

2023-2024 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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Case 1: The Scarce Resource

Curtis is a former Marine who has struggled with alcoholism since returning home from active service. He does not have any family, he relies on the government for health insurance, and he has been living on the streets for the last 3 years. Due to his frequent and unhealthy level of alcohol consumption, his liver is failing which requires him to make monthly trips to his local hospital for blood transfusions. Curtis' treatment team eventually suggests that he receive a liver transplant, which will eliminate the need for regular transfusions.

This would benefit the hospital since its blood supply has not kept up with demand. If Curtis has the transplant, the hospital would have an additional supply of blood for future patients who require transfusions. The transplant, however, would require that Curtis attend follow-up appointments and commit to stop drinking. Given his history, it is unclear that he would comply. The surgery requires Curtis's consent, which he is refusing to provide.

Curtis' treatment team, in collaboration with the hospital's risk management team, is left with a tough decision. Since doctors are obligated to "do no harm," do they continue supplying Curtis with transfusions even though the blood supply is needed elsewhere? (This is possible legally, since the demand for blood outstrips the current supply.) Or does the hospital deny Curtis' transfusions in an attempt to make him agree to the surgery since without surgery or continued transfusions, he would most likely die in a matter of months?

Match Question: Should Curtis' treatment team continue to supply blood transfusions?

Study Questions

1. Should the man's "worth" be taken into consideration? Is the fact that he's not actively contributing to society important to this case?
2. Is the hospital "leaving the man to die" if he had the option of surgery, but refused to take it?
3. When hospitals are low on resources, what factors do YOU think they should take into consideration when determining which patients should receive what care?
4. Does it make a difference that the patient is on state-funded insurance due to his lack of income?

Case 2: Zero Days

Bob is the head of a cybersurveillance team at the National Security Administration. His team has been monitoring a group of political radicals, all U.S. citizens, who may be planning a terrorist attack on a domestic target. Bob has many tools at his disposal, one of the most useful of which is a “Zero Day” exploit. What this means is that Bob’s team has found accidental flaws in the coding that underlies a social media platform. These coding flaws leave confidential data exposed to be read, altered or even deleted. So far, this has proved a tremendous resource. Bob’s team can read the messages which the radicals think are confidential. Members of Bob’s team are also able to access credit card records stored in the platform’s in-app store. Initial findings indicate that the radical group is using the platform to move funds, possibly in service of a terrorist attack.

Once government agencies discover these coding flaws during a surveillance, they could inform the platform so that the coding errors can be fixed. However, surveillance agencies are not required by law to do this and often don’t. Instead, the agencies leave the flaws in place so that agents can extract all the information they can - in this case, about the radicals’ plans.

However, the longer the Zero Day exploit continues, the more likely it is that “Black Hat” hackers (hackers with malicious intent) will also discover it and exploit it for their own ends. If this happens, the personal data and credit card numbers of the millions of users of the flawed platform will continue to be exposed - for as long as the government needs to keep the Zero Day exploit going. Unfortunately, there is no way to know how many Black Hat hackers - or anyone else - may also be exploiting this Zero Day.

Some members of Bob’s team want to warn the platform’s owners immediately to avoid a massive consumer security breach. Others, however, want to stay quiet and continue exploiting the Zero Day. At present, the team does not yet have enough information to determine the nature or scale of a possible terror attack. But the longer the Zero Day exists, the more precise information they can gather. Bob has to make a decision. He feels in a bind with too little information at his fingertips to make the best choice.

Match Question: Should Bob inform the social media platform of the Zero Day now or wait?

Study Questions

1. How far does one’s right to privacy extend on computer platforms such as Facebook?
2. When can individuals’ rights be violated for the sake of the public good?
3. Does it matter morally that the government does not create Zero Days but merely uses them?
4. Can not doing something count as an action with moral worth?
5. Does the government, in this scenario, have different moral obligations than private individuals or companies?

Case 3: Summer Engagements

Keisha is a rising high school sophomore. Her family has owned a daily newspaper in a moderately sized town for three generations. The paper covers local news and is a staple of the community. Keisha works there when needed and has always been a huge help. She also gets paid, which is a nice bonus.

Keisha doesn't mind working at the newspaper, but her real passion is the theater. She has auditioned for her school musicals since she was in middle school. Her teachers have always seen her potential and gone out of their way to support her. With her English teacher's help, Keisha applied for a summer internship as assistant to the director of a local semi-professional theater. Over 100 people applied, but Keisha was one of four chosen. She is really excited and thinks that this internship could be a stepping stone on the way to a future career in the theater.

Although Keisha's parents value her passion for theater, they really need her help this summer. The paper has been losing employees to national online news sources that pay twice as much as the family's paper due to their wide platform. The family's newspaper is now short-staffed which puts more of a strain on the remaining employees. As a result, each edition - which has become part of so many people's morning routine - is now drastically shorter. With less to read in the local paper, readers are increasingly turning to national, online platforms for their news. As subscribers cancel their subscriptions, Keisha's family is finding it harder to sell ads. If this cycle continues, Keisha's parents will eventually be forced to shut down the paper. The prospect of losing Keisha's help strikes them as the "last straw" at a very stressful time.

Keisha is torn. She knows that her working at the newspaper will reduce the strain on employees and help stabilize the organization. But she doubts how much of a difference she can make. The internship would be a dream come true and could be the key to a future career. But she feels terrible about abandoning her family when they need her the most.

Match Question: Which summer engagement should Keisha commit to? Why?

Study Questions

1. How can we weigh family obligations against personal opportunities?
2. Does Keisha have an obligation to her local community to continue with the paper?
3. When we choose to pursue our own opportunities, can it affect our family relationships?

Case 4: Running in Ramadan

Aurora lives in Virginia and is currently thriving in her junior year of high school. She is especially successful in track and field. A few days ago, her coach informed her that a talent scout from a local college will be attending a meet on March 23. Her coach thinks that Aurora has a good chance of securing an athletic scholarship. This meet is also a pivotal competition on the team's pathway to the championships. Aurora's high school has not won the state championships in 43 years. With Aurora competing, her coach is confident that the team has a chance to win.

Aurora is a Muslim. During the month of Ramadan, everyone in her community fasts from the time the sun rises until it sets unless they are physically unable to do so. Aurora is passionate about her religion and has fasted during Ramadan for the last four years. However, the upcoming track meet will take place two weeks into this year's fast.

Aurora is worried. She knows that if she competes while fasting, she will not be able to perform at her highest level. She may not even finish the competition! This would mean losing her chance at an athletic scholarship. It would also mean letting down her teammates and, especially, her coach.

But at the same time, Aurora doesn't want to let her religious community down either. She knows that the community would not consider needing to compete in a track meet a valid reason to break the fast. Aurora's religious community is important to her, and she does not want to disappoint them, or her family.

Aurora is torn between her competing commitments to her religion and spiritual community, and her commitments to her track team and her own academic future.

Match Questions: Should Aurora continue fasting or break the fast to participate in her meet?

Study Questions

1. How do we prioritize when our community's values and our personal aspirations conflict?
2. To what extent should a minority group conform to the expectations of the majority?
3. To what extent should a majority group accommodate practices of a minority?
4. How should individuals navigate competing demands between religious and secular society?

Case 5: Capitalizing on Capital Crime

Ryan, a television producer, wants to write a proposal for a new show about a serial killer similar to the recent Netflix series, *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Although that show had been a record-breaking success - reaching the number-one spot on Netflix in its first week, becoming the second most-watched English language series ever, and receiving six Emmy nominations - there was a strong critical backlash. This mixed critical reaction makes Ryan hesitant to create his own series. Ryan believes that the producers of *Dahmer* made two major errors.. First, the series was produced without the knowledge or consent of the families of the victims. According to Rita Isbell, the sister of one of Dahmer's victims, "Netflix should've asked if we minded or how we felt about making it. They didn't ask me anything... I'm not money hungry, and that's what this show is about, Netflix trying to get paid." In addition, the show included an LGBTQ+ tag which drew swift criticism from the queer community. The tag was removed within two days.

Ryan, who studied psychology in college, thinks he can avoid these problems when producing his own show. He would, for example, communicate with victims' families and members of the queer community. He also believes that the genre has value: it makes viewers more aware of their level of personal safety, familiarizes them with the social justice system, and potentially makes them more empathic. As well, after some true crime documentaries aired, verdicts were overturned because viewers shared DNA with law enforcement. In other words, these programs can affect real change, as well as draw attention to and combat injustice.

Still, Ryan worries that true crime shows, no matter how they are produced, normalize violence and may dehumanize victims who are often already marginalized members of society. These series may also perpetuate stigmas against people with certain mental disorders, especially when those disorders are described as "warning signs." As well, the programs can make viewers anxious. Even more worrisome, these shows can glamorize criminals. For example, many viewers found Evan Peters, the actor who portrayed Dahmer, very attractive. Some even compiled short clips of his most gruesome moments from the show.

Ryan is torn. On the one hand, as an artist, he relishes the opportunity to create a television program that offers responsible social commentary. As *Dahmer* actor, Evan Peters put it, "It's called *The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, but it's not just him and his backstory: It's the repercussions, it's how society and our system failed to stop him multiple times because of racism, homophobia. It's just a tragic story." Still, Ryan knows that there are other ways of offering social critique; perhaps shows about serial killers cause more social and personal harm than good.

Match Question: Should Ryan propose a series about a serial killer? If so, how should he go about it?

Study Questions

1. Who has the right to tell a story?
2. Do the dead have a right to respect and privacy? Why or why not?
3. Can telling a story be disrespectful?
4. Does medium matter? Can one kind of media be more ethical than another?

Case 6: Farmer's Market Fisticuffs

Mona and Ava have been friends ever since they shared a dorm room in their freshman year at university two years ago. Despite their differences, they have become close over the years, but continue to argue about little things and often don't see eye to eye. Mona grew up in town in a family of fourteen all living in one house. Ava, an only child, grew up in a wealthy suburb. Though Mona feels that Ava is a true friend, she is often frustrated by the "out of touch" comments Ava often makes.

Every Saturday, the friends meet at the farmer's market to browse, chat, and drink coffee. Things become tense, however, at a stand selling cured meats. Ava excitedly fills her bag with prosciutto and bacon, smiling as the woman working the stand talks about the sustainable practices used to produce the meats. Mona is impressed by this farm's commitment to the environment, but also feels envious of Ava whose shopping bag is filling up while Mona herself stands by, empty-handed. As Ava pays for her purchase, she asks if Mona is going to buy anything. Mona laughs and says that these prices are a bit exorbitant for her, and that she buys her ground beef from Market Basket, a large local grocery store.

Genuinely troubled, Ava replies, "You really shouldn't buy the cheap stuff from Market Basket, you know. It's horrible what they do to those animals. I'd rather just eat vegetarian than put those cows through what those farms do to them." The two continue to argue, though Mona holds her ground, she is genuinely troubled by Ava's comments. . Mona loves animals and feels that her love for them has been questioned. She asks herself if Ava is right - should she just stop eating meat if she can't afford ethically-sourced products?

Match Question: What should Mona do?

Study Questions

1. How much responsibility do people have to be "ethical consumers"?
2. When we buy something, are we supporting its production process?
3. Were Ava's questions appropriate? Would it make a difference if she phrased her ideas differently?
4. Does your stage in life make a difference in the ethics of eating meat regardless of how it was raised?