The Elephant Man (dir. David Lynch, 1980)
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Key Stage 5
Religious Education/Philosophy/Ethics

In this lesson students apply their knowledge of Kantian ethics to the experience of John Merrick, the Elephant Man. They do so through active watching, through a hot seat activity and finally by creating a trailer for a film that raises similar ethical dilemmas.

Learners are encouraged to think about the way trailers are used to capture the premise of films and attract audiences to watch whole film.

Learners should watch the film first. The content of the lesson can then be spread across several teaching hours or can be condensed depending on available time.

Curriculum Links

- Acquire knowledge and understanding of the relationship between the chosen area of study and other specified aspects of human experience.
- Develop skills by using appropriate language and terminology in context

Lesson Objective

To build on previous knowledge of Kantian ethics: duty, imperatives, good will and the “kingdom of ends”. To gain a better understanding of Kantian ethics (specifically categorical imperatives, means and ends), and to apply the relevant language and terminology to a specific context.

You will need...

- Trailer: DVD of The Elephant Man
- Main Attraction: Space for a hot seating activity – ideally a semi-circle or circle.
- End Credits: Trailer for The Elephant Man.
Activities

TRAILER: AN END-IN-ITSELF?

Watch the film (or select appropriate scenes to show if time is an issue).

Ask students to make note of the following while they watch:

- When is John Merrick/the Elephant Man used as a means to an end? Who is most guilty of using him instrumentally?
- When is the Elephant Man valued as an end? Who seems to value him as a human/individual the most?
- Does Dr Treves treat him well according to Kantian ethics, i.e. does he treat him as a means or an end?
- Kant’s categorical imperative of humans as ends applies to rational, autonomous beings. Do you think that John Merrick satisfies this criterion? Does his mental state allow him to be considered a member of the moral community according to Kant?

Following the film, have a group or whole class discussion based around these questions.

MAIN ATTRACTION: HOT SEATING

Recruit three students to play the following characters:

- Showman Bytes
- Dr Treves
- John Merrick

Give these students time to absorb their characters; they will individually need to sit in the hot seat and answer questions from their peers.

The rest of the students will need to develop questions to ask the characters, such as requiring each pupil to write down two questions (one for each character). You should act as a facilitator to ensure the questioning follows a constructive path.

- Showman Bytes should try to defend his ethical position of using Merrick in the freak show. The other students should try to use questioning to try to establish that Bytes is treating Merrick as a means not an end.
• Dr Treves should present a more complex case and questioning can be used to tease out the subtleties of the Kantian ethic. Students’ questioning should highlight that Treves is using Merrick as both a means and an end.

• Students can question Merrick on his relationship with the other characters to try to confirm who has been treating him ethically according to Kant. Merrick can also be questioned to establish his mental state and therefore the applicability of the Kantian ethic.

Here are some points to consider that should emerge from the Trailer and Main Attraction:

1. Showman Bytes clearly relates to the categorical imperative. Bytes is explicitly using the Elephant Man's deformity to profit from gawking customers.

2. Dr Treves’ wife is a good example of a character that treats him wholly as an end.

3. Dr Treves is an interesting case. Although he treats Merrick with humility and appreciation on a fundamental level, he also exhibits him to his medical colleagues. Arguably Merrick is still a spectacle under Dr Treves’ wing, albeit in a higher-status environment. Treves realises this – “Why did I do it? Am I a good man or a bad man?”

4. Kant has a resolution for 3. that is - it is acceptable to treat others as a means if they are also treated as an end. Use mundane examples to demonstrate this e.g. pizza deliveries or point-of-sale interactions. Although Treves uses Merrick for the advancement of science, he also shows kindness and compassion. Does this make Treves’ behaviour morally permissible?

In early scenes of the film, Merrick’s mental state is not developed, questioning whether he is an autonomous, rational being and perhaps could be perceived as voiding the above - according to Kantian ethics. But as the film develops, Merrick illustrates intellect and more sophisticated interaction. This, according to Kant, justifies the need to treat him as an end.

END CREDITS: COMING TO A CINEMA NEAR YOU!

Show the trailer for The Elephant Man as inspiration. Do they think this trailer is successful? Why?

Ask students to narrate/act out a trailer for a film that involves an analogous Kantian ethical dilemma. Have a class discussion first about topics that could be particularly interesting and challenging e.g. war, euthanasia, suicide, abortion and so on.
Extras

Other Ideas

- The hot seat activity can be extended by allowing someone to take on the role of Kant. The teacher could do this, or it could be an opportunity to differentiate for G&T. The other students can then be given the opportunity to question Kant on his response to the ethical considerations in *The Elephant Man*.
- The film can be used as a resource to introduce or consolidate the ethical stances of other philosophical thinkers on the curriculum. One option is for students to specialise on a given thinker and be called to the hot seat for questioning.

Read

- Articulating *The Elephant Man* (Peter Graham and Fritz Oehlschlaeger 1992)
- *Of Mice and Men* (John Steinbeck, 1937)
- *The Sound and the Fury* (William Faulkner, 1929)

Watch

- *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (dir. William Dieterle, 1939)
- *The Last Laugh* (dir. Friedrich W Murnau, 1924)