

At the Cinema: Aspiring to a Higher Ethical Standard

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Selected film scenes from feature films can offer exceptional visual and dramatic presentations of various aspects of ethics and moral reasoning (Champoux, 1999). Integrating such film scenes into classroom presentations of ethics and ethical dilemmas brings a dramatic new dimension to teaching and thinking about ethics. In this article I present an integrated set of classroom experiences centered on film scenes that show ethical dilemmas, moral reasoning, and the role of ethical thinking in the development of one's moral being.

I describe films and film scenes that readers can use as guides in showing the recommended scenes to their classes. These descriptions include position information for the scene on a VHS tape or a DVD. I also include a set of discussion questions that students can consider while viewing the film scene.

The film scenes focus the student viewers on ethical behavior, unethical behavior, or an ethical dilemma. *Ethical behavior* is behavior judged as good, right, just, honorable, and praiseworthy. *Unethical behavior* is behavior judged as wrong, dishonorable, or failing to meet an obligation. The judgment of behavior as ethical or unethical is based on principles, rules, or guides that come from an ethics theory, character traits, or social values (Brandt, 1996; Buchholz & Rosenthal, 1997; Rosenthal & Buchholz, 2000).

Three ethics theories that can act as guides to ethical behavior are utilitarianism, rights, and justice. Utilitarianism asks a person to examine the effects of the person's actions to decide whether these actions are morally correct under utilitarian guidelines. An action is morally right if its total net benefit exceeds the total net benefit of any other action. A *right* is a person's just claim or entitlement. The right can focus on what that person does or on the action of other people toward the person. Justice-based ethics theories use a comparative process, which looks at the balance of benefits and burdens among members of a group or resulting from the application of laws, rules, and policies. When people face an ethical dilemma, they can apply one or more ethics theories to resolve it.

Students will apply the ethics theories to various moral dilemmas shown in the film scenes.

The proposed classroom experiences have three purposes:

1. Stimulate and develop a student's ethical reasoning abilities.
2. Sensitize students to the nature of ethical dilemmas and moral reasoning within them.
3. Encourage students to aspire to an ethical standard that is higher than they or their organizations commonly endorse as ethical.

I recommend instructors follow three steps when using the film scenes: Step 1 asks students to complete a brief experiential exercise that presents them with an ethical dilemma. Step 2 presents students with a series of film scenes that show various aspects of ethical reasoning and moral dilemmas. Each film scene builds upon the previous one to develop more complex reasoning. Step 3 asks students to complete the same exercise used in Step 1 to see whether their ethical reasoning has changed after viewing the scenes.

STEP 1: ETHICAL DILEMMA EXERCISE BEFORE VIEWING THE FILM SCENES

You work in the same supermarket as your Aunt Emma, your mother's twin sister. Aunt Emma is a receiving clerk; you are a part-time stock clerk while finishing your college degree. You notice that she regularly takes a few cans of food from the cases after she accepts delivery. Your ethical values assess this behavior as theft. How likely is it that you would report her behavior to the store manager? Make some notes about the reasoning for your answer.

- Highly unlikely that I would report Aunt Emma's theft to the store manager.
- Somewhat unlikely that I would report Aunt Emma.
- Neither likely nor unlikely that I would report Aunt Emma's theft to the store manager.
- Somewhat likely that I would report Aunt Emma.
- Highly likely that I would report Aunt Emma's theft to the store manager.

Before showing the film scenes described next, instructors should ask students to present their reasoning about their choice. You can expect a bimodal distribution, where most say they would not report Aunt Emma; instead, they would discuss her behavior with her because she is family. Others will report Aunt Emma to the store manager.

STEP 2: VIEWING THE FILM SCENES

The following presents four film scenes in the proposed order of classroom use. Three scenes are brief and will fit well into a class schedule with two 1.25-hour meetings in a week. The scene from *Scent of a Woman* is longer and works well in a 2.5-hour class meeting in one week.

Each film scene section has a brief film description of the film story. Each scene description has location information on a DVD or a VHS tape. The descriptions also include some scene context information to help students place the scene within the film story. This is followed by some discussion questions that students can consider while viewing the scenes. These questions also help guide students' discussion after they view the scene in class. Finally, an analysis of the film scene closes each scene's section. Professors can use the analysis to debrief the film scene experience.

***Grumpier Old Men*, 1995, Director: Howard Deutch**

This sequel to *Grumpy Old Men* (1993) features the same two grumps: Max Goldman (Walter Matthau) and John Gustafson (Jack Lemmon). It is a light-hearted comedy showing the lifelong relationship of two next-door neighbors. They constantly argue and insult each other but are good friends, especially when fishing. Their lifelong goal: catch the biggest, most elusive catfish in the lake, Catfish Hunter.

Scene

DVD: Chapter 26, Something fishy to Chapter 27, Where he belongs (Stop: 01:30:15)

VHS: (Start: 01:27:14—Stop: 01:33:38—6 minutes)

These scenes start with an outside shot of John's house. Max and John approach John's car to go to Max's wedding. The scenes follow Max's marriage proposal to Maria (Sophia Loren). They end on the lake as Max realizes he and John are late for the wedding. Max races the boat to shore and they drive to the church. Max sings a verse from "Get Me to the Church on Time."

Discussion Questions

- Do Max and John behave ethically or unethically?
- Do they face ethical dilemmas? How many?
- What ethical theories (guidelines) do they use to decide a course of action?

Analysis

Max and John face an ethical dilemma on the way to Max's wedding. The chance meeting with Sven (James Andelin) poses the decision options of trying to catch Catfish Hunter or get to the wedding on time. Max resolves his ethical dilemma by noting that "weddings never start on time." Max clearly feels there are net benefits (utilitarian thinking) from going fishing, such as not letting someone else have the fish. He laments, "Some stranger with our fish mounted on his wall . . . It's too horrible to think about." Max's utilitarian analysis helps them decide to go fishing while Max's family and guests wait at the church in bewilderment.

John starts a rights-based discussion when he suggests they return Catfish Hunter to the lake. He notes that his father had tried for 20 years to catch the fish. John says, "Catfish Hunter deserves to be in the lake with Pop." Max reluctantly agrees. They resolve this ethical dilemma by returning Catfish Hunter to the lake.

The last ethical dilemma occurs when Max realizes they are now late for his wedding. They race to shore, drive to the church, almost causing an accident along the way.

***Shark Tale*, 2004, Directors: Vicky Jenson, Bibo Bergeron, and Rob Letterman**

Unable to accept his father Don Lino's (voice over by Robert De Niro) orders to kill and eat fish, Lenny (voice over by Jack Black), a vegetarian shark, leaves home. Lenny meets Oscar (voice over by Will Smith), a whale tongue scrubber at the local whale wash. Oscar has successfully presented himself to the reef community as a whale killer by lying about killing Lenny's brother Frankie (voice over by Michael Imperioli). The film comes to a predictable happy, emotional ending accompanied by exquisite animation, staging, and music.

Scene

DVD: Chapter 7

VHS: (Start: 00:23:52—Stop: 00:26:36—3 minutes)

This scene starts with a wide restaurant shot and zooms to the table where Don Lino dines with

his two sons. It follows the discussion between Oscar and Angie (voice overs by Renée Zellweger) about how her pink pearl will get Oscar the \$5,000 he owes Mr. Sykes (voice over by Martin Scorsese). This scene ends after Don Lino tells Frankie to show his brother around the reef. The film cuts to the racetrack where the sea horses leave the starting gate.

Discussion Questions

- Assess Lenny behavior and the Shrimp's (voice over by David Soren) behavior. Does the Shrimp experience an ethical dilemma while lying to Don Lino? Does the Shrimp behave unethically by lying? Why or why not?
- What type of dilemma does Lenny experience while trying to not eat the Shrimp as directed by his father? What is the basis of his dilemma?
- Is Lenny strongly committed to his values? What is the evidence in the scene?

Analysis

The Shrimp lies endlessly, telling a string of stories about working a double shift to help raise his late sister's son who has lost his arms. He does not appear to experience an ethical dilemma (cognitive dissonance) while lying. The Shrimp's almost believable complex story flows from his mouth as if he had rehearsed it many times. Lenny reacts emotionally to the Shrimp's story as Don Lino stares in apparent disbelief.

Instructors can query students about the Shrimp's behavior. He is lying. Is lying wrong? This should get many different responses, but the most likely one is that lying is acceptable because the Shrimp wants to save his life. Besides, students will say, "who will get hurt by lying," and "he will die if he does not lie." Many students will present a utilitarian analysis without giving it a label.

Lenny's behavior sharply contrasts with the Shrimp's behavior. Don Lino does not yet know that Lenny is a vegetarian, a revelation that appears later in the film. Don Lino says, "But you . . . I'm hearin' things," implying an unspecified suspicion about Lenny.

Lenny's values guide his behavior in the same way that ethical values guide a person's behavior. We learn much later in the film that Lenny becomes nauseous from the taste of fish. Ask students to recall Lenny's arguments about not eating the Shrimp. He creates a story about the high caloric content of shrimp. He also notes that he is on a diet.

Lenny lies to his father and passionately holds to

his values. The ethical dilemma for Lenny: tell the truth about his vegetarian preferences or lie and not eat fish.

Scent of a Woman, 1992, Director: Martin Brest

Young Charlie Simms (Chris O'Donnell) wants to earn extra money over Thanksgiving weekend for airfare to go home during his Christmas break. He becomes a guide and caretaker for ill-tempered, retired, Lt. Colonel Frank Slade (Al Pacino), who is blind. Charlie, from Gresham, Oregon, is quiet and reserved and has had little experience with the opposite sex. He attends the exclusive Baird Preparatory School on a scholarship. His wild New York City weekend with Frank Slade bonds them forever.

Charlie and another student, George Willis, Jr. (Philip Seymour Hoffman), had seen three students vandalize the headmaster's new Jaguar. Under repeated questioning by the headmaster, neither Charlie nor George identifies the students. The headmaster pressures Charlie by noting that his career depends on the headmaster's support for him to go to Harvard University.

Scene

DVD: Chapter 12, An Opening Meeting to Chapter 14, The Disciplinary Committee's Decision (Stop: 02:28:30)

VHS: (Start: 02:12:22—Stop: 02:29:06—17 minutes)

These scenes start with Mr. Trask (James Rebhorn), the headmaster, walking down the aisle of the school's chapel. The setting is the joint faculty-student hearing called by Mr. Trask to settle the vandalism incident and decide Charlie's and George's fate. These scenes are at the end of the film, after Charlie and Lt. Colonel Slade return from their New York City weekend. They end after Charlie and Slade leave the chapel surrounded by cheering students. This sequence has some R-rated language.

Discussion Questions

- Does George Willis, Jr., behave ethically or unethically?
- Does Charlie Simms behave ethically or unethically?
- Do other people (Mr. Trask, George Willis, Sr. [Baxter Harris], committee members) in these scenes behave ethically or unethically?

Analysis

George Willis, Sr., coerces George Jr. to testify to avoid expulsion. Notice that George Jr. starts to lie

about his vision, but his father pressures him to continue. George Jr. clearly faces an ethical dilemma that he eventually resolves by giving shaky testimony about the students' identity. Although he identifies the students, he does so under duress. Ethical behavior is always freely chosen behavior that features no coercion other than a person's values.

Charlie Simms chooses not to identify the students, although he likely will pay a high price: expulsion from the school. Mr. Trask pressures Charlie, but he stays with his beliefs and values. Charlie answers the questions to the letter and no more. He says that the students "were the size and shape . . . of most any Baird student, Sir." Charlie Simms shows us what moral philosophers mean by "freely chosen ethical behavior."

The headmaster does not want to punish George Willis, Jr., although George Jr. has given some testimony showing his knowledge of the event. Perhaps Mr. Trask faces an ethical dilemma. George's father is a big donor to the school.

Frank Slade lies about knowing Charlie's parents. He asks Mr. Trask whether they are under oath. Trask says there are no oaths. This might have cleared the way for him to lie, justifying it with a utilitarian ethical view. Slade likely perceives greater net benefits for Charlie if he lies than if he does not.

These scenes pose a larger ethical dilemma. The headmaster is hurt by the vandalism, raising the issue of whether Charlie has a moral responsibility to identify the students. Instructors should try to get some focused discussion on this issue, because it shows the difficulty of ethical decisions. As Lt. Colonel Slade notes, "Taking the right path is too damn hard."

The Emperor's Club, 2002, Director: Michael Hoffman

William Hundert (Kevin Kline), a professor at Saint Benedict's Academy for Boys, believes in teaching his students about living a principled life. He also wants them to learn his beloved classical literature. New student Sedgewick Bell (Emile Hirsch), challenges Hundert's principled ways. Bell's behavior during the 73rd annual Mr. Julius Caesar Contest causes Hundert to suspect that Bell leads a less than principled life, a suspicion reinforced years later during a repeat of the competition.

Scene

DVD: Chapter 18, The Candidate (Start: 01:32:23—Stop: 01:36:09)

VHS: (Start: 01:37:21—Stop: 01:41:08—4 minutes)

This scene begins with Hundert washing his face at a sink in the bathroom. He is the honored guest of his former student Sedgewick Bell (Joel Gretsch) at Bell's estate. Depaak Mehta (Rahul Khanna), Bell, and Louis Masoudi (Patrick Dempsey) have competed in a reenactment of the Julius Caesar competition. Bell won the competition, but Hundert notices Bell's earpiece. Earlier in the film, Hundert suspected that young Bell also wore an earpiece during the competition, but Headmaster Woodbridge (Edward Herrmann) urged him to ignore his suspicion.

This scene appears at the end of the film. Bell announces his candidacy for the U.S. Senate just before talking to Hundert in the bathroom. In his announcement, he carefully describes his commitment to specific values he would pursue if elected. The film continues to its end after this scene.

Discussion Questions

- Does William Hundert describe a specific type of life that one should lead? If so, what are its elements?
- Does Sedgewick Bell lead that type of life? Is he committed to any specific ethics view or theory?
- What consequences or effects do you predict for Sedgewick Bell because of the way he chooses to live his life?

Analysis

Sedgewick Bell continues his fondness for unethical behavior that he displayed earlier as a young student at Saint Benedict's Academy for Boys. Mr. Hundert describes a life philosophy built on virtue and principled values. Although Bell faced an ethical dilemma in his decision to cheat, his ethics view or theory lets him dismiss the dilemma quickly. He simply says to Mr. Hundert, "I live in the real world . . . where people do what they need to do to get what they want. And if it's lying and it's cheating, then so be it." Instructors might ask students, "Do Sedgewick's ethical standards suggest he is a symbol of a new generation of business people who will replace equally unethical figures such as Andrew Fastow and Richard A. Grasso?"

Also, ask students to consider some questions about Mr. Hundert's behavior. Should he expose Sedgewick's unethical behavior to the other guests at the banquet? Should Hundert accept responsibility for what Sedgewick has become? Should Mr. Hundert perceive himself as a failure as Sedgewick's teacher?

STEP 3: ETHICAL DILEMMA EXERCISE AFTER VIEWING THE FILM SCENES

Ask students to complete the ethical dilemma exercise presented earlier. You can then guide a discussion about any differences between the pre- and postviewing results.

CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

I presented the film scenes as an integrated set of classroom experiences, but they work equally well alone with a focus on a specific aspect of ethics that instructors would like to discuss. The film scenes can also be useful in a nonethics course where instructors want to introduce or reinforce ethical thinking and moral reasoning. Instructors

can insert a discussion of ethics theories and views into the classroom experience, but should be careful to define concepts before showing a scene so students can use those concepts in their analysis.

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