

PART ONE

ETHICS AND VALUES

A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

An Associated Event
of the Fifth Annual World Bank Conference
on Environmentally and Socially
Sustainable Development

Inaugural Session

Welcoming Address

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It is not new for the World Bank Group to address the issues of ethics. Two years ago we held the first Associated Events of the Annual World Bank Conference on Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development (ESSD) to address the issues of ethics in relation to sustainable development. World Bank Group President James D. Wolfensohn addressed the opening session. This year when we turn to issues of the global environment; the haves and the have-nots; the rich and the poor; consumption patterns and hunger; the short term and the long term; the rights of future generations; and our responsibility toward other species and all forms of life, we must again review the issues of ethics.

In essence, the questions before us are not new. They have been grist for the mill of philosophers over the millennia, whenever organized societies have existed. Six questions have tended to loom large. They were summarized by Mortimer Adler (1981) as three ideas we judge by and three ideas we act on. These are truth, goodness, and beauty for judgment; and liberty, equality, and justice to act on. Action is our primary concern here, so we must look to the questions of liberty, equality, and justice.

On Liberty

Is there liberty when we have people who are denied the most basic of basic needs: food? It is inconceivable that there should be some 800 million persons going hungry in a world that can

provide for that most basic of all human needs. In the last century some people looked at the condition of slavery and said that it was monstrous and unconscionable—that it must be abolished. They were known as the abolitionists. They did not argue from economic self-interest, but from moral outrage. Today the condition of hunger in a world of plenty is equally monstrous and unconscionable and must be abolished. We must become the “new abolitionists.” We must, with the same zeal and moral outrage, attack the complacency that would turn a blind eye to this silent holocaust, which claims some 40,000 lives every day.

But what about the many more who have escaped the trap of misery and live in better conditions today than their parents did? Do they not have the right to enjoy the liberty that their societies are creating for them as individuals? Liberty is not license. The old adage to legislators, “Go forth and fashion those wise constraints that make people free,” is most appropriate. For the runaway consumerism, the insatiable desire for more, and the greed that seems to hold the human race in thrall are likely to destroy the ecosystems on which we all depend. But can it be checked? Can we summon the better angels of our nature to master the demons of our civilization? And if the great philosophers of the Western tradition put limits on the liberty of the individual so that the freedom of others should not be infringed, what would they say about human liberty as it affects other species?

The human race has, of course, domesticated animals and plants and used them for its own benefit since the dawn of time. But is there something different—a special urgency—at this time? I submit that there is, and it is related to a relatively new phenomenon. This is the first time that the activity of a species—us humans—could truly destroy the ecosystems on which we and other species depend for our continued existence. Short of that extreme scenario we are also aware that we are, by our actions, irreversibly destroying biodiversity. The new moral dilemma is that we are the first species to be able to do so, and to be conscious of it. This has happened on our watch, this generation's. Thus there is no ducking the issue. We must consider human activity in terms of what it could mean for other species, for we are truly in a position to deny them the very right to exist.

On Equality

Is there any equality in a world where inequities are increasing between societies and within societies? The top 20 percent of the world population consumes 83 percent of world income, while the remaining 80 percent live on 17 percent, and the bottom 20 percent on 1.4 percent. These gaps have been growing. A generation ago, that top 20 percent was 30 times as rich as the bottom 20 percent. Today it is 60 times as rich.

We must address the monstrous inequities between the industrial countries and the poor, developing parts of the world, in lifestyles, consumption patterns, and the amount of the world's resources—including environmental services—they lay claim to. But within each of those worlds there are also rich and poor, haves and have-nots. Gaps exist, too, between the urban and rural worlds. And within the rural world itself there are the haves and the have-nots, the landed and the landless. And across all these domains the big questions of gender equity remain. We must revisit the sensitive issues of the status of women and young girls, who are particularly discriminated against in many societies of the developing world.

In these discussions let me state unambiguously where I stand: I do not accept the arguments of moral relativism to justify discrim-

ination against women based on respect for cultural diversity. There is a core of universal values that cannot be denied, even if we accept wide variations in other domains and forms of expression. Let us recognize that the claims of cultural specificity that would deprive women of their basic human rights, or mutilate girls in the name of convention, should not be given sanction, especially by those who, like me, are proud of their Muslim and Arab identity and do not want to see the essence of that tradition debased by such claims. Let us recognize that no society has progressed without making a major effort to empower its women, through education and an end to discrimination.

On Justice

We must ask: What sort of just world order would mete out such a poor prospect to so many? Surely the poor and the marginalized need our attention and support. Surely the status of women in so many societies cannot be ignored in some sort of cultural relativism devoid of ethical content. Discrimination based on race, gender, religion, or some other reason must be fought in today's world, when the assertion of identity is sometimes seen as a justification for prejudice against the "other." Only when we "fill the world with justice" will "the heavens rejoice and the earth be glad" (Psalm 96).

For many, myself included, the issue is not so much a matter of legal systems or judicial rulings. It is much more a matter of simple fairness. "Justice as fairness" has been discussed by the great philosopher John Rawls and by such distinguished neo-Rawlsians as Amartya Sen, but the concept is not easily defined in a way that can be acted on. Amartya Sen (1997) showed in a brilliant series of lectures at the World Bank that the issue of a theory of justice is very much at the heart of the concerns of economic development. He also appropriately showed just how complex the issues become when we know more and more about them.

Now, I am not unaware that the problems we are discussing lack for easy solutions, beyond the obvious rejection of extreme injustices that are easily recognized by one and all. But the problems of fairness are in fact more complex

and have been troubling philosophers for centuries. A beautiful story will sum up that dilemma. It comes from my friend, Amartya Sen, one of the greatest thinkers in the world today. Professor Sen suggests that we come upon three children, and between them they have but one flute. The children ask us to arbitrate who should get the flute.

Child A says, "I have no toys at all, and these other two children, B and C, have enormous amounts of toys, and surely I should be entitled to have the flute." The facts are correct, and not contested by children B and C. If that is all of the information we have, we would probably say yes, Child A should get the flute.

But let us hold off. Instant replay: roll back to the same three children with the flute. Child B says, "In fact, I am the only one who has any musical talent. I can play the flute; these other two children cannot. I have to express myself as a musician. They enjoy listening to me. Both of them only blow on it as a whistle. They have no capacity to use it whatsoever. I should really get the flute." The other two do not deny the facts, and it seems like a persuasive argument. We would say, Child B should get the flute.

Now replay it for the third time. We come back to the three children. Child C says to us, "Look, I am the one who made the flute, and it is mine, why should somebody take it from me after I have made it?" Again, the argument is very compelling, and it is not disputed by the others. And again, if that is the only information we have, we would say that Child C should get the flute.

Now what we have here are three perceptions of the issue of fairness that touch upon principles that we technically refer to as equity, utility, and entitlement, within certain capability domains. But whatever the case, whether or not we can come up with a definitive answer is not as important as recognizing that we must engage these problems, that we cannot turn our backs on them.

New Developmental Challenges

It is clear that the problems of development that we are addressing must be approached with a moral compass that will help us maintain the

sense of purpose and moral outrage necessary to tackle the enormous inequities that lie at the nexus of the issues that this conference seeks to address: environmental protection in the interest of future generations, current patterns of production and consumption, and related questions of food security, poverty, and empowerment.

In the matter of the global environment these intertwined issues will emerge with particular force. The use of the scarce planetary resources represented in the various forms of environmental services cannot be monopolized by the few, much less destroyed by anyone. But allocating just how much adjustment each should make depends on the time horizon chosen to assess the problem. Historically, the rich have contributed by far the greatest amount of greenhouse gases and continue to do so. But if we look at the present, the fastest growth in emissions is in the developing countries, which are projected to overtake the industrial countries of the North. If we look at the efficiency of energy use in U.S. dollars' worth of gross national product produced per ton of carbon emitted in 1991, the United States was about three times as efficient as India. But if we look at emissions per capita, the United States emitted 24 times as much as India.¹ And who is to say that an Indian citizen is entitled to use any less of the planet's environmental services than an American citizen?

Beyond these issues of consumption and entitlement—which have been with us for some time—two additional twists complicate the picture today: the need to address the responsibilities of humans toward other species is one; and the other, the issue of new technologies, specifically *biotechnology*, raises not just the specter of a complicated calculus of risks and opportunities but also profound questions about our tinkering with life itself. Do we have the right to create totally new life forms by inserting the genes of an animal into a plant, for example? How does this differ from modifying existing life forms through variants of selective breeding, which we have been doing for so many millennia? Can a life form be patented?

I will be chairing a panel later today that will address the complex ethical issues raised by

biotechnology and patenting, so I will not expand too much on it now.

Between Urban and Rural

Is there something to be said at this point about the lost virtue of bygone eras, of simpler lifestyles now overcome by consumerism and the short-term approach? I do not myself adhere to the viewpoint that romanticizes the noble savage or that seeks a Rousseauesque attachment to nature. The balance between people and ecosystems has in such circumstances been rigidly enforced by an unforgiving nature. Yet we must wonder about the loss of direct interaction with nature that the industrial revolution brought about, and the total rupture that the postindustrial world economy has wrought. Urbanization may always accompany, and be the instrument of, modernization but it also changes profoundly our appreciation of the life cycles of the natural world.

The values of the rural world seem anchored in the rhythm of the seasons, interaction with nature, and the nurturing of plants and livestock. They differ from the values of traders and craftsmen in cities, whose lifestyle is divorced from the discipline and the liberation that came with an interaction with nature. Nature's regimen has been replaced by the rhythm of organized urban social order with all its specificities and pressures.

But it is not just proximity to nature that counts. Indeed, farmers are different from the predatory hunters, who were close to nature in another way. Farmers work with nature and nurture other species. We are all dependent on their success, for no society with today's numbers could exist without farming. Looking back, we recognize that the original agrarian society made possible not only survival, but also the emergence of civilization as we know it, with all the values of altruism, the possibility of seeing beyond the ties of kinship, the opportunity to contemplate and to learn. Truly, we are all the guests of the green plants and those who tend them.

Yet these same farmers sometimes live in remarkably oppressive societies, where their individuality may be undervalued, or even stifled completely, by the hand of convention. We all have an individualistic drive and a need to

express ourselves, and too frequently we can do that only in the cities, the crucibles of change and modernization. The cities are also repositories of profound values, buried under consumerism and the emptiness of a self-centered life.

Even if we held rural values to be perfect, which we do not, we would still have to ask: are they the relics of a rapidly vanishing and unprotected past, carrying within them the seeds of their own destruction, since the current aspirations of the rural poor are increasingly defined by the ethos of the city? I am not speaking of the well-known images of a rural world under assault by the forces of Westernization and modernity: the breakdown of extended families, the threatened loss of the cultures of indigenous people—all of which are real enough. Rather, I would ask: do the current aspirations of the rural poor to have a decent life, with a reasonable equity to that of their urban counterparts in terms of education, health, nutrition, and disposable income, pose particular challenges for them, their rural way of life, and the values that undergird it?

These are the questions we must face if we are to fashion a global environmental consciousness that can inform our behavior—a sensibility anchored in our vision of a better future rather than a yearning for a vanished past.

Inventing the Future

These and many other questions will be addressed today by a distinguished series of speakers who will, I am sure, disagree on some issues even as they elucidate others. These questions, however, deserve our conscious engagement and must be addressed. I hope that you will see this meeting as an occasion where we can deliberate and learn from each other, where we can identify the areas where we must act, and where we can build a consensus on the core set of values that should guide our actions.

In the final analysis we are here this week to reassess important issues arising from our behavior as human societies and their relationship to the ecosystems on which we all depend. If we fail to reach a consensus and modify our behavior—from consumerism in the North to high fertility in the South, from "short-termism" in

decisionmaking to the lack of a holistic perspective in integrating full costs and real prices into our evaluations—if we fail to make these changes, then our own future and that of our children and grandchildren will be bleak indeed. We will be doomed to a future of misery and wretchedness, if our civilization survives at all. Our civilization will have been shown to be shallow and meaningless, and in Shakespeare's words it will have resulted in nothingness and emptiness:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out,
 brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the
 stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
 Signifying nothing.

(*Macbeth* V, v, 19–28)

But that barren vision need not be our future. Our behavior toward each other, toward the Earth, and toward the myriad other species with which we share the world's bounty is not fore-

ordained—in these matters we are indeed the masters of our fate.

Let us draw strength from our shared solidarity, and let us candidly confront our shortcomings. Let us decide what we must do if we are to be truly guided by the concepts of liberty, equality, and justice. Let us dedicate ourselves to this ethical path, however arduous. Let us commit ourselves to what needs to be done to turn such ideas into reality. In this endeavor we should be encouraged by the words of Margaret Mead, "Never underestimate the capacity of a few dedicated citizens with vision to change the world. After all, throughout history, nobody else ever has."

Note

1. See World Bank (1995), 51, table 6.2.

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