“12 ANGRY MEN” ©

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In an era of electronic media, professors inevitably compete with the ubiquitous special effects and thrills of sex and violence to which students have been exposed outside the classroom. Despite the fact that it appeals not to hormones, but to minds, the film "12 Angry Men" typically captivates the attention of students.

The filmscript was written by Reginald Rose (based on his television play), directed by Sidney Lumet and released in 1957. It runs 95 minutes, and among its better known actors (though not to our students' generation) are Henry Fonda, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Jack Klugman and Jack Warden. (The characters remain nameless throughout the film, enhancing the "Everyman" effect.) I have found it to be especially useful in a number of courses (especially Introductory Philosophy) as a way to illustrate connections between morality and logic.

The film opens in a courtroom, wherein we see a young man who appears to belong to some ethnic minority. We soon learn that he is on trial for the murder of his father. The judge instructs the jury that their vote must be unanimous, and that if found guilty, the boy must suffer the death penalty. The film then cuts to the jury room, where, from then on, the story unfolds. An anonymous written vote is taken, and all jurors vote guilty – except for Henry Fonda, who is ambivalent. Fonda questions the motives and abilities of the defense attorney, implying that the jurors' impression of the boy's guilt was skewed by inferior cross-examination.

Since I begin my lower level courses by noting (a) the importance of examining both one's own and others’ beliefs in order to determine whether those beliefs are consistent with each other and coherent with reality as we best understand it to be, and (b) elementary logic (including informal fallacies and simple "argument patterns"), it then becomes possible to use the film in order to illustrate such conflicts and fallacies. More specifically, the film allows one to show the moral ramifications of ignoring such conflicts and committing such fallacies in a real-life situation, as well as to illustrate the sorts of psychological traits which are or are not conducive to logical thought. Below are some examples of how the film accomplishes this:

a) One juror illustrates the fallacy of argument from ignorance when he notes that the boy must be guilty, since "no one proved otherwise."

b) Fonda notes that one witness, an old man, testified he heard the boy yell "I'll kill you," but another witness claimed to see the killing at night through the windows of a passing elevated train, and Fonda wants to know how the old man could have identified a voice while a train was roaring by.

c) One juror is a bigot who rejects the defendant's testimony because "you can't trust anything they say," yet (as Fonda shrewdly notes) the same bigot does accept the testimony of an eyewitness who belongs to the same (unidentified) ethnic group. (Here it is useful to reflect on what might explain this inconsistency.)

d) Lee J. Cobb accepts the testimony of the old man who says he heard the boy yell, "I'll kill you!" yet later he rejects the same man's testimony on the grounds that he is old and "half the time you can't believe anything he says." Cobb also claims that when someone yells "I'll kill you" (as the accused allegedly did) "they mean it," yet later he becomes infuriated with Fonda, yelling "I'll kill you" at him. Finally, Cobb seems intent on winning no matter what, illustrating the difference between arguing for the sake of winning vs. for the sake of discovering the truth.

e) The story takes place on a very hot, rainy day, and at a slow moment in the film, Klugman asks Marshall, who never removes his jacket: "Don't you ever sweat?" Marshall replies, "No, I don't." Later, however, when Marshall points out that the boy claimed to be watching a film at the time of the murder but could not remember the names of the films or actors, Fonda interrogates Marshall about the last film he had seen (a few days earlier). When Marshall fails to recall the names of those films, we see him wipe the sweat from his brow.

f) The stab wound in the victim's body was made in a downward motion, but Klugman points out that the boy was handy with a switchblade knife such as that used in the killing, and that anyone handy with such a knife would use it underhanded, thus making an upward wound.

After viewing the film, I begin the discussion on a light note by asking the students what they thought of this film which is completely devoid of sex, violence and action. By contrasting this film full of "talking heads" with the sort of film to which students are more accustomed, it becomes possible to lead into questions concerning what makes a film (or any work of art) good––and more generally, about the role of art in society, including discussion of art as education vs. art as entertainment.

I next ask the students how they would evaluate the moral character of the various *dramatis personae*, and to explain how they came to their conclusions. I note that Marshall acts as Fonda's foil, in that like Fonda, he is both intelligent and impartial, but arrives at an opposing conclusion. This makes it possible to discuss the concept of "honest disagreement" and how to distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable belief.

The jury often debates the need to continue their deliberations. One juror has tickets to a baseball game, another has a business to worry about. A third juror, however, notes that after all, "a boy may die." Still, many others become impatient with Fonda's insistence on hanging the jury with his "not guilty" vote. Fonda suggests (presumably because of the aforementioned juror's concern with the boy's fate) that the jury vote by secret ballot. If the vote for guilty is unanimous, he will go along with the others. But if anyone votes not guilty, the jury must talk out their differences. One juror changes his vote to not guilty. I raise the question of whether Fonda was morally justified in taking such a chance with the boy's life.

Different (irrelevant) characteristics of the boy are perceived as important by various jurors. For some, it is his ethnicity, for others his low economic class, youth, or previous criminal record. What accounts for these differences of emphasis on the jurors' part? Unpleasant past experiences with ethnic minorities or adolescents? Fear of being poor oneself? Marshall notes that the connection between poverty and crime is widely acknowledged, but that the jurors are not there to determine *why* the boy did something, but only *whether* he committed the murder. Thus the nature-nurture controversy is raised along with the issue of personal moral responsibility. If we are at least to some extent the products of our environment, does this in any way lessen our culpability? Are not the jurors themselves products of their environment? Suppose a certain juror is impartial but unaware of the logical fallacies he commits. Can we hold him morally responsible for that? To what extent can the jurors' failures as jurors also be considered failures on their part as human beings; i.e., are there many other situations in which those qualities which would make for a good juror would be needed if one were to function as a good person?

At one point, a juror who initially voted guilty and who seems interested in being fair decides to change his vote to innocent. One gets the impression that he does so when it becomes apparent to him that many of those voting guilty are of questionable moral character. Could it be that he wishes to dissociate himself from those others? If so, is this a good reason to change one's vote?

The main turning point occurs late in the story when Marshall removes his eyeglasses and the juror seated across the table from him notices that the glasses left impressions on Marshall's nose. This reminds the juror that the woman who testified she had seen the murder take place (at night in bed, through the windows of a passing train) also had those same impressions on her nose. Cobb quickly notes that she may have been far-sighted or that the marks on her nose may have been left by sunglasses. I point out that the jurors then make use of the following (unexpressed) modus ponens:

If one has impressions on her nose, then she must wear glasses.

If she wears glasses, her eyesight is probably poor.

If her eyesight is probably poor, then her testimony is questionable.

The woman who testified had impressions on her nose.

Therefore, her testimony is questionable.

I also point out that had the juror who noticed the marks on Marshall's nose not done so by sheer chance, the outcome of the trial might have been quite different.

The jury's perception of the trial in some ways seems to mirror the witnesses' perception of the murder, in that there are inconsistencies not only in the testimony of the witnesses, but also in the way in which the jurors recall testimony. This of course raises epistemological issues surrounding the ideal of objectivity and the trustworthiness of our memory.

At the film's opening Cobb says that he has nothing personal against the boy who is on trial, but we learn that he had had an altercation some years previously with his own son, whom he has not seen since. At the closing of the story (in an especially well-acted sequence) Cobb breaks down, making it clear that he had transferred his feelings toward his own son to the boy. Cobb is the last holdout for a guilty verdict, and thus, Fonda's tenacity has reversed the positions of his fellow jurors, thereby suggesting that a mere majority vote is not necessarily the best way to determine the most reasonable point of view. (Recall Xenophanes' point that reality is not revealed to us all at once, "but only through lengthy investigation do we discover what is true.")

Perhaps the greatest merit of "12 Angry Men" is the manner in which it shows us the numerous ways in which we can fail morally: through the inability or unwillingness to think clearly, self-centeredness, failure to notice what later seems all too obvious, etc. One can surely make a case that such an approach to morality is likelier to help us toward greater awareness of how we deal with situations which call for moral reflection than is a study of the classical moral theories. Neil Postman has made much the same point as follows:

“[T]he strategy I propose for educationists ... [is that] we abandon our vague, seemingly arrogant, and ultimately futile attempts to make children intelligent, and concentrate our attention on helping them avoid being stupid.

When we are thinking, we are mostly arranging sentences in our heads. When we are thinking stupidly, we are arranging stupid sentences. Even when we do a nonverbal stupid thing, we have preceded the action by talking to ourselves in such a way as to make us think the act is reasonable. The word, in a word, brings forth the act. This provides educationists with a specific subject matter: the study of those ways of talking that lead us to unnecessary mischief, failure, misunderstanding and pain.”