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4 | Martin Reynolds, 'Environmental ethics'

Reynolds highlights three dimensions of environmental ethics – normative, philosophical and political – in the context of a long-standing controversial development initiative for dam constructions in the Narmada river valley in India. In discussing these three dimensions, he promotes the importance of environmental ethics in fostering responsible development intervention. A version of this reading can be found in *Environment, Development and Sustainability in the 21st Century: Perspectives and cases from around the world*, edited by Gordon Wilson, Pam Furniss and Richard Kimbowa (2009), published by the Open University and Oxford University Press, for which the reading was originally commissioned.

Introduction

More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly. – Woody Allen, American humorist, quoted in Westley et al. (2006: 90)

Humour often provides respite in a perceived world of intractable dilemmas. Local issues such as access to clean water or availability of food can be driven by, as well as contribute to, global issues such as climate change and the global economy. Take for example the issues around constructing large-scale dams. The Narmada Dam Project in India is one of the longest-standing development and environmental controversies of its kind (see Figure 1). Box 1 summarises the history and some key issues. These issues are complex and they also generate some questions of responsibility.

The conflicts are formidable. Large-scale dam construction like other big socio-economic developments such as air-travel expansion have been subject to criticism, both through extensive consultant reporting and strong activism and protest. But often there is a sense of inevitability about such projects. Decisions appear to be made through some inescapable march of so-called progress. So perhaps Woody Allen is right to be cynical. But cynicism belies a wealth of opportunities for seeing and doing things differently.

An ethical outlook on such issues can help to realise such opportunities. For example, looking behind Woody Allen's acerbic observation, some basic ethical questions might be asked to reveal areas of responsibility that need to be and can be managed more constructively.

- 1 What are the particular issues that need attention? Does global warming deserve more attention than longer standing issues of abject poverty in the world? Or should we just despair at the magnitude and complexity of issues confronting us?
- 2 How might these issues be attended to and by whom? Is it just 'them' out there or is it also you/me/'us'? Or should we just resort to fatalism, nurturing a general sense of apathy and blame?
- 3 Why are some issues privileged more than others, and some ways of dealing with them prioritised over others? What opportunities are there for challenging mainstream ways of dealing with harmfulness and wrongdoing? Or should we just remain cynical of human nature and the prospects to realise alternative ways of doing things?

Despair, apathy and cynicism are all too prevalent in modern society. Moreover they are human attributes sometimes encouraged by those with an interest in keeping things as they are – contributing to vicious cycles of business-as-usual and the type of eco-social collapse invoked by cynics. In what follows I'll use each of the three sets of questions above in turn to explain how ideas from environmental ethics can help guide more purposeful engagement with environment and development dilemmas. The Narmada Dam Project is used to ground the discussion.



FIGURE 1 Map of narmada valley and proposed dams

Box 1 Narmada Dam Project

The Narmada Dam Project in India involves the construction of 30 large, 135 medium and 3000 small dams to exploit the waters of the river Narmada and its tributaries for better irrigated agricultural practice to produce more food, and the generation of hydroelectric power. The idea was first conceived in the 1940s by India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, but it was not until 1979 that the project took form. Of the 30 large dams, Sardar Sarovar is the largest and most controversial. In 1979, the Sardar Sarovar Project was proposed and attracted initial support from international financial institutions including the World Bank. But after much controversy and protest, particularly since the late 1980s, many financial institutions withdrew support. Protest was led by Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), a national coalition movement including people affected by the project, environmental and human rights activists, scientists and academics.

The construction of Sardar Sarovar dam itself was stopped in the mid 1990s. However, in October 2000, the Indian Supreme Court gave a go-ahead again for the construction of the dam. Other dams associated with the wider Narmada project have likewise been developing, come under criticism and have been the subject of protest.

Four general issues can be summarised in relation to the Narmada Project:

- Water access and quality (e.g. water-borne diseases from stagnant reservoir waters)
- Urban and rural economic development (e.g. displaced populations from rural areas)
- Change in agricultural practices (e.g. shift towards large-scale irrigated farming)
- Ecological impacts (e.g. loss of biodiversity in previously rich hydrological systems)

Source: Friends of River Narmada (2008)

The 'ought' comprises a normative world of *values* – often multiple and conflicting – which are used by stakeholders to make judgements on the realities they experience. Many issues relating to environment and development are experienced as complex questions requiring continual attention to value judgements on what ought to be.

So what role do value judgements play? Arguments for and against the Narmada Project can be considered as expressions of *value* judgements: arguments 'for' construction based on judgements on what ought to be the outcome, and arguments 'against' based on judgements regarding what ought not to be the outcome (Box 2).

One of the key problems arising from any controversial issue is sorting out judgements of 'fact' from value judgements. Scientific information on levels of domestic water supply, power generation, agricultural production, estimated numbers of poor and underprivileged communities being dispossessed of their livelihood, and ecological impacts, are vital. However, professed levels of impact, both positive and negative, are often contested even amongst scientists. 'Fact' and value are inextricably linked. So being aware of accompanying value judgements is also very important. Ethics makes values explicit. Box 3 provides an understanding of different types of value and different perspectives.

Arguments in support of the Narmada Dam Project can be said to have an anthropocentric perspective with a dominant, instrumental value judgement on water as a resource. Few would deny this as an important value judgement, particularly in a context of poor access to clean water. From a more ecocentric perspective, claims are made of providing flood protection for ecosystems, and offering compensation to support sanctuaries for endangered species.

Anthropocentric arguments can also be made against the project. The displacement of communities, loss of livelihood, and diminished access to water amongst vulnerable groups are particularly significant. The possible loss of biodiversity through deforestation and increased salinisation will have aesthetic disadvantages which can also be factored in from an anthropocentric perspective. Many of the arguments against such projects, however, derive from a more ecocentric perspective, bringing attention to wider and longer term ecological impacts.

But values and perspectives are not fixed entities. They vary and develop according to the context and time in which they are applied. This is evident with the Narmada case study. As time has moved on, protest around Narmada has become symbolic of a global concern for how we engage with nature and the long-term consequences. Environmental ethics helps to explain such changes in terms of different types of value judgements

Despair? Issues and values: normative ethics

Ethics concern contrasting questions of 'is' with questions of 'ought'. This is sometimes referred to as *normative* ethics. The 'is' comprises a descriptive world of *issues* that are experienced by different stakeholders.

Box 2 Narmada Dam Project: value judgements

Outcomes judged to be good/right/valuable (arguments for construction)

Outcomes judged to be bad/wrong/worthless (arguments against construction)

Water access and quality

Supply water to 30m people including drinking water facilities

Increase prospect of insect-borne diseases

Irrigate crops to feed another 20m people covering 17,920 km² of land.

Inundate areas causing salinisation of land alongside canals through build up of salts.

Urban and rural economic development

Provide hydroelectric power
Improve access to electricity in remote villages

Dispossess large numbers of poor and underprivileged communities of their land as a source of livelihood

Develop facilities for sophisticated communication systems in the project areas

Provide inadequate compensation and rehabilitation for resettled people as with previous experiences in India

Increase employment both in construction and post construction maintenance.

Over-estimate power generated and under-estimate likely long-term dependence on private trans-national companies.

Prompt excessive profiteering amongst private contractors and possible corruption in dispensing large budgets.

Agricultural practice and technological development

Modernise agricultural practices using irrigated farming

Lose skills in more sustainable farming practices

Provide irrigation infrastructure for biofuel agricultural production (and other genetically modified crops)

Undermine expert confidence (even the World Bank withdrew from the Narmada project!)

Develop fisheries industry.

Give false promises regarding maintenance of dams given seemingly disorganised State infrastructure.

Disrupt downstream fisheries.

Ecological impacts

Protect against advancement of desert and provision of flood protection to riverine reaches.

Diminish biodiversity through monoculture irrigated farming
Devastate existing riverine ecosystem

Establish wildlife sanctuaries protecting rare species (e.g., Sloth Bear, Wild Ass, Kutch Bustard)

Submerge current forest farmland
Ignore possible long-term impacts (e.g. large reservoirs could cause earthquakes)

Box 3 Values and perspectives on environment and development

Values are an assessment or measure of the worth of something. Two types of value can be distinguished in environmental ethics.

1 Instrumental is the value that something has as a means to an end. So money might be good *only* because it leads to other good things (purchase of 'goods'). Putting monetary value on environmental 'goods', or considering nature in terms of natural 'resources', and ecosystem 'services', are typical expressions of instrumental value in relation to nature.

2 Intrinsic is the value that a thing has 'in itself,' or 'for its own sake,' or 'in its own right.' Money for example is not intrinsically good (unless you are a collector of historic or different currencies) whereas most other goods might arguably be considered as having some intrinsic value. Environmentalism as a social movement in the mid-twentieth century grew from an appreciation of intrinsic value for nature.

A third type of value can be associated with the valuer as against the valued. Here, value is linked with obligations and the boundaries of the *moral community* – who or what is worthy of respect (past, present, future generations? other animals? all living organisms? ecosystems? biosphere? universe? multiverse?)

3 Personal (or individual) is the internally held value of the valuer usually attached to character traits such as having 'integrity'. Behind any value is a valuer with particular perspectives on the world guided by personal values. Two perspectives on the environment based on personal values can be distinguished – anthropocentric and ecocentric.

Anthropocentric perspective places humans in a privileged position over nature. An extreme position of anthropocentrism – egocentrism – privileges *individual* humans. Other extremes assume that the destiny of humanity is to conquer and master the forces of nature. Such a perspective assumes that nature is only valuable insofar as humans have a use for it, in terms of human needs (i.e. instrumental valuation).

Ecocentric perspective regards human beings as simply one part of a moral community consisting of all living things as well as non-living natural objects (rivers, mountains etc.). Humans no longer occupy a privileged position on top of the moral community.

and perspectives. Environmental ethics therefore help to make sense of arguments for and against a project, and to respond effectively to such arguments using the appropriate language of value and perspective. In short, rather than despair at the complexity of issues arising, environmental ethics provides a handle – a vocabulary around value judgements – for appreciating and dealing with issues more constructively.

So with a means of surfacing value judgements, what guidance might be given towards using those judgements for responsible action?

Apathy? How to do ethics and be ethical: philosophical ethics

Whilst *normative* ethics helps in revealing the interplay of value judgements, more specific questions on what to do can draw on traditions of moral philosophy. *Philosophical* ethics is about searching for answers to questions about:

i) *doing what's good (or harmful)*, and ii) *doing what's right (or wrong)*
The first question invites consideration of the *consequence* of a decision and appropriate ways of measuring the consequences. The second invites consideration to the *intention* behind any decision and any particular obligations behind such intention. Table 1 provides some ideas about the kinds of benefit/harm and rights/wrongs that might be looked at in association with each of the four main issues arising from the Narmada Dam Project. (It should be noted that, as with any philosophical abstraction, the categorisation into 'good' or 'right' is a slightly artificial one and there is not always a clear distinction between them.)

The responses to each question – what's good and what's right – in relation to any issue can be contested. For example, on the issue of agricultural practice some might suggest that a more appropriate 'good' from an anthropocentric perspective would be to improve intensity of production. Further contestation may arise in privileging one type of question over another. Should a focus on 'rights' and obligations be advanced in spite of the effects of action, or vice versa? An obligation to respect nature may for example be inappropriate in circumstances where the effect is to further human impoverishment. Similarly, a focus on maximising human welfare may infringe on the rights of other life-forms to flourish. Reference to value judgements and associated perspectives (Box 2) can help make sense of these conflicts.

Environmental ethics also addresses character attributes around 'being' ethical or environmentally responsible. This invokes a third tradition in philosophical ethics drawing upon Western (e.g. Ancient Greek) and Eastern (e.g. Buddhism and Taoism) philosophy:

TABLE 1 Philosophical ethics: what to do?

Issues around Narmada Dam Project	Doing what's good (not harmful) Measures of success	Doing what's right (not wrong) Intentions and obligations
Water access and quality	Improve quality of water and access to clean water (avoid disease and drought)	Provide universal access to clean water (not reinforcing or developing skewed access)
Urban and rural economic development flourish	Improve quality of life for citizens (avoid poverty and use of only economic indices)	Provide opportunity for all humans to (not constraining humans from flourishing)
Agricultural practice and technological development	Improve range of productive capacities for farming (avoid loss of ecologically sustainable farming skills)	Provide expertise to support appropriate practice (not contriving a simplistic solution)
Ecological impacts	Improve quality of the natural environment (avoid ecological deterioration)	Provide protection against ecological destruction (not ignoring wider obligations to nature)

TABLE 2 Philosophical ethics: how to be?

Issues around Narmada Dam Project	Virtue	Vice
Water access and quality	Justice	Injustice
Urban and rural economic development	Moderation	Greed
Agricultural practice and technology progress	Humility	Arrogance
Ecological impacts	Compassion	Recklessness

iii) *being virtuous (or non-virtuous)* Table 2 summarises some virtues and non-virtuous ('vice') character attributes that might be associated with each of the Narmada issues.

Identifying human character attributes can help to ground instinctive feelings about responsibilities and make more relevant discussion about consequences of 'good' action and the obligations implied by 'right' action. As well as mediating discussion between Western and Eastern traditions, it also helps with appreciating the many helpful ideas of human–nature relationships amongst existing indigenous tribal communities.

The risk of philosophical ethics though is in confining it to academic discourse – a sure way of generating cynicism! So another task is to keep ethics alive and integral to all deliberations around planning and politics.

Cynicism? Ethics and politics

Ethics is, by its very nature, contested terrain. Disparate value judgements and perspectives, contested ideas on what is 'good' and what is 'right', and indeed contested virtues (should justice have privilege over compassion? is compassion an appropriate environmental virtue?), all clearly need appropriate space for deliberation. When reviewing the list of four issues associated with Narmada you may personally feel aggrieved at the priority given to an anthropocentric perspective on the issues ('ecological impacts' being the last and only issue that privileges nature). What opportunities exist for countering value judgements and the development of alternative viewpoints? In other words, what political space exists to openly challenge assumptions underpinning development initiatives? Political space, meaning opportunities for non-threatening discussion and debate in both formal and informal settings, represents the interface between ethics and politics. An engagement with environmental ethics demands political space to avoid being seen as the cosy arena of armchair philosophy prompted by cynics. Box 4 illustrates examples of how such space has been nurtured in India.

Box 4 Ethics and opening political space in Narmada

Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA): their non-violent campaigns, including hunger strikes, a 36 day march, mass demonstrations, and use of the media, prompted institutions as powerful as the World Bank to withdraw support from the Project in the early 1990s.

Friends of River Narmada (FRN): an international coalition of individuals and organisations (primarily of Indian descent) supporting NBA in terms of providing a repository of information, on-going research, public education and outreach, promotion and publicity.

Navdanya movement: participatory research initiative set up in 1991 to counter corporate control over farming practices. Though not directly related to Narmada dams, Navdanya nurtures practices other than monocrop industrial agriculture promoted as part of large-scale dam projects.

Conventionally political space is dominated by men. Women activists such as NBA spokesperson Medha Patkar, and Vandana Shiva, founder of Navdanya, belong to a tradition of 'ecofeminism' reflecting an important gender imperative for creating new political space.

Sources: Friends of River Narmada (2008); Navdanya (2008)

It would be foolish to pretend that groups with more radicalised anthropocentric and ecocentric perspectives have 'won' the battle in Narmada against conventionally dominant economic interests. But it would also be misleading to underestimate the political space nurtured through the engagement of environmental ethics with social and political theory, policy advisors, and activist groupings.

Summary

Environmental ethics can provide support towards seemingly intractable questions of environmental responsibility that otherwise can lead to despair, apathy and cynicism. An understanding of normative values and perspectives – normative ethics – can help surmount a sense of despair. Practice in thinking about doing what's good, doing what's right, and being responsible – philosophical ethics – can help to overcome apathy.



FIGURE 2 Massive rally in Khandwa, MP on Jun 4 2007 by Omkareshwar and Indira Sagar dam affected

And cynicism needs to be continually checked through creating space for engaging more passionately with normative and philosophical ethics.

Vandana Shiva provides a helpful riposte to cynicism:

The big transformations always seem to move in the direction of destruction. But if you look at the small actions, the hundreds of people saying 'I will speak against human rights violations, I will be part of the voice'; at the thousands of farmers who work with us who have created an alternative agriculture in spite of the dominant policy; that's where change is happening, and that change will continue to grow. (Vandana Shiva in Davis 2008: 29)

Shiva surfaces three important virtues: Hope in countering the despair of real world violations; purposefulness in countering an understandable

apathy of a farming community subjected to industrialised agricultural policy; and trust in countering the cynicism that change to business-as-usual is unattainable due to 'human nature'. Environmental ethics alone is not 'the' answer, but it can provide precious support in guiding and keeping alive the right questions.

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