

The Ethical Issues of Energy Dependence: Slavery in 1850s America and Oil Today

“When we say the soil is rich, it is not a metaphor. It is as rich in energy as an oil well.”

(Manning, 39)

While it may seem like an unusual comparison, there are substantial similarities between America's energy dependence on African slavery until 1862 and, presently, foreign oil. Slavery and oil are forms of energy—slavery is power in the form of human energy extracting or harvesting energy from the soil; oil “is annual primary productivity [power] stored as hydrocarbons [energy], a trust fund of sorts, built up over many thousands of years” (Manning, 39), also extracted from the earth. The uses of both slavery and oil as energy sources have important ethical dimensions. The ethical issues of slavery are clear—as hindsight is 20/20, virtually everyone can agree that it was wrong. All we know is the past and the present, and we cannot see the future. Presently we rely on oil as a dominant energy source, and we do not know what the final consensus regarding the ethical issues of oil use will be. African slavery in America is in the past, which we can understand, and the end of the Civil War somewhat finalized slavery's ethical issues. Perhaps through the lens of another event in our nation's history we can better address today's oil issues.

The ethical issues that may apply to both slavery and oil are as follows: 1) Slavery and oil as energy sources cause us to support injustices that we otherwise would not, corrupting our moral compass; 2) We indirectly recognize our guilt, our understanding that our actions are morally corrupt, by justifying our actions and making a case for our innocence; 3) Because we know what we are doing is in some way wrong, we are fearful of the potential repercussions

caused by our actions; furthermore, the disagreement over the morally heated issue at hand causes intense political division.

America has been addicted to both slavery and oil as energy sources, an addiction that corrupts us. Until 1862, America relied on foreign people—shipped from West Africa to the colonies in the Triangular Slave Trade—for energy. The colonies exchanged goods for slaves from Africa. If not for the economic prosperity promised by African people who were forced to work our land, we would not support the inhumanity of this trade. Frederick Douglass, an African American who escaped slavery and became a leader of the abolitionist movement, writes of the moral corruption:

What a world of inconsistency, as well as of wickedness, is suggested by the smooth and gliding phrase, AMERICAN SLAVE TRADE; and how strange and perverse is that moral sentiment which loathes, execrates, and brands as piracy and as deserving of death the carrying away into captivity men, women, and children from the *African coast*; but which is neither shocked nor disturbed by a similar traffic, carried on with the same motives and purposes, and characterized by even *more* odious peculiarities on the coast of our MODEL REPUBLIC. We execrate and hang the wretch guilty of this crime on the coast of Guinea, while we respect and applaud the guilty participators in this murderous business on the enlightened shores of the Chesapeake. The inconsistency is so flagrant and glaring, that it would seem to cast a doubt on the doctrine of the innate moral sense of mankind. (Douglass, 225-6)

David Walker's Appeal, published in 1829, echoed Douglass's sentiments: In one section of a South Carolina paper, "the paper writes 'of the barbarity of the Turks... they treat the Greeks more like *brutes* than human beings.' And in the same paper was an advertisement [for the sale of] 'eight well built Virginia and Maryland *Negro fellows* and four *wenches*'" (ibid, 12-13). Walker wrote, "it is really so amusing" (ibid, 13) to witness people missing their own obvious inconsistency. Both Douglass and Walker identified America's skewed moral compass when trading goods for energy in the form of human beings.

Currently, America depends on foreign and domestic oil for most of its energy, a dependence that contributes significantly to global warming and economic, societal, and environmental destruction. Global warming, the “buildup of heat-trapping gases (such as carbon dioxide) in the atmosphere due to human activities” (McDonough, 31) is an ethical issue because the consequences of our actions create a dangerous, limited world for both present and future generations. “Increasing global temperatures result in global climate change and shifts of existing climates. Most models predict more severe weather” (ibid). In addition to more storms and rising sea levels, “Incinerating fossil fuels contributes particulates—microscopic particles of soot—to the environment, where they are known to cause respiratory and other health problems. Regulations for airborne pollutants known to threaten health are growing more severe” (ibid, 32). Furthermore, “brute force energy doesn’t make good sense as a dominant strategy over the long term. You wouldn’t want to depend on savings for all of your daily expenditures, so why rely on savings to meet all of humanity’s energy needs?” (ibid). It is not healthy for America to depend on oil, squandering our trust funds and our savings for energy, but we do it anyway. On top of contributing to environmental and health issues, our dependence on oil supports corrupt foreign regimes. The Bush administrations, whose family circle is close with the ruling family of Saudi Arabia, made the following deal: “In return for American protection from Israel and Arab radicals, the Saudis pursued an expansionary oil policy and opened their markets to U.S. business” (Buchar). In his book *House of Bush, House of Saud: The Secret Relationship Between the World’s Two Most Powerful Dynasties*, Craig Unger writes, “Never before... has an American president been so closely tied to a foreign power that harbors and supports our country's mortal enemies” (ibid). This behavior, however, is not uncharacteristic for oil-hungry nations:

If we look at energy consumption in the rich nations where America is again the archetype we get a disturbing take on fairness. Not only is there less and less to go around, but also what is left is being more and more unfairly and inefficiently allocated... [B]etter than three-fifths of the world's current oil production (and almost 93 percent of its potential production reserves) are controlled by the nations... most likely to be afflicted with political, social, and thus economic instability. (Barber, 42, 48)

Excessive oil consumption is bad for America, and it is bad for other nations. But we seem to ignore the injustices and take what we want, sometimes leaving environments and societies in ruins. By doing so, we turn a blind eye towards the ethical issues at hand.

America's need for energy is so strong that we readily compromise our moral standards to get it. What does this behavior—the altering of our moral compass to satisfy our addiction to energy—say about what America is willing to do for power?

What Hobbes called the quest for power after power that ends only in death has become the quest for oil wellhead after oil wellhead that ends only in economic and environmental bankruptcy... From the discovery of oil in western Pennsylvania just before the Civil War—a discovery that would make John D. Rockefeller's fortune—right down to the 1930s, exploration seemed to uncover new reserves far faster than an industrializing world used them up. Yet within a few years of the end of World War II, America found itself sliding into dependency, though reliance on imports was at first thought to be nothing more than a matter of convenience and efficiency. Why pump expensive domestic petroleum when foreign oil was so cheap? (Barber, 41)

What I find especially important here is the last sentence. Why get energy in America when foreign energy is cheaper? Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner himself, wrote of a similar preference for energy abroad: "For in a warm climate, no man will labour for himself who can make another labour for him. This is so true, that of the proprietors of slaves a very small portion indeed are ever seen to labor" (Jefferson, 52). The first sentence from Jefferson is almost synonymous with the last sentence from Barber: foreign petroleum and foreign labor are cheaper than domestic petroleum and domestic labor. Thus, our logic in both scenarios asks, "Why not take and use them?" In response, we followed this logic, and once we began to use them, we wanted more. The Atlantic Slave Trade began in the late 15th century and peaked in the late 18th

century; American use of oil began after the Civil War and “Today, despite a lingering business turndown and rollercoaster consumption patterns that have kept world oil production under the peak production levels reached in the seventies, American import dependency has remained well above 40 percent and in 1994 went, for the first time, above 50 percent” (Barber, 41). Pervasive in America’s addiction to both slavery and oil is an underlying theme posed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “All that we have only serves to make us ‘need’ more” (ibid, 60).

The argument of “If it is there, why not take and use it?” is one of a few ways people have tried to justify the innocence slavery and oil. Yet it is interesting that we feel the need to justify our actions and suggest our innocence at all:

This contradiction is... the paradox of innocent domination that we have seen time and time again wreaking havoc in the lives of the young and those who are marked as racially and sexually different in American history. As theologian and ethicist Miroslav Volf stated, assertions of innocence tend to implicate the subject in ironic forms of guilt. (Pahl, 173-4)

It seems that, deep down, we know that we are guilty.

Jefferson provides a good example of claiming innocent domination while being ironically guilty. Attempting to justify slavery, he writes:

[Of the] Romans, their slaves were often their rarest artists. They excelled too in science, insomuch as to be usually employed as tutors to their master’s children... But the slaves of which Homer speaks were whites... I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind. (Jefferson, 50-1)

By deeming black people inferior to white people, he ignored slavery’s injustices and instead rationalized it, granting slave owners a form of innocence.

Today we justify the use of fossil fuels by ignoring the damages they inflict upon environments and societies. For example, consider the following justification to use fossil fuels as energy sources:

If a bipartisan coalition of farm-state lawmakers has their way—and it appears they will—we will soon buy gasoline containing twice as much fuel alcohol as it does now... According to one set of calculations, we spend more calories of fossil-fuel energy making ethanol than we gain from it. The Department of Agriculture says the ratio is closer to a gallon and a quart of ethanol for every gallon of fossil fuel we invest. The USDA calls this a bargain, because gasohol is a “clean fuel.” This claim to cleanness is in dispute at the tailpipe level, and it certainly ignores the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, pesticide pollution, and the haze of global gases gathering over every farm field. Nor does this claim cover clean conscience; some still might be unsettled knowing that our SUVs’ demands for fuel compete with the poor’s demand for grain. (Manning, 44)

The USDA’s “claim to cleanness” justifies the use of gasohol and ignores the effects that fossil fuel use has on the global price of grain. Clearly, this is not an innocent energy source, but we try to make it sound like one. Also consider the justification of oil use in response to oil spills. The 1991 Exxon *Valdez* oil spill was rich in disasters:

By some accounts, the *Valdez* accident led to the death of more wildlife than any other human-engineered environmental disaster in U.S. history... Its impact on fish and wildlife continues today with tumors, genetic damage, and other effects. The spill led to losses of cultural wealth, including five state parks, four state critical-habitat areas, and a state game sanctuary... The spill took a significant toll on fishermen’s income, not to mention the less measurable effects on morale and emotional health. (McDonough, 36)

Even after this disastrous oil spill, America continued domestic drilling, and another disaster happened in 2010: the Deepwater Horizon Spill. According to White House energy adviser Carol Browner, Deepwater is the “worst environmental disaster the US has faced” (BBC). If Deepwater really is worse than Valdez, then its repercussions will most likely be more severe. President Obama said of the spill, “It is as enraging as it is heartbreaking, and we will not relent until this leak is contained, until the waters and shores are cleaned up, and until the people unjustly victimized by this man-made disaster are made whole” (ibid). This recognition of the injustices mankind wrought upon mankind illuminates the guilt of an oil spill. But will America’s addiction to oil overshadow the environmental, economic, societal, and emotional

losses caused by another disastrous oil spill? It overshadowed Valdez, and I wonder if it will ultimately overshadow Deepwater as well.

The guilt in slavery and oil, the knowledge that we are doing something wrong, caused fear and political division in 1850s America and causes fear and political division today. During 1850s America, the fear was that of a slave rebellion and the threat of a loss of slave labor property, and the political disagreement over slavery became so severe that it caused eleven states to secede from the Union. Jefferson expresses his fear of a slave uprising: "Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep for ever... I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution" (Jefferson, 52). Although he was a slaveholder himself and offered justification for slavery, he not only feared the possibility of a slave revolution, but he also revealed a deeper understanding of slavery's ethical issues by trembling at the thought "that God is just." The political division in 1850s America was stark: states formed the Confederacy on the basis of slavery, and—as much as history might want to forget—the Declarations of Causes of Secession verify this. The State of Mississippi, for example, states:

Our position is thoroughly identified with the institution of slavery—the greatest material interest of the world. Its labor supplies the product which constitutes by far the largest and most important portions of commerce of the earth. These products are peculiar to the climate verging on the tropical regions, and by an imperious law of nature, none but the black race can bear exposure to the tropical sun. These products have become necessities of the world, and a blow at slavery is a blow at commerce and civilization. That blow has been long aimed at the institution, and was at the point of reaching its consummation. There was no choice left us but submission to the mandates of abolition, or a dissolution of the Union, whose principles had been subverted to work out our ruin. (Hoemann)

The Confederacy wanted slavery; the Union did not. The Civil War was fought to abolish slavery, a practice that—compared to the rest of the world—America was slow to recognize as immoral, and became temporarily divided because of it.

While tensions in America are high right now, I doubt that we will fight a civil war over oil. Like slavery, we fear for the future—specifically, we fear that our energy-rich lifestyles, dependent on foreign oil sources, are not sustainable, and that we will deplete the world's resources. If, for example, Iran closes the Straits of Hormuz through which approximately 33% of the world's oil passes (U.S. Government), oil prices would skyrocket and cause serious crises. Furthermore, as finite sources of energy like fossil fuels become limited, "petrochemicals will become harder (and more expensive) to get, and drilling in pristine places for a few million more drums of oil isn't going to solve that problem" (McDonough, 32). In fact, we have already begun destroying natural, environmental gems—such as the Appalachian Mountains—for coal... and it is not solving the problem. Also, America's eating habits are a significant energy-related problem:

Ever since we ran out of arable land, food *is* oil. Every single calorie we eat is backed by at least a calorie of oil, more like ten... David Pimental, an expert on food and energy at Cornell University, has estimated that if all of the world ate the way the United States eats, humanity would exhaust all known global fossil-fuel reserves in just over seven years. (Manning, 42)

Intensifying the ethical issues of oil is the political divide: the believers and nonbelievers of climate change caused by oil use. In an article titled "Seeking Reality on Climate," Andrew Revkin responded to Former Vice President Al Gore and the organizers of the Climate Reality Project, who built a worldwide forum on human-driven climate change: "Our polarized politics and buffet-style media menu — in which anyone with a strongly held position can validate it with the touch of a remote control or mouse — guarantee persistent, even sharpening, divisions on greenhouse gases." (Revkin) In the 2008 Presidential Elections, we saw Republican candidates such as Sarah Palin overtly preferring oil use—"Drill, baby, drill!"—over renewable energy resources. Furthermore, many in America do not believe in global warming. According to

a Gallup poll in March 2009, “a record-high 41%” (Saad) of Americans believes the seriousness of global warming is exaggerated. This political division prevents America from investing in renewable energy:

Despite rapid growth in recent years, solar power accounts for less than 1 percent of electricity use in the United States. Solar power is more entrenched in European countries like Spain and Germany, which have promoted its development with strong incentives called feed-in tariffs that require electric utilities to buy solar power at a high, fixed price... China’s efforts to dominate renewable energy technologies raise the prospect that the West may someday trade its dependence on oil from the Mideast for a reliance on solar panels, wind turbines and other gear manufactured in China. (“Solar Energy”)

Just as America was slow to recognize slavery as immoral compared to the rest of the world, so are we slow to shift our energy dependence from fossil fuels to other renewable energies.

So, let’s recap: Slavery and oil as energy sources corrupt our moral compass, causing us to support injustices that we otherwise would not. We indirectly recognize our guilt, our understanding that our actions are morally corrupt, by justifying our actions and making a case for our innocence. Because we know what we are doing is in some way wrong, we are fearful of the potential repercussions caused by our actions; furthermore, the disagreement over the morally heated issue at hand causes intense political division.

Where does this leave us? In terms of slavery, the disagreement came to a close at the end of the Civil War: the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery. Another energy source was needed to replace cheap slave labor, and only after slavery was abolished did people seriously begin looking into other energy sources—i.e., oil:

In Cleveland, Ohio, an already deeply ambitious twenty-six-year-old John D. Rockefeller had become convinced that oil refining would become one of the most prosperous industries in the country... Every day throughout the late stages of the war, he talked “oil, oil, oil.” Weeks before April 1865, he had bought at auction the partnership of Andrews, Clark & Company. To his doubting critics at the time, this young man promised that this investment would be “something big.” (Winik, 368)

Only once slavery was abolished after a bloody and destructive civil war did people begin to seriously consider oil as an important energy source. This was the result of the ethical conflicts of slavery as an energy source discussed in this paper.

We have yet to see what the results of oil use will be. Oil may not seem as morally wrong as slavery, but oil is more complex than slavery. The ethical issues of slavery were apparent on the surface: one human objectified and abused another human to get energy from the land. Oil, on the other hand, is much more complex. It is not an immediate human-to-human relationship, and there are various, layers of insulation that distance us from the ethical issues at hand. Extracting oil from nature is a process that only environmentalists might deem an ethical issue. Oil spills are more readily recognized as ethical issues because people, especially fellow Americans, suffer from them. But even so, there is no one person to be held responsible for an oil spill, whereas the link between master-and-slave made the person responsible for the abuse—at least on one level—remarkably clear. In addition, various forms of energy contribute to global warming; therefore, it is easy to displace responsibility for the ethical issues of global warming. But deep down most people know that we are guilty, that we are doing something wrong, that causes feelings of guilt and attempts to prove our innocence.

I realize that lifestyle changes are hard. Even Al Gore, who vocalizes “the urgency of global warming and the need to reinvent the way the world produces and consumes energy” (Broder) has yet to harmonize his walk with his talk. After his global-warming documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, won an Oscar for best documentary feature, word got out that “Gore’s mansion, located in the posh Belle Meade area of Nashville, consumes more electricity every month than the average American household uses in an entire year” (The Economist). In response, Tennessee Center for Policy Research President Drew Johnson said: “As the

spokesman of choice for the global warming movement, Al Gore has to be willing to walk the walk, not just talk the talk, when it comes to home energy use" (ibid). I cannot help but see a similarity between Thomas Jefferson and Al Gore: both believed their respective energy sources were bad for America, but neither aligned their personal practices with their public opinions and hopes for America's future. They said one thing and did another. But unless the whole world agrees to use no oil, oil use will simply be pushed around geographically rather than abandoned. Until everyone agrees that oil dependency is wrong, we will use it. Furthermore, while lifestyle changes are hard, I believe that changing people's beliefs is harder. And even if everyone did agree with Jefferson during slavery, or with Gore today, the actions of these two men do not suggest that people would change their lifestyles to harmonize with their altered beliefs.

The last time, the United States fought a civil war to resolve an ethical issue. Our country was one of the last to abolish slavery. Now, we are faced with another moral issue: oil use. By understanding the ethical issues of oil, can we resolve the problem in a different way? Our decisions and actions explored in this paper seem to be driven by the desire for money and power. Slavery provided both, and oil provides both. Only when the rest of the world concluded that legal slavery was unethical did America fight to abolish it. But since the entire world has not deemed oil as unethical, perhaps we need a different approach: By making renewable energy options economically preferable, we can decrease our dependence on oil. Furthermore, if everyone better understood the ethical issues of oil, maybe America would have a greater will to do what is right. While economically attractive renewable energy and an understanding of oil's ethical issues will not resolve America's addiction to energy, maybe these changes will help us to be more morally consistent, unified as a nation, and confident and proud of the world today, the world that we will give to future generations.

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