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### Conscience, Fallacies and Ethics Bowl

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# Conscience, Fallacies and Ethics Bowl

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*Fallacious.* The Ethics Bowl team throws this word around without blinking. The first time, it can be shrugged off as a fluke, an AP vocabulary word that somehow made its way into ordinary conversation.

But then it's used a second time. By a different team member. And another Ethics Bowler uses the noun form, *fallacy*, and—

Oh right. This isn't ordinary conversation. This is a group of students whose main extracurricular involves upwards of three to five hours a week researching and discussing ethical and philosophical theories and their applications to cases like:

- Mental health of airline pilots
- Brain damage from playing youth football
- The programming of self-driving cars

Their brains are tuned to identify fallacies, because a fallacious argument is not only worthless—it undercuts their efforts to identify and effectively reason for correct ethical practices.

“When you challenge somebody's stance, they tend to get offended,” says Exercise Science major and Ethics Bowler Sarah Manko '18. “Here, we're kind of willing to offend.”

Spend an hour—or just 10 minutes—with the team and this is obvious. Outside of case discussions

and philosophizing, ongoing banter demonstrates the almost familial relationships they have with each other.

Jim Spiegel, Professor of Philosophy and Ethics Bowl coach, is bald. So is Sam Moore '17, a philosophy and biblical studies major from Powell, Ohio. They pass jokes back and forth. Spiegel says if he were Sam, he'd wear a beanie all the time to keep from catching cold. Spiegel is, in fact, wearing a beanie—it hasn't come off the entire hour and twenty minutes we've been in this classroom.

"I've always tried to get my friends back home to understand why Ethics Bowl is not this weird thing I do," Sam says, preparing to give a spiel on his attempts to make ethics relevant to his coworkers at Chik-Fil-A.

Teammate Blair Hedges '16 cuts in: "It really is this weird thing that you do, though."

Everybody laughs.

There's no set personality for Ethics Bowlers. The group is a mix of outspoken, sarcastic, jocular, and penetratingly quiet. Bo '19, a philosophy and history major, likes to collect his thoughts and organize his words before he speaks. When a metaphor draws unpursued ribbing, he waits for his teammates to settle down before continuing his thought.

"We're just one comment away from an avalanche of puns and jokes," Spiegel says, holding back his own laughter. "This experience is one comedic trip."

The team just returned from Nationals where, defending their 2015 championship title, they fell in the quarterfinals to Youngstown State University (Ohio). The loss ended a 21-match winning streak that reached back to spring 2014—a remarkable record considering this year's team had only two members return from the previous season.

For Spiegel, this record is evidence of thorough preparation—what he sees as the real value of Ethics Bowl.

Here's how it works:

Several weeks before competition (for Nationals, two months), the team receives the cases. They divide them among themselves and start researching, tracking down all available facts and any similar situations that can be used as examples, considering different philosophies to see what Kant or Aristotle would conclude in this case. Sometimes, the team knows right away what their own ethical conclusion will be. Sometimes, it's fuzzy until the night before the competition when they're forced to make a decision.

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# actually think?”” Veronica says.

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Veronica Toth '16, an English major from Medina, Ohio, has been on the team since her freshman year and was one of the two returning team members. As her understanding of philosophies has grown, she's gone from looking for the philosophy whose conclusion is closest to her own to “more creative uses of theories, more uses of theories together,” combining the best reasoning from separate theories to build her arguments.

Toth is particularly drawn to Aristotelian virtue ethics, a theory that sees vices (like cowardice and foolishness) as extremes and aims for the virtue at the middle (courage).

“Usually my cases are annoyingly nuanced, and people will be like, ‘What are you actually saying? What do you actually think?’” Veronica says. “But I see both sides, and I want to meet somewhere in the middle, which doesn't always work.”

The other returning Ethics Bowler, Kasey Leander '16, a history and PPE major from Colorado Springs, Colo., and the current Student Body President, has also been on the team since freshman year.

“He's come such a long way,” Spiegel says, “three years after being a green, quivering freshman.”

“I don't think you were ever quivering,” Veronica tells Kasey.

That's the joke. Kasey came from a background of high school debate where, he says, you “muster every argument to support what you think and blast them with it. And Ethics Bowl is like, okay, let's sit down for three hours and just plumb the depths of every question.”

His philosophical background?

“I liked listening to talk radio and I liked arguing with people,” he says, laughing. “So nothing.”

Ethics Bowl forced him to challenge his own gut instincts and track down the facts and intricacies of situations before deciding what he thought. In one case, the host mother for a couple's in vitro fertilization runs off to have the baby which she'd signed a contract to abort.

“On the surface of it, I would definitely adhere to a more pro-life stance,” Kasey says, “but as we dove into it . . . She was willing to do it for a sum—for some amount of money—[what they offered] just wasn't enough.”

Then there were questions of whose child it actually was. “Does our contract determine whose child that is? 'Cause that's just a piece of paper. . . . And then even further, when we say ‘whose child,’ what does it mean for someone to be somebody else's child?”

The case took a long time to sort through. In their conclusion, the team broke it down into segments, naming various parts ethical and unethical, morally sound and morally reprehensible.

“And the case never even came up—so we never discussed it in the competition—but we had hours

and hours of fruitful, amazing discussion,” Kasey says.

This year’s team looked to Kasey and Veronica for leadership and guidance in researching cases and building arguments. Neither considers himself or herself a philosophical expert, but for those starting out, they seemed leaps and bounds ahead.

At a meeting in January, one of the first after receiving the cases for Nationals, Veronica shared what she had so far for Case 15, a case that involved extending legal rights to chimpanzees. Veronica believes there’s a sharp distinction between humans and animals—her faith and specifically *imago dei*, the doctrine of humanity being made in God’s image (Gen. 1:27), are the basis for this—but she also doesn’t think animals primarily exist for human consumption.

As she went through philosophical theories, she kept finding holes or dangers in their logic. Either they’d erase any distinction between humans and animals, they’d remove children and people who are mentally disabled from qualifying as rights holders, or they’d dismiss misuse and abuse of animals.

Cases like this are always the hardest for Taylor’s team. They are dedicated to their Christian faith and running hard after truth, but they can’t appeal to Scripture and, as Spiegel says, cases like these “beg for theology.”

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Only two other team members were at the meeting that day: Sarah Manko and Jackson Wilcox ’18, an accounting major from Edmond, Okla. After 40 minutes of offering suggestions and asking about this or that angle of Veronica’s case, Jackson looked over at Sarah and asked:

“Sarah, why can’t we be like Blair and Kasey? Why can’t we argue instead of ask questions?”

“I don’t know,” Sarah replied.

“No, that was good,” Veronica objected.

If Kasey and Blair had been there, at least one of them—probably Kasey—would have played devil’s advocate.

“When you can stand up to the strongest critiques that anyone can levy,” Kasey says, “that’s for me when I feel most certain.”

Thinking through all the angles and intricacies, seeing the complexity, the overwhelming gray

between the black and white, identifying fallacies. This is what Ethics Bowl is all about. Kasey says it's played the most crucial role in developing his critical thinking skills while at Taylor.

"Ultimately, though, none of the ethical theories have any grounding apart from a theistic worldview," he says.

Competing in Ethics Bowl, Kasey has seen philosophy after philosophy lined up and shot down. Everyone brings in this or that reasoning—Kantian, Aristotelian, Cartesian—and presents them in relation to a case they think the reasoning is compatible with. But no one philosophy is held up as The Right One that all others should be measured against. "We're all evaluating them—the judges, the opponent—everyone is using their conscience as the plumb line," Kasey says.

When a philosophy leads to a conclusion most people see as wrong or unreasonable, it's declared unusable in that instance and another philosophy is introduced. When that happens:

"What they're doing is appealing to something different than either of those systems—it's their conscience. And what we're really having is a conscience bowl, where we really try and hammer out what our conscience says," Kasey says.

"When ethics is done well," Spiegel says, "you begin trying to search out answers to difficult moral questions and, in the process—if you do it well enough and sincerely enough—you end up having to search your own heart. Or it searches you somehow."

Once you start calling fallacies on ways of reasoning you previously agreed with, you have to start calling fallacies on your own arguments. You have to admit to the disconnections between what you know or believe to be true and the way you live—and resolve to do something about it.

No part of life should exist in a vacuum from what you profess to believe. Plumbing the depths of an ethical question should morph into soul-searching and develop a moral seriousness that impacts more than the head. It should reach into the heart and turn it toward what is right and true.



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