

Textbook Analysis  
Ethical Oil, by Ezra Levant

For this task, I was assigned the book *Ethical Oil: The Case for Canada's Oil Sands*, by Ezra Levant. This is actually a book I have seen on the shelves of bookstores in the past and have pondered reading before, but never got around to it until now, so I was actually somewhat intrigued when it arrived in my mailbox as required reading for this course.

I would like to begin my analysis by admitting my biases right off the bat. As someone who moved his life and career from Vancouver Island, British Columbia to Lethbridge, Alberta because of the salary differences between the two provinces, I am under no illusions about where my income is coming from. I also happen to own shares in the Canadian Oil Sands as part of my RRSP investment portfolio, so the success of the oil sands directly benefits me financially in at least two ways. I own a Nissan Frontier pickup truck, not a Toyota Prius, as well as a motorcycle and I enjoy road trips in both vehicles as well as vacations taken via air travel and ferry. For these reasons, I do not consider myself as someone who is opposed to the Oil Sands or to the Oil Industry in general.

On the other hand, being born and raised on Vancouver Island and then educated at UBC and BCIT in Vancouver, I have been raised to have a bit more respect for the environment and the need to preserve it as a part of doing business than what I believe to be the attitude of some of my friends in this province. That is not to say I think B.C.'s mining, forestry, or fisheries industries have always been outstanding examples of environmental stewardship, it just simply means that I think there is a lot of room for improvement in environmental practises in various resource-related industries, the Oil Sands being one of them. I have also heard and or seen mixed reviews of this book from

friends or acquaintances, most of whom have pretty strong opinions about the Oil Sands and whose opinions I tend to take with a grain of salt. I have also read some of Ezra Levant's editorial work in the Calgary Sun which caused me to read the book in a tone I might not have had I never heard of him before.

None of the above information is really very important, but I would feel it difficult for me to critique this book in good conscience without having given a quick declaration of where I sit on these issues. I could go on for longer on these, but that would be getting quite far off topic.

What struck me about this book was that the intent was supposedly to make a case for Canada's Oil Sands and this would lead me to think that it would be written in a way that was geared at changing the minds of opponents of the Oil Sands or even fence-sitters. Instead, the author chose to speak very condescendingly about oil sands opponents and even resorted to name calling in many parts of the book, which would in itself turn off any person with views that may be contrary to his. The author either really missed the mark when writing the book, or instead he wrote a book designed to sell a lot of copies to people who wanted to justify their support of the Oil Sands. The positive of this is that it is a great example of self-serving bias, but the absolute contempt the author shows for differing opinions makes it hard to take seriously.

Having said that, Levant does make some very insightful and relevant points about the oil sands and how ethical they are compared to oil producers in other parts of the world. I have even used some of his points since reading the book in conversations with people about the oil industry. He points out a lot of the good things that western companies bring to the table when operating in the Middle East, South America, Africa,

and Asia. He also calls out a lot of organization for their hypocrisy with respect to their opposition of the oil sands and their support of other companies.

I'm not sure that Levant really did a convincing job of presenting the Oil Sands as ethical as much as he demonstrated that they are less unethical than other sources. He used a lot of human rights infractions and examples of conflict of interest and the like to show that other oil industries operate with little regard for ethics. For the Canadian Oil Sands, he more or less just boils it down to a moral equilibrium argument and shows that because they do some good things, that we should not consider them unethical. If we wanted to use the same manner of argument, we could say that the oil companies from the Middle East have a different fundamental moral unit and therefore their actions that we find appalling should not be considered unethical.

While I had my own biases as declared above, which made me like some of Levant's arguments and then take others with a grain of salt, I do think that this book was well written and quite readable. It was also an interesting point of view. It did not seem to me as very relevant to the field of public health, although some health topics, such as hunger and drinking water, were mentioned in some parts of the book. It seemed as though it may have been more relevant to someone in politics or someone looking at investing in the energy sector. I do not think that this would be a good book for a government to base its foreign policy on, but it definitely brings some valid points to light and is very well referenced and could be a start in some preliminary reading. This book would also be of interest to someone who is curious about the other side of the arguments about the Oil Sands. Even if a person does not like Levant's style or agree with his point

of view, I do think that the information in this book does compel a person to look at the anti-oil sands arguments a little more critically and with a more balanced perspective.

As far as the relevance to this course, I actually do think that it demonstrates many of the principles we have covered from the *Ethics Unwrapped* materials and *Cowboy Values*, and is even demonstrative of some of the *Sinclair/Kohlberg Paradigm*. While none of these are directly referenced in the text, one could easily find examples of all of these in every chapter. In fact, had I not gone through all of our course materials before having read this book, I would probably have read it less critically and I may have had a much different opinion of it. However, Levant never really goes into any specific ethical principles, a student reading this book is rather identifying examples of ethical principles from his arguments.

My overall opinion of this book is that, although I really wanted to like it, I could not get over Levant's use of name calling and condescension and could not really take him or his arguments very seriously. This book does have some great examples of things we have learned over this course, but I also think that many out-of-province students might have reservations about taking a course in Alberta with a text that is called *Ethical Oil*. Even having said that, I am glad I read this book, as it did have some insights and points of view that were actually a refreshing balance to the constant irrational demonization of the oil sands I see all over the media and on many friends' social media.