

Yale Ethics Bowl Second Round Case Book

The second round of the Yale Ethics Bowl provides students with an opportunity to engage in live, structured debates that emphasize ethical reasoning, collaboration, and the consideration of diverse perspectives. This round builds on the first by challenging teams to respond dynamically to ethical dilemmas in real time.

Teams will present their analyses of the cases, engage with counterarguments posed by the opposing team, and respond to questions from judges. Each match consists of **two cases**, chosen at random, with teams alternating between presenting and responding roles. Participants are expected to demonstrate clarity of reasoning, depth of analysis, and respectful engagement throughout the debates.

The focus of this round is on fostering thoughtful, ethical discourse rather than competition, aligning with the Yale Ethics Bowl's mission to promote rigorous academic exchange and collaborative dialogue.

Not In My Backyard!

In July of 2021, the California-based company Arevia Power announced that they were scrapping plans for a large solar farm in Southern Nevada. The initiative, known as the Battle Born Solar Project, would have created the largest solar farm in the United States and provided daytime power to around 500,000 homes. Despite assurances from Arevia Power that the project would be set far enough back on the nearby mesa so as not to be visible from the closest town, local residents fought against the construction of the solar farm. They argued that the solar farm would discourage popular recreational activities such as biking, driving ATVs, horseback riding, and visiting the famous environmental art sculpture *Double Negative*.

Proponents of the project argued that it would have created 2,600 jobs and helped Nevada towards its goal of producing 50% of its energy from renewable sources by 2030. A ballot question in 2020 found that a majority of Nevada voters supported a transition towards renewable energy. One of the residents even said, “I’m not against renewable energy, I’m just against losing this beauty.”

People who oppose such projects are said to have an attitude of “Not in my backyard!”—often shortened to “NIMBY.” When residents of towns and neighborhoods disagree with a project being built near them, they will often band together to oppose it. The protested projects vary wildly in their impact to the community—everything from zoning changes and energy projects to affordable housing developments and landfills. While some argue that NIMBYism has contributed to rising housing costs and blocked many beneficial projects, others argue that communities have a right to oppose projects that will affect their neighborhood’s character.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Under what circumstances is a “NIMBY” attitude towards development morally permissible?

How should we evaluate the tradeoffs between the good of a larger entity (a state, a country, or the world) and the good of a local community?

When making a decision, how should we weigh the negative impacts on those directly affected against positive impacts on those who are indirectly affected?

21 Candles

In 1984, the U.S. Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, requiring all states to raise the drinking age to 21. This was the first national standardization of the drinking age in the history of the United States. Prior to Prohibition (1920-1933), many states did not have any laws in place regarding the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA). Between 1933 and about 1970, the MLDA in most states was 21, which mirrored the voting age at the time. In 1971, when the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18, many states lowered the MLDA accordingly. Currently, the U.S. is one of 12 other countries in the world with the highest comparative drinking age of 21. With the majority of countries in the world having a lower drinking age, a debate has begun as to whether the U.S. should lower the MLDA to 18 or 19.

Those defending the MLDA's remaining at 21 argue that it has made the roads safer, and indeed, saved many lives. The CDC points to a study which finds a 16% median decline in motor vehicle crashes in states where the MLDA was raised to 21. Another study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Association estimates that the increase of the drinking age saved 31,417 lives between the years of 1975 and 2016.

Those in favor of lowering the MLDA argue that, according to U.S. law, an 18-year-old is an adult. It seems absurd, they reason, that soldiers can fight and die for their country but cannot legally be served a beer in a restaurant or bar. Therefore, it is argued, 18-year-olds should have the right to consume alcohol given that they can serve in the military and vote. Some argue, further, that prohibiting the sale of alcohol to 18 to 20-year-olds has the unintended effect of making alcohol more desirable because it is taboo. They point out that drinking loses much of its allure when it becomes a mundane, legal activity. Finally, the culture of drinking is very present in college environments, despite the majority of undergraduate students being underage. This results in a lot of unsupervised and unsafe situations associated with alcohol because students have not been exposed to responsible drinking. Consequently, there is an increased risk of binge drinking, which can harm one's physical and mental health.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Is the MLDA an imposition on one's rights as an adult?

How should the government balance the right of autonomy with the need to protect citizens from harm?

Leaving aside its legal status, is it morally wrong to drink underage?

What are the significant differences between being 18 and 21?

Cutting the Cord

Students, parents, friends, family, and streaming service executives are all too familiar with the prevalence of shared subscription service accounts. According to a study by Cordcutting.com, 44 million U.S. adults currently “borrow” streaming service subscriptions. These adults most likely assume that this borrowing does not significantly undercut the business of streaming giants, like Netflix. It is estimated, however, that the “mooching” of streaming services represents a loss of \$2.72 billion in annual revenue from subscription fees for these companies.

Borrowed or shared accounts are most often paid for by parents, indicating that these arrangements generally arise as children reach the age of maturity and move out on their own but continue to utilize their parents’ subscriptions. Partners in relationships constitute the second largest paying group, reflecting the tendency of couples to share a set of subscription services. Lastly, siblings and friends make up a significant portion of shared accounts, reflecting favors between close individuals. The trend appears to be on the upside as the borrowing of streaming service accounts continues to rise: 14.4% more Netflix accounts were shared in 2020 than in 2019.

Netflix and other streaming services are faced with a dilemma: where should a line on account sharing be drawn? Netflix’s terms of service indicate that your account is for “personal and non-commercial use only and may not be shared with individuals beyond your household.” In order to prevent abuse of this policy, Netflix has instituted safeguards. Chief among these is the limitation of the number of simultaneous viewers an account may support. Many have felt the frustration of attempting to watch a show only to be met with the message “Too many devices are using the account right now.” Netflix has also introduced pricing bands based on the number of devices an account can support.

Executives at Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, and Disney are all feeling pressure to maximize their profit margin. For a streaming service, the only effective way to do so is to expand the paying viewer base. With 44 million “freeloaders,” employees wonder whether more stringent policies should be enacted to limit streaming services to a single household, as outlined in their terms of service. To these streaming services, borrowing or sharing an account outside of a single-family unit constitutes a form of stealing.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In what circumstances would an individual be morally obligated to no longer share a streaming service account with their family?

Does borrowing a friend’s Netflix account constitute stealing?

Under what conditions, if any, is stealing morally permissible?

Clothing of Calamity

Throughout Africa, the primary source of textile goods (especially clothing) is secondhand imports from the United States and other Western countries. Rwanda, and some other African nations, have decided to ban imported secondhand clothing. There are two primary reasons for this: (1) they want to protect their own developing textile industries and (2) they argue that the pervasiveness of secondhand clothing compromises the dignity of the Rwandan people. Because Rwandans can buy imported secondhand clothes for so cheap, or even receive them for free, it has been impossible for the Rwandan textile industry to flourish. In fact, the importing of secondhand clothes is often cited as the reason that textile industries in East Africa collapsed in the 1980s and 1990s.

In addition, the Rwandan government argues that the Rwandan people's reliance on secondhand clothing compromises their dignity. Throughout East Africa there are names for used clothing from Western countries. For example, in Kenya, people call them "clothes of dead white people" and in Mozambique they call them the "clothing of calamity." Clare Akamanzi, the CEO of Rwanda Development Board argues that the Rwandan government is looking out for its people. She says, "our citizens deserve better than becoming the recipients of discarded clothes from the western world. This is about the dignity of our people."

In 2017 Rwanda raised import taxes on secondhand clothing to such a high level that it functionally created a ban. The tax went from \$0.20 per kilo to \$4 per kilo. But the United States relies heavily on Rwanda and other East African countries as a place to offload its overabundance of used clothing. As such the United States threatened to remove Rwanda from a preferential trade deal. This trade deal was originally created to help lift countries in sub-Saharan Africa out of poverty. However, the trade deal was also beneficial to the United States and the White House had the legal right to end the deal if it ended up no longer being beneficial. Rwandan leaders, though, argued that this was a form of coercion and that they were being punished for looking out for their own people.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What kinds of obligations do nations have to each other?

Are countries obligated to create trade policies (and other kinds of policies) that are fair, or is it morally permissible for countries to seek whatever advantage they can?

Does the United States, because of its unique military and economic resources, have special responsibilities to poorer nations?

Think Outside the Box

United States citizens are routinely asked to fill out forms for school and work that require them to check a box identifying their race: “White, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, Hispanic and American Indian or Alaskan Native.” However, many racial identities cut across these categories, and others do not neatly fit into any.

Khadijah, a high school student, was born in the United States to Muslim parents who immigrated from Algeria. Throughout her youth, Khadijah struggled with her racial and cultural identity and was often bullied for wearing a hijab. She watched as her father, Ziad, who has a Master’s Degree in Mathematics, struggled to find a job due to increasing skepticism toward and discrimination against Muslims and those of Arab descent in the workforce, particularly after the events of 9/11. Khadijah knows she is North African, but often doesn’t know how to answer her friends when they press her: “But are you white or black?”

For the majority of her youth, Khadijah did not know what box to check off on forms that asked about race. She wished there was a box that read simply “Other.” If no such box appeared, and without knowing which box she should legally check, she’d often choose a box at random.

When she began applying to college, Khadijah stumbled upon information suggesting that, in the United States, people of Middle Eastern and North African descent are most often classified as white. However, Khadijah was reluctant to think of herself as white because she never felt that people from her culture enjoyed the privileges associated with that racial identity. Ultimately, she filled out her applications, which did not include an “Other” box, by checking off a random racial identity that was not white. She later worried that this would be considered fraud or that she would be accused of exploiting policies like affirmative action.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

How could Khadijah’s sense of identity be impacted by the confusion surrounding her race?

Is Khadijah’s behavior exploitative of education policies put in place to protect minority groups? Is it justified? Why or why not?

Should Khadijah consider herself as belonging to a minority group, even if she is recognized as white by the U.S. Census?

Oh, the Humanity!

On November 6, 2022, German charity vessel Humanity 1 arrived at an Italian port carrying 179 migrants who were designated as “rescued at sea.” The Italian port authority accepted 144 of the migrants, primarily minors and those in need of medical assistance, but refused to accept the remaining 35 migrants on the ship. In protest of Italy's refusal to process all the migrants onboard, the captain of the Humanity 1 has refused to leave the port until the remaining migrants have been allowed to disembark.

Since 2010, the European Union has seen a stark influx of migrants and asylum seekers hoping to find a better life in Europe. In recent years, right-wing governments have been elected to leadership positions in a number of EU member states and have the explicit objective of reducing immigration which many now see as a problem. EU humanitarian law dictates that, should someone seeking asylum set foot on EU soil, they must be processed thoroughly within the country where they arrived, and if they are found to qualify as an asylum seeker under the United Nations’ definition, they are permitted entry. Countries on the borders of the EU face many steep costs surrounding the processing of asylum seekers and migrants due to their ease of access by outside parties. Italy in particular sees a significant number of migrants due to its location on the Mediterranean Sea and proximity to Africa.

A number of EU countries have spoken out against Italy’s refusal to accept the remaining migrants, including Germany and France, as well as the non-governmental organizations that rescue and transport individuals saved in the Mediterranean to Europe. Many believe that these migrants should be allowed to enter the country because they have a right to live in safety. However, the Italian Government claims that Italy is not obligated to host non-citizens, particularly when the NGOs that carry them do not disclose their routes or intention to transport migrants.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Should the fact that the current Italian government was democratically elected on a platform to reduce immigration rates figure in their decision to accept migrants from the Humanity 1? If so, how?

Is it morally justifiable for Italy to limit admissions to minors and those needing medical assistance?

In cases of conflicting values, should the Italian government prioritize the well-being of its citizens or its humanitarian aims?

A LINE in the Sand

Urban livability, some argue, is in jeopardy. Responding to the environmental crisis inciting this problem, the NEOM Company has broken ground on a new project in the desert of the Red Sea coast. But this won't be just any residential development. In 2022, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and NEOM Board Chairman Mohammed bin Salman introduced the world to THE LINE, "the city of the future."

The community will run entirely on renewable energy: no roads, cars, or emissions. Most notably, this development will not be organized by any definition of "traditional." Instead, embodying its name, THE LINE is projected to be just over 200 yards wide, about 105 miles long, and sits about a third of a mile above sea level. It will quite literally resemble a line—and an invisible one at that: its outside walls will be paneled with mirrored glass, allowing the city to seamlessly blend into the surrounding desert. Accommodating 9 million people within 21 square miles featuring year-round climate control, the city will foster a greatly reduced carbon footprint while ensuring residents enjoy the surrounding "natural" features. All facilities will be accessible within a five-minute walk, and a high-speed rail can take visitors end-to-end within twenty minutes.

To some, bin Salman's proposal sounds like a utopia. By gathering "a team of the brightest minds in architecture, engineering, and construction" and establishing an alternative way to live, there is no denying that THE LINE redefines the idea of urban living, providing the rest of the world a blueprint for hypothetical civilizations of the future. Its residents' wellbeing will be prioritized alongside infrastructure and transportation: NEOM advertises a lack of pollution and traffic accidents, as well as "world-class preventative healthcare."

However, for others, the ability to live, learn, and work in a walkable, carbon negative community seems to be an out-of-character offer from an oil-rich country like Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom possesses roughly 17% of the entire world's known petroleum reserves, exporting millions of barrels daily. Critics point out that NEOM's efforts could be interpreted as a move to divert attention away from Saudi Arabia's dark track record of human rights abuses. Human rights organizations are banned, protests are often criminalized, and activists have been detained without trial for years.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the moral trade-offs between building a brand new city and investing in existing communities which are already struggling?

To what extent can THE LINE be a "green" development project given its connections to the oil industry?

What, if any, are the ethical concerns with a single private company providing basic needs for the residents of an entire city?

The Price of Knowledge

Alexandra Elbakyan, a graduate student from Kazakhstan, has attracted international praise—and a slew of lawsuits—for her creation of a website called Sci-Hub, which illegally hosts and distributes millions of research papers for free. Sci-Hub allows users to upload articles from scientific journals that can be downloaded by anyone.

Under current publishing conventions, university libraries negotiate expensive contracts with publishing companies like Elsevier and Wiley-Blackwell for access to the scientific journals they publish. If researchers are not connected to a university, or are members of one that cannot afford to pay, they must pay an individual fee to access an article, which can range from \$20-\$50 per article. These costs for researchers can add up quickly. Sci-Hub allows readers to bypass publisher paywalls and go directly to the research they are looking for.

Supporters of Sci-Hub argue that free access to research democratizes education and levels the playing field for scholars who do not work for well-resourced universities. According to some scientists, this also speeds up scientific discoveries by making it easier for more researchers to build on each other's work. Some defenders of Sci-Hub also complain that publishing companies operate with large profit margins, while the scientists who produce the research do not receive a cut of the profits.

Publishing companies argue that no matter Elbakyan's intentions, this website breaks the law, and encourages users to steal their intellectual property. Employees of these companies contend that they perform a valuable service for the academy and the public, and that sites like Sci-Hub undermine their ability to publish high-quality science.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the value of scientific research? Should it be available to everyone?

Is it permissible for researchers to download articles from Sci-Hub?

Is it permissible for people who have access to well-resourced research libraries to upload papers to Sci-Hub?

What are the similarities and differences between Sci-Hub and websites that allow users to illegally download music or movies?

Unequal Cities

Consider a city in the future where the population has grown and the supply of housing cannot meet the needs of the population. The majority of single-family homes are occupied by retired couples who have owned their homes for many decades, and may, in many cases, no longer need the space they once did. The majority of families with young children live in overcrowded apartment complexes in an industrial neighborhood with air pollution from factories and no outdoor parks within walking distance.

To address this problem, the city decides that at age 65, all residents will be moved into high-rise retirement homes in the city center, and all their basic needs will be met for the remainder of their lives. Their homes would then become available to families with young children. This policy is designed to be cyclical, ensuring that all residents under 65 will eventually have their turn in these high-rise retirement homes when they reach the specified age, and the next generation will have access to their single-family homes.

Of course, this policy imposes a significant burden on the lives of senior citizens, who are required to leave homes they may have lived in for most of their adult lives. At the same time, the policy seems to offer a fair rotational system. Every member of society has the opportunity to live in their own housing before being moved into the high-rise homes. If implemented equally and well, it seems, over their complete lives, everyone will be treated equally.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Would the cyclical housing policy described in the case be unjust? Would it wrong those who are required to leave their homes when they age?

Should citizens ever give up their claims to some kinds of resources that could be better used by others? Which kinds of resources?

Does the fact that every citizen gets an equal amount of time in the premium housing justify the burden it imposes on people whose time in individual housing is up?

Rejecting the Alternative

The Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland or AfD) is a right-wing political party in Germany known for their opposition to immigration and the EU, which the AfD suggests is restricting the national sovereignty of Germany. Members and leaders of the party hold right-wing social positions such as opposing feminism and gay marriage. Notably, AfD supporters also wish to rehabilitate language of “Volk” and “Vaterland” (nation/people and fatherland, respectively) and reject the policy of Vergangenheitsbewältigung (“coming to terms with the past”), a term referring to Germany's reckoning with its actions during World War II that is often associated with notions of collective guilt.

As of the fall of 2023, they are the second most popular party, with a little more than 20% support in recent polls, behind the center-right party Christian Democratic Union of Germany. In the 2021 elections, the AfD came in 5th, carrying about 10% support.

Recently, there have been considerations by government organizations such as the Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution as well as non-governmental organizations such as the German Institute for Human Rights suggesting that the AfD should be banned from the 2025 elections. A recent report suggests that banning the party could be legally permissible because the AfD may, on account of their nationalist positions, pose an existential threat to liberal democracy in Germany.

Critics argue that banning such a popular party would inflame tensions and profoundly damage faith in elections. Supporters, however, suggest that the AfD's positions on immigrants and their proclivity for right-wing causes might be incompatible with the fundamental structure of the German constitution.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Is it self-contradictory to ban a political party from elections in order to protect democracy?

Under what conditions, if any, is it justifiable to ban a party from an election?

Who has the right to ban a party from an election? To decide that a party is a threat to democracy? From where does this right derive?

Tips for Good Living

Ronald and his wife Tina are co-owners of the Good Food Café in their hometown. He is the chef, and she manages the restaurant.

The servers, busboys, and dishwashers are all paid using a system which has a baseline of hourly pay combined with income from tips. Ronald and Tina already pay their staff a baseline of \$8/hour, which is significantly more than the federally required minimum of \$2.13/hour for restaurant workers. Most of their staff have been with the restaurant for a long time. They also manage a local mutual-aid fund to help support workers in the restaurant industry when they face emergencies or hardships.

Recently, local activists sparked a debate in the Chamber of Commerce about whether there should be a campaign for local restaurants to all switch from the tipping model to a “living wage” model, where workers are not permitted to accept tips but are guaranteed to be paid at least \$17 an hour. The activists argue that tipping models allow for discrimination and create systemic poverty for workers in the restaurant industry. Studies show that tipping disproportionately rewards white men over women and people of color. Workers in the restaurant industry report sexual harassment at rates five times higher than any other industry.

But switching to a living wage model worries Ronald and Tina. They would have to significantly raise prices in order to accommodate living wage legislation. Most weeks of the year, their workers typically take home pay above the current living wage guidelines. However, there are typically some slow periods during the year, and Ronald and Tina worry that they wouldn’t be able to bring in enough business to maintain that level of pay when business slows down. They also worry that they would have to close the restaurant for part of the year, and that they wouldn’t be able to guarantee consistent employment for their workers. Their servers are also worried that the living wage plans would result in a pay cut for them because they often earn well above the living wage threshold.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What are the most important moral factors for restaurants to consider in deciding whether to adopt a living-wage or a tipping model?

Does tipping affect the customer-server relationship in a problematic way? Or is it a morally neutral practice?

How should restaurant workers' interests be weighed against the interests of restaurant owners in the decision to retain a tipping system?

Should governments regulate tipping for the restaurant industry, or should individual restaurants be allowed to decide for themselves which model to follow?

Compensation for Non-Profits

In April 2013, the Huffington Post ran an article titled, “10 Insanely Overpaid Nonprofit Execs.” The subject is receiving a great deal of attention. New York and North Carolina have both launched inquiries into the salaries of non-profit executives working for organizations that receive state funding, arguing that the non-profit sector is not a place for executives “to line their own pockets” but to help citizens. North Carolina has even considered a proposal to put a \$100,000 cap on the salaries of non-profit executives whose organizations receive state support.

According to this argument, those looking to earn top salaries shouldn’t seek employment in charitable organizations. People in the non-profit sector should focus on helping other people, not advancing their own self-interest. The money that now goes to high-paid executives should be spent on those causes the organizations are addressing, such as alleviating poverty or educating voters.

Dan Pallotta, who created the successful AIDS Rides and Breast Cancer 3-Day events, disagrees. In a recent TED Talk, Pallotta argued that as long as the non-profit sector is forced to play by different rules than the private sector, it will inevitably be less successful. Although the average salary for the CEO of a hunger charity is \$80,000, the average salary for someone who has an MBA and ten years of experience is \$400,000. Pallotta argues that we cannot expect the most talented and driven people to work for non-profits when they could make so much more working in the private sector. Furthermore, those causes and charities that are not able to recruit the top talent will inevitably suffer.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Should non-profit executives be paid competitive salaries?

Is it unethical for executives of state-subsidized non-profit organizations to earn \$100,000 or more in annual salaries?