The transition is smooth thanks to the evangelical tone of some of the writers, notably William McGee in his 1909 article on *Water as a Resource*: "[t]he

conquest of nature, which began with progressive control of the soil and its products and passed to the minerals, is now extending to the waters on, above, and beneath the surface. The conquest will not be complete until these waters are brought under complete control..." (p.89). In their introductory remarks to this section, the editors make a distinction between 'bureaucratic' and 'individualistic' utilitarianism. McGee represents a bureaucratic approach that views the exploitation of nature as a collective manifest destiny, to be implemented by government agencies. The individualistic approach is represented by Anderson and Leal in an excerpt from their 2001 book, *Free Market Environmentalism*. It is an argument heard many times in water conferences: let water markets find the highest utility for water through the magic of water pricing. This economic logic is, according to this view, also an ethical imperative.

Following these two rather conventional interpretations of utilitarianism, we are treated to three novel approaches of trying to determine what's best for people. Steven Kraft, writing in 1986, describes groundwater regulation as an issue of inter-generational ethics as well as of future utility. In a direct rebuttal to the logic of the preceding essay, Kraft disparages water markets as "a tyranny of the present over the economic future of society" (p.109). The next essay by Joseph Sax adds a further objection to water markets, that they ignore community interests in favour of individual interest leading to "reverse wealth redistribution" (p.124). The utilitarian theme comes full circle with the dense philosophical argument of Augustin Berque who considers Nature's ecosystem services to be generally undervalued. The utilitarian interests of society, and especially future societies, require an ethic that honours nature for her valuable services and applies the precautionary principle to limit unintended environmental consequences.

From utilitarianism, we move to the topic of *Water as a Community Resource*. Three of the four essays here (Bryan Norton's is the exception), presume a utilitarian perspective that explores how community interests can best be served. The lead essay by Ostrom, Stern and Dietz, was originally published in 2003 in *Impact*, the Journal of the American Water Resources Association and adopts a refreshingly straightforward style befitting an engineering audience. Ostrom et al., note that there are numerous cases of successful community resource management. Community institutions govern the commons through carefully constructed rules that balance the competing interests of the members. There seems to be little place for ethics (values) in this model, and it seems odd to include this essay as part of a book on water ethics, unless it is to show that the ethics dimension is largely missing from the Institutional model.

Paul Trawick offers a different model to describe what makes indigenous Peruvian irrigation systems successful. The essential element is not so much the rules, but the principles of equity and transparency. A "moral economy of water" based on equity is, he suggests, broadly held among widely different cultures, and constitutes "a highly effective and widely applicable solution to a major social problem" (p.163). The next essay by Madeleine Cumyn shows how the legal concept of water as a *res communis* in Quebec contributes to water governance that supports (at least potentially) the common good. However, implementation of that legal concept depends on government willingness to intervene in protecting the commons. In the last essay of this section on community resource management, Bryan Norton advocates "pragmatic, adaptive management" as the solution to the polarised debates between ideological utilitarians and equally dogmatic environmentalists. The way out is to adopt a pragmatic approach that avoids debates of principle and focuses instead on what to do. Then we will discover "convergence on a set of policies that would serve both the goals of saving humankind in the long run, and of saving present elements and processes of the natural world" (p.183). Norton is speaking also, it seems, on behalf of the editors who, return to this theme in the conclusion of the book.

The primary message of the book is found in the fourth section (*Water: Life's Common Wealth*) which explores how we should regard water. What categories should we use? Is it a natural resource? The essay by Peter Brown, who is also one of the editors, asks, "Are there any natural resources"? The answer is both yes and no, or perhaps one could say, yes and 'know'. It can be ethically proper to build dams and even pollute streams, if one is maintaining a 'Reverence for Life' (Albert Schweitzer's term).

When behaviour is guided by deeply reverential values, that behaviour will be ethical. Carolyn Merchant's essay on *The Changing Ethics of Ecosystem Management* uses the term "partnership ethics" to describe the balance between respecting natural ecosystems but still using them for economic benefit, much as indigenous hunters honour the animals they kill. A balanced partnership with nature contrasts not only with people-first ethics ('egocentric ethics' based on personal self-interest, or 'homocentric ethics' based on what's good for society) but also with 'ecocentric ethics' that place the planet above people. It is this kind of 'partnership ethic' which Sandra Postel is alluding to in her essay, *The Missing Piece: A Water Ethic*, a 2007 article based on the conclusion of her well-known book, *Last Oasis* (Postel, 1997).

The concluding section, *Ethics in Complex Systems*, presents two original essays, one by Malin Falkenmark and Carl Folke, and the other by the two editors, who try to articulate some take-home messages from the many essays in the book. In their introductory comments, the editors note that water ecosystems are so complex and dynamic that it should come as no surprise that conventional management systems, based on an expectation of steady-state management control, have not worked. We need an adaptive management approach that incorporates respect for Nature's complexity along with humility that there will always be uncertainty about how it all works. The Falkenmark and Folke essay describes this complexity and proposes an ethic (without ever using that term) of 'ecohydrosolidarity' based on catchment areas, grounded (literally) in ecological concepts of 'green water' (e.g. soil moisture) as well as 'blue water' (e.g. river flow), plus stakeholder-friendly governance. The implication seems to be that if we learn to appreciate the ecosystem dynamics of land/water systems, our ethical orientation around water (and land) will automatically become more enlightened.

I found this essay particularly unsatisfying, for suggesting the potential for ecological science to shift our ethics, yet stopping short of actually saying so, and thus precluding a discussion of how to harness the power of science to bring about an ethical transformation. It falls on Brown and Schmidt to clarify the message of this section, and the entire book, their concluding chapter, *An Ethic of Compassionate Retreat*. Recognizing the complexity of ecosystem dynamics, and how human destiny is tied up with ecological processes, our response should be respectful awe and a sense of caring (compassion) coupled with humility that we are always operating in some ignorance, so we should not be too sure of ourselves (retreat). The editors do not simply assert this position; they provide a usefully referenced overview of the evolution of water ethics thus far. They present the concept of 'compassionate retreat' as the water ethic we need now for pulling ourselves out of the unsustainable mess we have created. How to accomplish this ethical rescue is not well addressed, other than the general advice to use bits and pieces of existing ethical systems: "[w]e can draw on elements of humanity's shared moral and scientific heritage and reposition them within a narrative that puts science and ethics together in living within complex systems" (p.283).

Not surprisingly, *Water Ethics* offers no magic bullet for shifting into a new era of sustainably and equitably managed water ecosystems. Yet through offering this complex set of thoughtful if sometimes mutually discordant essays, and in sewing them together with introductory remarks and the concluding chapter, the editors have defined a messy frontier where cultural values (ethics) manifest in water policies. More than delineating that frontier, Brown and Schmidt help us understand how that frontier has developed, how it seems to be changing (some signs of hope here), and where they think we need to go (compassionate retreat). For these reasons, this book is an invaluable addition to the set of resources available to water managers, policymakers, researchers, activists, and the residual category of 'concerned citizens'.

My list of 'cons' about the book can be reduced to three points. First, the development of the editors' thesis about compassionate retreat could have been strengthened through more explicitly incorporating Indigenous voices about how water bodies, and nature overall, are perceived and understood. Indigenous Peoples routinely, and justifiably in my view, complain that their voices are ignored in water decisions, and this book, while strongly supporting indigenous values about water has, to some extent, appropriated their message without acknowledging the parallels. Second, the core

meaning of 'water ethics' deserves greater discussion. The term is used variously to refer to the category of cultural values about how to deal with water and water ecosystems, as well as to a specific set of ethics being championed by the editors and many of their essayists. The 'missing piece' that Sandra Postel identifies in her essay as *A Water Ethic* might be better titled in the plural, 'Water Ethics' to indicate that ethics are always present. The challenge is to identify what the operative ethics are in any particular case, and subject those ethics, and the resulting behaviour, to reassessment. The same issue arises with regard to discussions of 'ethical behaviour'. If 'ethics' refers to the underlying values driving behaviour, then behaviour is 'ethical' when it reflects those values, whatever they may be. Ethics then becomes relative and not absolute, and lends itself to analysis and reformulation. My third complaint about the book is another terminological quibble. I find the term, 'compassionate restraint' too passive and in a sense, negative. I very much like the concept, but would prefer 'reverential action' or anything that conjures up an image of moving forward, carefully, gently, even compassionately, but not backwards.

My complaints are minor details compared to the importance of this book. Peter Brown and Jeremy Schmidt render fundamental philosophical concepts of environmental ethics accessible to water practitioners and scholars from other disciplines. They show us the view from 35,000 feet (10,000 m) where we can hear their critique of our faulty reasoning without reacting defensively. From up there, we too can see that our planet is in trouble and that a shift is needed in our water behaviour and in the ethics motivating that behaviour. Whatever we call the new paradigm, we have no time to waste in making it happen!