

The ethics of "a beautiful mind" essay sample

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By examining the basic content sketch of the movie, A Beautiful Mind, and actual events that occurred in John Nash’s life, many ethical concerns will be addressed. Movies like A Beautiful Mind create and amplify many ethical concerns relating to the portrayal of mental illnesses and how society views them. The identity of the ethical concerns exposed in a popular media event, the ethical dilemmas presented and an ethical theory that is used to address public concerns when a major form of entertainment is used to misinform and the values exposed in an art form using distortion for entertainment are all ethical concerns that occur within this film, and through other entertainments. The concern lies in the social responsibility that is ethically addressed for moving making and then finally the ethical steps that should be taken and the overall conclusions about these ethical concerns.

Depiction of Mentally Ill CharactersIn entertainment, mental illness is rarely treated as a medical condition. Instead, people who have medical disabilities are usually portrayed as serial killers, psychopaths, or as objects of amusement or pity such as Norman Bates in Psycho, Hannibal Lector in The Silence of the Lambs, Bobby Bouchet in The Waterboy or John Nash in A Beautiful Mind. Unfortunately, under the guise of “ entertainment” the diagnosis and treatment of people with a mental disability has become misconstrued and downplayed. The other characters that interact with the person react in terrifying fear, malicious treatment, or unyielding support.

Mental illness is a legitimate medical condition often requiring intense treatment to control. When treatment is shown, is muted, and downplayed. In the examples above, Norman Bates, Hannibal Lector and John Nash were forcibly restrained in mental institutions. The final scene from Psycho shows him sitting in a padded room wearing a straight jacket. Hannibal Lector is behind one inch thick glass for most of the movie. Actual treatment of either character is not shown. In A Beautiful Mind, John Nash is briefly shown receiving chemical shock therapy and medication. The visualization of these illnesses and other characters' illnesses and treatment creates false images of what mental illness truly is or how disabling an illness it can be.

Public ReactionsA common misconception propagated by entertainment is schizophrenia and multiple disassociation disorder are synonymous terms for the same disorder (The Western Journal of Medicine, 2001). These illnesses are two separate disorders with schizophrenia being the inability to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Multiple disassociation disorder is the personification of multiple personalities within a single person. Another problem is the reaction by average citizens to people diagnosed with schizophrenia. A schizophrenic man fired weapons inside the United States Capitol building. Laurie Flynn, executive director for the National Associates for the Mentally Ill, worried about the public backlash from the shooting towards individuals who suffer from schizophrenia and other mental illnesses (Wary, 1998).

The overall public reaction to mental illness is fear. Part of the problem, as so avidly displayed in movies, is that mentally ill people can live undetected

within normal society. Dr. Lector was a leading psychiatrist who, for unknown reasons, turned into a psychopathic, cannibalistic serial murderer. John Nash was a respected member of the faculty at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who had revolutionized mathematical theory while obtaining his doctoral degree before becoming paranoid schizophrenic. With the possibility of a serial murder living next door, as in *Disturbia*, movies featuring the mentally ill create a climate of fear of those suffering from it.

Dr. John F. Nash Jr, Movie v. Actual Events
In *A Beautiful Mind*, Russell Crowe portrays Dr. John Nash and his journey through paranoid schizophrenia. The movie visualizes his hallucinations as three individuals, a roommate and friend, a little girl and a government operative who hired him to locate hidden messages in magazines. After his initial diagnosis, Nash is subjected to shock therapy and strong medication. The medication did help him, but he found that his mathematical and cognitive abilities were severely diminished so he stopped taking it. The movie has his wife faithfully standing by his side throughout his life offering continued support and his friends offering varying degrees of support, including a position on the faculty that is more honorary than anything. His illness did not readily pose a direct threat to anyone nor was he physically violent to those around him. The instance where he nearly downed his infant son was an exception rather than the norm and even then he believed the baby was under supervision. The end of the movie shows Nash receiving the Nobel Prize for his doctoral thesis in 1994 with an interview being conducted to ascertain his sanity. Nash claims he is sane under his current medication.

Dr. John Nash, the real person, led a much harder life. After his diagnosis, his wife divorced him in 1963 fearing safety, but did reunite in a non-romantic relationship several years later and ultimately remarrying in 2001. During their co-habitation, his wife referred to Nash as a boarder and their living arrangement similar to that of distant relatives (Nasar, 1998). At one point, he fled to Europe seeking refuge from his attackers. In his 1994 autobiography, Nash states his release from the mental hospitals was obtained only after temporarily denouncing his delusions and taking medication. He also stated that during the time he thought rationally, he felt more limited in his thought processes.

What sets Dr. Nash apart from most schizophrenic patients is since 1970; Nash has taken no medication related to treating his disorder. He claims that he chose to ignore the hallucinations and voices which ultimately resulted in his cure citing his own recognition of their falseness. The movie portrays this with the little girl not aging, but Nash claims never to have seen physical manifestations of the voices he heard. The voluntary but spontaneous remission of his illness is still a topic of debate.

Many elements of his illness were omitted from the movie, such as his claim to be the Emperor of Antarctica or threatening letters to the United States government. The movie depicts a relatively passive individual, but always incorporated into society. A common symptom of paranoid schizophrenia is seclusion (American Psychiatric Society, 2000). The movie touches briefly on this with the secretive seclusion of his work, but fails to show his resignation from MIT or subsequent retreat to Europe. In an interview, Nash was

adamant to point out his nonuse of medication, but understood the rationale behind why the movie showed he was using medication in the end. He fully supports to the use of medication to treat schizophrenia, but says it was not for him.

Ethical Dilemmas the Theories Ethics can be defined as the discipline dealing with what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. Values are then defined as the accepted principles or standards of an individual or a group. " Ethical theories and principles are the foundations of ethical analysis because they are the viewpoints from which guidance can be obtained along the pathway to a decision" (Ridley, 1998). Ethical dilemmas as presented when public concerns are brought to the surface when a form of entertainment is used to misinform. Ethical dilemmas come in a variety of forms when it comes to advertising. Two major forms stand out to be a part of the fabric of every organization and individual: ethics of character and ethics of conduct and behavior.

Ethics of character simply address the idea of what type of people should the world be. This is the idea of defining virtue as a society whole and agreeing and abiding by such an idea of virtue. The famous philosopher, Aristotle, shared many methods of thinking along these lines that tended to be empirical, scientific, and commonsensical. An ethical guideline that Aristotle proposed has come to be known as " Aristotle's Mean." This states that " moral virtue is a middle state determined by practical wisdom" (Christians, et al, 2005). Aristoteleanism is a mean is extremes of action or passion; moral virtue is a fixed quality of the will. " In Aristotle's own words, the

principle is this that moral virtue is a fixed quality of the will, consisting essentially in a middle state, as determined by the standard that a person of practical wisdom would apply" (Christians, et al, 2005).

Another idea of ethical theory that addresses public concerns is the ethics of conduct and behavior. Instead of asking of what type of people the world should be, this asks of what types of actions the world should perform. Three theories that address such thought are Egoism, Utilitarianism, and Kantianism.

Egoism is the theory that oneself is, or should be the motivation and the goal of one's own action. " Egoism has two variants, descriptive or normative. The descriptive (or positive) variant conceives egoism as a factual description of human affairs. That is, people are motivated by their own interests and desires, and they cannot be described otherwise. The normative variant proposes that people should be so motivated, regardless of what presently motivates their behavior" (Hospers, 2000). However, it is important to realize that even though several formulations of ethical egoism exist, the view that everyone ought to promote his or her own self-interests does not agree with the emphasis on social responsibility in the Potter Box model. The simple idea behind egoism gets to the motivation of the human heart. People act and behave for many reasons; but for whom or what to the act or behave for? This question penetrates the heart of the human being and attempts to reveal what motivates people to act certain ways. Many reasons exist for human behavior such as a belief in God, working toward the greater good of the planet, or simply helping friends and family.

Utilitarianism is another ethical theory offered. Utilitarianism promotes good or valued ends, rather than using the right means. Although this concept and ideas has evolved over centuries, utilitarianism holds a view that the good end is happiness and pleasure. Utilitarianism also suggests that people carefully calculate in a conscience manner the consequences of the options available to good and bad decision making. Hopefully weighing the consequences will result in sound ethical choices that will promote valued ends.

Utilitarianism is an ethical view widespread in North American society and a notion well developed in philosophy. Many different varieties are available, but they all hold in one way or another that individuals are to determine what is right or wrong by considering what will yield the best consequences for the welfare of human beings. The morally right alternative produces the greatest balance of good over evil. All that matters ultimately in determining the right and wrong choice is the amount of good promoted and evil restrained (Christians, et al, 2005).

Kantianism is the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. Unlike the previous theories, Kantianism revolves around duty rather than emotional feelings. Kant's writings contributed permanently to the topic and heart of ethics. Immanuel Kant believed that higher truth's existed which were superior to the physical universe. He believed that conscience is hard wired into every human being at birth, and their conscience must be obeyed. Kant's western thinking simply believed and supported that people should choose right, and shun

evil. Kant felt that " a moral rule is one that is required by rationality" (Hursthouse, 2007).

Kant gave intellectual substance to the golden rule by his categorical imperative, which implies that what is right for one is right for all. As a guide for measuring the morality of our action, Kant declared: " Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Values Exposed In understanding how to describe values, it is first necessary to understand the definition of ethics. Ethics can be defined as the discipline dealing with what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. Values are then defined as the accepted principles or standards of an individual or a group. In any time of decisions making, values are involved which reflect presuppositions about social life and human nature. The same occurs when using distortion for entertainment in an art form. So understanding that all decision making requires the distinction of values, there are underlying values that would be exposed in an art form using distortion for entertainment." The production of popular films and television programs that address societal problems and influence audience members' beliefs and behaviors raise important ethical considerations" (Brown & Singhal, 1993).

The action or act of using distortion in art forms shows one way in which these alterations that occur in distortion do in fact deceive or misinform the audience. What makes an action valuable may in turn depend on the ethic values of the objects it increases, decreases or alters. " The decision to

change a true story — to delete material that may confuse or disturb viewers, to telescope chronology, to insert composite or entirely fictional characters into historical events — is as much an artistic (and therefore an ethical) choice as the casting of a certain actor or the selection of a camera angle. And such choices are the basis of critical judgment” (Scott, 2002). Moreover, the values that are exposed through the use of distortion as entertainment in an art form are subjective.

Mainly, the aesthetic values like harmonious, pleasing, and imaginative come to mind when trying to explain distortion for entertainment but also moral values. The possibility of professional values as a film maker in regard to human interest, entertainment, novelty, thoroughness, and the public’s right to know. The question is then once the distortion has been identified, is it unethical or artistic? Art is always up for interpretation and evaluations in which values play a large role in that judgment, but it wouldn’t be considered unethical to distort a vision in an art form.

The Art of DistortionThe issue is to define where there can be ethical standards in the entertainment industry. As in creating the film “ A Beautiful Mind”, which was produced to portray the life of John Nash, there are portions in the film that were distorted or misinterpreted to gain the entertainment factor for viewers. When making a film, what obligation does a filmmaker have to avoid distortion, misrepresentation, coercion or betrayal, be it overt or extremely subtle, even if such acts appear to serve a higher goal such as “ getting the story told” or “ exposing injustice” (Nichols, 2008). As well as the responsibility to avoid these factors but what about “

ensuring that persuasive techniques do not distort established facts, rules of evidence, and the principles of sound debate" (Nichols, 2008). The focus when creating a film or retelling a story should protect the well-being of both the subjects of the film and the actual viewers. " In each case an ethical code needs to give primacy to respecting subjects and viewers as autonomous human beings whose relationship to the filmmaker is not limited to or solely governed by a formal contractual relationship" (Nichols, 2008).

The definition of distortion is the alteration of the original shape (or other characteristics) of an object, image, sound, waveform, or other forms of information or representation. " The movie- with a very different purpose from these statements about Mr. Nash and in a way that is by no means morally or artistically equivalent-also simplifies and distorts the complex and fascinating life presented in the book" (Scott, 2002). The response to most of the changes made in the film versus John Nash's real life have really just been simplified and omitted to create a more entertaining film. The values that are exposed do not leave the idea of distortion for entertainment as to appear unethical. But the choice to distort ideas or images during the film making of " A Beautiful Mind" ultimately still portrayed correctly the life of John Nash and the events during his life.

Social Responsibility Addressed Social responsibility can be an example of ethical behavior. Social responsibility is enhancing society in general. Some individuals argue that social responsibility is shown only when companies go beyond what is optional, and truly intend to create a benefit for others besides the company. Additionally, some companies may not benefit from

some forms of social responsibility. These businesses should focus on what they do best as a business and give back what they can. Examples of socially responsible behavior range from projects that raise money for research on diseases, raising money for the needy, requiring workers to volunteer within the community, recalling products that may be dangerous, promoting recycling, and offering free services to the disadvantages.

In the social responsibility theory of entertainment, the media is driven to benefit the public. It expects that media entertainment answer society's need for truth, requires an open and diverse debate on public issues, and honest updates of current events. In the film *A Beautiful Mind* examples of social responsibility are present. John Forbes Nash is a mathematical genius that is described as having "two helpings of brain and only half a helping of heart." His heroic struggle with mental illness and the incredible toll that took on his marriage forms the heart and soul of *A Beautiful Mind*. The social responsibilities presented in the film are evident today in how Nash's theories have influenced global trade negotiations, and even breakthroughs in evolutionary biology.

After marrying the love of his life Alicia, John Nash is diagnosed with schizophrenia. The onset of his disease came about in as little as two weeks. The underlying point of this film was to give people a realistic view of what life is like for someone with this disease. John Nash would not have survived for as long as he has if it were not for his loving and dedicated wife Alicia. Together they triumphed over his disease here portraying another example

of the social responsibility of the film displaying the power of love and devotion within families.

John Forbes Nash is truly a man of wonder. After having a mental illness for years and going through horrible ordeals such as electric shock therapy, John was able to continue to do what he loved to do and was awarded a Nobel Prize for his accomplishments. He is an example to those suffering from schizophrenia as well as other mind altering diseases, that life can still be successful and fulfilling. This movie is truly remarkable and displays qualities of social responsibilities at depicting so accurately Nash's trials and tribulations and how one can overcome all odds.

Ethical Steps in the Entertainment Industry Each of these ethical theories breaks down simple and practical ideas of decision making and determining the difference between right and wrong. Both individuals and business alike must always take into consideration the idea of ethics. Businesses like the entertainment industry are slapped with ethical questions every day. When the entertainment industry makes the wrong decision, and misinforms its readers and viewers, ethics are broken down and trust begins to be a reputation issue. The entertainment industry must take ethical steps to maintain credibility and character; while continuing to be entertaining. Two critical steps can be taken for the industry to maintain this stance: First, the entertainment industry must understanding and knowing ethical guidelines. Continuous training for all personnel can keep the staff trained and educated. Additionally, the staff needs accountability. A well established

built-in process can keep the employees cutting edge in entertainment, at the same time hold them accountable in their endeavors.

Second, the entertainment industry must follow the advertising code of ethics. Advertising plays a critical part in the development of the nation's economy. Successfully adhering advertising codes of ethics can help keep the reputation and integrity of the company intact. Too many times today, the advertising ethics are pushed the absolute limit in order for companies to gain ratings and make money.

Conclusion Movies like A Beautiful Mind create and amplify many ethical concerns relating to the portrayal of mental illnesses and how society views them. The movie distorts and simplifies the true story of John Nash's life and struggle with schizophrenia for increased entertainment value and promoting his non-use of medication was determined to be a risk leading to other patients with controlled illness disregarding their treatment. The entertainment industry has a social responsibility when portraying sensitive issues, such as mental illness, due to the tremendous influential power entertainment venues have on the public. Ethical standards within the industry need to be strictly followed to prevent exploitation of awkward societal situations in the pursuit of financial gain.

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