Ethics in the Courtroom:

A Time to Kill

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The Policy Tree

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Synopsis and Character Background

Watching *A Time to Kill* for the first time just a couple weeks ago, I was immediately drawn into to the story. The story is well-written (it is based on a John Grisham novel of the same name), dramatic and intriguing throughout. The film depicts a young Caucasian Southern lawyer, Jake Tyler Brigance, (played by Matthew McConaughey) who acts as the defense attorney for an African American acquaintance, Carl Lee Hailey (played by Samuel L. Jackson) in a murder trial. Hailey was charged for the killings of two Caucasian men who brutally raped and nearly murdered his 10 year old daughter. Carl is ultimately acquitted of the charges, even though he also wounded a peace officer in the process of murdering his daughter’s rapists. This story is full of issues regarding race, equality, retaliation and justice. The film is not short of ethical and moral dilemmas for several of the characters. The other cast members of importance in this study are as follows: Carla Brigance, Jake’s wife, Ellen Roark, a young Caucasian female law student who desires to help Jake with the case, Judge Omar Noose, the African American Sheriff, Ozzie Walls, the Caucasian Deputy Dwayne Powell Looney, and Ethel Twitty, Jake’s secretary (The Internet Movie Database, 2009).

Ethical Issues

The first of the ethical issues in the movie is the issue that Carl Lee Hailey deals with. He is notified of the terrible events shortly after the attack on his daughter took place. He rushed home to see his little girl, and was forced with an ethical dilemma:
should he let the court system do their job and sentence the suspects who were already in custody, or should he take justice into his own hands? The problem with letting the legal system have control over the situation is that Carl remembered a recent case in a nearby town where four white men were acquitted of raping a young black girl. Justice did not prevail in that case, so ultimately Carl decides that he must play judge and jury. In his mind, he must have thought that he was protecting his children, other black children, and perhaps the black community at large from two dangerous, racist men who might have been put back on the streets to continue to terrorize the community. Carl was convinced that the rapists were going to escape justice. He was sure that they would not have to repay their debt to society, which is Plato’s basic level of justice. While one can easily argue that his actions were morally wrong, many could argue that he acted ethically in ensuring that the rapists face justice. Clearly Carl broke the law, and thus faced a trial for the two murders shortly after the incident.

The next ethical issue in the film was faced by Jake Tyler Brigance. This incident actually took place when Jake met with Carl shortly after his daughter’s traumatizing experience. At that time, Carl hinted to Jake that he might consider taking justice into his own hands by doing something to the rapists, considering the high probability that they would be acquitted of their crimes. Jake faced the dilemma of whether he should report his friend, who may or may not have been plotting something against the rapists. For Jake, it may have been an issue of taking sides: Should he take the side of his friend, whose daughter had just been victimized at the hands of two heartless men, or should he take the side of those two heartless men? Considering that he wasn’t even completely sure of the validity of the threats that Carl was making, he decided not to report anything
to the authorities. This decision turned out to be a decision between life and death for the two rapists. Assuming that Jake thought that it was probable that Carl would indeed kill the rapists, he could have been operating under the utilitarian belief that if these rapists were off the streets, the town would be a better place. His thinking, along with Carl’s when plotting their deaths was probably something along these lines: *With them gone, that may save other little girls from also being victimized; it might stop others in the Black community from being victimized, as well, considering they were violent rapists.* (In the opening scene they were shown terrorizing the black part of town before ultimately raping the girl.) Although it is clear why some would side with and agree with Jake’s decision, others, such as his wife, believed that he had an obligation to report what Carl had told him for the sake of being completely truthful and avoiding further violence in the case.

After Carl went through with murdering the rapists, Jake faced another difficult issue of whether or not he should represent him as his defense attorney. Although Carl admitted to committing the murders, and there were many eye witnesses, Jake made the decision rather quickly to defend him under the grounds of temporary insanity. Jake, who had a young daughter himself, with his wife, Carla, could understand the feeling that Carl had after the attack. He deeply empathized with Carl, and that was the reason behind many of his ethical decisions throughout the film. He was able to put himself in his friend’s shoes, and realized that he probably would have done the same thing. The ethical dilemma surrounding his defense of Carl Lee Hailey was compounded when the case became a very heated one. Everyone associated with the defense, especially the whites involved began receiving threats and attacks. A bomb was planted under Jake’s house,
and nearly killed the officers who found it. The case became such an issue that Jake was forced to have his wife and daughter leave town for their safety. Soon after, Ethel Twitty, the secretary and her husband were attacked and the husband was killed by the newly formed chapter of the KKK that sought to avenge the deaths of the white rapists. Jake is forced with the decision whether he should quit the case due to the dangers involved. At this point he is challenged with the guilt of putting his family, friends and associates in grave danger. Ethel Twitty is very unforgiving, blaming Jake directly for her husband’s death. Jake now has to weigh the importance of the case verses the importance of the lives of his loved ones and himself. Jake knows that this is a landmark case, and he knows the implications if he is to lose the case. He knows that justice will not be served, and that the courts will continue to discriminate against African Americans if he does not win the case for Carl. Understanding this, Jake decides to press on with his defense, as he now has the support of a very bright law student Ellen Roark. Though this outlook and decision by Jake probably contradicts Kant’s categorical imperative, by using people as a means to an end, and not seeing them also as and end, this decision also has the same sort of utilitarian thought of the other dilemmas in the movie. Whether right or wrong, at this point, Jake is more than likely thinking: I would rather sacrifice my life and the life of my loved ones if that means that thousands or even millions of others in the present and in the future will get the justice that they deserve. He is unselfishly acting out of a desire to do what is right for the U.S. society as a whole, in his eyes. He knows that racism still exists in the minds of millions, especially in his state, and he knows that that transfers over into the justice system, and he knows that that is immoral and unethical.
Summary and Conclusion

The ethical dilemmas of this movie are complex and interesting. As this is a legal thriller, most of them involve issues of justice and equity. They touch on many elements from issues of race and discrimination to crimes of murder, rape and even terrorism. Many of the characters in this film act on the ethical grounds of utilitarian thought and out of the basic premises of justice and equality. Ultimately, the all-white jury in the trial is tasked with deciding whether Carl Lee Hailey is guilty of murder and should be sentenced to death. Until the closing arguments, the jury is set on a guilty verdict. However, when Jake closes, he brings up the issue of equity, begging the jurors to think about the case as if it was a 10 year old white girl that had been raped. The jury has the final ethical dilemma in the film, and they ultimately feel that justice is served by acquitting Carl of the murders, knowing that if he were a white man, they would have had no problem acquitting him. They made the decision, also knowing that many of them would have done the same if their daughter had been raped, and knowing that the streets are much better off without brutal, violent rapists.
References


