CREATIVE CASE STUDIES IN ETHICS[1]

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ABSTRACT

How should we think about the many ethical dilemmas that face us today? How should research in current ethical dilemmas be conducted to move beyond impasses in judgment towards developing a consensus for action? According to Anthony Weston, "we need a more expansive view of ethics," one that incorporates creativity. Following Weston's lead, I shall discuss our new Honors Interdisciplinary Seminar on Case Studies in Ethics. This course is designed to prepare our students to participate in the Ethics Bowl, which is already a creative act of engagement, but more importantly, we hope to open new possibilities in the study of ethical dilemmas that would allow for creative problem-solving in ethics. In this paper I explain background reasons for the course, the methods for preparing students for creative research in ethics, as well as potential problems to be avoided in the process.

INTRODUCTION

People tend to conceive of "ethics" and "ethical decision-making" as the reflection on moral dilemmas and the attempt to distinguish two possible choices, namely the right one and the wrong one (and thus anyone who disagrees with one's evaluation is stuck on the wrong side of fence). But do all such sticky, striking ethical situations we find ourselves facing really lead to "di-lemmas" (i.e., "two assumptions or alternatives")? Should ethics be conceived primarily as the rational attempt to determine right from wrong, which would seemingly be the predominant view of philosophical ethicists, or should our conception of ethics be expanded to emphasize more practical concerns for the well-being of others and oneself and the creative attempt to further that well-being. Obviously, how we conceive "ethics" (or "morality," which for practical purposes will be used synonymously throughout this paper)

will be decisive for how we teach the subject, so let us consider this distinction more closely.

Consider the understanding of ethics found in the justifiably well-respected textbook *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* by James and Stuart Rachels. Here the authors explain that "the essence of morality" is to "let our feeling be guided as much as possible by reason" (11), and morality is defined as "the effort to guide one's conduct by reason—that is, to do what there are the best reasons for doing—while giving equal weight to the interests of each individual affected by one's decision" (13). Easily a philosophical favorite, this view follows in the tradition of Socrates and Plato in which reason rules and emotion must be either subjugated or purged. Although rationality is certainly important for morality, it is interesting to note that quite a different emphasis can be found in the recent work of Anthony Weston, who has written on both rational argumentation and creative problem-solving. Perhaps surprisingly, Weston's definition of ethics makes no reference to reason; instead, he defines it as "a concern with the basic needs and legitimate expectations of others as well as our own" (*A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* 5). Although not necessarily opposed to the common view, it is clear that Weston's main emphases are different, for they fall on concern and creativity, while Rachels focuses on reason and judgment.

Are these different views of ethics compatible? And if so, is this always the case, or does a heightened sense of "rationality" sometimes obstruct the concern for the well-being of others? How, then, should we think about ethics, and how should one teach students to mediate between these different views and to move beyond impasses in judgment towards developing a consensus for action guided towards the furtherance of our well-being?

In order to begin to answer these questions we need to take "a more expansive view of ethics" (*Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* vii) one that, according to Weston incorporates inventive ethical thinking and practical creativity. Weston provides us with a striking example that begins with this ethically charged situation:

> A child in second grade underwent chemotherapy for leukemia. When she returned to school, she wore a scarf to hide the fact that she had lost all her hair. But some of the children pulled it off, and in their nervousness laughed and made fun of her. The child was mortified and that afternoon begged her parents not to make her go back to school. Her parents tried to encourage her, saying "The other children will get used to it,

and anyway your hair will soon grow in again." (Weston, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics 4*; *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox 8*)

Now what if you were the teacher of this class and had to determine how to handle the situation? Let's suppose that you are greatly bothered by it after school and throughout the evening. Maybe you toss and turn throughout the night. On the more common conception of ethics what to do the next day would be rather clear: sit the children down (perhaps in your anger or uneasiness with the situation you would raise your voice to get them in order) and lecture them about the wrongness of embarrassing and teasing others. You could provide thoughtful reasons and arguments about harm to others and appeal to the principle that one shouldn't treat others in a way that one would not want oneself to be treated. Perhaps you would want to make the lesson stick by punishing those responsible—and of course you would also have provided the class with an account of responsible action in a way that a second grader can understand. Such an approach seems rather straightforward, but would it be the best way of increasing the well-being of the class? Can you think of other ways to deal with the situation? Here's what our teacher in the story did.

> The next morning, when their teacher walked into class, all the children were sitting in their seats, some still tittering about the girl who had no hair, while she shrank into her chair. "Good morning, children," the teacher said, smiling warmly in her familiar way of greeting them. She took off her coat and scarf. Her head was completely bald.
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> After that, a rash of children begged their parents to let them cut their hair. And whenever a child came to class with short hair, newly bobbed, all the children laughed merrily, not out of fear but out of the joy of the game. And everybody's hair grew back at the same time. (Weston, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics 5*)

As Weston explains this moving example of creative problem-solving in ethics, without lecturing or moralizing the teacher provided a key moral lesson in "ethical solidarity," the idea that "we are all in this together." As we reflect on this example let us take Weston's point that

> Ethical problem-solving is not just a matter of finding a way out of a specific, practical fix. It is also an occasion to better live out our values and, indeed, to better the world itself.

That is the very essence of ethics! (*Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics*, 6)

A similar perspective is presented by David McNaughton in his recent paper, "Why Is So Much Philosophy So Tedious?" Here McNaughton explains how the conception of philosophy as a task "to find a cut-and-dried solution that will resolve as many as possible of the problems all at once" is not his own, because "especially in ethics—it tended to feel like a game of skill rather than a real inquiry into the human condition" (8).

What an interesting contrast this view provides to conceiving the application of reason as the essence of ethics, as citing in Rachels above. Of course, Weston's view does not reject reason—although it may be challenging to discover by which rational argument the teacher decided to shave her head—but reason is not the primary value to which everything else is subordinated. Instead, the primary focus is on living, on living well, of which reason most certainly is a part, but not the only, or necessarily most important, one. (Certainly the role of emotions in ethics is a significant one that should not be undervalued, although this topic is too broad to be pursued here.) I am not arguing, however, either to adopt rationality in ethics or adopt creativity, for clearly that would create a false dilemma—the likes of which were opposed at the outset of this paper. Instead, what I wish to suggest are possibilities for opening up ethical thinking to allow for the interplay of reason, emotion, and creativity.

In what ways, then, can we as teachers of ethics we move beyond cut-and-dried approaches to open new possibilities in the study of ethics that will allow for more creative problem-solving? Answering this question has been one of the main goals of the new Honors Interdisciplinary Seminar on Case Studies in Ethics that my colleague, Dr. Nancy Stanlick, and I co-created and co-taught for the first time in the fall semester 2009. Our course is designed to prepare students to engage with research in ethics creatively, and this preparation leads to active participation in our local University of Central Florida Ethics Bowl, which is modeled after the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl sponsored by the Association of Practical and Professional Ethics (more about this below). Before students (and instructors) can consider specific methods for applying creativity to research in ethics, however, it is important that they understand ways in which creativity is impeded. Thus, I shall devote some attention to these problems, although I can admittedly only provide a rather cursory treatment of what are very far-reaching theoretical issues.

WHAT IMPEDES CREATIVITY IN ETHICS?

Our aim, as I see it, is to facilitate creative, constructive ethical thinking that takes both everyday ethical questions as well as the less frequent tough questions as opportunities rather than conflicts. There are, however, certain mindsets that challenge this aim and actually obstruct creative ethical thinking. These mindsets, in short, are relativism, dogmatism, and subjectivism. For each one of these broad "isms" there are subsets, but the point is that they all represent for the most part meta-ethical positions that serve as "ethics-avoidance disorders" (Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* Chapter 2). For example, relativism and subjectivism can sometimes lead to "a kind of ethical laziness," which could be called "rationalizing" or "offhand self-justification" (e.g., one often hears excuses, such as "It's all relative" or "That's just what I think," which provide little opening for creative problem-solving methods). Let me comment briefly on these positions.

 Although there are some important philosophers who may embrace a kind of qualified relativism, most have recognized the many significant problems involved in cultural relativism. First in significance is that the conclusion that "there is no objective truth in morality" simply does not follow from the premise that "different cultures have different moral codes" (Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* 18). Whether objective truth in ethics is achievable remains an open question in the face of cultural diversity, and one could think that it is towards this goal of objective truth that we practically strive through our fallible human efforts. Further, the cultural relativist seems to maintain that cultures are morally infallible, that they are all equally "right," and that we cannot blame other cultures for "wrong" or "evil" deeds. This position is hardly practicable and hinders the idea that we can make progress in ethics through creative thinking and dialogue with other cultures (Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* 19-20).

There are however points that we can learn from cultural relativism, for it teaches us to be cautious in our ethical thinking and to be open-minded, which is certainly a prerequisite for creativity. When one is not open to other possibilities of acting in certain situations one is likely to fall into dogmatism, the second major "ethics-avoidance disorder."

It is important to note that there are different kinds of dogmatism, one which can be called religious dogmatism and the other philosophical dogmatism. Religious dogmatism—and I think we have all recognized this today, even though many people still persist in their dogmatic thoughts—can be very dangerous. Although I would not go as far as

Christopher Hitchens to claim that "religion poisons everything," to think that we can know with absolute certainty the will of God that only needs to be obeyed may very well lead us "to opt out of moral thinking altogether" (Rachels, "*God and Moral Autonomy*" 118). But ethics requires interpretation and thinking for oneself—and it is clearly arguable that these practices lie at the center of religious experience (see Weston, *A 21st Century Ethical Toolbox* Chapter 3), thus making a more positive view of religion possible. Such a case, I think, can be made, but I do not have the space to pursue it here.

Although philosophers (such as Socrates) often oppose religious teachers (such as *Euthyphro* in Plato's classic dialogue), it would be mistaken to think that philosophers were exempt from slipping into dogmatism. After all, there is perhaps no small number of philosophers who take there theoretical stances as ethical verities. This is why I am actually sympathetic to the so-called "end of ethics," which may mark the beginning of ethical thinking and provide an opening for ethical creativity. What is meant by the "end of ethics" is explained nicely by John Caputo:

> The end of ethics does not mean that all hell has broken loose. It does not mean that the philosophers have decided to lend their voice to the general anarchy, to unchecked greed, the free flow of drugs, and widespread violence. The end of ethics does not mean that "anything goes," which can now be taken to be official, because even the philosophers concur. The end of ethics means instead that for certain philosophers…the business as usual of ethics has given out and the ethical verities that we all like to think are true, the beliefs and practices we all cherish, are now seen to be in a more difficult spot than we liked to think. The end of ethics is thus a moment of unvarnished honesty in which we are forced to concede that in ethics we are more likely to begin with the conclusions, with the "ends" or triumphant ethical finales we had in mind all along, and worry about the premises later. The end of ethics means that the premises invoked in ethical theory always come too late, after the fact. So if there are "cases" in the end of ethics, the cases are casualties, "falls" (casus), stumbling over unforeseen difficulties and obstacles, the "accidents" that strikes at us in daily life, that sometimes strike us down. (111)

The end of ethics means that we cannot expect a single ethical theory—or perhaps any single ethical perspective—to encapsulate all the

complexities of existence, nor can we expect that a particular human situation can be best understood as a dilemma between two ethical theories. But this is often how the study of ethics is approached. For example, many students learn about the "Heinz dilemma" introduced by psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg. It goes like this:

> A woman was near death from cancer. One drug might save her, a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had discovered. The druggist was charging $2000, ten times what the drug cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow money, but he could only get together about half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said "no"… (Weston, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* 1-2)

What are Heinz's options here? For philosophers, this example serves nicely to illustrate two theories and two choices: either Heinz takes the utilitarian view and steals the drug to save his wife, or he takes the deontological view that one has a duty not to steal and watches his wife die. But are those really the only two options? Surely just a little imaginative thinking will lead to more than just these two possibilities.

But please don't get me wrong. Some of my best friends are theoretical ethicists, and I understand that theoretical speculation can be quite an enjoyable activity. What I am arguing against is a dogmatic view of ethical theorizing that holds that a situation should only be thought of in terms of utility, or duty, or virtue, or care. I am not arguing against doing or teaching ethical theory, as long as this approach to moral problems is rightly understood as one among others and doesn't entirely dominate the culture created in the classroom. Without a doubt, students should study ethical theory—or better, ethical theories—as they do in our course, because it opens up alternative ways of thinking about a situation, and opening up such possibilities is a first step towards applying creativity (see de Bono 119).

The third position that impedes creativity in ethics is subjectivism, and behind this position one finds the significant philosophical distinction between facts and values. As is well-known, this distinction originates in David Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, which proposes that you cannot derive an "ought" from an "is" (Book III, Part I, Sect. I). On the surface, the idea seems cogent. As many would suggest, the world consists of facts, not values, and there is a clear difference between saying "the book is heavy," which is quantifiable (e.g., it weighs 5 pounds) and

the qualitative statement "the book is good." But is it really fallacious to presuppose that you can derive an "ought" from an "is?" In *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* Hilary Putnam has argued that the argument is unwarranted, and in *Scientific Realism and Human Emancipation* Roy Bhaskar has argued that you can, in fact, derive an "ought" from an "is." Even beyond considering the technical arguments, what is worrisome for practical ethical thinking is that if you seriously think that no "ought" can be derived from an "is," then it would not be a big step to suggest that research in ethics is impossible, because after all, *what* are you researching? This is certainly one practical reason to question Hume's view, and another is that, following Weston, getting a fuller picture of a situation through collecting all the relevant facts is essential to the creative exploration of ethical possibilities (*Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* 11), and it is where our students start in their research on the case studies. Let me turn now to a discussion of our newly developed course.

CREATIVE RESEARCH IN ETHICS

The innovation that my colleague, Dr. Nancy Stanlick, and I have attempted to implement is to bring creativity, ethical theory, and the ethics bowl model together in one course. The initial impetus for this innovation was due to our continuous participation in the Southeast Regional Ethics Bowl since it began in 2004 and our participation in the National Ethics Bowl in 2009 and 2010. We recognized the high educational value of participating in an ethics bowl and knew that our students spent a great amount of time in their research and discussions. Thus, we wanted our students to be able to earn course credit for all their hard work in preparing for these competitions and also to have a regular class time for discussing ethical theory and presenting their research on the cases, since prior to creating our course, one of the biggest practical difficulties we faced was finding meeting times that could fit everyone's schedule. Also, since 2008 we have bi-annually been conducting our own local UCF competition, and thus participation in this event was a requirement of our new course. A clear description of the ethics bowl can be found at the homepage for the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE). It reads:

> The Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl (IEB) is a team competition that combines the excitement and fun of a competitive tournament with an innovative approach to

education in practical and professional ethics for undergraduate students. Recognized widely by educators, the IEB has received special commendation for excellence and innovation from the American Philosophical Association…for Excellence and Innovation in Philosophy Programs. The format, rules, and procedures of the IEB all have been developed to model widely acknowledged best methods of reasoning in practical and professional ethics.

In the IEB, each team receives a set of cases which raise issues in practical and professional ethics in advance of the competition and prepare an analysis of each case [I'd like to say a creative analysis]. At the competition, a moderator poses questions, based on a case taken from that set, to teams of three to five students. Questions may concern ethical problems on wide ranging topics, such as the classroom (e.g. cheating or plagiarism), personal relationships (e.g. dating or friendship), professional ethics (e.g. engineering, law, medicine), or social and political ethics (e.g. free speech, gun control, etc.) A panel of judges may probe the teams for further justifications and evaluates answers. Rating criteria are intelligibility, focus on ethically relevant considerations, avoidance of ethical irrelevance, and deliberative thoughtfulness [and here I'd also like to add creativity].

I think that it is easy to appreciate how preparing for such an event offers opportunities for the active engagement in undergraduate research and the application of creativity, and this is why we have modeled this approach in our own staging of the UCF Ethics Bowl, the sixth of which is scheduled to take place in November 2010. Organizing this event, although time consuming, is not that difficult to do. Since the cases, procedures, and judging guidelines provided by the AAPE are available for use (and can be modified where appropriate; for example, one may wish to have shorter rounds), the only actual new material that needs to be created by the organizers are the questions for the cases. Such an event requires many people to volunteer their support, and because of this it provides an excellent opportunity for the university to connect with the larger community and invite individuals (business leaders, alumni, etc.) to participate as moderators or judges.

An additional benefit of having a course centered on participation in the ethics bowl is that it allowed the students to work on actually writing position papers on the cases, something that we had not previously

required as coaches of the ethics bowl teams. The significance of writing for an application of creativity to the cases cannot be overestimated, and this is a point which needs no demonstration.

After we had introduced our students to the major ethical theories and methods of creative-problem solving in ethics (which shall be discussed below), we organized the eighteen students into four teams of four or five students each, where each student was primarily responsible for three cases. In order to organize the teams we had each student complete an "interest assessment" in which they ranked their top five cases and provided brief (50-word) justifications for their top three preferences. Then, teams were formed based primarily on the students' interests in the cases, which obviously would help to maintain a high level of motivation in the students' research. In this way each team of five was able to cover the fifteen ethics bowl cases published by the APPE for each competition. Students then conducted research on the cases, collecting significant background information on, for example, cognitive enhancement drugs, disclosure laws, health insurance, etc., as well as determining what various ethical perspectives had and could be brought to bear in a thorough consideration of the cases. When students then met in class after having initiated research into their cases they would spend time discussing their research both with students from other teams who had studied the same cases and then with members of their own teams. This allowed for far-reaching discussions and gave students confidence in informally presenting their research and ideas to others. The questions that guided their discussion of the cases were these:

1. What are the most significant facts of the case? What facts do you need to get a fuller picture? Are there any "suggestive facts"?

2. What are the ethical issues or questions raised by this case?

3. Apply the methods in Weston to your discussion of the case. In what ways do they open up alternative possibilities of thinking about the case? Be prepared to explain.

4. What are the various possible positions on your case?

5. What the arguments for these positions? Are they sound?

6. How do you think we should best deal with this case?

After this, the students individually wrote a 1,000-word position paper on each case, which was then peer-reviewed by a student from another team, and following that a 1,500-word revised version of the paper was submitted. Finally, each student gave an oral presentation on

his or her particular case—modeled after our ethics bowl presentations, up to eight minutes in length and without the use of any notes—after which an always lively class discussion ensued.

The methods for the applying creativity to the case studies were based on Weston's valuable work, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics*. In this work Weston discusses the methods that call forth ethical exploration and provocation and lead to inventiveness, which is the essence of practical creativity. These methods are the following: (1) get a fuller picture, (2) watch for suggestive facts, (3) get help from others including brainstorming, (4) compare and contrast, (5) invite exotic associations, and (6) go to extremes. In our course, it was important to provide students the time and the space to employ these methods in their research on the ethics bowl cases (although given the nature of philosophical thinking on the cases, one may find that there is never enough time). For example, after researching specific situations students worked in groups to come to a consensus on the relevant facts of the case. The facts do make a difference to a consideration of the ethical possibilities. After all, the fact that anencephalic children die within two weeks—often it is just a few days—after birth is highly significant when considering whether to transplant such a child's organs. It is especially important when researching to find "suggestive facts," which according to Weston are "those that open up new ways of approaching a problem" (*Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* 13). One example Weston discusses is this. Did you know that of the 30,000 people killed by guns every year in the US nearly half of them are suicides? This fact suggests that if we are only thinking about the pros and cons of gun control, we may miss the possibility of thinking about suicide-prevention and how by "giving people compelling reasons to live" (Weston, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* 14), we may actually improve the whole situation for us all. Another example comes from a case used in the 2010 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl called "Virgin Records," which involved the ethical issue of whether it would be morally justifiable for Natalie Dylan to auction off her virginity. In his position paper on this case one student highlighted key facts regarding prostitution. He wrote:

> The fact of the matter is that most prostitution that occurs exhibits a great deal of risk. In the United States, 82% of prostitutes report having been raped at least once while 73% of prostitutes report having been raped more than five times. This alone is enough to conclude that prostitution, in the form it usually takes, entails a great deal of risk on the part of the

prostitute. However, this may not even do justice to the plight of prostitutes, who are regularly controlled by means of drugs and violence by a pimp. Though there are exceptions, the vast majority of prostituted women are there by matter of circumstance, not choice, perhaps explaining a rate of 69% of prostitutes diagnosed with post traumatic stress disorder—the same rate as combat war veterans.

The significance of these facts is that they served to broaden a discussion which had previously been focused on a consideration of an individual's right over her own body to include a look at the larger picture and the many risks involved in prostitution.

Although these methods of creative ethical thinking are admittedly modest, that does not detract from their significance. We are surely all familiar with "brainstorming" as a means of stimulating creativity in a group, but how often do we apply this method to ethical problems? "The key rule [of brainstorming] is to defer criticism" (Weston, *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* 17), but how often do we really come together in groups or communities—in the spirit of openness, ready to listen and reflect, and slow to speak (all of which helps facilitate creativity)—to discuss possible ideas for dealing with an ethically charged situation? Instead, it seems more often to be the case that the "for" and "against" side of an issue is presented to us first; frequently it is forced upon us through the media, in a way that inhibits the application of creativity.

Consider, for example, the first case of the 2009 Regional Ethics Bowl cases, which concerned "Sexting" (i.e., using "cell phones to willingly send explicit, nude photos" of oneself to others [Harsha]). In our creative exploration of this case we attempted to move beyond a simple legalistic, right or wrong mindset and brainstorm on how this problem, which has come about through advances in technology and certain cultural perspectives, might be approached in the most satisfying way. Our discussion of this case came to some valuable insights through an application of the method that Weston calls "Go to Extremes!" and which creativity guru Edward de Bono calls "the Intermediate Impossible." This is one of my favorite methods and it involves imagining the ideal solution to a problem and then working toward a more realistic idea. One raises extreme possibilities of a perfect solution by asking "What if?" In this case, our students quickly asked: What if we had different attitudes toward nudity and sex such that sexting met with no embarrassment (and consequently did not lead to teenage suicide)? Or, what if students were better educated about sex, nudity, and respect

of self and others such that sexting lost its provocative appeal? In many of the cases we tried to think about the best case scenarios and reason back from these possibilities, an activity that shows how creativity and reason can be nicely combined. Other examples include: What if American politics were not so frequently dominated by religious elements that would lead political protests to be seen as hate crimes against a religion (Case #3: Christian Bashing)? What if we could satisfy both vegetarians and meat-eaters by producing a delicious cruelty-free synthetic meat (Case #12: Synthetic Meat)? By approaching the cases in this creative way the students developed a noticeably less dogmatic and more cooperative attitude towards developing positions that would best address the case, and this itself is a step forward in making ethical progress. As suggested above, however, none of this discussion is meant to imply that creativity trumps everything, for surely not every idea generated through the particular use of these methods is equally defensible. What is most important is the productive interplay between creativity and rational argumentation (Weston's *A Rulebook for Arguments* is also highly useful in our course), for both activities have valuable roles to fill in our formulating insightful and intelligent ethical positions.

CONCLUSION

The various methods Weston describes in his slim work *Creative Problem-Solving in Ethics* are those favored by most creativity experts. Although the methods are not new, the ethical context he provides is, and I think that the course that Dr. Stanlick and I have developed leading to participation in the UCF Ethics Bowl is a new application of these methods on contemporary case studies. In raising such questions and imagining the many possibilities—which is what creativity involves—we open up a space for careful ethical thinking to lead the way to the enhanced well-being of us all.

While the process undergone in researching the cases and preparing for the ethics bowl clearly opens up possibilities for creative problem-solving, I think that one way that the already immensely significant ethics bowl competition could be improved is to promote specifically the significance of creativity. As it is currently, creativity is not a criterion that judges consider in awarding points to ethics bowl teams. The closest criterion is "deliberative thoughtfulness," which is stated to involve "awareness and thoughtful consideration of different viewpoints, including especially those that could loom large in the reasoning of

individuals who might disagree with the team's position" (Ladenson). One may also wonder whether the competitive framework of the ethics bowl—even when organizers emphasize to the participants that the point is to learn and have fun doing so—ultimately pushes participants towards more cut-and-dried, contentious debates (especially when one gets to the finals!), rather than opening up the experience of coming together to solve a common problem. One possibility of moving beyond this tendency would be not to make the competition the final event, but instead some collaborative activity. Here a suggestion might be that teams who do well or stand out in the ethics bowl competition could be invited to take the lead in forming a student panel that would be charged with working together as researchers to produce a collection of written responses to the cases. I think there would be great value in a publication of student responses to the case studies, and this would also provide concrete documentation of the significance of the ethics bowl model, the final result of which would be an act of cooperation rather than competition.

Indeed, conceiving ethics as a competition may, at least on the surface, be seen as contradictory, especially when we consider that the goal of competition is to win or beat the other. At its best, ethics is not a competitive sport, but instead an activity where the conception of the other as opponent is replaced by an invitation to greet the other and work together towards the common good. We do well, then, to consider and promote the competitions as ways to challenge and improve the lives of us all.

NOTE

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