**Introduction and Portrayal of the Business World**

“Tony Stark: The most famous mass murder in the history of America.” This is one character’s take on Tony and his weapon-making company in the movie. *Iron Man* is about the work of Stark Industries, which makes weapons for the American military. Though its mission is defending American people, this business is also portrayed as above: murderous. The movie does well in portraying both perspectives of this business, the positive and negative light.

In a positive light, this work is necessary for protecting American soldiers and in turn, the American population as a whole. When Tony visits the soldiers overseas, they demonstrate their respect and adoration for him by taking pictures with him and asking many questions. Back home, in his interview with a confrontational reporter, Tony asks “Do you plan to report on the millions we’ve saved by advancing medical technology or kept from starvation with our Intellicrops? All those breakthroughs - military funding.” So besides defense, this business contributes to medical and agricultural advances. All nobilities aside, this business is definitely portrayed as glamorous. Tony’s lavish lifestyle is characterized by a fantasy home, extravagant cars, and gambling. The second scene of the movie takes place at Caesar’s Palace in Vegas, where the Apogee award for Design and Engineering was being given to Stark Industries.

In the negative light, this is a business whose products result in many deaths. That confrontational reporter asked Tony how he felt about his nickname “Merchant of Death.” She also says that people call this business “war profiteering.” Some of the negative sides of this business are also discussed in the following ethical dilemmas.

**Ethical Issue #1: Tony Stark and Stark Industries**

For all the reasons previously listed, business in this industry can be a constant ethical dilemma for anyone involved. In the first part of the movie, Tony has no qualms at all. He
believes the weapons he creates protect and defend American soldiers. Then, when he is in Afghanistan to demonstrate his new missile, his caravan is bombed by a terrorist cell. Before he gets hit, he looks at the grenade and sees “Stark Industries” on it. It explodes, he ends up peppered with shrapnel, and the terrorists capture him. He is only saved because another of their prisoners is a doctor, and they want Tony to create the missile for them. When Tony escapes and returns home, he begins second-guessing what his company does. “I never got to say good-bye to my father” he says, “I would have asked him how he felt about what this company did, if he was conflicted, if he ever had doubts.” Now that Tony has learned that somehow the terrorists obtained his weapons and used them against Americans, the ethical dilemma now is what to do with the company. Though his company does other things, most of his wealth comes from creating weapons.

This issue starts being resolved when Tony holds a press conference and states:

“I came to realize I had more to offer this world than just making things that blow up and that is why effective immediately I am shutting down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark Industries until such a time as I can decide what the future of this company should be, what direction it should take, one that I’m comfortable with and is consistent with the highest good for this country.”

It is clear at this point that Tony has decided that his wealth is not worth the harm that his weapons have caused. When an associate questions this decision, he says, “I don’t want body count to be our only legacy… we can do better, we can do something else.” Though he puts his reputation as well as his company’s stock price at risk, he resolutely decides to put his innovative talents to use in other ways.

Tony resolved this issue the way he should have. At first, due to the lack of (or biased) information, Tony believed his company did good things. While the defense industry as a whole is quite controversial, Tony believed that Americans and their weapons are achieving the most good possible in an imperfect world: that they are only being used against those who initiate the
attacks. When he learns his weapons are being used against Americans, he decides to change. He spends his time developing the Iron Man suit, which is bullet proof, can fly, and is armed. The first time he uses it is when he hears of an attack by the terrorists on a small town called Galmira in Afghanistan. He puts on the suit, flies there, and takes out the terrorists, thus protecting innocent civilians. Note that he has not limited himself to protecting just Americans: he truly wants to establish whatever peace he can. According to the previous quote, he wants to achieve “the highest good for this country,” which would make him a consequentialist at Stage 5 of Kohlberg’s Stages of Moral Development; however, now his actions put him in Stage 6. He has chosen to make moral decisions according to the ethical principle of establishing as much peace as possible in an imperfect world, being impartial to those affected by the decision. If you are hindering peace, he will stop you. If you are a victim of terrorism, he will protect you if possible, no matter who you are.

**Ethical Issue #2: Obediah and His Position**

The ethical dilemma that Obediah faces is what to do about the fact that he was Howard’s (Tony’s father) right-hand-man, but when Howard died, Obediah didn’t get to rise to the top as expected: Tony took over. Does Obe have the right to Howard’s position due to the years he put in, or does Tony?

Obe’s answer to this dilemma is that the position is rightfully his: “I built this company from nothing, and nothing’s going to stand in my way.” On top of the title, he also wants the money—as much of it as possible. To establish these ends, we discover that he is the one who sold Stark weapons to the terrorists, and told them where and when Tony could be attacked. Then, upon Tony’s return and announcement of the new direction for the company, Obe told the Board that Tony was suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and should not be allowed access
or decision-making power in the company: “Who do you think locked you out, I was the one who filed the injunction.” Meanwhile, Obe was secretly making his version of the Iron Man suit, only bigger and better so he could eliminate Tony.

Obe was acting according to teleological theory, specifically he was interested in the consequences of one restricted group: himself. The ends he wanted to reach were fame and fortune, without regard to the means. The way this dilemma should have been resolved is by a mixed deontological theory. While still obtaining the money and status he wanted, he could have followed some basic rules. For instance, he could have obtained money (an end) without double-dealing (unethical means.) Regarding the position as top of the company, had he explored the situation, he perhaps would have realized that Tony wasn’t on top merely because he was Howard’s son, but because he was extremely intelligent, inventive, and wanted to make the right decisions for and on behalf of the company. Had Obe been forward with him and honest about feeling wronged by not taking over “the throne,” perhaps they could have operated as partners and Obe still could reap the fame and fortune that came of Tony’s creations.

**Ethical Issue #3: Col. James Rhodes and His Military Responsibilities**

Rhodes faces an ethical dilemma regarding where his loyalties lie when he has to lie for Tony. The two have become friends because Rhodes serves in Weapons Development for the military, meaning they have worked closely together and established a lot of trust in each other through their work. Rhodes knows the importance of protocol with the military, but he also knows that Tony is an intelligent and well-intentioned man. When Tony has gone into a war zone with his new equipment (the Iron Man suit) that nobody knows about, he is caught on the radar as a bogey. The military does not know it is Tony and did not approve any clearance in this area, thus they assume it is an enemy. Though Tony does not have permission to be there,
Rhodes figures out that it’s him and has to decide whether to continue with protocol, or call off the attack in order to save his friend. Rhodes cannot admit to anyone that he knows about this though, because he was not supposed to be working with Tony due to the injunction.

Rhodes resolves this issue by calling off the attack and subsequently accounting for what happened by calling it “an unfortunate training exercise.” Part of military’s operating code is to share relevant information, but Rhodes chose not to disclose this information to the other military personnel in order to protect Tony.

Although he has to lie, this was the proper way to resolve this dilemma. Rhodes knew that some of the criticism aimed at Tony was unfounded, and that Tony could be trusted. These factors led to Rhodes’ decision to protect him. Had Tony been a true danger, Rhodes rightfully would have taken a different course of action. Instead he saved Tony, who would go on to work for peace and saving people. If “honesty is the best policy” is a rule in ethics, Rhodes had to break it in order to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number, acting at a Stage 5 level.

Not Just a Comic Book World

Although Iron Man is a comic book world, I trust that the issues addressed are still very real. A business ethics issue that I will be more aware of now when I enter the business world as a Human Resources professional, is that a real-world version of what Obe felt when he didn’t come into Howard’s position, will happen when people feel they are passed up for a promotion. It will be very important to communicate to these people why they weren’t promoted and get them on the right track, so that they won’t engage in counter-productive behaviors.

My reflection made evident that different ethical dilemmas call for different methods of resolution. It’s okay to be deontological if you seek altruistic consequences, but if you seek selfish ends, then you must follow some rules about the means of getting them.