

Teaching Notes

THE ETHICS OF WAR FILMS: CLINT EASTWOOD'S *AMERICAN SNIPER*

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Directed by Clint Eastwood, the war film *American Sniper* was released in late 2014. Starring Bradley Cooper, the film chronicles the life of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle from the perspective of his 2012 autobiography. Kyle's legacy is defined by his 160 confirmed kills as a sniper, making him the deadliest in United States military history. The film was received as a great success with a worldwide gross of over \$500M and 6 Academy Award nominations. Despite this success, *Sniper* is a war film, and with the genre comes an expected level of controversy. Supporters of the film praise the movie's portrayal of Kyle's selfless heroism and firm patriotism. Alternatively, critics of *Sniper* are uneasy with the movie's perspective on the US invasion of Iraq, its portrayal of the Iraqi people, and its particular brand of aggressive patriotism. Some argue that the sheer controversy is what has driven *Sniper* to become the most successful film in the history of its genre.

This case study was completed under the direction of Dr. Amber Díaz Pearson, The Kenan Institute for Ethics.

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Ethical Frameworks – Deontology and Consequentialism

When analyzing the ethics of this film, consider the two following ethical frameworks: deontology and consequentialism. The deontological school of thought comes out of 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant's writings in which he argues that moral acts are performed out of a sense of duty that we understand rationally. For Kant, *moral* acts are good-in-themselves, not because of their results (consequences) or how the actor feels about them (emotions).

Kant thought that everyone could be guided by the Categorical Imperative: "Act only on that maxim [principle] through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."¹ That is, for any action one is willing to take, one should be willing for anyone else to behave in the same way. Relatedly, he argued that humans are not and should not be treated as means to an end (regardless of whether that end – consequence – would be good or bad), but that people are ends-in-themselves. For Kant, people are moral agents, with the capacity to act and choose, and other people are intrinsically valuable as ends-in-themselves.²

In contrast, consequentialism emphasizes the outcomes of one's agency instead of the path to said outcome. In consequentialism, morality is measured by the end result of a string of decisions, which allows for actions of questionable moral fiber to be justified by a morally positive result. Motive and obligation behind actions take a back seat in this school of thought, which means that individual actions may be judged more or less strictly than according to deontology, depending on the consequences they produce.³

In its most classic form, Act Consequentialism justifies actions by the maximizing of good. Under this principle, acts of agency that maximize total utility (taking into consideration both negative and positive contributions by the act) are considered morally right. The common slogan of Act Consequentialism therefore reads "the greatest happiness for the greatest number."⁴

1 Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804. 1993. *Grounding for the metaphysics of morals ; with, on a supposed right to lie because of philanthropic concerns*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co.

2 See also Peter Sjöstedt's summary of deontology, <<http://www.philosopher.eu/texts/kants-ethics-summary/>>.

3 Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, "Consequentialism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/consequentialism/>>.

4 Bentham, J. (1776). *A Fragment on Government: Being an Examination of what is Delivered, on the Subject of Government in General, in the Introduction to Sir William Blackstone's Commentaries: with a Preface, in which is Given a Critique on the Work at Large* (No. 2). T. Payne; P. Elmsly; and E. Brooke.

This case study is meant to open discussion about the ethical dilemmas faced in the war film genre. By using a popular film like American Sniper, we are able to address the morality of the genre from both the perspective of the filmmaker and the audience. Use the ethical frameworks provided (deontology and consequentialism) to ground your responses.

- 1) What was your initial response to the film's portrayal of the Iraq War? Did you find yourself siding with its supporters or its critics? How do you justify your perspective?*
- 3) Do you find filmmakers to have certain ethical obligations when creating a war film? What would you describe these obligations to be?*
- 4) To what extent should filmmakers be held accountable to certain ethical standards? What about the audience? Who bears responsibility for viewers' actions related to a film?*
- 5) Since this film was based on an autobiography, is it wrong for the film to depict the opinions of the American soldiers the way they did? It is very likely that the views expressed in this film accurately reflect how Kyle and his compatriots felt about the Iraqi people and the war itself. If this were the case, is the film at fault for not changing this rhetoric?*
- 6) What do you believe were the major consequences of this film? Take note of who perpetuated these consequences (the filmmakers or the viewers).*
- 8) Amidst the controversy of the film, Clint Eastwood has gone on record saying that he and the film are both against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He states that his emphasis on the mental traumas associated with war make it a statement against the military actions in the Middle East. Do you find that to be the case in this film? Who gets to decide what the message was: the filmmakers or the viewers?*