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Ethics of stewardship questioned in Alaskan oil spill

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We are reading a lot these days about ethics — a result of the decade's unusually high incidence of real and alleged moral turpitude on the part of high-profile figures in government and business. Behavior we judge unethical has increased to a level where ethics courses are now standard fare in many professional curricula, and in the colleges the general subject of ethics has a new lease on life.

Even so, there is more to our moral duty than putting a few crooks like Ivan Boesky in jail, or reprimanding a self-serving legislator or two. Our present ethical frame-

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work is too narrow, and should be expanded to include those of our collective behaviors and attitudes that are profoundly harmful, but are not, as yet, considered unethical. The stakes here are so high as to make those who break or bend a few rules for personal gain dull by comparison.

The environmental disaster that occurred March 24 in Alaska's Prince William Sound, where the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground and spilled 240,000 barrels of oil, is an example. Horror and outrage were the mildest responses to miles of oil-blackened beaches and thousands of dead and dying marine animals. The fishing industry may be devastated. Cleaning up the mess will take years and cost millions of dollars.

But, so far, no one has suggested that any of the key players in the events that led to the spill acted unethically.

True, Joseph Hazelwood, the captain of the ship, was drunk, and not on the bridge when the Exxon Valdez hit Bligh Reef. But, drunkenness is not usually, nor has it been here, seen as an ethical breach. Rath-

er, it is an unfortunate aspect of human nature.

True, the tanker was being piloted by an officer not certified to navigate the sound. But someone had to do it, and 8,548 previous safe passages must have made running aground this time unthinkable. Nor does the fate of those subordinates who have gone public with their superiors' derelictions of duty inspire others to go on strike when they are needed. No ethical problem here, either. Just another regrettable circumstance.

True, in 1981 the Alyeska Pipeline Service Co., the oil industry consortium that owns the Trans-Alaska Pipeline, disbanded the emergency response team whose job it was to contain spills in harbor and the sound. The consortium considered the team, and the maintenance of spill clean-up equipment, a waste. Alyeska also rejected an offer by the town of Valdez to store the equipment.

But we aren't inclined to call these ethical decisions, either. Rather, they are classic economic decisions — unremarkable

examples of corporate power in pursuit of profit.

Moreover, even though we talk as if those at the top are responsible for the actions of their subordinates, we also understand that it is impossible for management to police the every action of their underlings. The greater the gap between them, the more forgiving we are of the manager or director when the worker triggers a ca-

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Spill raises ethical issue for both producers, consumers

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tastrophe. No moral laxity here.

Alaska's legislators accepted the consortium's decision with hardly a murmur. But this is not only understandable, it is downright forgivable, considering the likely political repercussions of crossing Alaska's major benefactor. No ethical lapse here either, it seems.

Thus it happens that when such an environmental disaster occurs, and no one has broken the rules for personal gain, or intended to do harm, we try to absolve everyone from moral responsibility altogether. President Bush did so recently by calling the spill an "aberration" attributable to "human error."

Nevertheless, I suggest that there is a deeply rooted ethical problem here.

As the players who made the first move, Alyeska officials bear the primary responsibility for the disaster. With the oil industry's tacit approval, they acted on the self-serving belief that the possibility of a major spill in Prince William Sound was very small. As a Chevron Oil Field Research Co. spokesman said "we can't spill enough oil in Prince William Sound to have an adverse effect on the fish."

Such an industry assertion should be viewed with extreme skepticism at the outset. Others — environmentalists, officials responsible for protecting Alaska's pristine environment — held contrary

views, not least due to the history of industry failures to clean up even minor pipeline and ocean spills.

What is clear is that by eliminating the emergency response team in 1981, industry leaders showed that, if and when it occurred, and regardless of its size, they preferred the results of the oil spill of March 1989 to all other outcomes of their corporate stewardship. (Perhaps they expected even then to offset the costs of a spill by higher prices at the pump.) Worse, industry "belief" in the low probability of a spill may well have contributed to the laxity on board the Exxon Valdez on March 24.

Why should not this attitude be judged in ethical terms? The ethical inquiry pro-

perly examines self-serving at the expense of others, and much corporate behavior falls precisely in this category.

We should also examine the ethical dimension of our own seemingly insatiable demand for material goods, which drives all corporate activity. We are running out of time to act on such problems as the hole in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect and diminishing resources.

It is an unfortunate truth that we often do the right thing only when forced to by "circumstances." The laudability of our conduct then is debatable. If we are not to be judged harshly by our posterity as a shallow and selfish people, we must voluntarily replace the ethic of consumption with the ethic of stewardship.