National High School Ethics Bowl
Regional Ethics Bowl Cases
2015-2016

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1. Too Young to Vote?

In September 2014, the people of Scotland held a referendum: Asked to decide whether to become an independent country or remain part of the United Kingdom, they chose the latter. Among the 3.6 million voters who participated in this decision were more than 100,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 17, who were allowed to vote on this question.¹

In June 2015, the Scottish Parliament unanimously passed a bill to secure voting rights for 16 and 17 year olds in all local and Scottish elections. However, these young people will not be able to participate in other UK elections or referenda, as only those aged 18 and above are eligible to vote in such elections.

Scotland is not alone in extending voting rights to some citizens under 18. Argentina, Austria, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, and Nicaragua allow citizens as young as 16 to vote in national elections. 16 year olds are also allowed to vote in local elections in some areas of Germany, Israel, and Norway. Even two cities in the United States—Takoma Park and Hyattsville, MD—have lowered the voting age to 16 for local elections.² Youth activists in other communities, in the U.S. and elsewhere, have also urged their lawmakers to lower the voting age to 16.

Proponents of lowering the voting age argue that because minors are subject to the laws and are directly affected by political decisions, they should have a voice in determining those laws. In the U.S., many 16 and 17 year olds have jobs and pay taxes, and can often be tried as adults in criminal proceedings. Moreover, some claim that it is unfair that those who are 18 at a time of a presidential election will be able to vote, while those who are only a few days or weeks younger will not be allowed to do so for four years. Finally, some claim that allowing people to vote before adulthood would promote important democratic virtues at a younger age, and increase the likelihood that those voters will remain politically and socially engaged citizens. This would not only increase civic participation of young adults (between 18 and 25) who traditionally vote at far lower rates than older citizens, but also would promote a more participatory democracy overall.

Others argue that lowering the voting age is a bad idea. They worry that voting is too great a responsibility to entrust to minors—especially on matters of great national importance. Not only are 16 and 17 year olds less mature, these people contend, but also teenagers frequently lack the political knowledge, life experience, and independence needed to make wise political decisions. Although defenders of the status quo concede that young people are affected by political decisions, they argue that it is the parents’ responsibility to take their children’s interests into account when voting. Finally, some claim that lowering the voting age is the first step on a slippery slope: If 16 year olds are allowed to vote, why not 15 or 14 or 10 year olds?

Study Questions:

(1) Why is the right to vote important?

(2) What qualities are important for voting responsibly? Why are those qualities important?

(3) Should the right to vote depend only on whether or not a person can vote responsibly, or should it also depend on factors such as whether or not a person is affected by the election, or would benefit from the experience of voting?

(4) What are some major differences between adults and minors? Do these differences justify allowing only adults to vote?

¹ [http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/29279384/scottish-referendum-how-first-vote-went-for-1617-year-olds](http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/29279384/scottish-referendum-how-first-vote-went-for-1617-year-olds)

4. A For-Profit 21st Century School

Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, donated $100 million for the “reimagining and transforming education with a proprietary technology platform” to AltSchool, which was founded in 2013 by Max Ventilla.¹ AltSchool is a collaborative community of micro-schools that uses teachers, deep research, and tools to offer a personalized, whole-child learning experience in San Francisco, Palo Alto, and Brooklyn for pre-kindergarten to 8th grade students.²

Each micro-school has a mixed-age class of 25 to 30 students with two teachers. Children enrolled in AltSchool use laptops and tablets to complete a daily, personalized “playlist” of lessons, projects, and activities. Children might work on a lesson from Khan Academy or collaboratively create a skit about cell anatomy. A student’s “playlist” also incorporates parents’ input as to the skills they want emphasized for their child. The cost of enrollment for AltSchool in Brooklyn is $27,500.³

What makes AltSchool different from other for-profit schools is its paired function as a tech company. AltSchool employs engineers and researchers to collect and analyze data on enrolled students for Research & Development. Each classroom is outfitted with fisheye-lens cameras and a sound recorder. AltSchool engineers are working on a wearable device for students with a radio frequency ID tag to track all movements. The goal is to use this data to improve teaching techniques and/or assess student mastery, thereby benefiting the students attending these schools, and potentially future students as well.

Using the collected data, AltSchool is also developing software to build an operating system for education. This software will combine elements of a learning management system, administrative functions (enrollment, recruitment, finances, record keeping), and a social network for parent-teacher communication. Ventilla plans to market the software to charter, private, and public schools. By outsourcing these basic administration functions, the argument goes, educators can focus on serving students.

Not everyone is a fan of this model. Some argue that education ought to level the playing field, and this technology doesn’t. In a technology-saturated world, students at schools that can afford this kind of education may be more advantaged, thus furthering the inequities that already exist. Also, Bryan Alexander, an education technology expert, believes this software model is too expensive for many K-12 schools. He also argues, “Issues of funding, technical support and confusing and sometimes conflicting state and federal policies make adopting new technology very difficult. In short a new platform would have to be astonishing to be worth the battle.”⁴

Study questions:

(1) What is the purpose of education? Should part of its purpose be to level the playing field?

(2) Is it morally problematic that children in school systems that can afford this technology can get this service, while children in other school systems cannot?

(3) Is it morally appropriate for schools to partner with technology companies in this kind of way? If so, what limits and safeguards, if any, should there be on such partnerships?

(4) Is it morally appropriate for schools to conduct research on students in this kind of way? If so, what limits and safeguards, if any, should there be on such research?

² http://www.altschool.com/
³ http://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/05/04/403577703/a-for-profit-school-startup-where-kids-are-beta-testers
5. Reacting to Racist Chants

During a 2014 Russian soccer match between two Moscow teams, the Torpedo and the Dynamo, fans of the Torpedo began reciting racist chants, and Congonese-native Christopher Samba of the Dynamo responded with an “unpleasant gesture.”

This was not the first time Samba had responded to racist insults from the crowd. In January 2013, a banana was thrown at him. He threw it back into the stands and received no punishment. Samba asserted, “I want to play football and not have to listen to racial taunts.”

Although Samba apologized for his “unpleasant gesture,” the Russian Football Union (RFU) suspended him for two matches. The RFU explained, “We took into account what happened on the pitch and he was provoked. Therefore we decided on the lightest possible punishment.” The RFU also punished Torpedo stadium officials who were ordered, for the upcoming match, to close the area of the stadium where the most vocal fans sit. The organization hoped this would send a message to fans that racism would not be tolerated.

However, racist chanting at soccer matches continued. For example, Spartak fans at a match in St. Petersburg made racist “monkey chants” towards a Brazilian-native Givanildo Vieira de Sousa, or the “Hulk.” In response, the RFU banned Spartak fans from attending the next home match, which was scheduled to take place in Yekaterinburg, 900 miles away.

Some might argue that, if fans continue to make racist chants, then the RFU should make further changes to address the issue, and that Samba can permissibly react with as much anger as he likes in the meantime. In contrast, others might argue that, whether or not fans continue to make racist chants, there are limits to what the RFU can do to address the issue, and there are also limits to how Samba can permissibly react to these chants.

Study Questions:

(1) Should athletes be held to a higher standard of behavior because they are in the public eye?

(2) Does Samba have an obligation to act “professionally” in the face of racist chants? If so, does he also have an obligation to apologize for his “unpleasant gesture”? If not, what ethical limits, if any, should there be on his reactions?

(3) To what extent should Samba be punished, if at all?

(4) Is it fair to punish a large number of fans because of the actions of a few racist fans?

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6. Fire at the Louvre

Paul is a scholar of Renaissance art history and a curator at the Louvre in Paris. One morning, a fire sweeps through the museum. As people are evacuating the museum, Paul has an important decision to make. Should he risk his own life by attempting to rescue anything? He sees that he has at least two options. First, he could rescue Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*, his favorite painting in the world and the museum’s most prized work. Second, he could rescue a museum visitor who seems to have lost consciousness, and who therefore seems to be incapable of rescuing themselves.

Paul realizes that no one would blame him if he did not attempt a rescue at all, given the personal risk involved. He also realizes that, if he does attempt a rescue, he faces a separate question: What / whom should he rescue? Paul thinks of himself as a kind and humane person. Watching a human being die as he saves a painting would be devastating. But he has dedicated his entire life to studying and preserving Renaissance art, and he loves the *Mona Lisa* more than anything else in the world. Moreover, approximately six million people visit the painting every year, and its destruction would be an immeasurable cultural loss.

Study Questions:

(1) Does Paul have an obligation to try to rescue anything at all? If so, can he permissibly choose what / whom to rescue, or does he have an obligation to favor the painting or the person? Explain.

(2) How, if at all, would things change if Paul was a firefighter?

(3) How, if at all, would things change if the museum visitor were still conscious (yet still immobile), or if the painting were less famous (yet still cherished by Paul)?

(4) What kind of value does art have? What kind of value do persons have? How, in general, should we compare the value of art and the value of persons?
8. Reporting on a Scandal

Charlie is an editor on the staff of her high school’s newspaper. Recently, she learned that the community service group at her school which raises money for Doctors Without Borders lost its status as a school-approved group.

Talking to former group members, Charlie learned that the group had not functioned according to school rules. For the most part, group members had fundraised instead of engaging in service-based activities like raising awareness. In addition, Jason, the leader of group for Doctors Without Borders, had often awarded service hours in exchange for money raised. Some students, behind on hours, had simply donated chunks of money, up to several hundred dollars, and Jason had signed them off on their community service.

Jason was initially defensive about these allegations and refused to be quoted in the article Charlie was writing. However, Jason later emailed Charlie, asking her not to publish the allegations, saying that they could hurt his college applications. Regretting his poor judgment managing the group, he explained that he had been too caught up in the cause to examine whether his methods were appropriate, and he now wanted to put the situation behind him.

Charlie was unsure how to proceed. She believed that Jason realized he had made a mistake and regretted his actions. She also wanted to respect his privacy, and she knew that releasing the information could damage his reputation among peers and teachers and affect his chances of college admission.

However, Charlie also knew that journalists have a professional obligation to run important stories no matter how controversial they are, and to hold those in power accountable for their actions. Jason’s abuse of the system had affected many students by encouraging cheating, and by devaluing the community service experiences of those who had put in hours honestly. Her paper, she felt, ought to expose the wrongdoing.

Study Questions:

(1) What responsibility do journalists have to uncover the truth? What responsibility do they have to respect individuals’ right to privacy? How should these responsibilities weigh against each other?

(2) Should private citizens have a greater right to privacy than public officials? If so, should Jason count as a public official or a private citizen for purposes of a student newspaper story about a student group leader?

(3) Suppose that Jason decided to break the rules because he believed that his group could do more good through fundraising than through other activities. Would his behavior be justified in this case? Why or why not?

(4) Suppose that Jason did not believe that he acted wrongly, and therefore his only regret was that he got caught. How, if at all, should that change Charlie’s thinking about what to do?
9. “Don’t Help Me!”

Tom is a sophomore at a prestigious college. He comes from a low-income household and is the first member of his family to attend college. During his freshman year, Tom did well academically and socially, though he sometimes consumed alcohol at parties, and he was twice cited by the school for drinking in the dorms. Going into his sophomore year, Tom already had “two strikes”: One more citation for underage drinking on school property and he would lose his scholarship.

During the semester, Tom and his friend Kevin are drinking at a party in a university-owned apartment. Tom, dancing merrily, accidentally smashes a glass bottle and badly cuts his hand. Bleeding profusely, Tom begins to feel lightheaded and wobbly. Concerned for his friend and beginning to panic, Kevin reaches for his phone to call for help. But Tom pleads, “Just bandage me up as best you can—if you call for help the school will find out I’ve been drinking and I’ll lose my scholarship! I’ll go to the health center tomorrow morning and everything will be fine.”

Kevin is uneasy with this plan. He’s not trained to clean and bandage a wound and doesn’t want to be responsible for Tom sustaining a serious, permanent injury. On the other hand, Tom insists that the decision to seek help is not Kevin’s to make. Tom says that he’s willing to risk his health in order to avoid getting kicked out of school and compromising his future. By calling an ambulance, Kevin might be changing Tom’s life forever.

Study Questions:

(1) Is it morally wrong of Tom to ask Kevin not to call for help? Why or why not?

(2) Can Kevin permissibly do what he thinks is best? If not, is this because he should call for help or defer to Tom’s judgment? Explain.

(3) Imagine that Kevin calls for help and that Tom ends up losing his scholarship. Would it reasonable for Kevin to feel guilty? Alternatively, imagine that Kevin defers to Tom’s judgment and Tom ends up suffering permanent damage in his hand. Would it be reasonable for Kevin to feel guilty? Explain.

(4) Suppose that Tom is clearly too drunk to be capable of making an informed decision about what to do, but that Kevin is fully aware of his academic and disciplinary situation. What should Kevin do in that case?
12. Ban the Box

It can be very difficult for former prisoners to find employment upon release. Employers in both public and private settings ask about criminal history on job applications. Employers can reject qualified applicants based on their criminal history alone. Many companies have human resources departments that screen and reject job applications before hiring supervisors see them.

Vermont’s governor recently instituted “ban the box,” an executive order that removes questions regarding criminal history from the initial application for state jobs. In other locations, “ban the box” legislation also applies to private employer applications.¹

“Ban the box” advocates argue that ex-convicts who have served their sentences have paid their debt to society, and should not continue to be punished when seeking meaningful employment. Offenders who have served their time should be presumed ready and able to become productive members of society. Others argue that these exclusions are counterproductive: Ex-offenders who cannot find jobs are more likely to commit crimes in the future. Some refer to the fact that even those convicted of non-violent and petty crimes are also affected by this policy. Finally, some have observed that this policy has racial implications. In the U.S., for instance, 60% of the 1.6 million people in prison are Black or Hispanic males.² Hiring policies that discriminate against ex-convicts therefore have a disparate impact on communities of color. One solution, advocates argue, is for employers to delay the background check. Questions about criminal history should come after those responsible for hiring have met with job candidates; this way, factors like a criminal record can be understood in context of who the ex-convict has become.

Opponents of these laws point out that private employers should have the right to screen applicants with criminal histories since previous behavior speaks to character. That is, employers have a right to ask about criminal history because committing a crime is an action people choose to undertake rather than an immutable characteristic such as skin color. An employer also deserves to know, for example, if the accountant she is planning on hiring was convicted of theft. Employers also don’t want to waste time and resources interviewing candidates that they will turn down for employment at a later phase of selection.

Study Questions:

(1) Is it morally permissible for employers, including state entities, to ask about criminal history on an application?

(2) Is it morally permissible for the state to prevent employers from asking about criminal history on an application?

(3) Assuming that employers do ask about criminal history on an application, is it morally permissible for them to reject all applicants with a criminal history?

(4) If a government employer refuses to hire someone with a past criminal conviction, does this count as an additional punishment? If so, is it fair for the government to impose such an additional punishment? If a private employer refuses to hire someone with a past criminal conviction, does this count as an additional punishment? If so, is it fair for that private employer to impose such an additional punishment?

² http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/p10.pdf
14. Swimming for Free

Angel has a college degree but is underemployed, working full-time and struggling to make ends meet. Mark, one of the college students with whom Angel shares an apartment, attends an expensive private college nearby where his tuition includes membership to the school gym and pool. Angel loves to swim to stay in shape, but he cannot afford to join a gym or have access to a pool. Since Mark does not swim, he agrees to let Angel use his school ID. Angel and Mark do not look identical, but they look similar enough that they can reasonably expect that no one will notice if Angel uses Mark’s ID.

Angel thinks that if Mark has already paid for pool access through his tuition fees and is not using it, then Angel can use the membership. It is not as if they are both using the membership. The private college, with its big endowment, is not losing money on the deal.

However, the college pool is open but not free to the public: Non-college personnel are charged fees that help maintain the facilities. The school considers access a special benefit to the students of the college that would be devalued if open-access were allowed.

Study questions:

(1) Is it morally permissible for Angel to use Mark’s ID to swim in the pool?

(2) If Angel were an employee or an alumnus of Mark’s college, how, if at all, might this change the moral permissibility of their behavior? Explain.

(3) If Angel were earning enough to afford a gym membership, how, if at all, might this change the moral permissibility of their behavior? Explain.

(4) If Mark attended an affordable public college rather than an expensive private college, how, if at all, might this change the moral permissibility of their behavior? Explain.