

Sample Definition Argument / Toulmin model

Despite the fact that Chevron Corporation already operates a controversial refinery in the City of Richmond, they recently presented a proposal to activate a second refinery in the City of Martinez, less than 25 miles away. The city's leadership and voters should soundly reject this plan, because the damage to public health and the environment outweighs the alleged economic benefits.

Chevron has adopted the language of corporate responsibility in an attempt to win over the public's trust, but corporations cannot always be trusted to value the public good over their own profits. "For profit" means a company (like Chevron) is primarily driven by the pursuit of profit over the needs of the community or the individual if those conflict with the adopted business model. Profit motivations are often antithetical to public health initiatives, as they clearly are in this case. Profit does not always coincide with doing what is right, nor is it always economically feasible to do what is right (for example, if the cost of doing so would put the company out of business). Thus, it is inevitable that the responsibility of Chevron to maximize profits will sometimes come into conflict with its promise to act responsibly in protecting the public good. Of course, if Chevron were to abuse the public's trust too severely, it could also hurt the company's profits, so to some extent there is an alignment between the pursuit of profits and keeping the public's good faith.

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Response

Chevron claims that the proposal's economic benefits and its generous "corporate giving" programs will compensate for the negative public health consequences of living near an oil refinery, but is it really an economic benefit to the community if it must then spend more on healthcare and if locals have fewer years of life in which to enjoy that "economic benefit?" Pediatric asthma and cancer have been shown to occur at higher rates near refineries (Wiley, 2013) and are associated with enormous health costs, not to mention major quality of life issues and death ("Asthma in the US", 2011). According to the Chevron website in the "Community Health" section, Chevron's giving for health-related causes are directed at combating HIV and other diseases in Africa. Since Chevron's efforts do not focus on mitigating the issues caused by their own refineries, it is unclear whether there would be any net economic benefit after a thorough assessment of healthcare costs. However, it is possible that if Chevron created additional programs to combat asthma, cancer, and other diseases for which it is at least partially responsible, there might be a net positive economic effect. Such an assessment would also have to take into account other intangible consequences, such as local quality of life due to living with disease and/or poor air quality, for example.

Chevron further claims that it is committed to protecting the environment by preventing future oil spills, but the move to open a refinery in Martinez would do just the opposite. The San Francisco Bay is already a highly congested shipping area (Andrew Ross, 2015), and this site would be mere miles away from the busiest oil refinery in Northern California (Berton, Fagan, and Ho, 2011). Just as with land-based traffic, maritime congestion is associated with an increased number of accidents, especially when

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there is inadequate traffic control (Yip, 2015). If Chevron truly wants to reduce the risk of oil spills, it should seek to open new refineries near less busy ports, or perhaps invest in improving the shipping infrastructure to provide better traffic control in congested areas. This would show that Chevron's commitment to protecting the environment, even if it might compromise some of its profits.

Protecting the environment is a "core value" at Chevron, according to the "Corporate Responsibility" section of their website, but if the minimization of pollution were truly one of its foundational beliefs, it would not continue to profit from making the very ingredients of pollution. Fossil fuels are the primary source of greenhouse gas emissions (www.epa.gov, "Sources of Greenhouse Gas Emissions") and Chevron is in the business of refining and selling fossil fuels. Most people would probably not trust a cigarette company that said its core value was protecting the health of its customers. Likewise, when Chevron claims to be committed to the environment, it should be treated with extreme skepticism. In Chevron's defense, they have taken significant steps in reducing the greenhouse gas emissions associated with their facilities' operations and have also invested resources into research on fossil fuel alternatives. If they are able to shift their primary source of income from fossil fuels to something more sustainable, then their supposed core values might seem more sincere, but there are market realities that no doubt would prevent them from doing so at this point, even if they truly wanted to.

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Chevron will continue to operate and open new refineries, whether or not the City of Martinez approves its proposal. Denying the proposal will not protect Martinez citizens from the harms of greenhouse gas emissions, which know no municipal or national boundaries and have severe consequences for us all. These global problems are unavoidable as long as the world relies so heavily on fossil fuels, but Chevron could ameliorate the significant local problems addressed in this essay by simply building a new refinery in a less densely populated urban area. While it might cost more in transportation costs, a less populated area would have fewer people to suffer health problems, less shipping traffic to risk accidents, and would probably provide a more significant boon to the local economy than in the already prosperous Bay Area. We do not need another refinery in the Bay Area.

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