

The ethical dilemma of the firm

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



There are a number of ethical dilemmas that are quite obvious on the surface in THE FIRM and play a large role in the development of the narrative. These dilemmas revolve around criminal activity and are obvious. The ethical dilemmas that the main character faces are that of whether or not to continue his relationship with illegal activity or to abandon his complicity of the illegality.

This is, of course, compounded by the fact that the authorities realize what is going on and will prosecute the main character if he does not aid them and if he does aid them he will risk discovery and, possibly, assassination. Again, while much of the narrative and the ethical dilemmas that resonate from it are obvious, there are also a number of subtle ethical dilemmas that equally contribute to the overt dilemmas that the viewer is clearly aware of.

Consider how Mitch McDeere, the main character, finds himself in the position that he is in, in the first place. McDeere is not a wealthy man and he supports himself through law school by working as a waiter. He is married and we must logically assume that his wife is also financially supporting him as a waiter's tips could never finance a full-time law degree course load. (A visual motif is employed when we first see Mitch and his wife - they are eating Chinese take-out food right out of the cartons.

A cheap device to hint that they are short on cash) Mitch is seemingly humbled by his experience and there is a bit of inferiority found within his perception of himself. When the job offer to work at a law firm in Memphis arises, McDeere is enamored with the job for one reason and one reason alone: money. The Memphis firm simply pays the best and it is located in an

area where the cost of living is low. Because of this, McDeere will reap cash rewards and, as a result, cleanse himself and his psyche of the inferiority complex that he developed pinching his budget in order to survive.

Of course, this also has created a tunnel vision approach to accepting the job offer and McDeere accepts his job offer from a firm he knows relatively little about. Because he rushes into the union based solely out of a desire for a quick profit, he leaves himself woefully vulnerable as he enters a world that is hardly what it seems. He is not so much entering the legal profession as he is entering the criminal profession as the law firm is heavily involved with organized crime and money laundering.

For McDeere's wife, the dilemma becomes one that conflicts her. Should she stay in the marriage and risk her life or should she leave her husband to his own fate? For McDeere's mentor, Avery Tolar, his dilemma is that he must convince McDeere to literally reshape his own ethical beliefs so as to accept a life of crime. If he can not convince McDeere of this, Tolar is then faced with the dilemma of what to do with McDeere. In other words, Tolar may be forced to have someone whom he considers a surrogate son assassinated.

Therein lies a number of complexities within the framework of THE FIRM: the dilemmas posed to McDeere are interrelated with other characters and, ultimately, the dilemma is rooted not so much in the narrative's complexities as much as they are rooted in the complexities of the motivations of McDeere. This is further compounded by the fact that McDeere's motivations have shifted from wealth as a source of providing for his family to wealth for wealth's sake to simply being able to survive.

In order to resolve this dilemma, McDeere must figure a way out of a no win situation. He can take his chances with the firm and hope he will not get prosecuted or he can help the police and risk being killed. Either way, his choices are not exactly good so he must seek a third option that may allow him to circumvent the police and his employers at the firm. This leads McDeere to investigate deeper into the business practices of the firm where he hopes to find the magic bullet that will allow him a safe passage out of the dilemma he finds himself. Eventually, he does find an escape and it is the downfall of the film as a serious drama.

The way in which the ethical dilemma was resolved is, quite honestly, insane. That is to say, it would appear that the producers of the film did not like the ending of the novel and wanted to create a more upbeat "Hollywood" ending. In the novel, McDeere and his wife have "co-opted" quite a bit of the firm's money and run away. The novel ends with them on a ship sailing away to a new life and we presume they also will have new identities.

The ending of the novel is purposefully ambiguous leading the reader to assume that the escape may or may not work. Whether it does or not is irrelevant as the purpose of the ending of the novel is to show that McDeere has matured and has become self-sufficient as well as to provide a cautionary warning to those who make the errors of pride that McDeere embodied.

The cinematic adaptation of THE FIRM was a summer release featuring a bankable, box office star. Simply put, there was NO WAY the studio was going to risk losing money with an ending audiences would find too

downbeat. In the ending of the film, McDeere's moral dilemma is solved by presenting the mafia bosses who employ the firm with records of over billings. This way, the mob no longer works with the firm.

They will not kill McDeere because he has provided them with proof that they have been "ripped off" and now the mob will file criminal charges against the firm. To put it mildly, this ending is UTTERLY IDIOTIC, and ruins all the proceedings of the film. It is, however, the way the ending of the film is scripted and it is how a convenient ending is crafted to escape the dilemma the main character faces.

Would a different framework to the ending have provided a better conclusion? Had the original ending of the novel been retained the answer would be yes as the ending would have made more logical sense within the genre as the cinematic ending was too ridiculous and contrived.

Furthermore, the cinematic ending allows McDeere to EVADE his dilemma that actually confronting it. That is, he plays a sleight of hand game to remove himself from the equation and eliminate the mob's threat. Again, the ending is silly, but it is the ending we are stuck with.

In terms of the overall entertainment value of the subgenres of courtroom/crime/police procedural dramas, there are a number of reasons for the success of these genres despite the fact that these subgenres have a great deal going against them: the age brackets they appeal to are limited and plots are generally not 'popcorn' entertainment, yet audiences turn out in droves to see them. (THE FIRM grossed well over \$100 million in theaters

when first released) Of all the reasons that these subgenres are popular, there are two reasons that stand out the most.

First, the audience perceives the films to be “ real.” Of course, what is presented on screen is far removed from what really exists in the mundane world of criminal investigations and courtroom proceedings, but the genres root themselves in the realm of plausibility.

While the events that are presented on screen generally do not happen in the dramatic manner in which the events are portrayed, there is the possibility that they could happen in such a manner. As such, the narrative becomes gripping and it draws the audience into the seriousness of the proceedings.

Second, the audience finds the morality play in these types of films to be gripping. THE FIRM is not a film that deals exclusively with corruption as it relates to the plot as much as it is a condemnation of corruption in general which is then dramatized in the form of a cinematic morality play. The concept of the audience learning moral lessons in from the entertainment medium is hardly a new concept and it is perennially popular. While such morality lessons started with Greek myths they have carried over into modern cinema where they remain equally popular and will remain so for many years to come.

Ultimately, THE FIRM is an excellent thriller that poses a number of ethical dilemmas for the cast of characters as well as the audience. Sadly, the

ending cheats both the characters and the audience out of an effective cure for the dilemma, but the film remains entertaining overall despite its flaws.

Bibliography

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