RESPONSE TO “A SIGN OF OUR TIMES?”

Maureen O’Neill
Chaffey College Emeritus

The above case study presents an ethical issue as seen through the eyes of teachers of philosophy and business. The study considers the appropriateness of a billboard advertisement for a radio station depicting a scantily clad woman with the words “Now Turn Us On.” The authors label the issue an ethical dilemma because of the many differing views and objectives held by the various stakeholders.

In their article, the authors present the viewpoints of all the stakeholders in the issue of the disputed billboard. They thoroughly explain the business objectives of the radio station, the billboard manufacturer, and the advertising company, as well as the concern for decency raised by the writer of the letter to the paper, the school teacher and the women’s group. After analyzing the interests of each of these parties, the authors proceed to simply state the “results” of the actual situation, which was that, due to the positive financial outcomes for the businesses involved, the billboard remained.

However, is this article really a case study? In order to be an educational tool as case studies are designed to be, it must not only tell what the outcome was but rather what it should have been and reasons for this claim. In other words, was the outcome a moral one, was there another outcome possible and would it have been a preferable one given the moral principles involved. In addition, a case study should pose an ethical dilemma, and to be a dilemma there needs to be two morally acceptable or morally unacceptable outcomes supported by the philosophical reasoning behind both. Therefore, the authors should have passed judgment on the radio station’s and the sign company’s decision not to take the billboard down as well as consider the alternative of removing it. Which one could be considered the a correct decision, why or why not? Merely stating that there were positive business outcomes does not automatically mean that the action was moral as these authors seem to imply. This point has been made only too clear by the recent
actions of those banks and mortgage companies who have thrived at the expense of their clients.

Furthermore, even if we are using Bentham’s hedonistic calculus or Mill’s utilitarian principle to say that the action that produces the better outcome is the moral one, there was no mention of the possible negative consequences of the billboard advertisement against which to weigh the positive business outcomes. Was there any noticeable increase in sex crimes or lewd behavior in this “low crime rate” area with people “active in local churches” who have “general respect” for each other? Was there any discomfort shown by young women of the area who felt objectified by this billboard? Was there any negative feedback from teachers, such as the one whose students pointed out the sign when on a fieldtrip? Could there possibly be some negative long term consequences such as an increase in detection of pornography in the town? Given the abundance of literature on the ethics of advertising and the feminist critiques of women’s images, there can certainly be a case made for not only the negative consequences of this billboard, but also for the violation of the principle of “respect for persons” so clearly stated in Kant’s philosophy. One only needs to turn to the video “Killing Us Softly 3” by Jean Kilbourne readily accessible on YouTube to see clearly how sex not only sells products but also sells values, success and normalcy. Proof of such claims can be seen in the authors’ reporting that some people in the town thought that the ad was brilliant, that women wore a lot less in public then the ad showed, and that there were more important problems for the town to consider. These comments demonstrate Kilbourne’s point that the use of women as sex objects to sell a product, in this case a radio station, is perceived as normal and not worth the time taken to challenge it. By not referencing these issues in their conclusion, the authors appear to be ignoring the moral worth of the opponents’ arguments and condoning the businesses action of not removing the billboard.

The situation presented in this article could indeed be a very enlightening case study for classes in business ethics and women’s studies. But in order for it to be effective, much more consideration must be given to arguments on both sides of the situation and to the philosophical principles behind them. In other words, both outcome based and rule based ethics must be considered in determining what principles hold. Also, both business interests and respect issues must be analyzed for their worth in decision making. If these factors are considered then the consciousness raising, which seems to be a concern of the authors, will truly be achieved.