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PROSTITUTION IN SALT LAKE CITY, TARGETING CIGARETTES, AND BREAKING THE SPEED: THREE CASE STUDY VIGNETTES ON ETHICS IN THE CAPITALIST MARKETPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Three vignettes are presented to help students think about and apply ethical, social, and economic concepts they have learned in courses incorporating business ethics. Each vignette is short enough to cover in a single class.

I. INTRODUCTION

The following vignettes are designed to help students think about and apply ethical, social, and economic concepts they have learned in courses in business ethics and business, government, and society. These vignettes do not require a great deal of time and effort from students yet still raise multiple theoretical and practical issues and present a valuable forum for student analysis. Their usefulness depends on the cogency of the issues presented in each example rather than the extent of detail. While detailed cases have their uses, short, clean vignettes allow multiple issues to be discussed and time to be focused on application rather than unnecessary detail.

Prostitution raises the issue of moral legislation and the ethical boundaries of the market system. How should society balance its ethical and its economic goals? Should everything be for sale?

Marketing cigarettes to youth presents another conflict between business and ethics. Legal limits on advertising to children are easily gotten around and the focus of this vignette should be morality not law.

While short, the third vignette also presents ample issues for analysis. Why is it wrong to speed? Driving eighty mph where the speed limit is seventy-five does not substantially increase the risk of harm to others, but it is, by definition, against the law. These questions allow students to address the relationship between law, conventional ethics, and moral principles.

II. VIGNETTE 1: PROSTITUTION IN SALT LAKE CITY

Unknown to most current residents, Salt Lake City once had a booming trade in legal prostitution. The entrepreneurs involved operated out of a specific section of town (just west of city center, near the railroad station) which was owned by the LDS church. It was thought by those in charge that it was better to have prostitution occur openly in a limited area, which good people could knowingly avoid, than to have it go underground and spread throughout the city. “Prostitution, it was felt, could not be eliminated. It could only be controlled. The best way to do that was to confine it to particular parts of town...where it could be watched and regulated.” (McCormick, 1982). Unlike their successors who in a fury of moral fervor outlawed prostitution and closed down the brothels, these leaders seemed to recognize the innate demand that needed to be satisfied.

Prostitutes offer a service which, even today, is clearly in demand. Isn't our economic system designed to efficiently meet society's needs and satisfy what the people demand? Shouldn't the role of government in Capitalism be limited? Why is the government interfering in a basic economic transaction (the union of supply and demand)? Is this appropriate? Should prostitution be regulated by the government? Why and how? Remember to appropriately structure your answer and support your assertions.

1. CONSIDERATIONS

What makes this issue an ethical issue?

What is the relationship between, morality, economics and the law?

How would you analyze the issue from an ethical, moral and legal perspective?
Should everything be for sale?

What instances of market demand should be prohibited by government in a free-market economy?

What is the rationale for the regulation of morality in a market economy?

2. RESOURCES

McCormick, John S. (1982). *Red lights in Zion: Salt Lake City's stockade, 1908-1911* in McCormick, John S. and Sillito, John R. (1995). *A world we thought we knew: Readings in Utah history*. SLC, Utah: University of Utah Press.

Mandeville, Bernard, (1724, 2006). “A modest defence of publick stews”: Prostitution and its discontents in early Georgian England. NYC: Palgrave Macmillian.

III. VIGNETTE 2: MARKETING CIGARETTES TO YOUNG PEOPLE

Recently Mike, a character in the comic strip, *Doonesbury* (4-17), has been offered a job in an ad campaign designed to make cigarette smoking attractive to young people. This will be done in a clear, effective, and not illegal way. A cigarette company executive notes that “this is a new campaign aimed at the new smoker! These young people are the future of the tobacco industry! We have to keep reaching them!” Mike sees this as an ethical dilemma, and responds “UM...this must be one of your periodic tests of my character, right sir? I’ll have to sleep on this one, Sir.” (see <http://www.gocomics.com/doonesbury/1989/04/17>)

Assume that Mike has come to you for advice, how would you help him to decide whether or not to accept the account? Would the decision differ if refusing the account meant a loss of profits to the firm, or even its closure; or if it meant a loss of career opportunities for Mike? The focus of your answer should be individual moral and ethical analysis not broader societal issues of advertising or cigarettes, (except as assumptions in your ethical analysis).

1. CONSIDERATIONS

How do we decide what is the right thing to do?

Think about moral ethical theory including ends (consequentialism) and various means, intuitions, and virtue.

How does the fact that this is a career decision affect these considerations?

Often ethical dilemmas are imposed upon us by others; we are not isolated in the motivations, situations and pressures we face.

How can ethics be managed in business, both by Mike and his boss?

2. RESOURCES

Reuters, (1995). Teen-agers and tobacco: Excerpts from Clinton news conference on his tobacco order. *New York Times*, August 11, 1995, p. A18.

For legal insights see Steiner, J. & Steiner, G. (2009). *Business, Government, and Society* 12ed. NY: McGraw-Hill Irwin, P. 321-330.

For ethical insights see Desjardins, Joseph (2011). *Business Ethics* 4 ed. NYC: McGraw-Hill Higher Education, p. 201-218.

IV. VIGNETTE 3: BREAKING THE SPEED LIMIT

My sister will not drive faster than 75 mph because she says it is against the law. I, on the other hand, often drive 80 mph on the interstate even when the posted speed limit is 75 mph. Am I incorrect in thinking of myself as an ethical person? Am I doing anything wrong or immoral? If I drive 100 mph instead of 80 mph, do your answers change? Why? Support your answers with clear analysis.

1. CONSIDERATIONS

What makes this issue an ethical issue?

What is the relationship between ethics, morality, and the law?

How would you analyze the issue from an ethical, moral and legal perspective?

Which moral theories would be most helpful in understanding this issue?

Does it matter whether I drive 100 mph or 80 mph? Why or why not?

2. RESOURCES

For an analysis of the relationship between law and ethics see Beauchamp, Tom L. & Norman E. Bowie (2001). *Ethical Theory and Business* 6 ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Ch 1.

Carter, Lief (1979). *Reason in Law* Boston: Little, Brown and Co.

Wasserstrom, Richard (1971) *Morality and the Law* Belmont, CA:Wadsworth Publishing Co.

Greenawalt, K. (1987). *Conflicts of Law and Morality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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Wasserstrom, Richard (1971) *Morality and the Law* Belmont, CA:Wadsworth Publishing Co.