

The Moral Drought: the Ethics of Continental Water Uses

Francisco García Novo
The University of Seville

FIFTH BOTIN FOUNDATION WATER WORKSHOP

WATER AND FOOD CONFLICTS VERSUS COOPERATION IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

Fundación Botín, Santander

27-28 October, 2010

Inherited Ethics

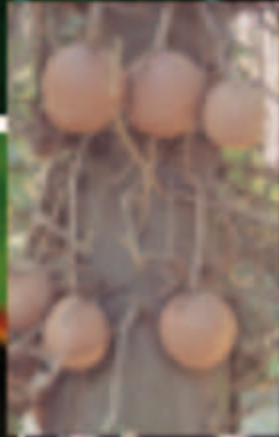
- Western society inherited most Ethic *principles* from a *religious, traditional and low technology* society.
- By and large, *religious attitudes* have dwindled by now.
- The weight of *traditional uses* and attitudes on society is rapidly shrinking as new uses are introduced at unprecedented rates.
- *Technology* not only expands but also enters my personal life as new devices, services, information and connectivity. New power, new understanding, new options, competing with previous conceptions of personal life and society.
- For Western society, the *individual* has grown to attain a key role, rarely witnessed in history.
- Ethics is being *obscured? revised? reshaped?*

Reshaping Ethics

- It is suggested that in Western society Ethics needs a revival, an updating, (perhaps an upgrading?), strongly addressing to the personal *knowledge, conscience and power of the individual*, in order to:
 - To better *focus* on contemporary society
 - To incorporate the vast amount of emerging *knowledge*
 - To embrace the whole *humankind*, present to us through the mass media
 - To seat the *Biosphere* as the frame of individual actions
 - Not throwing away the inherited moral attitudes but expanding them along above dimensions.

One more point

- Coming back to the Ethic dimensions of incorporating *knowledge and* embracing the *humankind*, perhaps there is a new dimension to explore: *sharing knowledge/sharing tech*.
- The issue goes beyond **my/our** duty to be well informed and the recognition of all people's rights to education, health or assistance.
- It is suggested that one of **my/our** commitments is to *make technology and knowledge available to others* on every critical issue.
- To shade some light on the discussion I have considered *water*, a basic commodity which also needs some basic knowledge.



WATER

AGU
A

AQUA





Ensenada do 13, Coruña

- Water is a most important molecule for the Biosphere at every level: energy balances, transport of materials, life support.
- Also for human societies from the lowest level to our technological bonanza, water uses are paramount to humans.
- Cultures have tried to build knowledge on water to improve its management. They dug wells, refurbished fountains and springs, invented irrigation schemes, made vessels to hold water and cook, built mills...and implemented complex customs to safeguard the population access to water.
- *All that is so obvious, that... I/we will probably feel quite unconcerned.*

Water traits/risks

- Traditional societies have been able to grasp *some* water properties and to invent *some* water technologies.
- **My/our** contemporary Western society, treasures both: knowledge and technology. Also knows the technical shortcuts which cause diseases, mortality, impoverishment linked to water misuses elsewhere in the World.
- The figure for Africa is: 56% of population not having an easy access to clean drinking water.

Water availability. Water transport



- Heavy water, strenuous task
- Woman's load, women condemnation.
- Other than searching fuel, preparing meals and tending children, many women must carry water to home.
- Water demands include: *household, washing garments, food preparation and cooking, children care...*and often home made beer (or equivalent) for the husband.
- **Scarce water, distant sources, difficult extraction, low quality make it a difficult job.** Eventually, small children have to be carried along with water.
- The obvious Western contribution is the use of plastic cans in place of tin jugs or earthenware to carry water.



**Water
frames,
women
frames**

photoburst

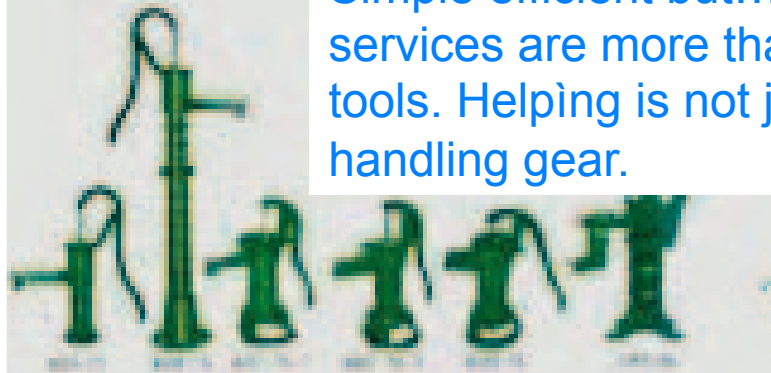
The painful contrast

- The domestic water supply in the tap is a wonder. We are so used to taps and sinks that take them for granted all over the World.
- It is not the case
- Taps rely on pipes and deposits or pumps. Even the humble manual pump makes a dramatic improvement to water supply.
- It represents crossing a very high barrier.
- A frontier to be pulled down by our perception of mankind, by our Ethic approach to social life on Earth.



Right to tech, right to knowledge

- **My/our** Ethics may grow, accordingly, along some directions. In particular to fueling the spread of knowledge and some elementary technology (pumps, pipes, taps) to underdeveloped areas of the World.
- **Only technical water is true useful water.** Only advice and knowledge can turn the tide towards safety (and wellbeing).
- A supply of clear but contaminated or toxic drinking water is a *population trap*.
- In my opinion it is **my/our** responsibility to bring to water the needed amount of knowledge and technology for (safe) human use. For all humans.
- **An Ethic imperative**
- On the other hand, it is so easy, so inexpensive....!



Simple efficient but...
services are more than
tools. Helping is not just
handling gear.

In Africa,
thousands
of broken hand
pumps are in need
of repair.



**Sun
operated
water
pumps in
narrow
wells
represent
a great
leap
forward**



**Carrying water makes a
difficult living. With only
one leg, it needs
stamina. The water pump
is a deserved help**



Some water knowledge gaps

- **Direct observation gives no evidence** of small water organisms in water: pathogens be it viruses, bacteria, protozoa or larvae of parasites remain unnoticeable to the naked eye. Water color or taste give little advice on water safety for drinking.
- If millions of **women** only knew better of the invisible risks of water, their food preparation and children care (as well as their personal health) will neatly improve
- If hundred of millions of **dwellings** close, above or around open sewage ditches remodeled their sanitary works, ... their inhabitants will improve their life standards, lowering children mortality and the prevalence of several diseases.



**Serious risk for children.
Contaminated environment for the whole population.**

Agents are ferried by garments, shoes, dust, cattle, goods..

Open air sewers in poor communities. Frames here from India (above) and Irak



Poisonous water: As, and many other elements



The Bangla Desh case



Back to Ethics.

- The widespread situation of *drinking water contamination, difficult access to water, inefficient water supply* and *poor sewage treatment* are well known to Western society.
- They all share in common the inability of local communities to solve their water problems.
- Some are not identified as *problems*, some are left to women, some are considered as *traditional way of living*, some are reputed to be above the community powers.
- But these problems **belong to me/us**. They are a part of **my/our** humankind, of **my/our** knowledge, of **my/our** relationships, of **my/our** understanding of the World.

But we reject to address the water problems as a share of our human burden

- Unfortunately we fail to address them as an Ethic issue.

Perhaps because...

- -we are unable to identify them as our problems.
- -we leave them to the local populations to solve.
- -we regard them as local ethnic traits.
- -some solutions are opposed because they are considered as trade. The technical equipment (including knowledge or training) is considered to be a service or a good to be paid for. Not to be freely granted to others.
- We, the Western society largely live from selling technology and services.



The water paradox. Bangla Desh 2010

The Moral Drought

- **The Ethics of Continental Water Uses should (in my opinion) stretch to embrace human water needs as a whole.**
- **More urgently, drinking water needs to be supplied to all inhabitants not solely as a fluid, but as a safe service which permits its direct use for drinking, food preparation and children care.**
- **It needs supply, information and technology going together in a single package.**
- **Water is one of the basis for life (and society). For wellbeing and health. And for the personal future of several million women and children.**
- ***We need to overcome the longstanding Ethic drought***

Enlarging our responsibilities, and the scope of our Ethics.

- Water is one of the issues.
- Others include energy, information, natural resources. The biosphere as a whole and in its different properties or compartments such as stability, diversity, productivity, ecological services. Cultural issues such as the preservation of natural and cultural landscapes. The cultural heritages from art to language and literature.
- Our own body and mind to be cared for a long time in lives extending close to one century.
- *And the richness of Ethics which has inspired our culture for over two millennia.*



Sharing our water



...is a wonder!

A summary

- Perhaps it can be stated that there is a *moral drought*, a restraint to share the knowledge and technology of water (or other resources).
- Easy water access will upgrade the life of a large share of human population, perhaps as much as a 25%, and composed, mostly, of women and girls.
- The right to a technical use of water probably represents a pressing ethical demand.

