

## Movies and Morals: Energizing Ethical Thinking among Professionals

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the use of film in the administrative ethics classroom, with special attention to energizing the moral imagination of professionals. Challenged by a shift in student demographics reflecting the emergence of the new public service, instructors must consider alternatives to pedagogies based on normative and applied ethics. Approaches designed to stimulate the moral imagination of students (based on contemporary metaethical perspectives) need to be considered. Using his experience with movies in the ethics classroom, the author argues that films are particularly effective in energizing the moral imagination.

Today's public affairs program can no longer be treated as an arena in which the typical student is a practicing or aspiring *public administration* professional. The "ideal" of classrooms filled with students committed first and foremost to traditional public service careers has been compromised in many ways over the past several decades. As Paul Light found in his study of the "new public service," the "government-centered public service is gone for good" (1999). Most public administration/affairs programs serve a diverse market of individuals who are more likely to perceive themselves as professionals engaged in public service activities rather than as members of a distinct public service profession.

This situation poses a direct challenge to instructors who have long operated under the assumption that the public affairs classroom is a place to profess the values, virtues, and skills of the public administration professional. Many public affairs students now include people who identify themselves as members of other professions—school administrators, civil engineers, social workers—who happen to be employed by government agencies or nonprofit organizations under government contract. There are also individuals whose professional roles—community activists, not-for-profit managers, hospital administrators—place them in positions in which the knowledge and skills associated with public administration are relevant but not central to their professional identities.

This is especially true in ethics courses, in which the subject matter goes right to the core of what it means to be a professional. The major textbooks on public administration ethics (e.g., Cooper, 1998; Lewis, 1991; Denhardt, 1988) reflect the fact that most courses in this important area have moved well beyond the preoccupation with legal rules and requirements. But the changing nature of the student body has created a demand for approaches that address the concerns and needs of "professionals" in a broader sense.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I argue for an approach to the moral education of this broader class of professionals that stresses the need to energize their

“moral imagination.” Specifically, I contend that it is desirable and possible to reconfigure our ethics curriculum in public affairs in a way that both meets the needs of our more diverse student bodies and enhances the moral education of the traditional public affairs students who remain central to our programs.

In offering this alternative, I am not advocating the abandonment of current approaches found in most public affairs programs. My intention is not to devalue the importance of more substantive goals currently associated with the moral education of public administrators. Instruction in “regime values” (Rohr, 1976), “civicism” (Frederickson, 1982), the “benevolence of patriotism” (Frederickson and Hart, 1985, 1997), “constitutional competence” (Rosenbloom and Carroll, 1990), civic-regardingness (Bellone and Goerl, 1992), political reasoning (Green, Keller, and Wamsley, 1993), and other values associated with democratic public administration are critical to any discussion of public service ethics.

Nor am I setting out to challenge the usefulness of the case study or problem-solving approach in moral education. Case study instruction has a long history in the field of public affairs (e.g., Stein, 1952) and has witnessed a revival of sorts in recent years in schools of public management (e.g., Lynn, 1999).<sup>2</sup> It is used quite effectively for ethical education in other professional fields (e.g., Lynch and Kline, 2000), including playing a significant role in business school ethics courses. As a means for teaching ethics and other subjects, it has much to recommend it (see Boehrer, 1990-1991).

But both the professing of ethical values and the use of case studies have their shortcomings in meeting the needs of the broader professional population we are now facing. The challenge is finding an approach to the teaching of ethics that casts a net wide enough to address those needs, and for that purpose we need to focus on efforts to energize the professional moral imagination. In this paper I offer an example of how that can be done through the use of films in the ethics classroom.

The paper begins with a discussion of what constitutes a “modern professional” and posits an argument for paying special attention to them as a gener-

ic group. I argue that meeting the challenge of teaching ethics to professionals must be guided by both a clear purpose and attention to context. Focusing on the use of films, I cite various examples from my public administration ethics course, stressing how films can be used in three ways: first, to provide moral lessons; second, as moral case studies; and, finally, to energize what Robert Coles and others have termed the “moral imagination.”

#### FOCUSING ON PROFESSIONALS

Targeting the professional class for moral education seems somewhat peculiar in at least two related respects. First, the very notion of professionalism traditionally implies the attribution of moral character to those who carry out their occupations under the “profession” label. Being a “professional” has meant more—at least socially and culturally—than merely laboring for compensation or being a good craftsman or competent technician. The appellation has historically linked the practitioner with a set of extra-functional standards applied to the means and ends of professional conduct. That said, the high ethical expectations we hold for professionals argues as well for an even greater emphasis on their moral education.

Second, there are perhaps no groups more explicitly and systematically exposed to moral and ethical prescriptions than the modern professions—whether through the educational regimen they undertake to achieve or retain their status or through the highly visible “codes” that seem to define and justify their formal associations. Some would argue, however, that professional socialization and this reliance on codes are at best insufficient and parochialized foundations for ethical behavior.<sup>3</sup>

In the “classical” (and highly idealized) model of professionalism to which many of us aspire, the task of moral educators would hardly be as problematic as it seems today. A professional, in the classic sense, was a person committed to a noble life of service and, at times, sacrifice (Green, Keller, and Wamsley, 1993). Character and integrity were inherent characteristics of that historical ideal. Today’s professionalism reflects little of the ideal social virtues and forms that generated much enthusiasm and hope in the

first half of the twentieth century. The civic-minded professionalism of the Progressive era has been overwhelmed by careerism and the specialization of the modern industrial state (see Sullivan, 1995). The more recent emergence of a highly individualistic "free agency" approach to work in general—and to professionalism in particular—is likely to overtake communitarian-based efforts to reinstill a civic-mindedness among the technocratic professional elite. The operational norms of most professions in a free-agency world are significantly more self-indulgent (Pink, 1997). The focal points of ethical reference for professionals has shifted away from the public good toward a variety of more self-serving considerations. Fulfilling a public-regarding role has been replaced by a need to satisfy standards set through one's peers or employment contract (Green, Keller, and Wamsley, 1993).

Not surprisingly, this qualitative shift in professional ethics occurred simultaneously with the spread of professional status. The label of "professional" has been applied to and—more often—adopted by an ever-wider range of occupations. Much of this has been driven by the economic, social, and even political rewards that come from being called a "profession"; but the lowering of the traditional ethical barrier to professional status has a significant impact as well. John Kleinig's assessment of police ethics summarizes the situation. After reviewing the major ideal characteristics of modern professionalism, he turns to the less glittering reality:

If we start...not from what might be called the conceptual expectations of professional status—which emphasizes expertise, ethical conduct, learning and individual responsibility, features that might incline one to a positive view of professional status—but instead from the social manifestations of professionalism, there emerges a somewhat different picture: of elitism, paternalism, exploitation, alienation, and discrimination. As conceptualized, professionalization represents the idealization of a phenomenon whose actual social worth is considerably more problematic than suggested by the...[qualities] I have provided. These problems, furthermore, are not easily remediable,

being to some extent endemic to the social status sought by and accorded to professionals (Kleinig, 1996, 41).<sup>4</sup>

Complementing this trend has been a simultaneous proliferation and narrowing of the scope of ethical education and training for most professionals. There are courses on ethics for almost every professional degree curriculum—medical ethics, business ethics, public sector ethics, journalism ethics, police ethics, etc. In addition, there are a growing number of academic institutes and private consulting organizations devoted to questions related to professional ethics in specialized fields.<sup>5</sup> More telling on this point is the proliferation of "ethics codes" for every conceivable trade association and special interest that has pretensions to professionalism—from antiquarian booksellers and professional numismatists to pug puppy breeders and software engineers.<sup>6</sup>

The challenge I am addressing is not one of filling an educational void, but of helping to reestablish an approach to professional ethics education that stresses the qualities inherent in professionalism generally defined rather than professionalism as narrowly practiced. This effort is not the product of nostalgia for the historical roots of civic professionalism, although there is something emotionally inviting about the romantic view of professionalism that informed the Progressives and others. Instead, there are quite practical contemporary reasons for redirecting our energies to this end.

First, the specialized approach to professional ethics raises the possibility of supporting myopic standards that conflict with more widely held values and norms. The conduct of the infamous Tuskegee study is perhaps the best-known historical example. For many it reflected an arrogant assertion of professional power, perhaps made worse by an equally arrogant defense based on then-professionally accepted (i.e., ethical) standards. Or consider the recent debate within the medical community over the use of research tests in developing countries using methods and means that would be ethically unacceptable in the developed countries that fund them (Lurie and Wolfe, 1997; Angell, 1997; and Varmus and Satcher, 1997). In both instances, which

many have seen as related, the narrower ethical standards of the medical research profession came in for severe criticism in light of standards that called for a more public-regarding position by the researchers and their funders.

Second, many of today's professionals rarely work in specialty-based isolation. The ethics of a wider range of colleagues, clientele, regulators, and competitors pose challenges to the more specialized perspective. Consider, for example, the problems faced by a legal profession burdened with ethical norms still firmly rooted in the formalities of the courtroom. It is not uncommon for those trained in law to find themselves in positions that rarely involve courtroom engagement or traditional attorney-client relationships. This is especially true for lawyers who enter middle-management positions in government or corporations where a commitment to professionalism in their relationships with other actors is perhaps more relevant than any special knowledge of the law.

Third, the increasingly complex nature of their jobs frequently challenges the appropriateness of a specialized approach to ethics that professionals might receive in their formal training or previous work experience. Managed care and other changes in the economics of health care have turned many physicians and nurses into administrators (Sullivan, 1999); staff cutbacks and downsizing in legal firms have forced lawyers to take on additional functions even as they remain within their traditional arena of activity; and professional social workers are coming to accept their role as paternalistic law enforcers as well as service providers (Mead, 1997).

Finally, it is more difficult for individuals to ethically separate their personal from their professional lives. Despite a longstanding and still widely accepted norm that articulates a separation of one's private and public (i.e., workplace) lives, there is a growing movement toward a more holistic perspective that assesses people on their "character" on and off the job as well as their on-the-job performance. It is a movement evident in the renewed academic interest in virtue ethics, the popularity of Stephen Covey's philosophy of life and work, and large numbers of individuals who turn out for "Promise Keepers" and similar rallies. In this context, the nar-

rower standards of professional conduct that have dominated in the post-World War II era are being challenged.

What emerges from all these developments is a common set of conditions shared by a growing number of practitioners who regard themselves, and are regarded by others, as professionals. While in the past there was a professional class defined by its distinctive ethical standing, today we are faced with a large segment of the population that is nominally professional but lacks the common ethical core that its status begs for. William Sullivan's insightful analysis of this situation notes that there is more at stake here than the collective soul of America's professional class. With our growing reliance on the expertise of many of these professionals, it is in the collective interest of society to address the moral education of this powerful segment of our population. It is the agenda that should shape the moral education of today's professionals.

#### THE PURPOSE AND CONTEXT FOR EDUCATING PROFESSIONALS

Two factors should be driving decisions about the moral education of professionals: purpose and context. Purpose relates to what we as educators of professionals seek to achieve. Context involves more mundane determinations.

The purpose of moral education has typically followed an instructor's decision about which aspect of ethical studies is most relevant for students. Although ethical studies can be sliced many ways, the salient distinctions today are among normative ethics, applied ethics, and metaethical studies. In public affairs, normative and applied approaches have dominated the ethics curriculum.

The normative ethics perspective stresses responses to the substantive and substantial issues facing public administrators—issues of right and wrong behavior, of the benefits and costs of value systems, of what it means to be a good or competent public manager, and of what it takes to be benevolent, equitable, civil, just, fair, and all the other standards to which public servants should aspire. Much of the scholarly attention paid to ethics in public affairs focuses on these normative issues (for example, see Garofalo and Geuras, 1999), and it is

not surprising that most texts for public affairs ethics courses concentrate on helping students understand the many (normative) ethical options and how to deal with them (see Cooper, 1998; Lewis, 1991).

The applied ethics approach is associated with a problem-solving view of ethical studies and is closely linked to the use of case studies in the ethics classroom. Those adopting this approach do so as either an extension of the normative ethics perspective (Gutmann and Thompson, 1997; Pasquerella, Killilea, and Vocino, 1996), or on the assumption that ethics (and other forms of relevant knowledge) emerge from practice rather than from some abstract principles (see Hummel, 1991).

The metaethical approach is inherent in both normative and applied ethics, but the kinds of "second-order" questions it raises—Is it possible to be ethical? What is the point of ethics? What is the nature of ethical or moral behavior? What do we mean when we say something is "right" or "wrong"?—are typically perceived as too abstract and theoretical to be directly relevant or appropriate for public affairs practitioners.

Nevertheless, recent metaethical scholarship has generated interest in a different approach to ethics education that focuses student attention on just those kinds of issues. For example, a new understanding of the connection between emotions and ethical reasoning has rekindled interest in the role of sentiment, empathy, and feelings in shaping human behavior, including how we make moral choices (see Wilson, 1993; Vetlesen, 1994; May, Friedman, and Clark, 1996; Johnson, 1987; Lakoff and Johnson, 1999). Reflection, rather than articulation or application, is the action verb in this approach. The idea of ethics education as the energizing of the "moral imagination" has emerged as a central concept. Ethical thinking is not the search for universal rules or strategies for applying them. Instead, it involves our ability to creatively extend our imaginative sense of morality to situations in which existing rules do not easily apply. "Our moral understanding," argues philosopher Mark Johnson, "is fundamentally imaginative in character" (Johnson, 1993, 189).

The link between moral imagination and ethical thinking is hardly new; it has its roots in Hellenistic

philosophy (Nussbaum, 1986, 1994) and remains an important feature of the relationship between the narrative arts and moral philosophy. What is new is the growing scientific support for this linkage, derived from neuropsychological and cognitive science research (e.g., Flanagan, 1991; Damasio, 1994). Controversy still surrounds the scholarship connecting ethical thinking to bodily functions (see Held, 1996), but that ongoing debate has not halted the development of new pedagogical approaches to moral education based on the moral imagination thesis.

The context factors are as important as purpose in the case of professional ethics, and to some extent can trump whatever purpose the instructor tends to favor. A handful of programs and schools have the luxury of being selective in their admissions and specialized in their curriculum. A program that admits only a dozen students each year for a curriculum focused on city management is more likely to find the normative and applied ethics approaches desirable as well as feasible. Most programs, however, are subject to the student demographic trends discussed at the outset of this paper.

In my case, the context is typically a class of twenty to twenty-five mid-career managers working for state, local, or not-for-profit agencies in New Jersey. They are enrolled in a master's degree program conducted in an "executive" format—that is, weekly sessions held Friday afternoons and Saturdays at an off-campus site over a two-year period. The students go through the program as a single cohort; all take the same courses at the same time. The ethics course is usually offered in the third "semester" of the program and meets for at least 42 classroom hours during that time.<sup>7</sup>

Although the students have much in common when it comes to type of employers, they differ significantly in terms of professional identification. A typical class is likely to include students who identify themselves as nurses, teachers, pharmacists, accountants and auditors, village administrators, hospital administrators, social workers, and even TV producers. There are usually a number of law enforcement professionals, but even within this group the different professional identities are significant. For example, it matters whether they regard themselves

as probation officers, corrections officers, or juvenile officers. And for uniformed police the distinctions among city police, county sheriff officers, and state patrol personnel are significant. Engineers from the transportation department have a professional identity quite different from those working for the environmental protection agency, and administrators of different residential institutions perceive themselves as experts in managing facilities for their special populations (e.g., the developmentally disabled, the elderly).

There are, of course, some crosscutting ethical concerns. State regulations and ethical codes form a common "problem" for all state and most local employees, and there is a common perspective on law enforcement ethics, at least among the uniformed police. But the primary commonality is their enrollment in the executive curriculum and a sense of all being professionals who are one way or another associated with the public service. This has proven to be the perfect setting for the agenda of developing an ethics course for "professionals in general."

#### THE USES OF FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

The decision to use films in the executive program ethics classroom at Rutgers came in 1994, but not as a result of the kind of pedagogical analysis proffered in this paper. Rather, it developed from the realization that I was constantly referring to movie plots and scenes during class discussions as a means for finding some common experiential grounds to make my points about ethical issues. Earlier versions of the course relied on loosely structured lectures based on assigned readings. While touching on a particular point in the lecture, I would reach out for examples based on personal experiences, student comments, some case referred to in the readings, or a recent relevant news event. Every so often, movies provided useful examples.

By chance, one particular movie released in 1992—*A Few Good Men*—generated some heated and insightful discussions that proved more valuable than many of the points in my lectures. Issues of loyalty, lying, character, and integrity were more poignantly and pointedly brought to the fore—and what was merely a course on ethics was trans-

formed into an intellectual and social experience for instructor and student alike.

I decided to experiment in the spring of 1995 by restructuring the course in a way that made specific films central to both class discussions and essay assignments. The recent video release of *Schindler's List* (1993) provided a significant launching point for the course. Students were contacted prior to the winter break and told of their first assignment in a class that they had yet to attend. They were asked to screen *Schindler's List* over the break and write a five- to seven-page essay addressing the question of whether Oskar Schindler was an "ethical person." Despite some initial grumbling about having to give up part of their vacation time to view a film many had avoided seeing, the results at the first class session in January marked an immediate transformation of the course. Within a year, movies such as *Music Box* (1990) and *Quiz Show* (1994) had been added to the list of required screenings, and the course began to be driven by a logic quite different from the more traditional format I had been following. It was at that point that I realized that the use of film in the ethics classroom could serve to do more than merely offer lessons in morality or exercises in applied ethics.

Of course, using the popular film in the classroom is not uncommon. There are entire curricula as well as specific courses devoted to film studies. For many of these courses the motion picture is regarded as either art form or artifact (Jarvie, 1978). While films are important as a subject of study, my interest was in their use as a pedagogical tool in the ethics classroom. In an effort to understand the impact the films were having, I applied the previously cited distinctions among normative ethics, applied ethics, and metaethical studies to the uses of the film in moral education. Thus, a motion picture can be used in the ethics classroom as (1) a moral lesson, (2) a moral case study, or (3) a moral energizer.

#### *Film as Moral Lessons*

In 1978, author and critic John Gardner published his controversial *On Moral Fiction* in which he posits moral purpose as the only true measure of art. For Gardner, good art—art worthy of the name—"is

moral: it seeks to improve life, not to debase it... That art which tends toward destruction, the art of the nihilists, cynics, and merdites, is not properly art at all" (Gardner, 1978, 5-6). Gardner applied this standard to popular media as well as to traditional forms:

[T]elevision—or any other more or less artistic medium—is good (as opposed to pernicious or vacuous) only when it has a clear positive moral effect, presenting valid models for imitation, eternal verities worth keeping in mind, and a benevolent vision of the possible which can inspire and incite human beings toward virtue, toward life affirmation as opposed to destruction and indifference (18).

Whether one stands with or against Gardner on this issue, he does point out that all forms of fiction (at least those with some semblance of a plot)—whether written or staged, whether on paper or in film—can be approached as a moral statement (also see Nussbaum, 1985). If this is the case, then the use of film for moral education purposes would seem obvious: find motion picture expressions of morality and use them as lessons to be discerned or models for students to emulate.

There is clearly no shortage of films in which good is triumphant over evil, or in which ethical behavior is rewarded and immoral behavior is punished. The studio system and its legacy of genre formula films provide a rich inventory of highly moral tales, some of them quite useful as morality plays. And even after the studio system had run its course, Hollywood continued to produce the genre films as a low-risk approach to surviving the onslaught of television. But morality plays produced through the various genres<sup>8</sup> are rarely the kind of material that holds the attention of—or poses ethical challenges for—more sophisticated viewers. Although well-educated adults might enjoy *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) or the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977, 1980, 1983) for their entertainment value, efforts to transform the plots of these movies into relevant models for professional behavior will prove difficult, if not completely fruitless.

This is not to say that films cannot potentially inspire more ethical behavior. Films using a bio-

graphical format—from those based on “real life” (*Knute Rockne, All American*, 1940; *Gandhi*, 1982) to those lives created for the screen (*It’s A Wonderful Life*, 1946)—can play such a role. But the value of such “model lives” for professionals may depend more on questions raised about how their “real life” (assuming the protagonist had one) differs from the fictionalized version. Consider, for example, the first film assigned for my ethics class, *Schindler’s List* (1993). The inspirational theme in that movie—the transformation of this amoral/immoral Nazi Party member into a savior of 1,100-plus Jews—is obvious to all and comes through clearly in most class discussions. But when I asked my students to answer the question “Was Oskar Schindler an ethical person?” the moral lesson of the film was radically altered. The model life of the film thus became a closely examined life,<sup>9</sup> and the issue of what it means to be an “ethical” person became central to class discussions.

#### *Film as Moral Case Study*

Another potential use of the film in the ethics classroom would be as a dramatized case study. As previously noted, the use of the case study in the teaching of policy and administrative ethics is widespread and effective (see Gutmann and Thompson, 1997; Pasquerella, Killilea, and Vocino, 1996), and extending that method through the use of movies would seem natural. But here the film industry disappoints, for what they produce and market are typically designed to meet genre standards rather than to recreate realistic situations.

Consider the example of *Outbreak* (1995), a movie “loosely based”<sup>10</sup> on *The Hot Zone*, a nonfiction work by Richard Preston that focused on the work of investigators and decision-makers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other public health organizations (Preston, 1994). Whether intentional or not, Preston’s book is an excellent case study of ethical dilemmas and choices made by a variety of people facing critical conditions. To Preston’s credit, he presented the case as an engaging thriller that was difficult for readers to put the book down despite graphic, “scary” depictions throughout. The book’s potential as a script was obvious enough for Robert Redford to purchase the

movie rights and hire director Ridley Scott to direct it. However, before that “property” could be brought into production, the making of *Outbreak* was underway—a successful preemptive strike in the film industry.

The result was a story that met the needs of filmmaking, but at a substantial cost in terms of content. Preston not only complains about being “ripped off” and unpaid, but also frowns at what *Outbreak* did to the “science” of *The Hot Zone*. Just as tragic was the treatment of the realistic ethical case study at the hands of *Outbreak*’s creators. But as the “case study” value of the story went down, its critical acclaim rose. Consider the following comment by one critic:

“Outbreak” is an absolute hoot thanks primarily to director Wolfgang Petersen’s rabid pacing and the great care he brings to setting up the story and its probability. Never mind that in the race to beat Ridley Scott’s *Hot Zone* to the screen, scenarists Laurence Dworet and Robert Roy Pool relied on clichés and left plenty of plot holes. But they have injected the dry, potentially bewildering material with humor and a sense of urgency (Kempley, 1995).

But it was Roger Ebert’s very personal reactions that spoke directly to what happened to *The Hot Zone* specifically and to what any potential “case study” faces when put to celluloid:

*Outbreak* is the kind of movie you enjoy even while you observe yourself being manipulated. The [Dustin] Hoffman character has been recycled out of dozens of other movies; he’s the military version of that old crime standby, the Cop With a Theory No One Believes In. [Donald] Sutherland plays a role so familiar that he, himself, can be seen playing the flipside of the same character in a Soviet uniform in the current HBO movie *Citizen X*. But the roles are well written and acted, and Morgan Freeman, as a general caught in the middle, brings something quite real: a general trapped between obeying instructions and his own better instincts. It is a Hollywood law these days that all thrillers end with a chase. Mere dialogue-driven endings are too slow for today’s

attention-deprived audiences. I am not sure I believed the helicopter chase sequence in *Outbreak*, and I am sure I didn’t believe the standoff between a helicopter and a bomber (in a scene with echoes of *Dr. Strangelove*). But by then the movie had cleverly aligned its personal, military, medical and scientific plots into four simultaneous countdowns, and I was hooked (Ebert, 1995).

Interestingly, the one “moral lesson” highlighted in Ebert’s review—the ethical dilemma faced by Morgan Freeman’s character—was not part of *The Hot Zone* story. Instead, it fits well into the Hollywood formula approach that required such a scenario in order to meet genre requirements.

The important point here is that the current production values of filmmakers make it unlikely that movies can be a source of relevant case studies for use in the ethics classroom. Whatever the real or known facts of a case might be, the job of the screenwriter and director is to recast them into a form more suitable for the movie-going public. Thomas Schatz summarizes that form as follows:

- *establishment* (via various narrative and iconographic cues) of the generic community with its inherent dramatic conflicts;
- *animation* of those conflicts through the actions and attitudes of the genre’s constellation of characters;
- *intensification* of the conflict by means of convention situations and dramatic confrontations until the conflict reaches crisis proportions;
- *resolution* of the crisis in a fashion which eliminates the physical and/or ideological threat and thereby celebrates the (temporarily) well-ordered community (Schatz, 1981, 30).

There is, of course, case material that fits quite effectively in that format and can prove pedagogically useful. Two such movies have proven useful in my ethics courses: *Quiz Show* and *A Few Good Men*. Robert Redford’s *Quiz Show* has all the characteristics of the film industry’s formula while offering a highly relevant case for discussion. This is especially true when the film’s screening is associated with a

reading assignment such as Sisella Bok's *Lying* (1989) or David Nyberg's *The Varnished Truth* (1993). The implications of the quiz show scandals for American society may be overstated in other contexts, but in the ethics classroom they provide a foundation for discussions and insights into individual character and collective behavior that might not otherwise be broached. As a case study it typically proves fertile soil leading to discussions of still other cases, from Watergate to Iran-Contra.

Rob Reiner's *A Few Good Men* is a work of fiction, but it has the feel of a real-life case study and plays that role well in the ethics classroom. Issues related to professionalism and loyalty pervade the screenplay, and each character forms the basis of a case study unto him or herself. All this is developed within the context of the trial genre that has become so popular in recent years. In my classes I have used this film in a variety of ways: as the basis for group discussions, as the focus of an essay assignment, and often as the material upon which a take-home final examination is designed. In each instance, *A Few Good Men* has proven an effective case study—one that begs for emulation.

#### *Film as Moral Energizer*

It was the work of child psychiatrist and noted teacher Robert Coles that led me to see a different function of movies in the moral education of professionals. For Coles, the value of stories—not just the fiction of professional writers, but the narratives of everyday people—is not in the lessons expounded or the case scenarios they pose, but in the role they play in energizing the moral imagination. Taking his cues from writers such as William Carlos Williams, Ralph Ellison, and Anton Chekov, Coles approaches stories as a vehicle people use to relate to the world and reflect upon their experiences in it.<sup>11</sup> In Coles' view, the context and content of a story are not as important as the story's ability to stir those reflections. Applying this approach in the classroom, he found that

[C]onstructing a good reading list involves not so much matching student interests with the author's subject matter (though there is no rea-

son to ignore the pleasures such a correspondence can offer) as considering the degree of moral engagement a particular text seems able to make with any number of readers. "This novel won't let go of me," a college freshman said to me about [Ellison's] *Invisible Man*—and the student was white and from a wealthy, powerful family (Coles, 1989, 190).

This stories-based approach permeates much of Coles' writings on both children and adults (1986, 1989, 1993, 1997), but his first detailed examination of movies as a source of moral energy came in his 1986 work *The Moral Life of Children*. In that book he builds his appreciation of film on the comments of two young children—one black and one white—who were living through and actively participating in the integration of New Orleans' public schools. His interviews with both after a viewing of *A Raisin in the Sun* (1961) pointed to an impact that went beyond the film's explicit lessons about race and the human condition. The children also had a notable response to the personal situation facing some of the major characters:

These two girls had seen a movie and found in it not only what the critics had discovered, a frank public airing of the black ghetto experience; the movie also resonated with their experience as children growing up in the South, always strong on the matters of family and faith.... These two children may be regarded as having done precisely what Flannery O'Connor hoped readers would do with her stories. The white girl took a few seconds in a movie and made what she saw the basis of a vigorous examination: the risks of self-pity, the utter demands of religious belief. A movie gave her moral energy a chance to exert itself in her life; and neither race nor sociology nor geography nor theology nor psychology, nor the aesthetics of a film, quite accounted for what happened. The same held true for Ruby [the black child], for whom one fraction of a movie started some big thoughts indeed: the relationship between avowed religious conviction and the

everyday testing of its strengths, its vitality, its resistance to temptations this world constantly presents (1986, 63-64).

What Ruby and the white child engaged in was “ethical analysis”—an analysis “provoked by artistic expression” and leading to some very serious thought about right and wrong and the complexities of life (Coles, 1986, 64-65). Coles’ more general conclusions are worthy of repeating at length:

Perhaps the word imagination is...the one required to do some justice to us as moviegoers: moral imagination as it is lent energy by that inert celluloid going round and round for a hundred minutes or so. After those eyes have watched the hundreds and hundreds of frames that in their sum become a film—then the mind recovers the remembered words, the scenes that engage with a person’s own scene, his or her life-situation. An impression is left, perhaps, of one or another character—an impression that may linger and stimulate the viewer’s mind. It is not a matter of reflex reaction, a behavioral consequence of sociological and psychological stimuli finding their mark. Rather, those behavior stimuli are, not infrequently, ignored, or absorbed in some broader moral vision of things that even small children seem unself-consciously able to construct for themselves (1986, 76-77).

Coles’ comment about the power of films to energize the moral imagination of moviegoers does not discriminate among good movies and bad or among various film genres. Instead he focuses on the very personal experience that each person goes through in relating to the characters and scenes—the “life situations”—portrayed on the big screen. Thus, to the extent that a film contains characters and scenes that the viewer can identify with or relate to, it has potential value in the ethics classroom.

That fact raises the issue of which films actually meet those basic criteria—that is, of offering the spectator some basis for reflection and, if all goes well, some energizing spark for the moral imagination. Coles’ own focus on *A Raisin in the Sun* and

*To Kill a Mockingbird* (1962) seem obvious and relevant choices for his analysis because he is studying children in the South during the early period of court-ordered integration. Interestingly, he also refers to another popular movie released at the time—*The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and especially to the impact of John Wayne’s character (Tom Doniphon) on the children he interviewed. As in his choice of books for his college courses noted above, subject relevance was not as significant as “considering the degree of moral engagement a particular” screenplay “seems able to make with any number of” viewers.

Early in my ethics course I assign George P. Fletcher’s *Loyalty* (1993) to engage students in a discussion of the ethics of commitment and loyalty. Following Fletcher’s argument that there is an ethic tied to the “historical self,” I ask students to consider what “claims” various groups or communities have on their ethical standards and behavior. I’ve used a number of films to complement this assignment. One suggested in Fletcher’s text is *Music Box*, a relatively little known movie starring Jessica Lange as a lawyer who defends her father against charges that he committed war crimes as a young man in Hungary. She is eventually led to evidence that proves the charges true, and she is left with the dilemma of choosing between loyalty to her father and to the community she was raised in and to which she has devoted her professional life as a lawyer. I have also used Spike Lee’s *Do The Right Thing* (1989), Quentin Tarantino’s infamous *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Barbet Schroder’s *Before and After* (1996), and John Dahl’s *Rounders* (1998) for the same segment of the course. In their focus on the push-and-pull of personal loyalties and community values, all five films generate the kind of course discussion and essay responses that reflect the energized moral imagination valued by Coles.

Equally important, these reflections among mid-career professionals often go directly to issues of commitment, responsibility, and the need to understand the complex nature of their lives. Mike Newell’s film *Donnie Brasco* (1997) is especially effective in stimulating discussions about the dilemmas many students face between the demands of

their professional and personal lives—demands that take the form of ethical dilemmas each must resolve on his or her own terms. With a few exceptions, none of the students see themselves or their lives depicted on the screen in these movies. And yet they often feel comfortable identifying with and reflecting on the dilemmas facing specific characters—even those in *Pulp Fiction*! That a film can stimulate the moral imagination is not surprising; any good story should be capable of doing that. That such movies stimulate a discursive reaction—a willingness to engage publicly in ethical analysis and personal reflection—is a quality of film viewing that makes movies an effective tool in the ethics classroom (see Metz, 1982, part II).<sup>12</sup>

How useful or helpful this approach has been among the students is trivially reflected in higher course evaluation scores. The more important feedback has been anecdotal. The often-heated exchanges in class are indicators, and sometimes the less shy students volunteer that a few of their more silent peers were speaking out in class for the first time during the more intense discussions. Initial reactions during the course typically take the form of comments about how challenging—and difficult—the essay questions were. Exit interviews for graduating students conducted nearly a year later have rated the course among the most challenging and useful in the curriculum, and alumni—who often call with new movie suggestions—relate how they constantly reflect on the ethical issues on almost every key decision that crosses their desks.

#### CONCLUSIONS

In this general overview of my recent experience in the ethics classroom, I have stressed what I regard as the special needs of a very special population—the American professional class. It is a group of considerable stature and importance in our society, and yet one that has failed to retain the core of moral values that defined its emergence over the past century. The moral education of professionals should take higher priority among educators, especially in public affairs programs, where professionals are showing up in greater numbers each year.

My focus on movies as a principal means for accomplishing the moral education of professionals is informed by experience and the inherent value of popular films as a teaching resource. There are significant weaknesses in using films as either moral lessons or case studies—weaknesses reflecting the lack of appropriate movies that can be used in those roles. But the use of film as an energizer of the professional's moral imagination shows great promise in two ways. First, this approach depends on the quality of movie characters and settings rather than appropriate plot lines—and on that count the film industry continues to add to the wealth of useful material. Second, it's an approach that depends as much on the spectator as on the film. In that regard, professional students are no different than the vast majority of Americans who demonstrate a willingness to engage in an open discourse on what they see at the movie theater. The task is to create the educational environment for taking advantage of this situation.

#### NOTES

1. In his survey of graduates from the top public service master's programs, Paul Light found a significant gap between the perceived importance of ethics in the curriculum and the degree to which the programs met student expectations in that regard. This was especially true among those who graduated in the 1970s as compared with those matriculating in the early 1990s. Light notes that the difference between the cohorts is not due to enhanced instruction in ethics, but to the lower level of importance assigned to ethical matters by the younger group. See Light, 1999, 115-118.
2. Two major sources of public management cases are the Kennedy School at Harvard ([www.ksgcase.harvard.edu/](http://www.ksgcase.harvard.edu/)) and The Electronic Hallway based at the University of Washington ([www.hallway.org/](http://www.hallway.org/)).
3. For a critical assessment of the reliance on codes and other forms of institutionalized ethics, see Bauman, 1993, and Schwartz, 2000.
4. For a more general indictment of the professional classes, see Lasch, 1995.
5. For a sampling, visit [www.depaul.edu/ethics/](http://www.depaul.edu/ethics/), [csep.iit.edu/codes/codes.html](http://csep.iit.edu/codes/codes.html), or [www5.fullerton.edu/les/ethics\\_list.html](http://www5.fullerton.edu/les/ethics_list.html).
6. See, respectively, [csep.iit.edu/codes/coe/abaa-coe.htm](http://csep.iit.edu/codes/coe/abaa-coe.htm), [csep.iit.edu/codes/coe/png-coe.htm](http://csep.iit.edu/codes/coe/png-coe.htm), [www.pugs.org/ethics2.htm](http://www.pugs.org/ethics2.htm), and [www.acm.org/serving/se/code.htm](http://www.acm.org/serving/se/code.htm).
7. Until 1998 this involved weekly 3-hour sessions for 14 weeks. Since spring 1998 we have used a more intensive format involving 6 hours for 7 weekends, spread over the normal semester time frame. Another course is offered intensively on the alternating weekends.
8. The traditional film genres are noted as the Western, the gangster film, the hard-boiled detective film, the screwball comedy, the musical, and the family melodrama; see Schatz, 1981.
9. In addition to the film, students are encouraged to read supplementary material such as Thomas Keneally's novel *Schindler's List*

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(Keneally, 1982) or a supplementary "Teaching Guide" issued by the Southern Institute at Tulane University ([www.tulane.edu/~soinst/slindex.html](http://www.tulane.edu/~soinst/slindex.html)).

10. This is how Preston characterized the movie's relationship to his book in an interview found at [cool.infi.net/agent/prestoninterview.html](http://cool.infi.net/agent/prestoninterview.html). In fact, he called the movie a "rip off" of his book for which he received no credit or compensation.
11. Again, there was nothing new in this perspective. See the work of Martha Nussbaum cited previously.
12. This phenomenon is even more evident in the general public reaction to the TV miniseries "The Sopranos" (1999, 2000). Despite the horrendous nature of Tony Soprano's criminal activities, much of the show's popularity has been attributed to how much a large segment of viewers identifies with the choices he faces regarding his family and friends.

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