

## WATER ETHICS: COMMODITY OR FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT?

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**Abstract:** *Water is the essence of life and lies at the center of a current ethical and political debate: should it be treated as a market commodity or as a fundamental right for all living beings? In recent decades, economic pressures and corporate interests have led to the commercialization of water, with private companies controlling distribution and setting prices, which can limit access for vulnerable populations. Proponents of water markets argue that market mechanisms increase efficiency and fund infrastructure development. Critics, however, contend that life should not be sold and that treating water as a commodity exacerbates inequalities.*

*Internationally, water is recognized as a fundamental human right: in 2010, the United Nations General Assembly declared that access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation is a human right. This recognition extends beyond human needs to include the protection of ecosystems and future generations. The ethical debate raises fundamental questions about equity, justice, and responsibility: is it morally acceptable to profit from a resource essential to life?*

*In conclusion, while market mechanisms may provide efficiency, the moral weight of water as a life-sustaining resource supports its recognition as a fundamental right. Universal access to clean water and the protection of ecosystems are imperatives for ethical governance and global sustainability.*

**Keywords:** *water ethics; human rights; sustainability.*

## **Introduction**

Water represents the foundation of life and of all ecosystems on Earth. Its importance goes beyond the immediate needs of human beings, being vital for the health, development, and survival of all living organisms. However, in recent decades, water has become the subject of intense debates, where two fundamental perspectives confront each other: on one hand, the idea that water can be treated as a marketable commodity, managed and distributed by private entities; on the other hand, the conception that access to water is a universal, inalienable right for all living beings. This ethical dilemma reflects the tension between economic logic and the fundamental principles of social justice and ecological sustainability.

Historically, water has traditionally been considered a common good, accessible to all members of a community. In this context, water resources were collectively managed, and communities bore the responsibility of protecting and distributing it. In the modern era, however, globalization and the expansion of corporate interests have led to the privatization of water, transforming it into a tradable good. The privatization of water resources raises multiple ethical questions: is it morally acceptable for a life-essential resource to be subject to market laws? Who has the right to decide on access to and use of water?

On the international level, the recognition of water as a fundamental right was clarified by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010, which declared access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation a human right. This recognition emphasizes the collective responsibility to protect water not only for human needs but also for ecosystems, wildlife, and future generations. Water ethics, therefore, is not limited to the human dimension but involves an extended ecological responsibility, reflecting a holistic vision of sustainability.

Current debates on water ethics also have a significant practical component. In many regions of the world, access to safe and potable water remains unequal, and resource privatization can exacerbate these disparities. Thus, the issue is no longer purely theoretical or philosophical but involves public policies, international regulations, and

governance decisions affecting millions of people. From this perspective, the analysis of water ethics becomes essential for identifying mechanisms through which societies can ensure equitable access, environmental protection, and respect for fundamental rights.

This introduction sets the stage for an in-depth examination of the dilemma between treating water as a commercial good and recognizing it as a universal right. As climate change, population growth, and economic pressures intensify, the need to find ethical and sustainable solutions becomes increasingly urgent. The following analysis will explore these dimensions, combining philosophical, legal, and ecological perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance of water in contemporary society.

## **1. Water as a commodity**

Water is an essential resource for human life, economic development, and environmental sustainability. In recent decades, as global markets and private sector involvement have expanded, water has increasingly been treated as a commodity, subject to market mechanisms, pricing, and trade. This perspective emphasizes efficiency in resource allocation, assuming that consumers respond rationally to costs, thereby reducing waste and stimulating investment in infrastructure and technology (Pearce & Turner, 1990, p. 112). Viewing water as a commodity frames it not only as a vital resource but also as an economic good with value determined by supply and demand dynamics.

Economic arguments in favor of commodifying water stress efficiency and investment. Markets are seen as mechanisms to allocate resources where they are most needed, encourage conservation, and provide incentives for private investment. For instance, private management of urban water services in France has allowed significant investments in infrastructure modernization and service expansion, reducing system losses and improving water quality (Hall & Lobina, 2005, pp. 45-48). Similarly, in Chile, privatization initiatives sought to increase efficiency, stimulate responsible consumption, and ensure that

tariffs reflect the full cost of water services (Bakker, 2010, pp. 77-80). These examples illustrate how market-based approaches can theoretically improve resource allocation and financial sustainability.

However, commodifying water raises serious social and ethical concerns. Access to water is not evenly distributed; low-income and marginalized communities may be excluded or burdened with disproportionate costs. Transforming water into a commodity risks turning a fundamental human need into a privilege accessible only to those who can afford it (Budds, & McGranahan, 2003, pp. 87-89). The 2000 Cochabamba Water War in Bolivia provides a dramatic example: when tariffs rose after privatization, widespread protests erupted as local populations faced restricted access to a basic necessity (McDonald, 2002, pp. 23-27). This case demonstrates that without regulatory safeguards, treating water as a commodity can exacerbate social inequality and threaten human rights.

Ethically, the commodification of water challenges the notion that it is a basic human right. Critics argue that market forces alone cannot guarantee equitable access, particularly in regions affected by poverty, marginalization, or environmental scarcity (Gleick, 1998, pp. 487-488). Water, as a life-sustaining resource, should not be subjected solely to economic valuation. Ensuring accessibility requires state regulation, social protection measures, and public accountability to prevent the exclusion of vulnerable populations.

Hybrid models have emerged as potential solutions, combining market mechanisms with regulatory oversight and social safeguards. Progressive pricing schemes, subsidies for low-income households, and legal frameworks that guarantee minimum access levels can reconcile economic efficiency with social equity (World Bank, 2010, pp. 33-36). Such models recognize water's economic value while preserving its essential role in sustaining human life and protecting social welfare.

In conclusion, treating water as a commodity offers economic advantages, such as increased efficiency and investment incentives. Yet it carries significant ethical and social risks, particularly for marginalized communities. Effective water governance requires balancing economic and social considerations: leveraging market mechanisms to ensure

efficient use while implementing policies that guarantee equitable access and protect the fundamental rights of all citizens. In an era of growing water scarcity and increasing demand, this balanced approach is crucial to ensure both sustainability and social justice.

## **2. Water as a Fundamental Human Right**

Water is one of the most essential resources for human survival, health, and societal development. Its fundamental role in sustaining life has led the international community to recognize access to safe and sufficient water as a basic human right. Unlike approaches that commodify water, treating it as a marketable resource, the rights-based perspective emphasizes equity, social justice, and state responsibility. Recognizing water as a human right underscores the ethical, legal, and social imperatives for ensuring that all individuals, regardless of socio-economic status, have reliable access to this vital resource (Gleick, 1998, p. 488).

The legal foundation for the human right to water is rooted in international law and human rights frameworks. The 2010 United Nations General Assembly resolution explicitly acknowledged the human right to water and sanitation, affirming that access to clean water and adequate sanitation is essential for the realization of all human rights (United Nations General Assembly, 2010, para. 1, p. 2). This resolution builds on instruments such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), which obliges states to ensure access to sufficient, safe, and affordable water for personal and domestic use (United Nations, 1966, Art. 11, p. 24). By framing water as a human right, these instruments place the responsibility on governments and public institutions to guarantee access, rather than leaving provision solely to market mechanisms.

Ethically, water as a fundamental right underscores equity and social justice. Marginalized communities, including those living in poverty, indigenous groups, and residents of informal settlements, often face severe water scarcity. A rights-based approach requires that states

adopt policies prioritizing vulnerable groups and preventing discrimination in access (Amnesty International, 2013, pp. 14-16). Moreover, framing water as a right emphasizes that it is not merely a commodity to be purchased, but a prerequisite for health, dignity, and meaningful participation in society.

The implications for governance and policy are substantial. States are expected to implement legal frameworks, regulatory mechanisms, and participatory strategies that ensure universal access. South Africa, for example, enshrines the right to sufficient water in its constitution, obliging municipalities to provide at least basic quantities to all residents, irrespective of their ability to pay (South African Constitution, 1996, p. 28). This example demonstrates how legal recognition of water as a human right can translate into concrete protections and equitable distribution while supporting sustainable management.

Scientific research reinforces the necessity of water as a human right. Access to safe water is directly linked to public health outcomes, economic productivity, and social stability. Inadequate water and sanitation lead to waterborne diseases, reduced educational opportunities, and increased poverty (WHO/UNICEF, 2022, pp. 9-12). Recognizing water as a fundamental right provides a framework for interventions, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms, ensuring that human health, development, and environmental sustainability are mutually reinforced.

International experiences illustrate the transformative potential of rights-based water policies. For instance, Brazil's constitutional recognition of water as a social good has led to programs focused on expanding access to rural and urban populations, integrating sustainability objectives and community participation (de Albuquerque, 2014, pp. 55-59). Similarly, in Kerala, India, state-led initiatives have combined legal mandates with participatory water governance to improve equitable access, highlighting how rights-based approaches can guide practical implementation while addressing social and environmental challenges (Sivaramakrishnan, 2009, pp. 321-324).

In conclusion, framing water as a fundamental human right represents a shift from market-centered approaches toward equity, justice, and state accountability. It obliges governments to prioritize

universal access, especially for marginalized communities, while establishing legal and institutional frameworks for sustainable, participatory water management. In a world facing growing water scarcity, climate change, and social inequality, recognizing water as a human right is both an ethical imperative and a practical necessity for ensuring human well-being and societal resilience.

### **3. Ethics and Sustainability of Water Resources**

Water is not only essential for human survival but also a cornerstone for sustainable development, ecological balance, and social well-being. The ethical management of water resources demands that access and usage are governed by principles of justice, equity, and responsibility toward both current and future generations. As global water demand rises due to population growth, urbanization, and climate change, the sustainability of water resources becomes an urgent concern, intertwining scientific, social, and ethical dimensions (Pahl-Wostl, 2007, pp. 49-52).

From an ethical perspective, water management must address inequalities in access and usage. Marginalized communities, indigenous populations, and low-income households often face limited access to clean water, resulting in disproportionate health and social burdens. Ethical frameworks argue that water, as a life-sustaining resource, should not be allocated solely by market mechanisms or economic capacity, but guided by principles of equity and human rights (Bakker, 2010, pp. 101-104). The recognition of water as a fundamental human right by the United Nations in 2010 underscores this ethical imperative (United Nations General Assembly, 2010, p. 2).

Sustainability in water management involves balancing human consumption, economic activities, and environmental preservation. Overexploitation of rivers, aquifers, and lakes has led to ecosystem degradation, loss of biodiversity, and diminished resilience of water systems (Gleick, 1998, pp. 488-490). Ethical water governance requires that water use is efficient, equitable, and ecologically responsible.

Policies promoting conservation, pollution control, and adaptive management are crucial for sustaining water resources for future generations (World Bank, 2010, pp. 37-41).

Participatory approaches and integrated water resource management (IWRM) models have been proposed as effective strategies for aligning ethics with sustainability. By engaging communities, stakeholders, and policymakers in decision-making, these models foster transparency, accountability, and shared responsibility (Global Water Partnership, 2000, pp. 10-12). Case studies from the Netherlands and South Africa demonstrate that inclusive water governance not only enhances efficiency but also strengthens social equity and environmental protection (van der Zaag, & Gupta, 2008, pp. 450-452).

Scientific research also supports the ethical imperative for sustainable water management. Studies show that sustainable practices-such as water recycling, rainwater harvesting, and efficient irrigation techniques-reduce ecological impact while improving access for vulnerable populations (Trawick, 2001, pp. 344-346). Moreover, ethical and sustainable water policies contribute to public health, economic stability, and resilience against climate-related water crises, highlighting the interconnectedness of human, social, and environmental well-being.

In conclusion, the ethics and sustainability of water resources are inseparable dimensions of responsible governance. Ethical principles guide equitable access and usage, while sustainability ensures the protection of ecosystems and long-term availability. Integrating participatory governance, scientific innovation, and legal frameworks is essential for managing water resources in a manner that respects human rights, promotes social justice, and preserves environmental integrity. In the face of global water challenges, ethical and sustainable management of water resources is not only a moral obligation but a practical necessity.

## **Conclusions**

The ethical analysis of water highlights the profound complexity of an issue that lies at the intersection of human rights, ecological responsibility, and economic principles. Water is not merely a natural



resource; it is essential for life, health, social development, and the maintenance of ecological balance. In today's world, facing climate change, population growth, and corporate pressures, the discussion on how water should be managed has become increasingly urgent. Treating water as a marketable commodity may provide short-term economic solutions, such as improved efficiency and investments in infrastructure, yet it raises fundamental ethical questions concerning equity, justice, and morality. Commercializing water can exacerbate social inequalities, limit access for vulnerable populations, and contravene the principle that life itself should not be subjected to market forces.

International recognition of water as a fundamental human right, as declared by the United Nations in 2010, underscores the collective responsibility to ensure universal access to safe drinking water and adequate sanitation. This perspective transcends immediate economic interests, highlighting the moral and ecological dimensions of water management. Access to water is not merely a human concern; ecosystems, wildlife, and future generations depend on responsible usage of this vital resource. Ethical approaches to water must, therefore, integrate social, legal, and ecological considerations, promoting equity, sustainability, and intergenerational justice.

From a practical standpoint, implementing equitable governance requires policies that guarantee universal access, environmental protection, and corporate accountability. Effective water governance must encompass regulatory frameworks for privatization, investments in public infrastructure, and educational programs that raise awareness about the ethical and ecological importance of water. Ethical responsibility in water management is not theoretical-it must translate into tangible actions that prevent abuse, conserve resources, and secure the fundamental rights of all living beings.

Moreover, the ethical imperative extends to global cooperation. Water scarcity and mismanagement are transnational issues, affecting countries and communities beyond national borders. International collaboration, agreements on water sharing, and joint stewardship initiatives are crucial for addressing the unequal distribution of water and

the pressures imposed by global economic systems. Water ethics thus requires a global perspective, combining local accountability with international responsibility, ensuring that every community has access to life-sustaining resources.

Philosophically, recognizing water as a universal right challenges the commodification model inherent in market economies. It questions the moral legitimacy of profiting from a resource that is indispensable to survival. Ethical frameworks grounded in justice, equity, and ecological stewardship assert that access to water must be decoupled from purchasing power. Furthermore, sustainable water management is inseparable from broader environmental ethics. Protecting water sources, maintaining biodiversity, and preserving ecosystem integrity are inseparable from the ethical responsibility to safeguard water as a shared heritage.

In conclusion, the dilemma between treating water as a commercial commodity and recognizing it as a fundamental right is not merely an economic issue; it has profound moral, social, and ecological implications. Responsible water management requires balancing economic efficiency with respect for human rights, environmental sustainability, and intergenerational equity. Water must be viewed not as a product to be traded, but as a shared inheritance essential for life, dignity, and ecological balance. As global resources become increasingly limited, recognizing water as a universal right is vital for establishing an equitable and sustainable society. Ethical, legal, and policy frameworks must guide global water governance, promoting cooperation, accountability, and protection of resources for the future. Defending and responsibly managing this fundamental resource is a moral, social, and ecological obligation, central to building a world where every living being has access to life, health, and dignity.

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