



2027

Ethics Olympiad

SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL CASE SET

Welcome to the cases for the 2027 Senior High School Ethics Olympiad. An Ethics Olympiad is a competitive yet collaborative event in which students analyze and discuss real-life, timely, ethical issues. An Ethics Olympiad differs from debating in that students are not assigned opposing views; rather, they defend whatever position they believe is right and win by showing that they have thought more carefully, deeply, and perceptively about the cases in question.

Experience shows that this type of event encourages and helps students develop intellectual virtues such as ethical awareness, critical thinking skills, civil discourse, civic engagement, and an appreciation for diverse points of view. Please feel free to email us if you have any queries at: admin@ethicsolympiad.org

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Cases 2, 7 & 8 were written by students who submitted cases for the 2026 Ethics Olympiad Case Writing Competition. Cases 1, 5 & 6 were published by UK Ethics Cup, The Centre for Ethics and Public Affairs at the St Andrews University UK. (<https://ethicscup.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>) Cases 3 & 4 are from the National High School Ethics Bowl (Ed.), 2025-26. National High School Ethics Bowl Case Library. UNC Parr Center for Ethics: Chapel Hill, NC (<http://nhseb.org/case-library>). Case 2 Reserved Organs is an adaptation of a case written by Juliet Khoury from Loreto Kirribilli NSW. Case 7, Transfusion of the soul is an adaptation of a case written by Zakia Goddard from Wellington High School NZ. Case 8 The Perfect Recommendation was written by Shuyuan Sun from Chongqing Depu Foreign Language School CHINA. <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/>

Case 1 - Whole Life Sentences

Committing a serious crime may result in being sentenced to life in prison, known as a whole life order in the UK.⁴⁴ The sentence is one which lasts for as long as or longer than the accused is expected to live with no possibility of release.⁴⁵ In the U.S., the Sentencing Project estimates that approximately 97,160 prisoners face a life sentence without the possibility of parole.⁴⁶

Even in cases of life imprisonment without parole, the sentence is not always a final judgement. That's because punishments should be sensitive to our evidence. If DNA evidence is found and shows that a convicted person is innocent, they should be released. Exculpatory evidence may influence a sentence long after the sentence is given.

That said, some evidence is considered only before the sentence has been given in the case of whole life sentences. Given that there is no chance of parole, expressions of remorse, cooperation with investigators, or admitting to having committed the crime can reduce a sentence only before it is given. Even if a person is dramatically transformed after trial or incarceration, recognise their wrongdoing and sincerely disavow their past behaviour, this cannot alter their sentence.⁴⁷

The fact that a criminal's attitude to their crime, and their character more generally, can change over time, and yet this cannot be taken account of after their trial if they're given a whole life order, makes the timing of the trial very important. Yet some trials happen very quickly after the alleged crime is committed while others happen only months or years later. Likewise, the possibility of attitudinal and character change makes it important how young the convicted criminal is, as younger people, one would think, are much likelier to undergo attitudinal change than older people.

Questions:

1. Is it right for the criminal justice system to take into account, after trial and sentencing, new exculpatory evidence but not attitudinal and character change?
2. Are a criminal's attitudes and character at the time of their trial more ethically appropriate as guides to sentencing than the attitudes and character they demonstrate whilst serving their sentence?
3. Are whole life orders defensible if we accept that people can fundamentally change?

Sources:

44 <https://www.gov.uk/types-of-prison-sentence/life-sentences>

45 <https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/sentencing-and-the-council/types-of-sentence/life-sentences/>

46 <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/a-matter-of-life-the-scope-and-impact-of-life-and-long-term-imprisonment-in-the-united-states/>

47 <https://academic.oup.com/book/41035/chapter-abstract/349331348?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

Case 2 - Reserved Organs

John Smith is an elderly man who has just been informed that he has a few days left to live. As John's death will be due to old age, his organs are perfectly healthy and he is asked whether he would like to donate them to science, or, as a new technology has been discovered, whether he would like to use cryopreservation so that his organs can be transplanted into someone who needs them. This new cryopreservation only lasts for 5 years at most, so the organs must be used under time conditions.

Pausing to deliberate his final choices, John thinks about his son - Angus. Angus has been a heavy smoker for nearly 15 years, and the effects are starting to become apparent. Angus has been having lung issues for the past few years, nothing serious, but the doctors believe that his condition may progress.

With no way to determine whether Angus may need a lung transplant later in life, John requests that his organs be cryopreserved, but only given to Angus, otherwise, reburied with his body. The doctors do not agree with this decision as it is unclear whether Angus will need the lungs later or whether a dying patient may come in and need John's organs but have them withheld from him.

John's situation raises complex questions about fairness and the purpose of organ donation. While John's desire to help his son comes from love and loyalty, it challenges the ethical principles of equality and justice in medicine. Doctors must consider whether personal wishes should outweigh the greater good of saving multiple lives.

Questions:

1. Should a donor's wishes about who receives their organs override medical judgments about who needs them most?
2. Is it ethical to prioritise the future health of someone you love over the present needs of strangers whose lives are at stake?
3. Should the fact that Angus's lung problems come from his own choices affect whether he receives the organs?

Sources:

1. DonateLife. (2015). Clinical and ethical guidelines for organ transplantation. DonateLife. <https://www.donatelife.gov.au/for-healthcare-workers/clinical-guidelines-and-protocols/clinical-and-ethical-guidelines-organ-transplantation>
2. Jang, T. H., Park, S. C., Yang, J. H., Kim, J. Y., Seok, J. H., Park, U. S., Choi, C. W., Lee, S. R., & Han, J. (2017). Cryopreservation and its clinical applications. *Integrative Medicine Research*, 6(1), 12–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.imr.2016.12.001>
3. Mitchell, G. (2022, February 28). Body Donor Program. School of Biomedical Sciences. <https://biomedicalsciences.unimelb.edu.au/departments/anatomy-and-physiology/engage/body-donor-program>

Case 3 - The Population Bomb

In recent years, many countries have seen birth rates fall below what demographers call “replacement level,” roughly 2.1 births per woman. When birth rates remain below this level for extended periods, populations begin to shrink and age. This trend is sometimes referred to as demographic decline. South Korea’s total fertility rate has fallen to around 0.7, France’s to about 1.6, and India has dipped below replacement. If current trends continue, some countries will have dramatically fewer children by the end of the century than they do today.

These shifts raise concerns for governments and citizens alike. With fewer young people entering the workforce, a shrinking tax base must support a growing population of retirees. Pension systems, healthcare services, and social safety nets may face increasing strain. In some regions, declining populations have already led to school closures, labor shortages, and “ghost towns” where younger generations have moved away in search of opportunity. Alongside economic effects, some worry that languages, traditions, and ways of life may slowly disappear as communities age and disperse.

Some governments have attempted to encourage family formation through policy. Child tax credits, paid parental leave, subsidized childcare, and housing incentives all aim to make raising children more affordable and desirable. However, some question whether governments should be so directly involved in personal decisions like childbirth, noting that these policies are often not very effective. Hungary, for example, spends a significant portion of its GDP on family-support programs but has seen only modest increases in birth rates, remaining well below replacement level. As traditional policy tools show limited success, some suggest societies may need to rethink cultural norms around parenthood, work, and community. This raises a broader question: what are we obligated to do if demographic decline threatens systems that support the elderly and vulnerable?

At the same time, others argue that population decline may not be entirely negative. A smaller global population could reduce pressure on the environment, lowering carbon emissions and resource consumption. Some also note that falling birth rates often accompany positive social changes, such as increased access to contraception, higher levels of education, and greater gender equality. From this perspective, demographic decline may reflect individuals having greater freedom to decide how they want to live their lives.

Questions:

1. Should governments actively try to shape population trends, or should they accept decline as a consequence of values like freedom, equality, and environmental sustainability?
2. Are governments morally obligated to uphold past commitments, such as Social Security benefits, if demographic changes make those commitments increasingly difficult to sustain?
3. Is having children a private choice or one that carries obligations to society?

Case 4 - License to Speak

Scroll through social media for a few minutes and you are likely to encounter content from influencers across many areas of life. One moment, a travel vlogger is reviewing street food in Thailand; the next, someone is explaining how to open a Roth IRA or treat acne using products recommended by board-certified dermatologists. Influencers increasingly occupy roles once associated with professionals such as teachers, financial planners, and doctors, offering advice to large audiences.

However, the online environment also contains significant misinformation. A 2024 UNESCO survey found that 62% of content creators do not rigorously fact-check the information they share. To address this, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) has introduced new rules requiring influencers who discuss topics with serious implications, such as finance, medicine, education, or law, to hold formal qualifications. These may include university degrees, professional certifications, or licenses. The CAC states that these rules are intended to protect the public from misleading content and harmful advice.

Supporters of this policy argue that it promotes credibility and reduces harm. For example, an unqualified influencer promoting unsafe medical treatments or financial strategies could mislead large audiences. Requiring credentials may help prevent such outcomes and rebuild public trust. Some argue that limiting who can provide advice is justified if it protects people from serious risks and improves the overall quality of information online.

Critics, however, see the policy as a potential overreach of government authority. In countries with a history of strong censorship, such regulations could be used to suppress dissenting views under the justification of public safety. There are also questions about how “serious topics” are defined and which qualifications are considered valid. Individuals with practical experience, such as self-taught investors or practitioners of alternative medicine, could be excluded despite their expertise. These requirements may concentrate influence among those with formal credentials, regardless of their real-world knowledge. There is also concern that authorities could label certain voices as “unqualified” simply because their views challenge established perspectives.

Questions:

1. Does the government have a responsibility to ensure the public receives credible information?
2. Does a person who has achieved expertise through life experience have the same moral right to offer advice as someone with formal qualifications?
3. When, if ever, does the need for truth outweigh the right to speak freely?

Sources:

1. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/2/3-digital-content-creators-do-not-check-their-facts-sharing-want-learn-how-do-so-unesco-survey>
2. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/global-trends/us-news-no-degree-no-discussion-china-tightens-the-grip-on-influencers-and-its-new-law-has-sparked-massive-debate-online-check-details/articleshow/124929667.cms>

Case 5 - Animal Adoption

Sally has long wanted a pet dog and her parents have agreed that she can have a puppy for her 13th birthday. Her Dad, Richard, suggests that the family should adopt a puppy or young dog from their local dog shelter. He believes this would be the kindest thing to do, as he had a rescue dog when he was a child, and believes that the dogs that are given up by their owners deserve a second chance at finding a loving home. However, Sally's mum, Bethany, is adamant that the family should purchase a puppy from a breeder. She has seen pictures on Facebook of a breeder in the local area selling Dachshund puppies, which is Sally's favourite breed of dog, and she is certain that this would delight Sally.

Last year alone, the RSPCA's 14 re-homing centres and 135 independent branches managed to find homes for 28,208 animals, which was far short of the 40,118 pets that came into its shelters across England and Wales.⁵⁵ This represents 42% more animals coming in than going out of shelters, which is part of a pattern that was seen across animal rescue centres in 2024.⁵⁶ Given that the intake of animals to shelters increasingly outpaces the number of outgoing animals, some would argue that it is wrong for breeders to be increasing the numbers of animals available to become pets. Alternatively, the burden of responsibility could be placed on individual consumers, as the supply of purebred pets is a consequence of the demand.

Bethany cites some perceived advantages of purchasing through a breeder, one being the availability of specifically desired breeds—a Dachshund in this case. Despite her sympathy for the sheltered animals, she is aware that purebred dogs, especially puppies, are extremely rare in rescue centres. She is also keen to buy from a breeder, as the one she has found does not require a background check, and puppies are available to reserve immediately. In her research, she has found that animal shelters generally conduct a screening process to ensure that animals are going to a suitable home where the adopters can demonstrate that they have adequate time and resources to looking after an animal. Bethany perceives this as a potential barrier to obtaining the desired puppy, as both her and Richard work long days, which a shelter might deem problematic.

Questions:

1. Should breeders be required by law to screen their customers to determine their suitability for dog ownership?
2. Is there anything wrong with wanting specific traits in a living being you're going to care for?
3. Can it ever be justified to purchase from a breeder when there is a surplus of shelter dogs needing homes?

Sources:

⁵⁵ <https://www.countryfile.com/animals/pets/animal-crisis-deepens>

⁵⁶ <https://www.countryfile.com/animals/pets/animal-shelters-overflowing-as-people-abandon-pets-in-record-numbers>

Case 6 - Trans Women in Sports

Lia Thomas, a trans woman, has made headlines in Great Britain for dominating women's swimming. Critics argue that Thomas should not participate in women's sports since her increased height, muscle mass, and lung capacity give her an unfair advantage.

From this perspective, sports should involve ensuring fair competition among competitors in a particular class, and Thomas makes swimming competitions unfair for women, which warrants her exclusion. Others argue that Thomas should be permitted to participate in women's sports. Excluding Thomas, some might say, constitutes sex-based discrimination.

Questions:

1. Sports divide athletes into categories to make competition fair. What should those categories be based on, and who should decide?
2. Is it discriminatory to exclude trans women from women's sports?
3. If Thomas were to continue to be permitted to swim in the Women's Division, would there be anything unethical about her choosing to do so?

Sources:

1. https://www.espn.co.uk/college-sports/story/_/id/33492251/lia-thomas-controversy-surrounds-ncaaswimming-championships-incites-national-debate 21
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/swimming/articles/c4nn20w0x0zo> 22
3. <https://www.newsweek.com/lia-thomas-upenn-swimmer-transgender-ban-records-update-2093323>
4. <https://nwlc.org/once-and-for-all-this-is-why-we-support-trans-women-and-girls-in-sports/>

Case 7 - Transfusion of the Soul

Jehovah's Witnesses is a global religion with beliefs that overlap with, and in many ways differ from, mainstream Christianity. Members do not celebrate holidays such as Christmas, Easter, or birthdays, and they generally abstain from political involvement, including voting. Door-to-door ministry is a central practice, and children often participate alongside their parents. The religion has attracted controversy over its practices regarding children, and over potential harms to members.

A particularly controversial rule is that Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood, plasma, and platelet transfusions, including for their children. They believe that blood is sacred and represents life itself, and so receiving a transfusion would violate God's command. They cite verses which instruct believers to "abstain from blood." This means if a member falls seriously ill and requires a transfusion to survive, they would be expected to refuse and accept the consequences.

This has caused major controversy, especially in situations where it applies to young people. In most countries, these decisions for under 18s usually come up to a court, as parents are generally not allowed to refuse life-saving medicine on behalf of their children, but what the court ends up deciding has varied a lot through history. In 2007, a Skagit County court considered the case of 14-year-old Dennis Lindberg in Washington, USA, who had been diagnosed with leukemia. Doctors estimated he had a 70% chance of five-year survival with treatment, which required blood transfusions. Lindberg refused on religious grounds, and his legal guardian (his aunt, also a Jehovah's Witness) supported his decision, though his biological parents wanted him to receive the transfusion. The judge ruled in Lindberg's favour, stating he was mature enough to understand he was "basically giving himself a death sentence." Lindberg, who had already fallen unconscious the day before the hearing, died that evening. Another infamous case was in the UK more recently in 2019, in relation to a male 14-year-old whose name has stayed private. In this case, he had lymphatic cancer and would have died without treatment. The UK high court judge ended up forcing the treatment on him, leading to his survival, despite him saying he was angry and upset.

Those who believe Jehovah's Witness children should be forced to receive transfusions tend to argue that a child who has grown up in a religion may have their views manipulated by their upbringing, and that if a transfusion were forced on them, they may be glad in the future that it was, since they are not old enough to truly know what they want. Those who argue they should be allowed to refuse transfusions tend to say that their religion and beliefs should be respected, and that if they can articulate what they want clearly, the fundamental right to refuse medical treatment should be given to them.

Questions:

1. When does protecting someone from harm become disrespecting them?
2. When a young person says they want to refuse treatment for religious reasons, how do we know it's really their own choice?
3. When people are harmed by acting on what they were taught, where does responsibility lie? With them, with those who taught them, or somewhere in between?

Case 8 - The Perfect Recommendation

Alex is a high school junior thinking about college and feeling overwhelmed by choices. He signs up for an AI platform that analyzes his grades, interests, and online behavior to recommend paths with the highest likelihood of success.

At first, it feels accurate. It suggests business and data-related content, shows examples of similar students succeeding, and assigns each option a “success score.”

But over time, Alex notices a shift. He has always loved painting and visual design, yet the platform gradually shows him less art content. When he engages with it, the system labels it as “low economic potential” and reduces similar recommendations. Instead, his feed fills with finance and data-focused pathways, presented with clearer outcomes and stronger success narratives.

Slowly, Alex begins to question his own interests. Was art ever a realistic path, or even something he truly wanted?

Eventually, the platform presents an “optimal path”: data analysis at a top university, with strong predictions for stability and success. Around the same time, Alex receives an offer from a smaller university with a respected visual arts program. It excites him, but comes with uncertainty and a much lower “success score”.

Now he must decide between a secure, optimized path and one aligned with his long-standing passion.

What unsettles him most is not just the decision, but how his thinking has been shaped. The platform never forced him, but subtly influenced what he sees and values.

Alex wonders: if his preferences have been shaped by the system, are they still truly his? And if he follows the “optimal” path, is he exercising freedom or giving it up?

Questions:

1. If an algorithm can predict which choice will likely lead to the best outcomes, does that make it the morally better choice? Why or why not?
2. To what extent can a person be said to have free will if their preferences are shaped by algorithmic recommendations?
3. Is choosing a less certain path that aligns with one’s personal interests more valuable than choosing a highly optimized path? What values are at stake in this decision?