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USING FILM TO EXAMINE THE PLACE OF ETHICS IN BUSINESS

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INTRODUCTION

Although literature, particularly the classic novels, is increasingly used to illustrate various ethical theories, film is also useful to present ethical dilemmas in a context of business and society. Indeed, the use of film in business schools is another means to present a vocabulary of ethics and context for discussion.¹ However, there is a question prior to the teaching of ethical theories within the business environment: What relevance, if any, does ethics have in the practice of business? Students must see first that there is a place, indeed a

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¹ Shepard, J. M., M. G. Goldsby, and V. W. Gerde: 1995, "Teaching Business Ethics Through Literature", unpublished manuscript; McAdams, T.: 1993, "The Great Gatsby as a Business Ethics Inquiry," *Journal of Business Ethics* 12, 653-660; Kennedy, E. J. and L. Lawton: 1992, "Business Ethics in Fiction," *Journal of Business Ethics* 11, 187-195; McAdams, T. and R. Koppensteiner: 1992, "The Manager Seeking Virtue: Lessons From Literature," *Journal of Business Ethics*, 11, 627-634; Freeman, R. E., ed.: 1991, *Business Ethics: The State of the Art* (Oxford University Press, New York); Coles, R.: 1989, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Houghton-Mifflin, Boston); Derry, R. and R. M. Green: 1989, "Ethical Theory In Business Ethics: A Critical Assessment", *Journal of Business Ethics* 8, 521-533; Ward, R. J.: 1982, "Business in The American Novel: The Fictional Treatment of The Market Society," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 39(4), 195-200; Dooley, P.: 1980, "Nineteenth Century Business Ethics and The Rise of Silas Lapham," *American Studies*, 21(2), 79-93.

need, for morality in business, before a meaningful discussion of various ethical theories and their application to the business world occurs.

The issue of business ethics did not seem to exist in preindustrial days when actions in business were held to the same standards as actions in the home or the community. However, with the advent of widespread capitalism and industrialism, ethics came to be seen as separate from business; economic activities were considered outside the scope of morality. Thus, a paradigm shift occurred from the pre-industrial era to the industrial era — from the theory of moral unity to the amoral theory of business. Concerns about the morality of business are increasing.² Indeed, several scholars have challenged the supposed 'value-free' stance of organizations and business.³ Considering the growing concern of morality in business, a possible paradigm shift is presently occurring as well. The shift may be a return to norms that prevailed in pre-industrial days, although in a different context (for example, the firm's goals and/or responsibilities are more than just economics or maximizing profit).⁴

Film is powerful and useful as a pedagogical device to promote student understanding of the place of ethics in business. The role of ethics in business is examined through two distinct business paradigms: the theory of moral unity under which ethics and economics are intertwined and the amoral theory of business under which there is no connection between morality and business.⁵ The purpose of this paper is to encourage the use of film (and plays in eras before film) to explore the place of ethics in business. The first step, however, is to discuss the power of film as a medium to examine business values.

THE POWER OF FILM

The Advantages of Film

Novels have been used to illustrate various ethical theories and to guide dialogue about business ethics.⁶ This paper is more inclusive

² Shepard, J. M., J. Shepard, J. C. Wimbush, and C. U. Stephens: 1995, "The Place of Ethics in Business: Shifting Paradigms?", *Business Ethics Quarterly*, 5(3), 577-601; Collins and Wartick, 1995.

³ Scott and Hart 1989, Etzioni, 1988, Coleman, 1990, Selznick, 1993.

⁴ The history of the dominant business-society paradigms of preindustrial and industrial society — the moral unity and amoral paradigms, respectively — and the shifts between the two are discussed in Shepard et al 1995.

⁵ Shepard, et al., 1995.

⁶ See note 1.

and suggests that film be added to the arsenal of pedagogical devices for teaching business ethics. Film entertains people; it brings to life ethical issues. Students, employees, managers, and the public can relate to movies because film is an integral part of Western⁷ culture.

The advantages of using film to examine business values are similar to those for using literature.⁸ First, film provides texture and richness. Film reveals the situational context of a dilemma, the issues involved, the decision-making process, and the repercussions of actions taken with respect to the dilemma. This provides a rich backdrop from which to discuss a complex issue and the place of morality in business. Second, film helps students to understand better the rich context of a complicated, multifaceted situation. Third, in film, the issues seem less removed from 'real life' decisions, showing the characters as real people whose decisions affect others and are themselves affected by business decisions. Because of the richness of the characters, the bottom-line mentality often reflected in case studies is moderated. The fourth advantage of film is its ability to humanize the impact of ethical dilemmas in business. Fifth, the fullness and emotional appeal of film can stimulate the moral imagination, allowing students to see the bigger picture and the wide variety of options entailed in real life. Sixth, as the decision-making process is played out, film illustrates the ambiguity, uncertainty, and intricacy involved in ethical dilemmas. Finally, film enables students to see changes not only in the context of the film, but also in the characters as they respond to their environment. Ethical development and ethical dilemmas change over time, a feature of life which film aptly illustrates.

Success in the Classroom

From experience, using film in class is a powerful teaching tool to illustrate a theory or to analyze an issue. A film draws the student into the situation; one can sense the energy of thought as the students respond to the words and images of the characters and situations. The viewing of a film provides students with an exciting and engaging opportunity to grapple with concepts and theories. Film introduces characters in their business, social, and personal lives. The characters' lives and situations are typically portrayed over a long time period.

⁷ The use of the "West" or "Western," which is conventional, does not include all of Europe or even the entire western hemisphere. The reference is to North American and northwestern Europe — England, France, Germany, and the Lowlands (Wilson, J. Q.: 1993, *The Moral Sense* (The Free Press, New York) p. 194).

⁸ Shepard, Goldsby, and Gerde, 1995.

Students gain a sense of satisfaction from the experience as well. They previously may have sensed a moral dilemma upon viewing a film but may have been unable to articulate it. Students develop the ability to address the situation with a moral vocabulary and to delve deeper into the key issues.

When discussing the various plots and characters, the following questions may be addressed: How is either business paradigm illustrated? What are the beliefs and values of the characters? What philosophical approach to morality do the characters use? Do the characters behave morally? Why or why not? What would a deontologist do in the situation? A utilitarian? An advocate of virtue ethics?

Film helps students go beyond their previous ontological views of the actions of characters as being simply 'right' or 'wrong.' Students will often approach the instructor after class to discuss further the film or to ask for more information about the situation. When students become this active in discussions, both in the classroom and in the hallways, they are certainly applying and learning the concepts for more than just an examination grade.

PARADIGMS OF BUSINESS

To explore the business-society paradigms of preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial eras and the shifts among them, students require a working understanding of paradigms and paradigm shifts in general and of business-society paradigms in particular.⁹

A paradigm is a widely recognized set of views that "for a time provide model problems and solutions to a community."¹⁰ As such, a paradigm refers to the shared cultural understandings that define the place of social institutions in society and the relationship between social institutions and individuals.¹¹ Business-related paradigms ex-

⁹ Shepard *et al.*, 1995.

¹⁰ Kuhn, T. S.: 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

The example used in Shepard *et al.*, 1995, is "For example, our paradigm of the family shapes the way in which we understand the relationship between the family and education or the family and health care (Coontz, 1992). If we understood the family to be a completely self-sufficient entity, then any talk of public or even private schools would be anomalous, as would talk of a collective health care system. The family unit, however defined, would be *the* education and health care provider. For Americans of the 1990s, however, while family units are considered independent enough to discern one family unit from another, we recognize the larger interrelationship among such units and other social institutions, like education and health care systems. The family paradigm also informs the way in which we play our roles within the family institution as fathers, mothers, children, and perhaps grandparents, uncles, aunts, etc."

plain the relationship between business and other social institutions in the society; they are useful in clarifying the role of business as a social and economic practice. A paradigm for business activity defines “the relationship between business and the morality of the larger society.”¹²

Paradigms are not universal within cultures, and they are, by definition, dynamic over time.¹³ However, because the paradigm is a universal view that defines relationships and roles, all forms of business are seen as evidence of the dominant paradigm or if in contrast to the dominant paradigm, as errant.

There are two basic business paradigms — the theory of moral unity and the amoral theory of business. The theory of moral unity maintains only one set of standards for actions within a community; business is an integral part of the community life, subject to social and cultural expectations. In contrast, the amoral theory of business holds economic organizations exempt from moral constraints that other social institutions and individuals live by. The amoral economic model makes no reference to social value questions, asserts only technical, scientific or rational utility, and ‘sets aside the relationship of economic activity to values as a given.’¹⁴

The Theory of Moral Unity

The theory of moral unity maintains that “only one set of moral standards exists within a society.”¹⁵ In pre-industrial society, economic activity, like politics and religion, was embedded in the larger social fabric; business was seen as part of the community, integral to the web of social life linking community members.¹⁶ Such embeddedness meant that economic functions were subject to the same social and cultural constraints as other parts of the community. It was difficult for people to practice on a wide and public scale one set of ethical standards at church, in public office, or at home and a more permissive set of ethical principles at work — though, of course, many in business were unethical. The ethics of the society was considered to be the ethics of economic activity. Moral unity was the dominant paradigm because institutions were tightly interwoven.

¹² Shepard, *et al.*, 1995: 580.

¹³ Kuhn, T. S.: 1970, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

¹⁴ Elbing and Elbing, 1967, p.66.

¹⁵ Shepard, *et al.*, 1995:580.

¹⁶ Tommies, F.: 1957/1887, *Community and Society*, translated and edited by C. P. Loomis (Michigan State University Press, East Lansing, MI).

Evidence of moral unity predates the Christian era in the works of Aristotle.¹⁷ Although Aristotle held moneymaking in low esteem, he did advocate the holding of private property. Private property was thought to promote the economic system, and only then could the virtues be practiced and the community improved.¹⁸

A similar understanding of the relationship between business and society appears centuries later in medieval economic thought. Theologian-philosopher Saint Thomas Aquinas argued that economic gain was socially circumscribed by the doctrine of the just price and the prohibition on usury. While property and profit were not considered inherently immoral, their morality depended on the uses to which they were put. Moderate profits and property were morally sanctioned if they were shared with other members of the community in terms of charity and contribution to the public good.

This paper will employ several plays from the pre-industrial era to demonstrate the theory of moral unity. Films obviously cannot be used because they did not exist until the twentieth century. Plays, however, are a parallel medium to film, because they too are designed for a mass audience. For the Classical age, some Greek comedies reflect the theory of moral unity by depicting the lack of moral unity as an absurdity. Aristophanes' comedy, *The Birds*, is a valuable example of moral unity in society. The theory of moral unity persisted through the Middle Ages, as shown in Dante's *Inferno* (a poem rather than a play). Shakespeare's plays, such as *The Merchant of Venice*, are good illustrations of attitudes toward business and society in the pre-modern age.

The Shift of Paradigms

As Western thinkers grappled with the shift from the pre-industrial to the industrial era, familial, political, religious, and economic institutions underwent massive reorientations.¹⁹ For the first time, the individual's role in family, politics, and religion could be distinctly separated from his or her role in the economic sphere.

In *The Prince*, Niccolo Machiavelli first introduced the viability of a separation between politics and ethics. It was a powerful idea well suited for those in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with

¹⁷ Aristotle, 4th century BC.

¹⁸ Collins, D.: 1987, "Aristotle and Business," *Journal of Business Ethics* 6, 567-572.

¹⁹ Tonnies, 1957/1887; Durkheim, E.: 1964/1893, Redfield, 1941, *The Division of Labor in Society* (The Free Press, New York).

the most to gain from the gradual shift from feudalism to industrialism. Machiavelli's work helped open the gates one hundred years later for the creation of new ideas and the reframing of old ones to lay the groundwork for a new business-society paradigm. The amoral theory was gradually, although unintentionally, promoted by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in the seventeenth century and, to a lesser extent, Adam Smith in the eighteenth century.

The amoral paradigm of business slowly began its rise to general social acceptability in the sixteenth century, as proponents of the new forms of commercialism used new social theory to break the hold of a Church.²⁰ The moral doctrines of the Church were forged within the context of more primitive economic systems, as shown by the abhorrence of usury. The paradigm of moral unity was weakened as the Church's moral hold declined; Church doctrines viewed economic transactions as cases of personal conduct involving personal responsibilities. These doctrines were ineffective when applied to impersonal finance, world markets, and corporate finance.

The Amoral Theory of Business

In the amoral theory of business, economic relations are based, and should be based, entirely on the pursuit of exclusive self-interest. This pursuit entails the maximization of profit. According to this paradigm, business relationships are *not* immoral; they are simply not subject to the morality of other social institutions and relationships. This compartmentalization of business and ethics allows business decisions to be based on moral considerations when it is convenient and profits are not negatively affected. This view is consistent with Friedman's conviction that the use of stockholders' money for nonprofit activities is wrong.²¹

To represent the nineteenth century, a film, based on Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, will be utilized to illustrate the amoral theory of business. Charlie Chaplin's "Modern Times" and the film adaptation of John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* are deft portrayals of the separation of business and morality in the early to mid-twentieth century period. The amoral theory of business in the late

²⁰ All references to "the Church," with a capital C, refer to the Catholic Church.

²¹ Friedman, M.: 1962, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago); 1970, "The Social Responsibility Of Business Is To Increase Its Profits," *New York Times*, September 3, 122-126; 1971, "Does Business Have A Social Responsibility?" *Bank Administration*, 47, 13-14; and, 1982, *Capitalism and Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago).

twentieth century is vividly shown in the films "Wall Street," "Working Girl," and "Glengarry Glen Ross."

ILLUSTRATING THE THEORY OF MORAL UNITY

Ancient Greece

In Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds* Pisthetaerus leaves Athens and tries to make a paradise, a kingdom of the birds.²² This paradise is an intricately linked community — the economy and well-being of the kingdom depends on the interdependence of the institutions and members of the community. Aristophanes ironically demonstrates the theory of moral unity by depicting a community which does not adhere to the theory of moral unity. Business and personal lives are conducted without regard for morality; the people and birds (gods) in the play are greedy and self-centered. Trying to live off the kingdom, they harm the community. Viewing ethics as a secondary matter, if considered at all, the humans and birds are seen as parasites on the newly established community.

Middle Ages

Dante's *Inferno* is a vivid description of Hell and the various punishments awaiting immoral citizens.²³ In the Middle Ages, usurers were viewed as evil, as those who placed economic gain over the spiritual demands of helping neighbors in need. Since a loan would typically be made for emergency needs, not to invest in a means of production, one who charges interest was seen as one who takes advantage of another's misfortune.²⁴ Therefore, the Church considered usurers immoral and thus not part of the integrated web of relationships existing under the theory of moral unity. Hoarding man-made goods and money is to show no respect for the community and even God's overall plan for society. This misuse is a sin and not part of the natural, unified purpose of the Kingdom of God. Reflecting this negative attitude toward those who engaged in immoral business practices, Dante placed money-lenders in the fourth circle of Hell. Guarded by Plutus, legendary god of riches, the fourth circle of hell is the place for those who commit the sins of avarice and prodigality.

²² Aristophanes: 1984, *Four Plays by Aristophanes*, translated by W. Arrowsmith, R. Lattimore, and D. Parker (Meridian Classic Printing, New York).

²³ Dante: 1959, *The Inferno of Dante* translated by L. Lockert (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ).

²⁴ Tawney, T. H.: 1926, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harcourt, Brace, & Company, New York).

Here toiled souls who accumulated and/or spent money without consideration of other people. Dante used this contrast to implore the citizens, especially of his native city of Florence, to use wealth wisely, as a means to provide a better life for the community, not as an end in itself.

Pre-modern Age

William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*²⁵, a tragicomedy, was filmed in 1980 starring Gemma Jones and Warren Mitchell. Antonio is a Christian merchant who lends money without charging interest, while Shylock is a Jewish businessman who does charge interest. The character of Antonio is not a major character in the romantic plot, but he is in the tragic bond in the plot. One virtue of Antonio is his generosity; he lends without charging interest and prepares to sacrifice all for his friend Bassanio. In contrast, Shakespeare uses Shylock, the most vivid and memorable character in the play, to contrast generosity with selfishness. Antonio is the ideal-type merchant of that age — he embraces the virtues of justice and friendship in all aspects of his life, business and personal. Shylock's hatred and anger on various levels, such as commercial, personal and religious, are embodied in one judgment — the exacting of one pound of flesh from Antonio. Shakespeare expertly draws out the audience's sympathy for Shylock, until Shylock fails to cede to mercy in the administration of justice. Shylock's fall is caused by his inability (or unwillingness?) to accept the predominant theory of moral unity — that economic activities are under the same ethical constraints as other activities.

ILLUSTRATING THE AMORAL THEORY OF BUSINESS

Nineteenth Century — Rise of the Amoral Theory

Because Charles Dickens described many social aspects of industrialization, any of his works can be used to illustrate the rise of the amoral theory of business. First published in 1843, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* also was filmed in 1951.²⁶ Dickens' classic story tells of a

²⁵ Shakespeare: 1960, *The Merchant of Venice* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT); and, the film "Merchant of Venice" produced by J. Miller in 1980 with BBC and Time-Life (157 minutes).

²⁶ Dickens, C.: 1924, *A Christmas Carol* (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York); and the film "A Christmas Carol" directed in 1935 by Brian Desmond Hurst.

miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, who is warned by his former business partner, Christopher Marley, that he will be visited by ghosts from Christmas past, present, and future. But first Marley, wrapped in chains and damned to eternal torment, shows Scrooge what his pursuit of riches to the exclusion of all else has done to him. Like Shylock, Scrooge was an outsider because of his amoral business behavior. He was alienated from the townspeople by his own business activities. One of Dickens' descriptions depicts this separation: "Oh! but he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner. Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster."²⁷ Indifference to others, exemplified in a man consumed with business and the amoral theory of business, seems to be the prime sin in Dickens' short novel.

Early to Mid-twentieth Century — Growth of the Amoral Theory

Some films from the first half of the twentieth century portray changes in American values and lifestyles emanating from the rise of industrialization and, especially, changes in technology. The most enduring vision is from the 1936 silent comedy, "Modern Times," in which Charlie Chaplin is impaled on the wheels of a machine.²⁸ At first in the factory, then as a night watchman and a waiter, Chaplin shows the disparate paths economic activity and morality have taken as 'progress' is juxtaposed with the impoverished and jobless masses in the Depression. As Chaplin moves from job to job, searching for a way to make a living and to find happiness, he is on an endless journey. The economic world has detached itself from religion and morality. Economic behavior is no longer in the realm of religious influence; indeed, the political, economic, and spiritual realms are considered separate *and equal in importance*.

A classic silent comedy, "Modern Times", is a remarkable depiction of modernization, showing the power of the economy over other institutions. According to critic Garret Stewart, "Modern Times" focuses on the conflict between man's "comic spirit" and "an opposing universe of mechanical energy."²⁹ In one scene Chaplin is 'lubricating' his fellow workers with an oil can — reflecting their roles as cogs

²⁷ Dickens, C.: 1924, *A Christmas Carol* (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, New York).

²⁸ "Modern Times" directed in 1936 by Charlie Chaplin and produced by CBS/Fox Home Video (87 minutes).

²⁹ Stewart, G.: 1976, "Modern Hard Times: Chaplin and the Cinema of Self-Reflection," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter, 3(2), 295-314, p. 296.

in an industrial machine whom he is trying to liberate to function as human beings.³⁰ This separation of humanity in work and spirituality (or practical ethics) is clearly beginning to take hold in the industrial world; the amoral theory of business is becoming institutionalized.

John Steinbeck's Pulitzer Prize-winning "Grapes of Wrath" were filmed in 1940 by John Ford with Henry Fonda as Tom, eldest of the Joad sons.³¹ The film vividly recounts the migration of an Oklahoman family after the bank took their land *without* conscience, and even the car salesmen and other businesses took advantage of the families forced to leave their homes by offering little return for their goods. The ruthless behavior of businessmen continues to be encountered by the migrant workers in camps. For example, a contractor misrepresents himself and then has the rebelling workers arrested. It is not until they reach the government camp and the kind and patient Jim Rawley that the family is treated well and feels 'human' again. "Grapes of Wrath" depicts the operation of the amoral theory as most of the businessmen act without consideration for the ethical aspects of their decisions.

Late Twentieth Century — Dominance of the Amoral Theory

White-collar guys with blood under their manicured nails,
Tom Grunick and Bud Fox are the ring bearers, the genetically streamlined children of the new amorality.³²

More recent films richly depict the separation of ethics from business. Prominent among these 1980s and 1990s films are: "Wall Street," "Working Girl," and "Glengarry Glen Ross."³³ Although only these three films are mentioned here, other films of this era illustrate the amoral theory of business.

Directed by Oliver Stone in 1987, "Wall Street" is often discussed as the epitome of capitalism and the amoral theory of business. A political and economic allegory of America in the 1980s, "Wall Street" depicts an economic system in which consumption dictates values:

³⁰ Stewart, G.: 1976, p. 302.

³¹ "Grapes of Wrath" directed in 1940 by John Ford and produced by CBS/Fox Key Video (129 minutes).

³² Corliss, R.: 1987, "Wall Street" (movie review), *Time* December 14, 130(24), 82-83, p. 82. Tom Grunick was played by William Hurt in "Broadcast News" and Bud Fox was played by Charlie Sheen in "Wall Street."

³³ "Wall Street" directed in 1987 by Oliver Stone and produced by 20th Century Fox (126 minutes); "Working Girl" directed in 1988 by Mike Nichols and produced by 20th Century Fox (115 minutes); and, "Glengarry Glen Ross" directed in 1992 by James Foley and produced by NewLine Cinema/Life Home Video (100 minutes).

Greed is good, Greed is right, Greed works.³⁴ In the rationalizations Gekko gives for his amoral, and at times illegal, behavior — ‘Nobody gets hurt,’ ‘Everybody’s doing it,’ ‘There’s something in this deal for everybody,’ and ‘Who knows except us?’ — students easily can see the dominance of the amoral theory of business. Roger Ebert’s insightful review of “Wall Street” acknowledges the objective of the movie: “His [Stone’s] film is an attack on an atmosphere of financial competitiveness so ferocious that ethics are simply irrelevant, and the laws are sort of like the referee in pro wrestling, part of the show.”³⁵

The amoral theory of business is also well illustrated in the 1988 film “Working Girl,” Mike Nichols’ movie about a secretary, Tess McGill, who gets ahead only by lying and stealing. McGill’s boss, Katherine Parker, asks for ideas from McGill and then tries to sell one of them as her own. With this example to guide her, McGill sets out to also ‘make it’ on the assumption that the only way to be successful in business is to act without any moral considerations. Although the film ends with the promotion of McGill to a management job, the audience is quite aware that she got there by masquerading as Parker, misleading other professionals, and lying to a potential client.

Further depiction of business as an amoral practice occurs toward the end of the film. Jack Trainer regains control of a meeting by diverting everyone’s attention away from the ethical dilemma of Parker and McGill and back to the “real” purpose: “The name of the game is ‘Let’s Make a Deal.’” In that same meeting, the CEO of the acquired firm refers to the acquisition agreement: “This is an agreement in principle. As to what constitutes principles in this day and age, I’m going to leave that up to you barracudas to squabble over.” This comment receives general laughter from the other executives revealing the reliance in business on legality and the bottom line instead of morality in decision making.

Based on David Mamet’s 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Glen-garry Glen Ross*, a portrait of land salesmen in the 1980s, James Foley’s 1992 film illustrates the dominance of the amoral theory of business as the salesmen try to sell land by any means. The salesmen are not concerned with the potential buyers, nor even the theft that occurs at the end. Rather, they see their business as one of ruthless competition, including the deception of clients. The salesmen’s only

³⁴ Boozer, Jr., J.: 1989, “‘Wall Street’: The commodification of perception,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 17(3), 90-99.

³⁵ Ebert, R.: 1987, “Wall Street” in *Microsoft Cinemania* ‘95.

goal is the sale, the money. The bribery and deception are taken in stride as just part of the business; ethics is fine at home or church, but 'business is business' and ethics has no role in it.

MOVEMENT TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM?

The tension resulting from this separation of ethics from business may be leading to the search for a place for morality in business in post-industrial society. This is certainly reflected in the work of some contemporary scholars. It may also be mirrored in film.

Although any new paradigm will not go back to the pre-industrial theory of moral unity, it could entail a moral dimension in the practice of business. While this search for a new business paradigm seems to be just beginning, there is some evidence of a renewed search for community and an emphasis on the moral role of social institutions. A few examples from scholars are: (1) the call for communitarianism³⁶; (2) the resurgence of virtue ethics³⁷; (3) the challenge to the traditional egoistic interpretation of Adam Smith's writings³⁸; and (4) the rising demand for ethics courses in business, medicine, and law.

If a genuine call for a return to moral unity in some form is occurring, it has some antecedents in film that can be used for student exploration. The tension between the two business paradigms is masterfully brought to the screen in the 1946 classic "It's A Wonderful Life" directed by Frank Capra.³⁹ Jimmy Stewart plays a small-town banker, George Bailey, who, because he contemplates suicide, is allowed by God to look back at his life and the impact he has had on his community. Bailey sees that he provided a needed service to his community and that he maintained continuity in his values in both his personal and business life. When his guardian angel, Clarence, shows Bailey how the town would have been *worse*

³⁶ Etzioni, A.: 1988, *The Moral Dimension* (The Free Press, New York); Etzioni, A.: 1993, *The Spirit of Community* (Crown Publishers, New York); Selznick, D.: 1993, *The Moral Commonwealth* (University of California Press, Berkeley, CA); and, Solomon, R. C.: 1992, *Ethics and Excellence* (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

³⁷ Collins, 1987; MacIntyre, A.: 1981, *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN); and, Solomon, R. C.: 1992, *Ethics and Excellence* (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

³⁸ Collins, D.: 1988, "Adam Smith's Social Contract: The Proper Role of Individual Liberty and Government in 18th Century Society," *Business and Professional Ethics*, 7, 119-146; Muller, J. Z.: 1993, *Adam Smith in His Time and Ours* (The Free Press, New York); Shepard, J. M., J. Shepard, and R. E. Wokutch: 1991, "The Problem of Business Ethics: Oxymoron Or Inadequate Vocabulary?", *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 6, 9-23; and, Werhane, P.: 1991, *Ethics and Economics: The Legacy of Adam Smith for Modern Capitalism* (Oxford University Press, Oxford).

³⁹ "It's a Wonderful Life" directed in 1946 by Frank Capra and produced by Republic Pictures Home (132 minutes).

off without him, George has renewed faith in himself and the community. Bailey, however, had to fight constantly to prevent the greedy, egoistic banker, Mr. Potter, from gaining hold of the town. Believing 'business is business' and that morality is not applicable to business decisions, Potter lies, steals, and takes unscrupulous advantage of situations to amass a fortune. Potter does not seek to better the community for the sake of the community, but aims only to increase his power and wealth. Whereas Bailey embodies the theory of moral unity in business, Potter represents the amoral theory of business.

With the insider trading scandals which reached a crescendo in the mid-1980s, and a growing disillusionment with the economic and political power structure, business ethics has become a 'hot topic.' The idea that business has an ethical dimension that ought to be addressed began to gather some momentum. However, it is difficult to see business as a moral, social practice without a vocabulary to express this viewpoint in an intelligible way to the public. Consequently, when the film industry responded to people's concern for an ethical business environment, a moral vocabulary was not present. Instead, viewers had to see through characters, threads of a plot, and satire the implication that a renewal of ethics in business should and could occur.

Some films of the 1980s and 1990s can also be used in class to discuss a possible call for business to encompass morality. These films include "Roger & Me," "A Shock to the System," "Bob Roberts," and "Hudsucker Proxy."⁴⁰

Michael Moore's "Roger & Me" is a documentary made in 1989 about the closing of eleven General Motors plants in Flint, Michigan. Moore covers the impact on families as some are evicted from their homes and the impact on the town as small businesses leave. In one scene, GM's chairman Roger Smith reads part of *A Christmas Carol* in a holiday address to employees as Moore shows footage of a now-jobless GM worker being evicted. The film exposes the priorities of big American corporations of profits over the lives of its workers. According to Roger Ebert, "the movie is a counterattack against the amoral pragmatism of modern management theory."⁴¹

⁴⁰ The following films provided here with date, director, production company, and length: "Roger & Me" (1989, Michael Moore, Warner Bros., 91 minutes); "A Shock to the System" (1990, Jan Egleson, Corsair, 88 minutes); "Bob Roberts" (1992, Tim Robbins, Paramount/Polygram Film, 102 minutes); and, "Hudsucker Proxy" (1994, Joel Coen, Warner Bros., 111 minutes).

⁴¹ Ebert, R.: 1989, "Roger & Me" in *Microsoft Cinemania '95*.

Although written as a satire, Jan Egleson's 1990 "A Shock to the System" illuminates the amoral theory of business in an interesting way. Told through the main character's point of view, the plot follows a businessman, Glenn Marshall through his daily life. What is never stated directly, but is readily apparent in Marshall's world, is the lack of consideration of ethics. As shown through Marshall's perspective, actions in the office are determined by business 'value'; deceit, sabotage, and murder are contemplated, morals are never addressed. In fact, murder becomes merely one way to eliminate from Marshall's dull life those obstacles in his way to a better life. According to movie critic David Denby, "the movie's satirical view is that murder is an extension of the cutthroat tactics of office politics. . . ; the bad guy is all too companionable — the bad guy is us."⁴²

The 1992 political comedy "Bob Roberts" is Tim Robbins' satire on the 1980s mind-set of the pursuit of profit above all else. As a political candidate, Bob Roberts assumes that the American public does not care about right and wrong; they are thought to be concerned only with personal gain. His campaign vehicle is a rolling connection to Wall Street. With his pulse on the market and the future of industries, Roberts is believable when he says that all he ever wanted was to be rich. When he sends his message in his folksongs, he calls for a society divided by race, wealth, and nationality. Roberts uses religion in his folksongs to talk about ethics. All of his actions, however, show a disregard for morality, from lying to attempting to frame an innocent person for personal gain. Shot as a documentary, "Bob Roberts" satirizes the amoral theory of business by showing its practical absurdity; if society operates in a purely economic world, anything goes.

In Joel Coen's 1994 film "Hudsucker Proxy," the board of the corporation, after the chairman dies, decides to devalue the company and the stock by putting a novice, Norville Barnes, in the position. Barnes, however, takes over the role with amazing success. His naiveté, based on his belief in the moral unity of business and his innovativeness insure his success as the company's leader. Barnes pursues his idea for a new toy, while conducting business in an ethical manner, considering the workers, community, and social responsibility of the firm. Eventually, Barnes falls into the pattern of the '80s greed' and the 'business is business' mentality. He and the board are corrupt, but without even seeing a problem with their behavior.

⁴² Denby, D.: "A Shock to the System" (movie review)," *New York* April 2, 1990 23(13), 60.

When Barnes recognizes at the end of the film that his approach to business has changed, the audience sees Barnes return to his original business virtues.

SUMMARY

Throughout American history, there has been a split in consciousness between the egoism (*exclusive* self-interest or selfishness) undergirding the free enterprise ideology and altruism (*exclusive* concern for others or selflessness) American religious foundations. The dominant amoral theory of business separates ethics from the practice of business and bases economic relations exclusively on self-interest. Epitomizing the amoral theory of business is Milton Friedman's strongly held conviction that, legal demands aside, the use of stockholders' money for nonprofit purposes is wrong.⁴³ Clearly, the prevalence of the amoral theory demonstrates a moral void to be addressed by ethics courses in business schools. Instructors can begin to fill this void by introducing the concept and recognition that ethics has a place, indeed an inherent role, in economic systems and business organizations.

Film and plays (for eras when film is not available) can be used to deepen students' facility for critical thinking, promote their intellectual flexibility, and enhance their appreciation for the complexity of ethical dilemmas. Film can help students to see business not as an amoral activity, but as a practice integral to society and communities. By illustrating the theory of moral unity and the amoral theory of business through film, students are better able to understand the need for, and the place of, ethics in business.

⁴³ Friedman, 1962, 1970, 1971, 1982.