Articulations of Ethics: Energy Worlds and Moral Selves

Regimes

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Corporate capitalism today is marked by a striking concern with ethics. Business performance is commonly evaluated in relation to fair trade standards, corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices, and environmental sustainability frameworks. This performance is often rendered public through an audit culture of accreditation and certification, brandishing and promoting companies' ethical behaviour (Dolan 2010; Jaffe and Howard 2010; Muehlebach 2012). While the language of ethics has been strongly adopted by corporate actors, it has also long provided a cornerstone for disapproval, with critics pointing to corporate shortcomings if not outright failings, be it corporate greed, human rights violations, or detrimental environmental practices (Kirsch 2014; Sawyer 2004). Ethics has thus become a battleground where corporations and critics uphold the kind of flourishing that they believe should be brought into being.

Described by some as 'ethical capitalism' (Barry 2004), this ethicalisation of corporate capitalism does not necessarily imply that companies and their critics are now embracing deeper, more profound moral imperatives than they did in the past. Instead, it is a moment in capitalist practice where ethics are actively and concertedly demonstrated, with some practices being categorised and made visible as ethical, while others are not (Strathern 1996). In a 'risk society' where risks are perceived as not only natural and inevitable but also as

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anthropogenic and avoidable, corporations stand as key producers of, and contributors to, perceived risks (Beck 2006). This is intensified through neoliberal economic policies that have led many governments to retreat from their role in caring for the well-being of citizens and posited the market as the most efficient replacement and focus. With consumers and investors pushing for greater transparency and accountability, not from governments but from corporations, auditing has become a prime tool for assessment, demonstrating as well as condemning corporations' ethical behaviour. It has become a way for leveraging demands that corporations demonstrate responsibility, sustainability, and transparency. Applied across geographical regions, political regimes, and economic sectors, ethics is now an explicit public part of global corporate practice and central to the scrutiny advanced by critics, extending far beyond any single industry.

This ethicalisation of corporate capitalism is particularly evident in industries that are involved in the transformation of natural resources into market assets, such as the energy sector. Energy companies' direct engagements with the environment, its many inhabitants (human as well as non-human), and its desired riches (oil, gas, coal, uranium, wind, sun, water, peat, timber) bring everyone into close and tense relationships where there is much at stake for all parties and the production of risk becomes an immediate issue. These relationships are enacted across multiple sites and multiple scales as energy companies implicate others through technological infrastructures, institutions, and discourses, as well as through their powerful 'performances and re-enactments of future prosperity' (Lord and Rest 2021, p. 83; see also Weszkalnys 2016). It is an industry where sociotechnical imaginaries embrace individuals and collectivities, the immediate and the distant, the past and the future, paucity and prosperity, hope and despair. As has been well documented by scholars (see, e.g. Behrends et al. 2011; Strauss et al. 2013; Weszkalnys and Richardson 2014), in these multi-scalar encounters stakeholders are often highly unequally positioned and able to mobilise very different capacities, resources, and networks. Yet, as Suzana Sawyer (2004) notes in her work on oil production in the Ecuadorian Amazon, 'the power differentials we see across the globe are hardly inevitable. They emerge from the sticky webs of social relationality' (p. 16). She demonstrates with great nuance how an indigenous organisation fought against a US oil producer by subverting and redeploying the state's neoliberal proclamations of corporate care. Given the centrality of ethics in today's corporate capitalism, I suggest that we explore with similar attention and nuance the ways in which energy companies, as composite constellations, draw on and engage with ethics.

I will focus here on the sprawling oil and gas industry, which is 'vast on all counts' (Appel et al. 2015, p. 19) and steeped in moral language. From small independent companies to big multinationals, corporations present their purposes as not only being about finding and supplying hydrocarbons to meet global demand but also about improving people's lives. Nestled within modernist ideologies of technological development and progress, public-facing

moral ambitions to be a 'force for good' in the world—'serving societies and communities' and having 'a positive impact'—reverberate through the industry, across countries and positions. Corporate brochures and websites promote catchy moral slogans, which are also emblazoned on corporate merchandise, such as mugs, caps, and golf polo shirts. These declarations of moral ambition (High 2019) appear as near-ubiquitous protagonists for the industry, ending up in potentially unexpected places, far away from rigs, field offices, and board rooms. As 'traveling technologies' (von Schnitzler 2013), they render tangible that this is an endeavour couched in moral terms, conjoining hydrocarbons with not only political and economic opportunities but also with explicit visions of what is deemed good and right. These ethical claims fly in the face of those who do not share the same or similar visions. As an industry that, for many, is associated with wealth accumulation, political inequalities, and environmental disasters, the vocal front-facing articulation between hydrocarbons and ethics begs the question of how the industry considers the production of oil and gas ethical projects. And how, in turn, do these resources come to be part of highly specific, as well as widely shared, forms of moral reasoning and practice? In what ways do these ethical projects also entail modes of working on the self as a certain kind of subject? That is, at a more fundamental level, how does the production of energy come to be ethical?

To begin exploring these questions, it is important to recognise that the public-facing moral proclamations are simultaneously assertive yet partial, demonstrative yet incomplete. They intersect with, form part of, and are challenged by what I propose to call 'regimes of ethics'. These regimes are sometimes formal yet fluid, distinctive yet rarely consistent (see also High 2018; Lambek 2018). Inspired by Andrew Lakoff and Stephen Collier's (2004) work on developing 'a broader understanding of contemporary configurations of ethical reflection and practice' (p. 420), I propose an analytical framework that is not limited to individuals' attempts to develop a virtuous character but also includes the more widely dynamic configurations in which ethical activities are articulated. As noted by Cheryl Mattingly and Jason Throop, the demarcation of 'moral selves' in the recent anthropological turn to neo-Aristotelian traditions of virtue ethics risks reproducing an individualism that is reminiscent of the Western humanist tradition (Mattingly and Throop 2018, p. 481; see also Mahmood 2003; Mattingly 2012; Wentzer and Mattingly 2018). This individualism 'animated our philosophies and our ethics for so long: the universal subject, stable, unified, totalized, individualized, interiorized' (Rose 1998, p. 169). Focusing on such individualisation of ethics would not only hark back to 'outworn and problematic metaphysical assumptions' (Wentzer and Mattingly 2018, p. 144); it would also hide from view how ethics is intrinsically entangled in, part of, and disrupting wider social processes. I contend that to understand how ethics conjoins with economic practices, such as in today's 'ethical capitalism', demands an appreciation of not just moral selves but also moral worlds.

The notion of regime brings attention to these broader ethical configurations, suggesting congeries of moral reasoning and practice. I use *regime* here to indicate not aspects of governmentality, such as in the work on 'carbon democracy' (Mitchell 2009), 'energopolitics' (Boyer 2014, p. 7), and 'petrocultures' (Szeman 2019), but rather to indicate a manner, method, or arrangement that reaches across individual instantiations and circumstances. As such, regimes of ethics are abstractions that are underpinned by specific values in specific instances and sites. Whilst this might seem to bear some semblance to Joel Robbins's (2013) structuralist value theory, the proposed analytic differs in important ways. Robbins draws on Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus* to suggest that societies have identifiable 'paramount values'. These values reign supreme by encompassing subordinate values or co-exist in configurations of value pluralism that can be more or less stable, with the possibility of giving rise to dramatic clashes of value conflict in order to reach a value resolution. In his work, the identified values mapped onto societies at large appear so abstracted as to emerge clear, coherent, and neat, fundamentally decoupled from, and uncontestable by, the messiness of life. Instead, in order to take this messiness seriously in analytical terms, I approach regimes as emerging dynamically and animatedly, acquiring a provisional distinctiveness and direction. As the regimes intersect and interrelate in varying ways, this analytic acknowledges that there are many potential responses to the question, 'how should one live?'

In this chapter, I focus on three differentiated regimes of ethics that are central to the ways in which oil and gas companies conjoin their pursuit of hydrocarbons with ethics. Firstly, I explore corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks that are central to the 'facialising' (Shever 2010) and 'enacting' (Welker 2014) of corporations. I will show how oil and gas companies draw on the language and practice of ethics to balance stakeholder demands with 'the ever present need to make a profit' (Jenkins 2004, p. 24). While much scholarship has focussed on CSR in terms of external stakeholder engagement, I suggest CSR activities can also be part of fostering industry pride and company-wide 'moral communities' (Allahyari 2000). Whereas the CSR regime of ethics is positioned as a deliberate and explicit corporate strategy, a second regime of ethics is grounded in the professional codes of employees, partners, and subcontractors. I explore here US engineering ethics, which highlight the range of possibilities that can be pursued by engineers in the oil and gas workforce. Practices such as whistleblowing and breaking ranks in situations of unsafe practices are valued, epitomising individual ethical action in the context of corporate employment (Johnson 2017; Mitcham 2015). Both corporate social responsibility frameworks and engineering ethics highlight normative definitions of what is worthy to pursue and what should direct moral action. While CSR centres on corporate ambition and purpose, engineering ethics emphasise individual professional decision-making. Co-existing with these two formal regimes of ethics are also industry actors' own moral sensibilities. This third regime of ethics draws on my ongoing ethnographic research carried out since 2013 among predominantly small-scale private oil and gas

producers, service companies, financiers, and other industry participants in Colorado, USA. I introduce a rancher-turned-oilman who might appear to echo emphatically industry moral visions, yet presents a life of flourishing that unsettles and questions the industry of which he has become part. By discussing these various articulations of ethics, my aim is to take seriously formal rules and codes, as well as industry actors' personal, potentially idiosyncratic, ethical reflection, and practice. I suggest that, given the stakes involved in different energy visions, it is timely and urgent that we recognise these multiple and competing regimes of ethics. While the oil and gas industry's moral visions might appear monolithic, firm, and unchallengeable, regimes of ethics indicate the underdetermined nature of ethical life.

Corporate Responsibilities

The President of the Society for Petroleum Engineers Sami Alnuaim recently made a call for greater 'industry pride'. He noted how 'our industry's mission is not limited to providing energy to support the global economy, but also to improving human lives. I am very proud of being part of this industry. Are you?' (Alnuaim 2019, p. 11). In his appeal to members, he expressed sentiments that are shared by my interlocutors in Colorado when he grounded pride in how 'the use of our products has raised living standards for billions of people' (Alnuaim 2019, p. 10). While this sense of servitude, of providing energy to meet the demands of consumers, is a frequent motive elaborated in industry advertising and news reports, it is also central to how industry actors position themselves as moral actors (High 2019, p. 34; see also Smith 2019a). It foregrounds how their work brings to market the 'lifeblood of oil' (Huber 2013) on which industrial life today has come to depend so heavily, while it also serves to deflect criticism and distribute blame across both producers and consumers when industry actors are criticised for their actions (Smith 2019b). Pointing to specific products and tracing their components back to the oil patch is a gleeful exercise for many of my interlocutors. Yet the President of SPE invited his members to take pride in not only the specific material products of their labour, but also in how the industry conducts its business. With CSR becoming central to how oil and gas companies address 'stakeholder concerns' and 'manage risks' (Knudsen et al. 2020), he recounted numerous CSR initiatives across the industry and remarked, 'We are now realizing that practicing CSR needs to be a way of running a successful business' (Alnuaim 2019, p. 11). The potential twinning of 'doing business' and 'doing good' offered an important source of industry pride, which he felt could be better harnessed by the industry.

The concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and its associated practices of community development (CD), and environmental and social governance (ESG) form a broad, growing, and flexible set of discourses, accounting regimes, and practical initiatives through which companies attempt to position themselves as moral actors. In their recent review of CSR scholarship,

Ståle Knudsen et al. (2020) note how both advocates and critics of CSR have found CSR primarily a business strategy, while critical studies generally see CSR as associated with the global neoliberal shift in policies. Richard De George (1996) has described how CSR evolved as a concept in the business environment of the USA in the 1960s along with the rise of consumer, environmental, and social activist groups' critiques of 'big business'. At this time, 'groups that had vested interests clothed their demands on business in terms that gave their demands more respectability. By calling them socially interested demands, they disguised the fact that they were often demands not of society as a whole, but of particular groups with special interests' (1996, p. 19). In order to respond to these demands, businesses used the same language and

> clothed their answers in terms of social responsiveness or social responsibility. No one knew exactly what those terms meant, but that was unimportant. The terms indicated some concern for the social good, the general welfare, or society as a whole. The term 'social responsibility' took some of the sting out of the charge that big business was part of a military-industrial complex that acted for its own benefit or for the benefit of an elite, rather than for the good of society. (De George 1996 p. 19)

While for decades various definitions, models, and practices were debated, Heleed Jenkins (2004) has shown how companies continue to struggle in their relationships with local stakeholders, partly because of the difficulty of actually delimiting stakeholders in a way that makes sense for all parties involved. As noted by Francisco García-Rodríguez et al. (2013, p. 375), this difficulty is particularly acute for oil and gas companies as they extract highly profitable natural resources at the risk of causing serious environmental harm in countries and among populations about which they might know little. Ethnographic work in this field has thus demonstrated how CSR policies, practices, and standards have largely evolved out of corporate responses to critics' disapproval, yet have rarely been implemented effectively in dealings with local stakeholders.

In her pioneering study of CSR at the multinational mining company Anglo American, Dinah Rajak (2011a) shows how CSR enables corporations to lay claims to and demonstrate moral authority and extend, if not utilise, this in the places and communities where they operate. She found that CSR employees brought their own passionately held desires of 'doing good' to their work of 'empowering' and 'partnering' the participants of their programmes, celebrating publically the elusive win-win solution to political and economic inequalities. Yet, through the performance of CSR, employees ultimately re-inscribed unequal gift relationships that stirred dependence rather than empowerment. Despite virtuous discourses of partnership, equality, and sameness, the politics of the 'development gift' (Stirrat and Henkel 1997; see also Jenkins 2004) thus cemented unwanted power relations between giver and recipient that were predominantly in the interest of the giver. As other research reminds us, while such hierarchical relations of patronage might not be the intended outcomes of

CSR, they can facilitate the rebranding of companies. Elana Shever has shown in her work on Shell's CSR activities in Argentina how the investment in participatory community programmes gave the company a 'smiling face', reinforcing the image that Shell had 'good intentions and a friendly disposition' (Shever 2010, p. 28, see also Shever 2012). With its front of caring and compassionate corporate personhood, yet with limited obligations, the company deflected and diffused responsibility when confronted with accusations of poor practice. Perhaps indicative of a wider 'corporate ethic of detachment' (Cross 2011), Katy Gardner's (2015) study of Chevron's CSR activities in a Bangladeshi village near a large gas field also depicts a company's on-the-ground preference for distance and disconnection. Whereas villagers sought ongoing, open-ended relationships with Chevron in the hope of greater employment opportunities, infrastructural projects, and impending 'development', they experienced the oil and gas company as desiring a 'moral economy of disconnection' (Gardner 2015, p. 507; see also Gardner et al. 2012). Jobs were offered on-site but suddenly terminated, community programmes were initiated but implemented entirely by external subcontracted NGOs; many promises had been made but then abandoned without explanation. Advancing tropes of self-help and empowerment, the CEO of Chevron was clear that 'their motivation…was wholly profit-driven' (Gardner 2015, p. 506). Echoing Shell's insights from the Niger Delta where CSR activities were also presented as publicly and strategically advancing the interests of their business (Edoho 2008), Chevron's CEO concluded that 'CSR was "good business"' (Gardner 2015, p. 506; see also Anderson and Bieniaszewska 2005; Frynas 2005).

While these accounts demonstrate how CSR partakes in the (re)production of capitalist relations through the consolidation of hierarchical social relationships between corporations and critics, they can appear 'remarkably one sided and remarkably stable…the only happenings, meanings and consequences worth recording appear to be those that can be entered into a corporate balance sheet or appear as indices of profit' (Cross 2014, p. 126). In contrast, Jamie Cross argues that the labyrinthine ethical accounting regimes of CSR, with standardised ISO certifications, conventions, and policy forums (Rajak 2011b), can also be a means through which employees perform and create professional personhood. In his fieldwork in India where the CSR accounting regime was considered a key part of management training, the trainee managers found the performance of bureaucratic rituals, procedures, and practices that centred on countless ethical accounting documents creative and formative. They felt it was 'a task through which they could perform themselves as modern professionals' (Cross 2011, p. 42), capable of abstracting and decontextualising themselves from local relationships and becoming proficient in globally translatable forms of expertise.

Focusing on employees who are not directly involved in CSR as the unit of analysis has received relatively scant attention in the CSR literature, yet recent studies in this field indicate a striking influence of CSR on employees' own attitudes to their work and their employer. In a study of CSR activities in the

oil and gas industry, Kenneth De Roeck and Nathalie Delobbe (2012) found that 'an organization with a poor reputation in the environmental realm can still strengthen its legitimacy in the eyes of internal stakeholders by engaging in concrete initiatives that preserve and promote the natural environment' (p. 408). In such instances, CSR helped reinforce employees' organisational identification and trust, strengthening their sense of loyalty and readiness to take responsibility for company operations. While many external stakeholders felt frustrated and disappointed, if not furious with CSR, many internal stakeholders felt a growing affinity for their company's values and mission (see also Fatma et al. 2018). Given the CSR activities, they were better able to support their company's efforts and tap into that source of 'industry pride' that the aforementioned President of SPE had identified.

In my ethnographic research in Colorado, CSR activities are also an important aspect of how individual employees come to embrace company values and mission, but also how they collectively come to form company-wide 'moral communities' (Allahyari 2000). In 2014, a medium-sized oil and gas producer was heavily involved in a drilling programme across the high plains of Weld County in the North-Eastern corner of the state. While landmen worked on the legal title work, reservoir engineers and geophysicists prepared the drilling activities, and others negotiated subcontractor and limited partner involvement. Spread out across multiple floors in the company building, frequent meetings brought people together in their small, focussed teams. Only rarely did they come together in larger groups, in which case it was for occasions such as management announcements, training sessions, or information gathering. However, CSR activities offered spaces where people collectively took pride in projects outside any single area of specialisation and focus. It also physically brought people together across all teams. With an explicit public-facing corporate emphasis on 'caring', the company encouraged its employees to donate their work time and volunteer in soup kitchens or women's shelters, if not helping to build a playground in a nearby community. The hours that were donated this way were then matched in dollar terms by the company to its outreach activities. Most of the employees took part in this, building friendships and networks that strengthened their usual teams while also reaching far beyond. As such, CSR offered this company a virtuous vocabulary and suite of actions that helped foster stronger teams which the company needed, as it was about to head into a commodity downturn.

When oil and gas companies draw on the language and practice of ethics in their CSR initiatives, their noticeable success is thus among their own employees. As oil and gas companies fund schools and hospitals, wildlife sanctuaries and playgrounds, microcredit schemes and participatory community development, poverty alleviation schemes and food banks, they turn their moral visions of the good into specific material corporate strategies that are likely to resonate strongly with their own employees, while also keeping a clear and strong focus on improving the bottom line. For oil and gas companies, CSR is thus a business strategy that, by operationalising international standards and conventions

which draw on the powerful virtuous vocabulary of generosity and charity, offers them a win-win twinning of hydrocarbons and ethics, even if it is in ways that may not be intended.

ENGINEERING ETHICS

While CSR is part of the vocal front-facing articulation of moral ambition in the oil and gas industry, it co-exists with other regimes of ethics that present industry actors with different frameworks for ethical reasoning and practice. As an industry that encompasses a broad range of professions and skills, there has been a growing recognition that everyone carries special moral obligations. In today's 'risk society', this has partly been emphasised through the formalisation of workplace health, safety, and environment (HSE) policies. These aim to evaluate, manage, and improve safety culture among employees in the industry, as well as promote externally the standards they seek to uphold. As I have also experienced in my fieldwork, both on rigs and off-site, 'HSE culture is the number one priority in the oil and gas sector' (Makambura 2018). From her fieldwork in Equatorial Guinea's offshore oil and gas fields, Hannah Appel (2012) captures this sense of 'HSE culture' well when she notes how 'the off-shore's saturation with practices, performances, media, and bureaucracies of risk avoidance and safety gave it the immediate feeling of an immersive, hermetic environment' (p. 695). While she considers how the HSE culture contributes to the prefabricated 'modularity' of a global capitalist project, such as an offshore rig, by attempting to disentangle it from the sociopolitical reality of Equatorial Guinea, I will here consider it as part of a broader regime of normative professional codes of ethics that require industry actors to recognise and evaluate their immediate and specific entanglements at the workplace.

In the USA, formalised HSE frameworks in extractive industries evolved around the turn of the previous century, amidst concerns about work hazards faced by miners. These frameworks soon branched into broader concerns about engineering practices across various industries. While official health and safety standards, specifically governing the oil and gas industry, only emerged in the 1980s, codes of engineering ethics, for example, emerged much earlier. As noted by Carl Mitcham (2015), this relatively early emergence of engineering ethics has been crucial for the particular ideals of ethical responsibility that are predominant in engineering today. In the USA, as a civilian profession, engineering arose out of the military and this 'military ethos of obedience to authority exercised a formative influence on engineering conceptions of responsibility' (p. 50). Initially engineers were trained in the military as regimented national corps with a duty to defend and an ethos of obedience to authority. While professional engineering schools were eventually established and specialisations emerged, 'engineers remained duty-bound to obey their employers, whether a non-military branch of government or a private corporation' (p. 51). They were thus subject to employers' ideas and standards of what was considered to be right and wrong. However, in the 1960s, when activist movements

spurred the emergence of CSR frameworks, they also called attention to tensions between national and corporate interests on the one hand and public safety, health, and welfare on the other. The intense fears of atomic warfare at the time demonstrated and rendered plain the radically different interests of the nation, corporations, and the general public. This period inspired a new code of ethics, which in later versions lists as its first fundamental canon that 'engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health and welfare of the public' (p. 54). As such, an engineer's loyalty was no longer to an authority like the military or a corporation but rather to the general public, ensuring engineering practices serve the public good.

In recent decades, professional ethics for engineers has centred on 'preventive ethics' (Harris et al. 2013, p. 11), commonly expressed in rules oriented towards the prevention of professional malpractice, misconduct, and harm to the public. The rules are often phrased as prohibitions, using clear negative wording. For example, in the Code of Ethics of the National Society of Professional Engineers (NSPE), it states that 'engineers shall not reveal facts, data or information without the prior consent of the client or employer except as authorized by law or this Code'. This negative character of the code not only makes it easier to enforce, as it renders violations clear and specific, but also supports the notion that 'before engineers have an obligation to do good, they have an obligation to do no harm' (Harris et al. 2013, pp. 12–13). Scholars have noted how these negative obligations afford engineering ethics a markedly conservative and stultifying ethos that fails to encourage engineers 'to question or contest why engineering is being used to support particular ends' (Smith and Lucena 2021). It also marginalises and deprioritises 'what can be called "aspirational ethics", namely the use of professional knowledge to promote the human good' (Harris 2008, p. 154). Placing value on compliance and obedience, the rules present moral actors as individual decision-makers who are, first and foremost, rule-followers (Stovall 2011; Vanderburg 1995). To illustrate the implications of any negligence or misjudgement, case studies of accidents and disasters are used in the teaching of engineering ethics, such as the Deepwater Horizon tragedy in the Gulf of Mexico or, as I experienced during my fieldwork, a recent gas explosion in Firestone, Colorado. These case studies offer forceful evidence of what can happen if an engineer strays from what is deemed right and wrong.

These cases of accidents and disasters acquire trajectories that span and interconnect realms of engineers with government, corporations, and publics. They become important pedagogical tools for the industry as it seeks to learn from the past and improve practices for the future. Casting risk avoidance as a virtue, the combination of the codes of ethics with the detailed case studies highlights how the industry frames its operations in terms of ethical sensibilities. Yet, as noted by Deborah Johnson, 'engineers are not required to explain or justify their behavior to publics until something goes wrong or until engineers—in the act of whistleblowing—bring something to the attention of a public' (2017, p. 96). It is in these moments that accountability practices

become public. When a disaster occurs, it is government agencies that are held accountable for what happened rather than engineers (Johnson 2017). Engineers are usually included in the teams that report to the government agency, but they are not considered responsible for the health, safety, and welfare of the public. However, when an engineer blows the whistle on a threat to the public, his commitment to the public becomes strikingly visible. It is in these situations that the engineer renders apparent that he recognises that he has a responsibility that goes beyond the demands of his employer or client and beyond his own interest. It is in these situations that he becomes celebrated for his courage and heroism. The stakes are high as 'engineers who blow the whistle are often seen as heroes [while] those who stay silent are rarely held to account' (Johnson 2017, p. 95). It is in whistleblowing that the individual engineer breaks ranks and publically affirms not just his obedience and loyalty to his profession but also the rightness in the codes of ethics. As such, the whistleblower emerges as a 'moral exemplar' (Humphrey 1997) of individual decision-making, affirming his loyalty and obedience to the normative regime of engineering ethics.

As a regime of ethics, these professional codes highlight the range of possibilities that can be pursued by individual employees when finding themselves entangled in difficult and challenging work situations. With its conservative ethos grounded in prohibitions and admonitions, it can assist engineers to be part of a 'modular' capitalism that benefits from a labour force's obedience and loyalty. In an industry where offshore drilling rigs, travelling through international waters, rely on multinational teams to come together at short notice and where onshore operations demand flexible and transient crews, the clear declarations of right and wrong in the formal rules and codes are conducive to advancing industry and worker interests. The implicit identification of the abstracted individual as an autonomous and isolated moral actor further supports a self-cultivation that is apt for this sprawling and constantly re-configuring sector. As a regime of ethics that undergirds the professional practices of many in the oil and gas industry, the narrow and circumscribed 'microethical' focus (Herkert 2005) can be seen to bolster the industry's corporate practices and visions of flourishing.

Corporate social responsibility frameworks and engineering ethics offer insights into some of the distinctive regimes of reasoning and practice that inform the conjoining of hydrocarbons with ethical sensibilities. However, if we attend only to these particular regimes of ethics characterised by their official codes and predefined aims, the emerging moral worlds can seem noticeably static and monolithic. Industry interests and corporate practices may appear unchallenged, perhaps even unchallengeable, across multiple scales ranging from individual to corporate action. In order to explore and recognise the more personal and potentially idiosyncratic ways in which industry actors make sense of their worlds and their unique contribution *as* moral actors, I suggest we also need to consider regimes of ethics that move beyond formal declarations of right and wrong.

OIL, GOD AND LIBERTY

In my ethnographic research in Colorado, I have come to know rig hands, mud engineers, landmen, geo scientists, capital providers, investment bankers, executives, and many others. I have had a temporary office within a drilling company, which has afforded me opportunities to be part of daily company life, ranging from on-site drilling operations and investor presentations to industry events and barbeques. I have listened to countless unprompted and often emotional accounts of people's 'industry pride', to such a degree that I see these as amounting to a distinct regime of ethics that is shared, yet idiosyncratic, in its articulation of value. These accounts echo similar themes, transcending people's individual positions and specific company within the industry. While I had come to almost anticipate these unprompted accounts of 'oil as a force for good', I was still surprised when a rancher in 2019 in the heart of Colorado's 'oil country' voiced it too.

Norm, as I will refer to him, was a third-generation rancher who ran about 1000 cattle on the family ranch which had been founded by his grandfather in 1888. His grandfather started the ranch with 110 acres and Norm had been able to build it up to 38,000 acres. It extended as far as the eye could see, continuing to the horizon across the plateau in almost all directions. As we drove on the dirt roads across his property, he showed me places that held distinct memories from his childhood: an almost hidden ditch amidst the sagebrush bushes where he had fallen off his first horse and an elevated flat hill where his grandfather had built basic wind turbines on wooden frames. Describing just how attached he was to this place that anchored so many memories and so much knowledge built up over the years, he said, '131 years my family has been here. I'm not going to go anywhere. I'm 61 years old. My grandparents died here. My parents died here. I will die here'. With a piercing commitment to honour the promises he made to his father to continue the family ranch, he recounted some tough times: when hailstorms and blizzards cost cattle lives, when diseases and epidemics raged, and when meat prices dropped so low that it almost put an end to the ranch. He lamented what he saw as a lax work ethic among youth today, describing how difficult it was to get good workers and scoffing at their wishes for 'weekends off' and 'vacation time'. While he inspected some of the cattle, he reminisced, 'My dad just worked hard. I don't think they ever took a vacation. We worked from sunup to sundown. That was just how it was. That was what everybody had to do to survive. You had to work to live. It was never a job. It was a lifestyle'. The pressure to bring the cattle through the season was immense as, like other ranchers in the region, they worked on borrowed money. They borrowed in the spring and then paid back when they sold their cattle in the autumn. Sometimes they had good years, at other times bad. Ranching was demanding and fundamentally unpredictable, with pressing questions often centring on money. As we crested a hilltop, a drilling rig and some tank batteries appeared in the distance. Norm

looked at me and said, 'Dad always thought it'd be nice to get some extra money. And then this started'.

Today Norm is deeply involved in the oil and gas industry. With more than 800 wells on his property and with new ones still being drilled, it has become one of the largest oil and gas operations in the state. In addition to receiving royalty payments on the produced hydrocarbons, he also saw it as an opportunity to partner with the industry and run all operations except for the actual drilling. This has turned into four major companies, owned and run by himself and his son. Employing more than 1200 people, these companies do everything from water hauling to road building, from well pad construction to waste disposal. The oil and gas business now dominates their lives, especially as they have become involved in operations across the USA. One day, as we sat chatting in their enormous barn, which has been turned into a luxurious private bar complete with neon signs, arcade machines, pool table, and vintage cars, Norm and his son both agreed that they had never envisioned being able to make this kind of money. Norm has now become a major charitable donor in the area, supporting initiatives from the local food bank to women's shelters. But rather than setting these up as formal CSR activities, Norm did not want the formalities and paperwork. 'I write a cheque and support causes that matter to me, causes that are being led by good people'. Having grown up with the uncertainties of ranching, this industry actor felt that oil and gas had not only safeguarded the ranch and its future but also enabled him to donate generously to causes he supported.

His gratitude for what the oil and gas industry had given him was deeply felt. He saw his riches as not merely a question of 'having done the right thing at the right time'; nor was it just about having been determined and hard working. For him, oil and gas were blessings bestowed by God. As I have detailed elsewhere (2019), many of my interlocutors held Christian-inspired outlooks. As I was once told by a seasoned drilling engineer, 'You either come *with* Christ or you come *to* Christ in this industry'. Given the broad geographic overlap of the so-called Bible belt with drilling sites, Christianity in its various forms was often a more or less explicit referent in daily life, both within and beyond company spaces. For Norm, hydrocarbons were gifts that brought life and prosperity to all of humankind. While it was clear that he himself had enjoyed immense prosperity from oil and gas, it was less clear how these resources had enriched the lives of others, beyond the recipients of his philanthropy, not just materially but also spiritually. In what ways were oil and gas gifts from God? Conversations about God were often woven seamlessly into conversations about 'energy independence', with Norm emphasising the importance of the USA becoming independent from other countries in its energy supply. As gifts from God, oil and gas were there to be developed to provide the electricity for houses and the fuel for trucks; they were there to relieve people of the cold in the winter and the heat in the summer. For Norm, developing US oil and gas meant that the country could ideally be self-reliant for its energy and have 'unfettered' foreign policy relations with nations such

as Russia, Saudi Arabia, and others. Norm reasoned that by not fighting over oil and, instead, relying on domestic energy production, there would be less motivation for wars and many conflicts could be avoided. As a God-created purveyor of peace and prosperity, hydrocarbons were for Norm an unquestioned good.

While Norm saw oil and gas as a blessing, many people saw it differently. He had recently experienced a clash with a local politician. The encounter was for him striking and he would return to it, recounting it with what seemed like sharp clarity. It was a moment that constituted a confrontational situation in which the very terms of ethical activity were articulated and intensified. Rather than entailing a 'moral breakdown' (Zigon 2007; see also Robbins 2004) in which self-questioning, doubt, and struggle are part of the experience of 'moral torment' (Zigon 2007, p. 142), the situation rendered clear and explicit some of the values that Norm held. He recounted to me how he had given a statement in support of oil and gas production in the state. Once he had finished his statement, the politician had responded disapprovingly, 'You just want the money. You are greedy and just want to get as much money as you can. Because that's all you care about! Money!' According to Norm, he had then looked the politician in the eye and replied, 'Yes, you are so right! That's indeed all I care about. I couldn't care less about the environment, about the land, about the rivers, about the air. I just want money!' Along with many others present, the politician had apparently stared at him with an expression that conveyed seeming disbelief that this man really stood there, in front of an audience, admitting to his greed. But Norm had continued:

> Everybody wants a cleaner planet—we all do. Our kids live here, we live here. It's not like we live separately. Why do you think I run all these businesses? I saw an opportunity to make money, yes. But I also saw that running these businesses was the *only* way I could truly protect our environment. I care about this place so much more than anyone else. This ranch has been a really pristine ranch for a long time. We never overgrazed it. Always very careful in how we managed it. When the oil and gas came along, we wanted to make sure they didn't make a mess of it. We wouldn't let them make a mess here. Nobody takes care of your home like you do! This land means everything to me.

That this rancher-turned-oilman self-identified as a libertarian and had been awarded the Independence Institute's annual award in recognition of his charitable support for its activities underscores how he saw the conjoining of oil and gas with ranching through the prism of not only energy independence but also individual freedom.

Rather than offering blanket advocacy for the industry, however, he saw his own control over operations as paramount. Distancing himself from large corporations, top-down management, and executive greed, he valued liberty as a core principle, emphasising the necessity of freedom of choice and individual judgement. While, in his case, it led to his involvement in oil and gas

operations, he was also horrified and deeply critical of so-called low-end operations. Indeed, for him, such poor practices reaffirmed the importance of individual control when engaging with this industry. As he commented, 'There are some low end companies out there that have made messes on ranchers and farmers. We have seen some farms they have just made a mess out of. If my Dad would have seen this on our place, he would have shot me! When the oil price was high, some people just got stupid!' While he felt he had been accused of 'getting stupid' in his presumed greed for money, he deflected the accusations back onto others, in particular the executives of these 'low-end' companies and the people leasing their land to them. For Norm, their reverence for the environment was eclipsed by their pursuit of profit, wanting to extract as much wealth as possible from the ground while leaving behind oil spills and open wastewater pits. When I highlighted how his substantial acreage gave him a much stronger negotiating position with the producers than others would experience, he just nodded and said, 'I have been fortunate'. It was this 'fortune' that had enabled him to exercise the individual control that he valued and that he regarded as fundamental to any involvement with the oil and gas industry. Through this, he had come to share and take part in promotion of the industry's moral vision that the production of oil and gas was 'a force for good' which 'improved people's lives'. It had enabled him to deliver on the promise to his father while making what he saw as a positive contribution to the lives of others. But he was never to be a 'company man'.

While Norm's ethical sensibilities firmed up and offered advocacy for industry practices, it also led to disruption and the emergence of new companies directed by different moral visions. He distanced himself from 'Big Oil' and rejoiced in local control. He lent support to those who were keen to pursue a similarly entrepreneurial path and would help with the eradication of 'low-end' companies. His 'industry pride' encouraged greater production of oil and gas, while also insisting on more local ways for this to happen.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

While industry actors may share the same moral vision that is put forth so vocally by oil and gas companies, their regimes of ethics and underlying values can differ greatly. From the CSR ethical accounting regimes that materialise virtues of charity and generosity, through the professional codes of engineering ethics that enshrine individuals' obedience and loyalty, to an industry actor's emphasis on libertarian values, a moral vision that sees the production of oil and gas as 'a force for good' can thus emerge from radically different regimes of ethics. If focusing on moral visions without considering the regimes of ethics through which such visions are articulated, we risk overlooking the great commonalities and differences in ethical sensibilities, simplifying the reasoning and practices that flourish and sustain them.

When studying industries in general, and the oil and gas industry in particular, it is important to avoid such analytical simplification as it can lead to the

industry's moral visions appearing monolithic, so solid and so uniform, as to overshadow any potential alternatives. It can create moral worlds that seem devoid of fragility and contestation, emerging as firm and inevitable features of 'ethical capitalism'. To do so would not only be to treat companies as black boxes of profit maximisation and employees as their mere mouthpieces, collectively superior at demonstrating their moral visions. It would also be to turn the politics of inequality, with which the oil and gas industry is so closely associated, into an epistemological truism: How could we ever come to know the world as any different? It would create conditions of knowledge in such a way that moral worlds cannot surprise and cannot be contested. While some might find comfort in 'the image of the world offered by social sciences…[as] one of misery, of suffering, of injustice' (Stoczkowski 2008, p. 348), we would fail to recognise what is demonstrated and rendered visible in each articulation of a moral vision. It is by attending to energy ethics as involving multiple co-existing regimes of ethics, and by being critical of our own moral presuppositions, that we can respect the epistemological grounds for our work and ensure its political potential to see new worlds.

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