The movie “Erin Brockovich” brings a number of ethical issues to light through the perspective of Erin Brockovich herself. This film is based on a true story, which is one of the reasons it intrigued me when I first watched the movie and what peaked my desire to write this paper on the story. The movie describes the story of Erin Brockovich who is a struggling single mother who becomes connected to Ed Masry’s law firm because of an unfortunate car accident, and begins working at the law firm out of desperation for an income. As she spends time filing papers as a clerk, she becomes interested in the human nature of the medical cases and persuades Ed Masry to allow her to investigate further. Erin spends numerous hours examining these cases and finds a link to between the community members of Hinkley, CA and a company by the name of Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E), who have a plant in Hinkley. The film goes on to show viewers several families in the Hinkley community who have various health problems, from headaches, to miscarriages, to gastrointestinal cancer. Although Erin does not have a law degree, she is able to uncover many details of this case through her discussions with these families, and therefore this film is focused on the perspective of the law firm and the members of the Hinkley community. She discovers the link between these health issues and hexavalent chromium in the water, which infiltrated the water system through PG&E’s plant in Hinkley.

This film portrays the business world in a very negative light, as it uses PG&E as the cornerstone of the controversy. In this case, we learn PG&E is clearly at fault, which allows us to learn from a number of ethical issues with their business practice. There are two primary examples that stand out in my mind as harmful to the business world. First, once PG&E learn that Masry’s law firm is investigating their use of hexavalent chromium, a representative from PG&E is sent to the law firm to attempt to stop the investigation. This representative offers to buy out the Jensen
family who has been affected by poor health, and their young daughter, Annabell, is battling cancer that is speculated to be linked to PG&E. He offers $250,000 for the Jensen’s home in Hinkley, however claims absolutely no responsibility for any medical conditions and would not pay any medical expenses. This representative is perceived to be a heartless person who is not taking responsibility for the damage his company has caused to families like the Jensen’s in the community of Hinkley. Another example of the company, and therefore business world, being rightfully portrayed in a negative light was when an assumed employee from PG&E actually calls to threaten the safety of Erin and her children. Erin is threatened by this person because PG&E know that she has valuable information that could prove their fault in the health issues of Hinkley community members. Clearly, this act portrays the business world in a damaging way, and I believe we would all hope that our co-workers and/or companies would never act in a way to threaten an innocent mother and her family.

The primary business ethics issues that were portrayed involve deception, bribery, harm to the environment, and ultimately the inability to trust local businesses. These ethical business issues were focused on PG&E and their employees. I would argue that the employees of PG&E must have been at Kohlberg’s level one and were motivated by sheer selfishness. It seems this group of individuals did anything to survive, including an employee who cleaned the tanks at PG&E while continuing to have severe nose bleeds. Additionally, PG&E did not care for others; otherwise they would have changed their policies to stop the use of harmful chemicals. The only employee who I would suggest to be at a higher level on Kohlberg’s scale was a man named Charles Embry who approached Erin toward the end of her investigation. He was instrumental in this law suit because he had saved the documents that PG&E had requested he destroy,
because he knew it was unethical to destroy the evidence of harmful chemicals. He watched his cousin pass away at only 41 years old, after suffering nose bleeds while cleaning the cooling towers, having his colon and intestines removed, and ultimately dying from kidney tumors. Charles Embry clearly cared about others, the greatest good for the greatest number, and was willing to go against his manager’s direction to do the ‘right’ thing, and therefore I would consider him to be at Kohlberg’s stage 5.

The most obvious ethical dilemma of this film is the deception of PG&E, and the effect that the deception had on the members of the community. In this case, PG&E deceived the entire town of Hinkley by allowing them to believe that their water source was safe. Deception was clearly portrayed throughout the film, with a particularly good example toward the beginning of the movie. The film described how PG&E held a meeting with 200 people from Hinkley to explain the benefits of PG&E using chromium 3 at their plant. Chromium 3 is similar to hexavalent chromium (or chromium 6), however the deception is clear when the film goes on to show that PG&E was not actually using chromium 3 at their plant, and was actually using the harmful chromium 6 instead. As explained previously, hexavalent chromium, or chromium 6, is extremely dangerous and harmful to humans. This deceit continued for far too long, allowing the community to believe that children could safely play in pools and all members could safely drink water out of their faucet. It was even proven toward the end of the film that it was ‘conscious complete deception,’ as we learned about in class, because there were internal PG&E documents dated 1966 that described how it would be “better for all if documents were not discussed…”
Unfortunately, this issue was not resolved in the film as PG&E continued their denial and dishonesty until the very end of the film. This company ended up losing the largest direct-action lawsuit in United States history, therefore in some sense it was resolved with $333 million paid to the people of Hinkley. They should have resolved this issue originally by removing the hexavalent chromium from their processes and admitting wrongdoing. This company should have done everything in their power to prevent health problems from starting in the first place, or spreading to additional members of society. They also should have reimbursed anyone affected by hexavalent chromium at the very beginning. PG&E was portrayed very negatively, and should have taken various actions to prevent this situation from originally occurring.

The second ethical dilemma that was illustrated in this film was bribery. This issue was also viewed very negatively, and as if the bribery offer was too small to even be taken seriously. There were two good examples of PG&E’s attempt to bribe the members of the Hinkley community to drop the charges against them, and even before that to accept that their health issues were not at all related to PG&E. The first example of bribery was shown when a PG&E representative offered to pay $250,000 for the Jensen’s home to drop any potential, future charges against PG&E, as mentioned previously. This was clearly portrayed to be an inappropriate action, and was resolved quickly through the Erin’s decision, along with the Jensen’s, not to accept the bribe. It was an insulting bribe from their perspective, and PG&E should not have attempted to use bribery in the first place. The second example of bribery, which I believe personally to be a higher level of ethical dilemma, was that PG&E paid for doctors’ visits for Hinkley community members with health issues. PG&E essentially bribed these people to go to a specific doctor by paying for the visit, where the doctor told them all that
their health problems were completely unrelated to the chromium used at PG&E plants. This is an extremely unethical behavior in my mind, as it compounds the negative aspects of bribery, deception and dishonesty. This issue was not directly resolved in the film; however it should have been resolved by PG&E paying for the people of Hinkley with any health problems to see a doctor of their choice, in order to receive a second opinion on their health condition. PG&E again should have admitted wrongdoing and sent a letter of apology to all who were affected explaining what went wrong and encouraging them to see another doctor as soon as possible. Bribery was exposed in this film, which shed a very disappointing perception onto the PG&E company.

Lastly, the issue of harming the environment was very clearly illustrated as a third ethical dilemma in “Erin Brockovich.” This hexavalent chromium was clearly very dangerous to humans, and it was also very harmful to the environment, especially the water system. PG&E was portrayed in an extremely negative light once again because this company did not seem to care about sustainability whatsoever. Sustainability was described in class to be “The ability to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” (UN 1987 Summit) PG&E did not enact policies to keep the water safe, and therefore compromised the future of Hinkley by contaminating the water. In the film, attention was specifically brought to the fact that PG&E skipped the step of adding liner to the pools at their plant to keep the flow-off water safe. This clearly was harmful to the environment and risked sustainability. PG&E did not resolve this dilemma until the very end of the movie when it stated that “PG&E claims to no longer use hexavalent chromium in any of their compressor plants and holding ponds are now lined to prevent ground water contamination.” It took the
lawsuit from Erin Brockovich and Ed Masry to motivate them to prevent harmful contaminants from seeping into the environment, when they should have taken care of this ethical dilemma from the beginning. They should have taken the steps to line the pool and prevent all flow-off water from being contaminated. PG&E could have resolved this ethical issue easily, however instead continued on their path of unethical behavior which they paid for in the long run.

Overall, this was a great learning experience because it brought to light numerous unethical behaviors that can happen in a company. I understand that it would be difficult to act against your company, as I believe it was for PG&E employees; however this exercise illustrated exactly how important it is to act in an ethical manner, even if your company is unethical. By focusing on the families that were affected by PG&E’s unethical behavior, the movie was impactful in portraying how serious the effects can be if they are not treated appropriately. If I am ever faced with a situation where my company is acting in an ethically questionable manner, I know this experience will provide great knowledge for me to lean on and ultimately take the right actions.