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COMMON GROUND: AN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHIC FOR LOS ALAMOS NATIONAL LABORATORY

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ABSTRACT

Three predominant philosophies have characterized American business ethical thinking over the past several decades.

The first phase is the "ethics of self-interest" which argues that maximizing self-interest coincidentally maximizes the common good. The second phase is "legality ethics." Proponents argue that what is important is knowing the rules and following them scrupulously. The third phase might be called "stake-holder ethics." A central tenant is that everyone affected by a decision has a moral hold on the decision maker.

This paper will discuss one recent initiative of the Los Alamos National Laboratory to move beyond rules and regulations toward an environmental ethic that integrates the values of "stakeholder ethics" into the Laboratory's historical culture and value systems. These Common Ground Principles are described.

INTRODUCTION

"Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching, and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land. Finally, however, comes the day of reckoning, that is, the day when the long-desired goal of social stability becomes a reality. At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy."[1]

Garret Hardin describes this relentless march toward disaster in his famous article, "The Tragedy of the Commons."

What happens next? Each herdsman tries to maximize his gain and so decides to put another animal in the commons to graze. True, there is a down side, since overgrazing is beginning to be a problem. But

since he gets the full value of his additional animal and shares only a fraction of the negative problem of overgrazing, another animal is added to the herd, and another, and another, and another. Each herdsman comes to the same conclusion. Each herdsman adds more animals.

"Therein is the tragedy. Each man is locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit - in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."[2]

The commons is no longer a pasture. The commons is the planet. We breathe Eastern European air and the exhaust from my car lands on Canadian forests.

An environmental ethic is fundamentally an ethic of the commons. How should we behave? What are the right actions with respect to our commons? Can we avoid the tragedy?

There is room for argument among people of good will about how fast our commons is being despoiled, where it is leading, what should be the priorities in halting the destruction, and about whether technology is itself the problem or our main hope for solution. These things are arguable. That we are trashing our planet is not.

The purpose of this paper is to describe one of several initiatives the Los Alamos National Laboratory is taking to meet the challenge of these awesome facts. A group of seven employees called "Our Common Ground" has articulated a set of principles, a code to provide guidance to individual employees and our institution in being responsible members of the planet. Before describing this initiative let me try to put it in some historical perspective.

Historical Background

Three predominant philosophies have characterized American business ethical thinking over the last several decades. These may be briefly named the "ethics of self-interest," "legality ethics," and "stakeholder ethics."

The "ethics of self-interest" dominated the 19th and early to mid 20th century. Its spirit is captured in the old saw "What's good for General Motors is good for the country." This is Adam Smith's "invisible hand" that orders our social life so that what

maximizes self-interest coincidentally maximizes the common good. With the understanding that our resources are not inexhaustible and that private corporations are fouling the public nest, this philosophy has been declared bankrupt and is no longer tolerated by the public.

While this "ethics of self-interest" has all but disappeared from public (if not private) discourse with reference to corporate business enterprises, it has a cousin which is alive and well in parts of the scientific and technical community.

This "ethics of self-interest" in technology derives from the following tenants. The first is that technology is culturally and morally neutral. This is untenable. In fact, technology exists in a web of human culture, values, and roles.

The second tenant is the so called "technological imperative." This presents technological advance as "... a process of steady development dragging human society along in its train."[3] From this vantage point any social problems that arise are a result of cultural lag, a failure of the social systems to adapt quickly enough to the new technology. This position espouses the notion that progress and technical advance are roughly the same thing. Anything, anyone, or any institution that hinders technological advance is also hindering progress.

You can hear in this position "what's good for General Motors is good for the country." Simply substitute the word science or the word technology for General Motors and the underlying value is clear-- What's good for science (or some particular scientific laboratory or project) is good for the country.

This is the ethics of self-interest clothed in scientific rather than industrial garb.

A naked, unadorned version can be found in a guide book from the 1933, Chicago World's Fair. "...science discovers, genius invents, industry applies, and man adapts himself to, or is molded by new things." Everyone, all of us, are compelled to "fall into step with ... science and industry. Science finds--Industry applies--Man conforms."[4]

Science and technology are just recently getting the message General Motors got decades ago. The public will no longer blindly follow, conform and consent to be molded by science and technology. The public is losing faith in technological determinism.

Perhaps these notions are still around in the scientific/technical community because they serve a dual purpose. First, they serve a political purpose of fending off the growing trends in this country toward the democratization of science and technology. People who believe that "... the development of technology follows a smooth path of advance predetermined by the logic of science and technique ... are more willing to accept the advice of 'experts', and less likely to expect public participation in decisions about technology policy."[5]

Secondly, and more ominously, a belief in technological determinism absolves scientists from social accountability--someone who is merely following the inherent and inexorable logic of progress is difficult to hold accountable for the impact of that science.

The ethics of self-interest is no longer tenable for corporations or the science industry. Social expectations have moved beyond. Thus we move to the next phase of "legality ethics" or to what Irv Rosenthal,[6] Senior Research Fellow of the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, calls "legal legitimacy." This is the stance in which we say, "Yes, we have to be accountable to our employees and to public--we will scrupulously follow all the environmental laws and regulations, all safety rules and, in general, be good law abiding citizens of our communities."

This ethics of rules and legality is turning out to be a transitional phase in corporate ethics. While it is much more palatable to the public than the ethics of self-interest, it contains two severe, even fatal, limitations.

First, large portions of the public believe that the law itself does not meet reasonable social expectations. Laws are by nature backward looking, reflecting problems that arose, aroused a concern, survived the near-endless legislative review process, and became law. With our knowledge about environmental degradation moving rapidly, the laws can't keep pace. Many people believe that a corporation could be scrupulously keeping the law and still contributing significantly to our environmental problems, to the degradation of the commons.

The second flaw of "legality ethics" is related to the first, the unstated but implied corollary that if it's legal, it's ethical. If there is no law against it, it must be okay. Another bankrupt idea.

The third type of corporate ethics I term stakeholder ethics. The word "stakeholder" in this context means someone who has a personal or emotional concern, interest, involvement, or share. Put another way, anyone who is influenced by a decision is a stakeholder in that decision. Anyone who is a stakeholder in a decision has a moral hold on the decision maker. This meaning joins together those having a financial interest with those having an emotional/social interest. They are all stakeholders.

Perhaps the most telling indicator that an industry is moving toward a stakeholder ethic is its concentration on changing the industry's performance rather than the public's perception. Thus, stakeholder ethics move away from perceiving a problem as "the public acceptance problem" and the arrogance of viewing the public as irrelevant or even irrational because its members don't agree with the technologists.[7]

Another characteristic of corporate stakeholder ethics is the realization that one-way communication, simply supplying information, doesn't work. Communication also requires listening. This is moving beyond the often-held notion that the corporations' problems with their publics will be resolved as soon as they discover how to package the information so the public really understands. In this context really understanding means agreeing with the information packagers.

The final characteristic of this stakeholder ethics is a commitment to openness and respect and what Otway calls an authentic relationship with the organization's publics.[8]

The face of this new push for social legitimacy is apparent in two recent advertisements. Listen to this: "Our Pledge--The World we share is only given to us in trust. Every choice we make about the earth, air, and water around us must be made with the objective of preserving it for generations to come. This is how we will be judged. August A. Busch, III, Chairman of the Board & President, Anheiser-Busch, Inc."[9]

Similarly, the Chemical Manufacturers Association - "You're driving by that chemical plant, just like you do every day, when one of your kids asks you what they make in there and you answer that you're not really sure and it occurs to you that you probably should be." The advertisement goes on to say that the chemical manufacturers have been negligent in keeping people informed and in listening, and they are trying to turn this around through an industry-wide program called "Responsible Care."[10]

Common Ground

At the Los Alamos National Laboratory a small group of employees began working a year ago to articulate an environmental ethic for the Laboratory. The group calls itself "Common Ground" and is a committed, diverse, mostly technical group of employees who has received support and encouragement from management.

The process of articulating an ethic proved a difficult and time-consuming one. The difficulty cannot be attributed simply to the notion that writing by committee is inherently inefficient and cumbersome. Rather, it arose out of the process of becoming self aware and of thinking about institutional and social issues as they relate to the environment in new ways. Ideas that were privately held had to meet the test of group scrutiny and assumptions were uncovered.

This process is as important as the product. It is a process that is repeated over and over as more individuals become committed to the Common Ground principles and involved in its activities. The fact that Common Ground is a initiative of low to mid-level employees, as opposed to the more conventional top down approach will, we hope, accelerate this process.

The document itself is divided into three parts, a preamble, a statement of beliefs, and a statement of obligations, as follows.

OUR COMMON GROUND[11]

Preamble

The Laboratory is investing an increasing portion of its resources in activities that address environmental concerns. This investment reflects a growing awareness of serious environmental problems on our planet (acid rain, stratospheric ozone depletion, local pollution, global warming) and a recognition that we--like the country at large--have not always been sufficiently sensitive to the consequences of our actions. Indeed, it is clear that humanity's impact on its life support system must be assessed from a global, long-term perspective. As individuals, we must change our frame of reference and broaden our vision to include the entire planet and future generations.

We at Los Alamos want to help solve environmental problems, and we can contribute a vital tool--science--to the endeavor. In response

to an earlier national need for which our Laboratory was established, we used this tool for the development of nuclear weapons. While supporting the national defense will continue to be our primary mission, we expect to increase our efforts to solve other large, technologically complex problems facing the nation, such as environmental protection, health research, energy sufficiency, and economic strength.

We must also continually work to improve our understanding of the long-term effects of our diverse activities on the environment, sharing that understanding with our fellow citizens. To foster dialogue, we must guard against technical arrogance, acknowledging that environmental problems have a social dimension as well as a technical one and that the public must contribute to their solution.

We have met the challenges of the past, and we can meet the new challenges of the future. We adopt the following principles as a guide, realizing that we must continually review and improve them as we learn.

We Believe

- We must increase our sensitivity to and knowledge of the environment and its fragility.

- The Laboratory, as a national institution, can and should conduct appropriate research and development and serve as an example in promoting respect for the environment.

- Our concern for the environment must be an integral part of how we conduct all of our programs.

- We must address the environmental consequences of past Laboratory operations.

- Open and respectful dialogue with our co-workers, other organizations, and the public is essential.

- The Earth and all its current and future inhabitants are stakeholders in our individual and collective decisions and actions.

Therefore, We Will

- Demonstrate respect for the environment in our personal and professional lives and protect the health and safety of our neighbors beyond mere compliance with regulations and laws.
- Ascertain and weigh the true environmental costs of all our actions when making decisions on matters ranging from major research and development programs to recycling.
- Follow these principles in negotiating with our sponsors environmentally sound approaches to new and existing activities.
- Communicate openly and honestly with the public, conveying uncertainties as well as facts and judgments.
- Listen to and learn from the public.
- Search for opportunities to help our neighbors, our country, and our world with solutions to health, safety, and environmental problems.

The process of translating these principles into action will not be easy or non-controversial. The business practices of today and the rules of competition for dollars are too ingrained in the philosophies of the past. It is very likely that serious attempts will be made to ignore stakeholder ethics when stakeholders are other than our funding sponsors. This reality will be confronted by another, that of dialogue, education, and consciousness raising. Hopefully the Common Ground initiative developed at the Los Alamos National Laboratory is one piece of many, that together may help avert the tragedy of the commons.

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