

Peter G. Brown and Jeremy J. Schmidt (eds.), *Water Ethics: Foundational Readings for Students and Professionals* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2010), iii + 294 pp., \$70.00 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-5972-6564-5. Review doi: 10.1558/jsrnc.v4i1.102.

As we move into the next decade of the new twenty-first century, perhaps no other issue will stamp its imprint on our consciousness as much as the global water crisis. Although climate change, world poverty, war, and a host of other concerns dominate the headlines, the responses and necessary changes surrounding the access, management, rights, and distribution of water underlie the entire host of these other issues, even resulting in 'water wars'. Yet, as the editors and authors of *Water Ethics* repeat, approaches to this central issue which only emphasize management concerns, economic and political policies, new technologies, or water rights and distribution schemes are currently driven by sets of ethical principles which fail to address fundamental understandings of water on planet earth. The editors call for a new 'normative framework guiding actions that affect water' (p. 4).

Editors Brown and Schmidt have assembled eighteen essays that span one hundred years of ethical reflections on water, from 1909 to 2009, including their own carefully crafted concluding essay. The book is arranged as a chronology of understandings surrounding water ethics, understandings that have driven water policies and practices. The reader, then, is able to move through developments as they occurred in light of previous approaches. At the same time, the book spans a wide variety of philosophical and theological approaches. The chapters reveal the persistence of strictly utilitarian uses of water in shaping past and present views of water as a resource primarily for human betterment, with little regard for the needs of other earth beings. Fortunately, the range of authors provides suggestive and critical reframing, such as a 'partnership ethic' or in the editors' own chapter about a 'compassionate retreat' from human arrogance and consumption of water and other resources. They advocate a compassionate approach, providing a new perspective on water ethics, while criticizing the worldviews and religions of the West, which have dominated water-management practices.

This editor's approach reflects major themes of a new water ethic articulated in this valuable volume. First, several authors emphasize the essential need for a critical examination of the religious values that have framed contemporary worldviews. Such a framework has rested upon a human/nature gap, and this dualism eventuates in policies of human domination, expansion, and consumption of nature for human convenience, rather than for essential needs. At the same time these authors call for a new water ethic which incorporates the positive dimensions of those religious traditions. As Brown and Schmidt noted in their summary chapter: 'What we also need is a new narrative that positions scientific knowledge and technological know-how as part of the broader systems people seek to manage and which include the cultural, religious and ethical values by which the managers and users are informed' (p. 274). This is no easy task, but many of the authors envision precisely such a revolution in thinking about water issues.

A second major theme in several articles involves an adoption of some form of Aldo Leopold's 'commonwealth of life'. That is, humanity is at a point where it is absolutely essential to incorporate a biocentric understanding of 'community' which includes the entire natural world and involves the rights of various communities of beings, not just the human community. The argument extends further when some

authors argue that rivers, too, have moral standing (Postel, p. 222), and that water rights involve not only traditionally human rights to water use but the rights of waters to their own flourishing. There is a strong case here for extending the discussions of ethics to other-than-human beings, as well as to mountains, rivers, the seas, and nature itself. Using this moral compass, Bryan Norton modifies Leopold's mantra of 'thinking like a mountain' to 'thinking like a watershed' (p. 189). This is only one of the many significant insights the authors bring to bear upon the creation of a new water ethic.

Although there is no one particular ethic that emerges in these collective writings, *Water Ethics* offers a glimpse of a major revolution in thinking about water and water issues. In addition to the general principles and philosophical arguments developed in the book, several authors utilize case studies to support and illustrate their positions. As the subtitle of *Water Ethics* indicates, these writings are not meant for a casual reader but are directed at students and professionals who work with water concerns. These concerns will certainly intensify in the next decades, and therefore, *Water Ethics* is a critical resource for current and forthcoming debates.

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