

Film Title: *Quiz Show*

Director: Robert Redford

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Principal Players: Charles Van Doren, professor turned quiz show contestant-Ralph Fiennes; Richard Goodwin, government investigator-Rob Morrow; Dan Enright-David Pather; Albert Freedman-Hank Azaria, quiz show producers

Genre: Historical drama, media history

Exact Segment: Segment One: Van Doren is interviewed by Enright and Freedman and is told he will have to cheat to be on the quiz show; Segment Two: Investigator John Goodwin confronts Van Doren in his apartment, and Van Doren attempts to justify participating in the rigged quiz show.

Exact Segment Length: Segment One: 3:05

Segment Two: 3:15

Exact Segment Start: Segment One: Beginning of Track 6

Segment Two, Beginning of Track 21

Exact Segment End: Segment One: After Van Doren is told he must cheat to be on the quiz show, he wonders aloud what Kant would do. Segment Two: When Goodwin says he would not take an offer like the one made to Van Doren, Van Doren replies, "Well, I would."

Synopsis: A college professor accepts an offer to appear on a rigged quiz show. The deception is revealed by a government investigator and the professor attempts to defend his action.

Keywords: Truth, utilitarianism, formalism, rationalization

Setting the Stage: A quiz show called *Twenty-One* is one of the most popular shows on the new medium of television in 1957. Charles Van Doren, a young college professor and member of a famous family of intellectuals, wins big money and national fame on the show. What the public does not know is that the show is rigged; the producers conspire with the sponsor and network executives to keep popular contestants winning by giving them the answers in advance.

Description of Events in Segment: In the first segment, Van Doren is interviewed for the quiz show. The show's producers explain that by being on the prime time show *Twenty-One* instead of the minor quiz show he had intended Van Doren can not only win much more money than he makes as a college professor but he can also serve as an intellectual example to millions of school children. Then they tell him that he cannot do this by playing honestly; they will have to give him the answers in advance. Van Doren says it is an interesting situation and wonders what Kant would do.

In the second segment, Van Doren is confronted in his apartment by congressional investigator Richard Goodwin. Van Doren at first denies any cheating, but Goodwin says he has evidence. Van Doren then asks Goodwin if he would appear on a rigged quiz show in return for all the prize money, the fame, and the network television job Van Doren had received. Goodwin says he would not. Van Doren replies, "And I would."

Ethical Concepts and Issues Illustrated: The two segments seen together illustrate an ethical choice and the attempt to justify the choice. When Van Doren wonders aloud what Kant would do if confronted with his choice, he is being disingenuous. The formalistic ethics associated with Kant prohibit deception regardless of the benefits. The test of formalistic ethics is whether the principle can be a categorical imperative; i.e., could it be a universal law that everyone could follow. Since deception cannot be a universal law in a functioning society, it is not ethical.

A more appropriate reference would be to Bentham, whose utilitarian ethics would weigh the rewards being offered to Van Doren and the improvement in the image of intellectuals against the possible harm caused by the deception. Even then, an objective weighing of possible harm against possible good would have precluded Van Doren's collusion in the scandal.

A third approach to ethics is that of virtue, which emphasizes personal characteristics such as honesty and integrity. Van Doren is obviously deficient in these virtues; otherwise, he would not have even been tempted by the offer made to him. In this case, being an honest man would have served him better than his intellectual knowledge of ethical theory.

The choice made by Van Doren is apparent in the second segment. By this time he has ceased any pretense at ethical reasoning. He tries to defend himself first by lying about his accuser. Then, when the investigator says he has corroborating evidence, Van Doren dismisses the ethical choice as merely a matter of personal taste.

The story of Van Doren as depicted in the movie provides a good example of an ethical decision and the consequences of that decision for the people involved and for society.

Additional Comments: Quiz Show is a fairly accurate depiction of the quiz show scandals as recounted by Richard Goodwin in his book *Remembering America*. While the segments indicated here focus on the ethical choice of Van Doren, the movie also deals with the ethics practiced by corporate executives and with the relationship between business and government.

The closing scene of the movie reveals what eventually became of all the main characters in the story.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Did Charles Van Doren do the right thing according to Kant? According to Bentham? Why did Van Doren make the choice he did?
2. The Quiz Show producers argued that the image of intellectuals would be enhanced and education improved by Van Doren's participation in the rigged show. What was the actual effect of Van Doren's participation on education and on society once the deception was revealed?
3. These events occurred in the late 1950's, when television was a new phenomenon. Could this scandal have happened today? Why or why not?
4. While Van Doren's career and reputation were ruined, the other figures in the quiz show scandals emerged unscathed. How could this be explained?
5. What are the similarities between the quiz show scandals of the 1950's and the

scandals of Tyco, Adelphia and other high-profile corporate scandals of more recent times? What are the differences?

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