

# ETHICS, ECONOMICS AND COMMON GOODS

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## GENERAL INFORMATION

Ethics, Economics and Common Goods Journal aims to be a space for debate and discussion on issues of social and economic ethics. Topics and issues range from theory to practical ethical questions affecting our contemporary societies. The journal is especially, but not exclusively, concerned with the relationship between ethics, economics and the different aspects of the common good perspective in social ethics.

Social and economic ethics is a rapidly changing field. The systems of thought and ideologies inherited from the 20th century seem to be exhausted and prove incapable of responding to the challenges posed by, among others, artificial intelligence, the transformation of labor and capital, the financialization of the economy, the stagnation of middle-class wages, and the growing ideological polarization of our societies.

The journal Ethics, Economics and the Common Goods promotes contributions to scientific debates that combine high academic rigor with originality of thought. In the face of the return of ideologies and the rise of moral neopharisaisms in the Anglo-Saxon world, the journal aims to be a space for rational, free, serious and open dialogue. All articles in the journal undergo a process of double anonymous peer review. In addition, it guarantees authors a rapid review of the articles submitted to it. It is an electronic journal that publishes its articles under a creative commons license and is therefore open access.

## NATURE OF CONTRIBUTIONS

Research articles, research reports, essays and responses are double-blind refereed. To be published, articles, reports, essays must obtain favorable opinions. Responses, however, may be accepted with a single positive opinion and rejected with a single negative opinion. The journal is biannual and publishes two issues per year, in June and December. At least one of these two issues is thematic. The journal is pleased to publish articles in French, English and Spanish.

Further details regarding this paragraph are given in the Editorial Notes.

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# **BOOK REVIEW**



# Ethical Engagements

## A review of Shashi Motilal, Keya Maitra and Prakriti Prajapati's *The Ethics of Governance: The Moral Limits of Policy Decisions* (Springer, 2021)

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Nilanjan Bhowmick\*

Individuals face hard decisions, but not often. A government faces difficult decisions all the time. Covid-19 saw governments impose lockdowns the world over. There were debates about it. People resented their freedom of movement being curtailed. In India, lockdowns led to an appalling situation for migrant laborers.

On reflection, Covid-19 was actually a not-so-hard “decision-making” case, since the ethical dimensions of the choices were stark. Governments had to deal at one go with the welfare of an entire population. But there are situations where the choices are hard to make. And sometimes governments do end up taking decisions that are deeply flawed. The Sardar Sarovar Project is such an infamous case, where a dam was constructed on the river Narmada in India against heavy opposition from environmental activists and those who were affected. Now that the dam is operational, we know what it has submerged, and who it is has displaced, but the benefits have remained surprisingly hazy.

Governments are powerful agencies, but they do not do what is beneficial *automatically*. When a “public policy” decision has to be taken, governments tend to rely on economic aspects and forget “humane” considerations. If a slum has to be removed to build a shopping mall, out goes the slum, with even worse conditions guaranteed for the slum dwellers. If mining has to be done on land where tribals reside, the mining is done and the tribals are forgotten. These are local examples. But when we come to the big ones, like reservations in education and public offices, then the whole population is involved, and sensibilities are charged. What is the right decision to take? What is the reasonable thing to do in such situations?

A book written by Shashi Motilal, Keya Maitra and Prakriti Prajapati (MMP, hereafter) tries to engage with questions relating to public policy decision making. In their carefully constructed book *The Ethics of Governance: The Moral Limits of Policy Decisions* (2021), the authors argue for governments to consider an ethical toolbox which can prove to be effective against obviously unethical decision making.

Two important distinctions, drawn from the literature, are made at the beginning by the authors. One, applied philosophy is distinct from engaged philosophy. In applied philosophy, one looks to ground action on some ethical theory, treating the ethical theory

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as a foundation. Thus, one may treat utilitarianism as a bulwark for some government initiative. In engaged philosophy, one does not treat any particular theory as a foundation but looks to apply values in a context without treating them as being founded in some theory.

Two, the authors draw a distinction between being rational and being reasonable. Being rational often involves being subject to a theory and making decisions based on certain metrics. Being reasonable does not exclude rationality, but considers other voices on the issue under consideration and the decision is taken keeping all the stakeholders in mind. Rationality does not require consulting others. MMP make it clear that their book is a book in engaged philosophy which finds reasonableness in public policy framing and decision making to be critical, not so much rationality.

The book then lays out three cases studies, one relating to the aforementioned Sardar Sarovar Dam, another regarding animal experimentation, and the last being reservations. All three are drawn from the context of public policy framing in India.

The book then dives into the job of developing an ethical toolbox. The book discusses the major ethical theories of the West: Bentham and Mill's utilitarianism and Kant's deontological approach, apart from Rawls' difference principle and Nozick's libertarian philosophy. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach to development is also highlighted by the authors, apart from care ethics and advantages of thinking intersectionally about the people who will be affected by the policy being framed. Non western conceptions of ethics, like the beliefs of the Hindus, Buddhists, South Africans and South Americans are also brought forward, in Chapter 7.

The authors do not try to adjudicate between rival ethical theories. They don't try to suggest that they found utilitarianism to be more suitable than Kantian ethics or Nozick's ideas to be more sensible than those of Rawls'. They present all the theories, criticize each, but the main purpose of the authors is to develop an ethical toolbox which comprises of the best features of each of the theories. The idea is that these best features can then be utilized by policy makers to frame policies in an ethical manner.

The authors then apply the ethical toolbox so developed to the three case studies, nicely rounding up their earlier discussion of the same, and showing how the three case studies can be understood in the light of the toolbox.

There is much useful, patient and thorough discussion in the book. Vital distinctions, like that between equity and equality, or well being freedom and agency freedom, or rule utilitarianism and act utilitarianism are brought out with much needed clarity. The authors are commendably unhurried in their approach. Small case studies are peppered through the book to show the applications of each theory, making the book livelier and



engaging. The emphasis on care ethics, the encouragement of the south African concept of *ubuntu* (roughly, that we are all interconnected) , and seeing the good in the idea of *sumak kawsay* (roughly, collective well being), make this book a very welcome addition to engaged ethics.

Naturally, anyone who reads this book wants to know what the toolbox consists of. The toolbox, as I have already mentioned, takes the best features from all the theories discussed. Thus, Mill's principle of minimizing harm is as much part of the toolbox as Kant's doing duty for the sake of duty; the principle of equanimity is part of the toolbox and so is the principle of compassion, both taken from indian philosophy. I could go on, but one gets the picture.

In itself, this is an attractive way of approaching the ethical aspects of governance. Public policy makers will be spoiled for choice. Instead of wondering whether there is any ethical principle to guide them, they will have an embarrassment of riches on their hands. Not just advice from Kant and Mill, but Sen and Nussbaum, Rawls and Nozick, the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela's views are on offer too.

One question does arise though. Given the toolbox, on any given occasion, which principle should one pick? What if there is a conflict between the principles? What should we do then? Covid -19 is not the best example to fall back on here, for it is obvious that minimizing harm was paramount on the minds of governments. Respecting people's right to freely move around was not. And rightly so. But not all situations are so clear cut.

Principles are bound to conflict. Do we need a meta-toolbox, that will tell us what to do when principles conflict? The authors are silent on that. I do think that the authors have an implicit belief that when principles conflict then we must try to move towards looking at care ethics, or the capabilities approach, or ubuntu or some other theory. Kant and Mill alone cannot turn the tide in favor of any decision. When the authors discuss the admittedly bad case of the Sardar Sarovar Project – half a million people displaced, vast tracts of forest submerged – they clearly think that the stakeholders' views should have been taken into consideration. Had Sen and Nussbaum's notions of agency freedom and well being freedom been taken into account, the situation surrounding this entire project would have been much less painful. It would then have been a real case of sustainable development rather than the human rights and environmental disaster that it has been.

Indeed, the authors think that utilitarianism – the greatest happiness principle, so to speak - is definitely not an option unless it is very obvious that no one has an objection to it. If a minority is against a decision that favors the majority, the minority's views have to be taken into account. A case in point is the public policy framed by the CPCSEA (Committee for the Purpose of Control and Supervision for the Experimentation on Animals) in India. The animals have no voice, of course. Utilitarianism might suggest



that one can just carry out experiments on animals since these are of benefit to a large number of humans. But the Committee framed rules taking the views of many animal rights activists into account, apart from the latest scientific findings on the sentience of animals. This shows that bland utilitarianism is not to be followed all the time. We have to be reasonable and not rational. Other considerations and others' considerations need to be taken into account.

What the need for a meta-toolbox tells us that we have ethical intuitions that are awakened, given an ethically charged situation, and the presence of the toolbox. These ethical intuitions find that we need to make a choice between the various principles on offer. I do believe that the authors think that a pluralistic view has to be taken of how we choose what ethical principles will be most relevant to the public policy being framed. In a sense, since the public policy cannot be framed in a vacuum, and the views of stakeholders have to be taken into account, it follows that plural views will emerge, and respecting such plural views is a fundamental message of this book. In that sense, the meta-toolbox is implicit in the book, especially in the light of the stress on reasonableness.

The book does not discuss certain issues which one might have wanted the authors to have engaged with. To mention a few: whether progressive taxation is ideal, whether health services should be controlled by the government or the private sector, whether education should be free for children or not. These are not merely economic decisions. They involve ethical ideals and principles. Such principles have riven the world apart into separate camps not too long ago. Even the presence of a toolbox here would be a breath of fresh air. It is not that we do not have economic evidence for what we need to do in such cases – witness Thomas Piketty's (2022) compelling contribution to the case for equality. The ethical principles working behind such views need to be freshly engaged with.

In all, the authors do a commendable job in painstakingly developing a toolbox for public policy framers, giving examples of how this toolbox is of help or could have been of help in certain concrete situations. The book is a fine example of engaged philosophy, a robust contribution to ethics, and a reminder that good philosophy can leave an inimitable mark on governance.

*Nilanjan Bhowmick\**

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