

*Ethical Oil*

Before I studied Levant's very enlightening book *Ethical Oil* (2010) I must admit that I was quite ignorant on the subject of oil namely the political and economic ramifications that have consumed the leaders and economists, etc. throughout our oil-possessed world. Basically, all I knew about oil was that my vehicle needs it to move, greenhouse gases are formed from its combustion, and that some people are getting ridiculously rich from its profits. Reading *Ethical Oil* has shown me that such a highly valued commodity such as "black gold" can magnify greed to such a level that I often wonder if we are the most intelligent species on Earth. As Kohlberg and associated research show (Sinclair Ph.D., 2009), humans are capable of moral reasoning at higher cognitive levels, which directly influence our moral behaviour but the benefits of such intellectual power can quickly become mired and distorted by placing arbitrary values on vital items such as oil; instead of basing our actions on universal principles of truth and justice when reasoning at the higher post-conventional stages 5/6 of moral reasoning we can see how oil can influence behaviour through the amplification of our basest vices involving greed and the pursuit of total power when we reason at the lowest pre-conventional stages 1/2 of moral reasoning. The purpose of this paper is to examine how *Ethical Oil* can be a valuable resource to a health officer's leadership role, and in what ways the book can and can provide valuable insight into making critical choices when faced with ethical dilemmas.

The message of *Ethical Oil* is quite clear: those who support Canada's oil sands are supporting environmentally and ethically responsible practices, and sending the message to the world's despotic and corrupt oil producers that their unethical and environmentally irresponsible practices cannot be tolerated; these countries violate basic freedoms and harm the overall quality of life for their inhabitants. Levant cites many examples of such human rights abusing oil-producing countries such as Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Sudan, Russia, Iran, etc. I get the impression that you can write several books on the vast array and number of crimes against humanity and the environment that are practiced by these countries that include anything from suppressing freedom of speech and censorship to wrongful imprisonment and genocide. In comparison, Canada is portrayed as the most angelic oil producer by far by exhibiting the highest ethical and environmental standards as shown by the high quality of life surrounding the oil sands projects, and the constant improvements in making the oil sands environmentally friendlier. Throughout the book Levant poses and attempts to answer the question in several instances: if Canada is the poster-boy of oil production then why are we constantly facing attacks from various NGOs like Greenpeace who should be celebrating our efforts? It is because misled ethical behavior can lead to self-serving and unrealistic expectations by groups selling idealism;

likewise, health inspectors must use caution and balance the enforcement of regulatory ideals and functional reality.

I first encountered this concept when I was training to become a public health officer at Concordia University College of Alberta. My class attended a lecture by a health officer who had several years of field experience; he was explaining to the class about the challenges of getting compliance among various operators. The lecturer stressed to be wary of letting us be bullied into accepting minimal compliance with a difficult operator while requiring a higher level of compliance from an operator who has much higher standards – the same principle applies to understanding why Canada’s oil sands operation is being attacked whereas more unethical oil regimes are largely left alone. It is easier to exert more power over individuals and corporations who are willing to co-operate and do the right thing. Levant gives many examples explaining how despotic and corrupt governments in countries like Venezuela and China conceal their unethical practices with widespread censorship whereas Canada is almost transparent to a fault. It appears that the more information Canada discloses regarding its oil sands operation, the more we are criticized and criminalized. At the end of the day, ethical and environmental lobbyist groups are just creating headlines and selling idealism by picking on Canada because extracting the truth about an oil operation in a country such as Iran or Libya would be much more difficult. Similarly, to be a fair and just health officer I have to be wary of being too demanding of more compliant operators who are being effective at greatly reducing risk to the public just because it is easier to do so; in fact, I should be more critical and demanding of more noncompliant operators even though getting them on board “the health train” can be much more difficult.

Levant presents a very compelling argument that, in order to be fair and just, when judging the actions of an entity (i.e. person, corporation or government) we can do so by basing its actions on a universally accepted moral code, and not simply on the availability and/or absolute value of data, or on the entity’s willingness to co-operate with auditing agencies. I realize that some of the information in *Ethical Oil* is less than one-hundred percent accurate such as when I checked to see whether Mark Twain had said, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its boots” (Levant, 2010, p. 174); according to Schmidt (1997, as accessed from [www.twainquotes.com/Lies.html](http://www.twainquotes.com/Lies.html) on August 13, 2011) it was a 19<sup>th</sup> Century English fundamentalist Baptist preacher named Charles Haddon Spurgeon who attributed it to an old proverb in a sermon on Sunday April 1, 1855. The point is that as a society we tend to believe the first information we receive and make judgments based on single data points such as the “x” amount of greenhouse gases that an oil operation produces. Instead of fact checking and

conducting additional research we are quick to point fingers, which often lead to inaccurate, biased and sometimes completely wrong judgments. Levant stresses these points from the beginning, whereby he toys with us and - by advancing all of the criticisms leveled at the oil sands by activists - paints a very incriminating picture of Canada's oil sands by mentioning the cluster of very rare bile duct cancers near Fort McMurray, the "deformed" fish with two jaws, and mass death of birds landing on the tailings ponds then he uses reliable sources of information to educate the reader on the truth that the oil sands are not nearly as unethical or environmentally contaminating as we thought. It is a very effective technique to illustrate how the media can skew the facts and manipulate individuals.

This brings me to the important question: can this book provide helpful insight into assisting the reader in making better moral choices? I believe that it can. We are tempted to judge something based on absolute terms; for example, Canada's oil sands belches out so much GHGs per year, destroys "x" number of trees, and kills "x" number of animals so therefore the oil sands is bad. Well, no it is not because we are not making the right comparisons. Admittedly, oil is a required commodity to continue enjoying our current way of life, which is proven by the high value (and profits) we place on it. Furthermore, every oil operation is negatively affecting the Earth and its inhabitants to some degree, so we have to ask ourselves, "what is the appropriate amount and type of damage we can morally allow to occur and what standard are we going to compare against?" Levant attempts to answer this question by stating that we should be judging each operation against highly valued and universal principles of human rights, justice, freedom and environmental stewardship. I agree with Levant. We should judge the value our actions not absolutely such as either right or wrong, but relatively such as what is more right. After all, is it okay that we incriminate the oil operation because "x" number of birds die in a tailings pond, but we easily forgive a wind energy corporation when birds die as a result of its efforts? The same principle should be applied to health inspection duties in the way that individual infractions should not be judged absolutely, but judged relatively to the overall performance/state of the facility. To do so otherwise, would be morally irresponsible.

Therefore, how can we, as a society, help ensure that future generations will reduce the moral injustices that we currently see polluting our physical and political worlds? I believe the solution must start to take shape in the home and school environments where our future leaders are developing crucial social skills, including the basics of moral reasoning, which is especially important for positive change as explained by Buskey and Pitts (2009). They discuss the importance of training children to refrain from the "fight or flight" response when faced with ethical conflicts, and to develop better strategies at effectively

resolving such dilemmas – in short, kids must learn to become proactive moral stewards and servant leaders. Gill (2003, as mentioned in Sherblom 2007) mentions that the school climate must be conducive for children (and adults for that matter) to have a sense of purpose, and to believe that their actions are crucial in the shaping of our society. Sherblom (2007) article further discusses the importance of recognizing that the school climate holds a rich interconnectedness, and therefore is an environment that must develop and promote open and clear communication. Strong family-school collaboration means that our children's roots are being constantly nourished and tended to during all hours of the day. This also allows for the early recognition of potential problems to be "weeded out" before they can cause serious damage.

Levant presents a very convincing case for supporting Canada's oil sands not because it makes Canada a lot of money, but because we have a moral obligation to do so. I honestly cannot say that I think he "wastes the reader's time" or presents poor material (except that maybe he presents a bit too much technical data) as I was quite engaged throughout the book's entirety. I realize that some of his information may be subject to scrutiny, but one only has to watch/read the news to understand that other major oil drilling countries, such as Iran, Nigeria, Venezuela, etc. are not ethically and environmentally responsible as Canada. Sure, we could improve upon our practices as well, but it is very frustrating to know that we are being criticized by countless groups, many of which are questionably ethical at best such as the infamous Greenpeace who has evolved into a self deluded lobbyist group who is more intent on selling idealism and earning profits to run its bureaucracy than to tackle the much more extremely unethical and environmental criminals of the world. *Ethical Oil* provides an excellent example of the importance of adhering to a high ethical standard even in the wake of vigorous and unfounded criticism, and that like oil production, conducting one's duties as a health inspector is sustained through the consistent and honourable practice of exercising good ethics.

### References

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