



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
TENNESSEE  
KNOXVILLE

COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

TENNESSEE HIGH SCHOOL

# ETHICS BOWL

## Ethical Reasoning and the THSEB: A Primer for Coaches

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# ETHICS BOWL

**This document was prepared to assist coaches preparing for the Tennessee High School Ethics Bowl (THSEB).**

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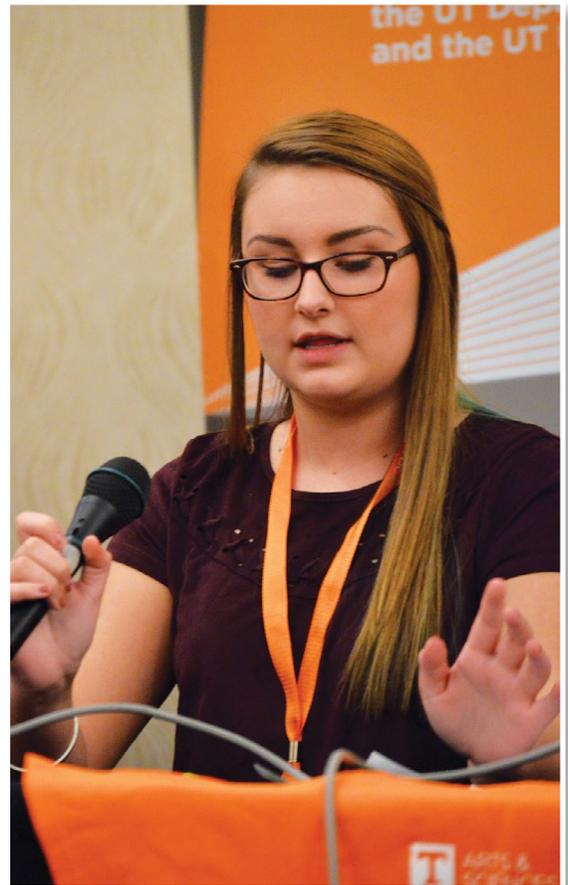
With the THSEB being an *ethics* bowl, you might think that there is an expectation that students will cite directly from traditional moral theories in offering their analyses of the cases. Such an approach tends to support a particular style of ethical reasoning, what we've termed a plug-and-play model—that places more emphasis on, for example, what deontology or virtue or consequentialist or care ethics might say. Taking such an approach, however, limits the range of students' responses, while giving the false impression that what is important in ethics is finding a particular theory that solves our ethical questions. This fails to respect the students' capacities to find their own solutions and offer their own arguments about what is morally relevant and how we ought to act in particular situations.

Consequently, the students' views should be put at the forefront of their own reasoning. Rather than telling the judges what Kant might say and then aiming to anticipate objections that might come from other moral theories, we look for students to offer their own arguments—arguments that clearly consider students' values and how those might interact with the particular details of the cases. None of this is to suggest that traditional ethical theories cannot and should not play a role. It simply means that these theories ought to be seen more as tools to help students create their own arguments. Rather than telling us what Aristotle said, or just giving us their own opinion, students should aim to offer a line of reasoning that explains why certain aspects of the case are relevant and why we ought to focus on certain values as opposed to others when engaging the case.

It is our hope that this type of approach, both in preparation for the event and during the actual competition, will lead students to the following outcomes that are central to our understanding of the THSEB as helping to develop citizens' abilities to engage in respectful deliberation and dialogue about controversial issues:

- They will be better able to critically reflect on their own value systems and beliefs.
- They will be better able to ask why a particular value, rather than another, makes the crucial difference in deciding the right course of action.
- They will be better able to consider how other people might take other values to be crucial difference and be sensitive to this fact.

What follows in the remainder of this section serves as a basic primer of key concepts and theories that can help students in developing their own arguments and engagement with moral values. You will not only find a discussion about the difference between mere opinions (an unsupported moral judgment) and moral judgments, but a primer on four primary types of ethical reasoning that students can find helpful in creating their arguments.



## Mere Opinions vs. Reasoned Opinions

We are all familiar with the phrase “everyone’s entitled to their opinion.”<sup>1</sup> However, it is worth thinking about what opinions are, and why this idea might not be useful in public discourse. Opinions can range across a wide variety of subjects, from things like what your favorite ice cream is to who is the best pianist to what is the best medical treatment for a certain ailment. While it might make sense to say that we are all entitled to our opinion when it comes to ice cream, it doesn’t seem helpful in the realm of medical treatment – especially if I have no medical training. Why should my opinion matter? But if I can defend my opinion by appealing to things that are relevant, and in fact show that I have some level of expertise, then perhaps you should take me seriously. However, at that point, it also wouldn’t make sense to say that this is *just* my opinion.

This can help us see the difference between a *mere* opinion and a *reasoned* opinion. If I have no medical training and simply offer my opinion that you just need to “walk it off after an injury,” I have no real support for my claim beyond “because I think so.” However, if I can offer relevant reasons for why you just need to walk it off, then that support backs up my claim and does so in a way that someone who might not already agree with me can evaluate. The former, where I have no real support, can be thought of as an example of a *mere* opinion, while the latter can be seen as a *reasoned* opinion. The difference is that in the case of the mere opinion my only support is my subjective belief that I think it is the case, whereas in the case of reasoned opinion, I am able to offer evidence that supports my judgment.

The difference between mere opinions and reasoned opinions can help us understand a worry about the idea that “everyone is entitled to their opinion” and why it is important to not rely on mere opinions in public discourse. As Patrick Stokes remarks in discussing this idea:

The problem with ‘I’m entitled to my opinion’ is that, all too often, it’s used to shelter beliefs that should have been abandoned. It becomes shorthand for ‘I can say or think whatever I like’ – and by extension, continuing to argue is somehow disrespectful. And this attitude feeds, I suggest, into the false equivalence between experts and non-experts that is an increasingly pernicious feature of our public discourse.

When we rely on mere opinions, the conversation often stops. There becomes no way to evaluate if one set of reasons are better than another because we lack explanation. If we rely on reasoned judgments, the conversation can continue. We can evaluate and discuss the reasons that are offered, recognizing that some reasons are more relevant or better than others.

## Moral Opinions: Mere or Reasoned Opinions?

To help think about whether our moral opinions are more like mere or reasoned opinions, it is important to think about both what type of thing morality is and where most of our moral opinions come from. First, it is important to think about what morality is—is it more like ice cream or the medical profession? This is important, since if morality is more like ice cream, then we might think that all we can offer are mere opinions (e.g. “Cookies and Cream ice cream is the best because I like it”). However, if morality isn’t just a matter of subjective preference, then we want to make sure that any moral opinions are reasoned opinions and not mere opinions, just like we want to make sure a doctor’s medical advice is a reasoned opinion and not a mere opinion.

Why should we think of morality as something that isn’t just about individual preferences or subjective beliefs? While there are a variety of ways one might engage this, there is a one fairly common and simple argument:

If we were to believe that moral questions were a matter of personal opinion, similar to which

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<sup>1</sup> For a two-page commentary engaging this idea that can be given to students for discussion, see Patrick Stokes, “No, You’re Not Entitled to Your Opinion,” *The Conversation*, 4 October 2012, accessed 30 August 2016, <https://theconversation.com/no-youre-not-entitled-to-your-opinion-9978>. This sub-section is indebted to Stokes’ remarks.

flavor of ice cream is most delicious, logical consistency would require that we endorse the claim that virtually *any* action is morally permissible, *for any given person*—just like any flavor of ice cream would be the most delicious, *for any given person*.<sup>2</sup>

However, this seems to go against our commonsense views of morality. Certain actions seem wrong, no matter what someone else might believe, e.g. randomly murdering someone, sexually assaulting someone. If so, then it seems we should be able to offer reasons for why it is wrong that go beyond our mere opinions. Thus, we should think of morality as the type of thing that requires reasoned opinions when we make a moral judgment. It can't just be that something is wrong because I think so, but that something is wrong because of other relevant facts, keeping in mind that these facts cannot be wholly subjective—they have to be accessible to others.

Since we have reason to think morality is the type of thing that demands reasoned opinions, it is important to think about where most of our moral opinions come from and whether this is likely to lead us to offer mere or reasoned opinions. It seems our moral opinions frequently find their basis in three sources:

1. From a **particular value or set of values**
2. From the (both mere and reasoned) **opinions of other people**
3. From **our past experiences**.

The first source, concerning values, tends to *directly* inform our opinions, while the second and third, concerning the views of others and our experiences, tend to *indirectly* inform our opinions by informing our values.

Consider the institutional practice of capital punishment (i.e. the death penalty) and the ethical question of whether it is morally permissible to put human beings to death. Two people might have opposing moral opinions on this topic, with one holding that it is morally permissible to execute certain individuals and the other holding that no one should ever be punished with death. Whether you fall into the camp supporting the death penalty or opposing it can depend heavily on the **ways in which your values are structured**. What it means to think about how values might be structured can be seen by pointing out the way in which certain values rise to prominence over others when attending to a particular case. For example, the opinion “the death penalty is wrong” may come from a value structure in which the value of “life” is at the top, even while also holding values of “justice” and “protecting others.” Alternatively, the opinion “the death penalty is right” might stem from a value structure in which the value of “justice” is on top, followed by the values of “protecting others” and then “life.” Here, the moral opinion of the individual is seen to be directly influenced by the structure of their values.

In addition to the direct impact of our value structure, our moral opinion about capital punishment might also be informed by or grounded in our social environment. This would include not just the direct opinions of others, but also our own personal experiences. While the most common influences in our social environment are our family and friends, religious organizations and the media also often impact our moral opinions. For example, you might hold the opinion “the death penalty is wrong” because your mother had this opinion or you subscribe to some religious doctrine that opposes it due to an emphasis on the value of each human life. Additionally, you might have had significant experiences with death that have made you view death in such a way that you hold this view. In either case, **your social environment indirectly helps forms your moral opinions by helping shape how your values are structured**. What is important to recognize about your social environment is that sometimes the opinions you encounter that inform your values might not themselves be reasoned opinions. Or, in other words, sometimes you form your beliefs and values based on other’s opinions, which may or may not be justified.

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<sup>2</sup> Matt Deaton, *Ethics in a Nutshell: An Intro for Ethics Bowlers*, 2nd edition (Hanover, MD: Notaed Press, 2013), 15-16; available online at <https://nhseb.unc.edu/files/2013/10/Ethics-in-a-Nutshell-an-Intro-for-Ethics-Bowl-Participants.pdf>  
This is another helpful resource for you and your students.

## Why the Conversation about Moral Opinions Often Stops

Generally speaking, people tend to be firm in their moral opinions, regardless of whether those opinions are reasoned or not. The firmness of moral opinions tends to derive from moral convictions (alternatively, a moral conviction may simply be a firm moral opinion). Here, our moral convictions can be thought of as the sorts of settled moral views that are, generally, wrapped up in personal identity. For example, if you consider yourself to be “a Christian,” the fact that you consider yourself to be “a Christian” may translate into the moral conviction that “because my religion disallows capital punishment, I must believe capital punishment is wrong; otherwise I am not a Christian.”

The firmness (or conviction) of this moral opinion tends to stop the conversation. If someone were to challenge the opinion that “capital punishment is wrong” you may take this to be a challenge to you as a person—that you are wrong, as a person. It might make you easily dismissive of alternate points of view if they are unlike yours. Moreover, it may become impossible for you to even consider alternate points of view because it may entail giving up your personal identity (as a Christian, Atheist, Democrat, Republican, Kantian, etc.).

However, a problem emerges when you have a population divided by firm moral opinions. If the parties in a conversation have contrary moral convictions, then the moral disagreement between them will seem to be irresolvable. Irresolvable moral disagreements, in other words, tend to arise because of conversation stoppers. Worse, there is a tendency to exaggerate the contrary point of view and ascribe false beliefs to others.

For example, suppose that Ash holds that capital punishment is ethical. This might be grounded in his belief that it promotes the value of justice, which he finds important. Now suppose that Val holds that capital punishment is wrong. Whatever the grounds for Val’s point of view, Ash might say that Val is “anti-justice” or “doesn’t value justice.” This is because Ash might be convinced that *if* you value justice, *then* you **must** be pro-capital punishment. However, this is probably false. Val likely values justice as much as Ash does. The fact that Val is against capital punishment doesn’t mean that Val doesn’t value justice any more than it would be correct to say that Ash doesn’t value human life by being pro-capital punishment.

## How Reasoned Opinions Can Get the Conversation Going

For the most part, people share the same values. Most people value justice, human life, family, freedom, and so on. We just tend to value these in different ways or to different degrees. But when we encounter what seems to be an irresolvable moral disagreement, we have a bad tendency to say that the other person doesn’t value what we value. When we think of moral opinions in this more limited way, reducing them to claims tied to individual identities or opinions—thinking of them more as mere opinions—we don’t get anywhere. However, if we start to think of moral opinions as reasoned moral opinions, then we can start to better understand how two individuals might hold the same values while reaching different conclusions given the particular issue or case in question.

As noted earlier, reasoned opinions require appeals to relevant facts in a way that makes them accessible to others. To go back to the case of Ash and Val, if they both acknowledge the value of reasoned opinions, then they should each be able to offer an explanation of what they identify as the relevant facts. This allows them to begin a conversation—more importantly, it might lead them to find common ground. Perhaps they both appeal to values of life and justice, but Val highlights certain facts related to the frequency of error in capital murder trials. This causes Val to note that, in this particular context, the value of life becomes more important than justice, while in other cases Val would give justice priority, in the same way that Ash gives justice priority in this case (since he believes the frequency of error is sufficiently low).

By focusing on reasoned moral opinions, we gain the ability not only to enter into a conversation with others about controversial issues, we also gain the ability to reflect on our own positions.

## A Moral Reasoning Toolkit: Four Basic Theories

While we want to focus on students offering their own reasoned moral opinions, there is no reason to abandon common ethical theories found within moral philosophy. Rather, these can be part of a toolkit used by students in thinking about how they would respond to particular cases, rather than about how some ethical theorist might respond. Essentially, these theories can help students think about how to make use of or prioritize certain values. We might all agree that promise-keeping is an important value, for example, but we might disagree on the particular conditions under which we ought to keep our promises. What the moral theories can then do is provide examples of how we might engage a general value of promise-keeping in our deliberations about how to act in particular situations. Thus, the hope is that students will **not use the theories as a replacement for their own views, but instead as a supporting element**. Also, just as in practice few people subscribe perfectly to one ethical theory. It may be more effective, in thinking about how one would respond to particular cases, not to rely on reasoning rooted solely in one theory.

### *Consequentialist Ethics*

Consequentialist moral theories, as their name may suggest, typically evaluate actions based on some value metric associated with the consequences of those actions. In most cases, such a theory first identifies an account of value—what it is that constitutes goodness—e.g., pleasure, welfare, happiness, etc. This is typically followed by articulating a choice principle which suggests how we ought to interact with these values—e.g., maximizing them, making them relevantly “good enough,” etc. In classical versions of utilitarianism, like those of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, happiness (and by extension, the absence of pain and suffering) is identified as the chief good, and a maximization choice principle is employed, yielding a moral principle something like the following: “Act in such a way that the consequences of your actions produce the most overall happiness and alleviate the most overall suffering.”

If you think that promise-keeping is only valuable if it promotes some other good outcome (however this is defined by the theory in question), you are thinking in consequentialist terms. This means you are open to the possibility that there are conditions under which keeping a promise is not the right thing to do. The decision would depend on whether keeping a promise (or breaking it) in fact promotes the overall human good in question. Taking the utilitarian view, to the extent that keeping a promise (in some particular circumstance) promotes the greatest happiness for the greatest number, it would be right to keep the promise, but wrong otherwise.

### *Deontological Ethics*

Someone who subscribes to a deontological ethic will hold that some things are inherently, and thereby always, the right thing to do. Of course, just as consequentialists might argue about what the chief good is, deontologists might disagree as to how to define what is inherently right. One prominent example of a deontologist, Immanuel Kant, held that it is inherently wrong to ever use other people merely as a means to our ends. Alternatively put, at least as Kant saw it, what is inherently right is always to act in such a way that respects the rationality in ourselves and others.

Using Kant, for example, we can consider whether promise-keeping is inherently right. This means that if breaking a promise treats others merely as a means to our ends, then it is always wrong to do so. Think of a promise like a contract—we both agree to do something for the other. If I then break that agreement, I am doing so to advance my ends (even if they may not be self-centered ends) while taking advantage of the fact that you are going to act as you agreed. I am able to use you merely as a means to achieve my end (the reason I've broken the promise). Thus it is always wrong to break a promise, no matter the circumstances, or alternatively, promise-keeping is inherently right.

## Virtue Ethics

A virtue ethicist holds that ethics should not attempt to codify human values in ethical rules or principles. Such rules as “Do X if X promotes the greatest happiness” or “Do X if failing to do X fails to respect the rationality in ourselves and others, or involves using others merely as a means to our ends” (and so forth) fail to capture the fluid dynamic of moral life. The claim isn’t that we should do X because failing to do so always contradicts a standing moral principle, but rather that doing X is part of a *virtuous character*. In other words, instead of asking what is the right action in any given circumstance, virtue theory adopts a focus on the agent and might ask something like: “How would a good person behave?”

Of course, virtue ethicists might disagree as to how to define a “virtuous character.” Following Aristotle, for example, one might begin with a conception of a truly “excellent” human living and regard a virtuous character as the sort of character that would be displayed by someone living that life of excellence. Alternatively, and likewise following Aristotle, one might determine whether promise-keeping is part of a virtuous character by looking at the extremes of character that might be exhibited with respect to such behavior – true moral excellence in human living consisting in a life displaying a sort of “Golden Mean” between possible extremes of behavior. Thus, while it seems likely that persons of virtuous character would typically keep their promises, they would not go to such extremes as to always keep their promises no matter the circumstances, as sometimes there might be other virtues (e.g. justice) that lead them to break their promise.

## Care Ethics

Care ethics arises from feminist criticisms of the project of moral theory in general. Many feminist theorists have contended that traditional moral theories typically concern themselves with considerations outside the realm of feminine moral experience—issues that disproportionately affect men rather than women. In contrast, care ethics focuses on the values inherent in *caring practices*—the recognizing and addressing the needs of others for whom we have responsibility. This approach also adopts an understanding of the moral being of persons as inherently relational instead of the understanding of them as more independently engaged in decision-making offered by traditional moral theories.

Just as virtue ethics rejects standing moral principles, so too does care ethics. However, even with this kinship, Virginia Held, a prominent care ethicist, stresses a key difference: virtue ethics focuses on the character of *individuals*, while care ethics centers on caring *relations*. Taking this back to our example of promise-keeping, not only is there no moral principle that I am to look at, I also shouldn’t ask what would the person of virtuous character do—this would itself restrict important considerations about who I made the promise to and for whom I might be breaking the promise. If I made a promise to my mother, care ethics says that this relationship and her standing as my mother carries significant moral weight and should be central to my reasoning. Alternatively, if I made a promise to a stranger, but face a choice to keep that promise and not help my mother (who does need my help) or break that promise and help my mother, care ethics says I ought to accord priority to that relationship in a way that the other theories do not include as part of moral reasoning in such cases.

## Using the Theories in Competition

The THSEB is aimed at developing the skills for public discourse in a world of disagreement, not necessarily the skill of giving, for example, a perfect Kantian or a perfect Aristotelian answer. Also, while the above examples provide a brief description of four common types of ethical reasoning, they are not meant to be wholly exhaustive. Students are welcome to engage other approaches or emphases in their deliberations. What is most important is that students are always making sure to give clear reasons why we ought to take their opinion as a guide, as opposed to the opinion of some other theory or line of reasoning.

To this end, students might simply want to keep the following questions in mind when turning to a particular moral theory:

1. Why does that particular moral theory (in this particular case) offer a better guide than our own moral judgment?

For example:

2. What important value(s) might be undermined if we acted contrary to that particular theory (in this particular case)?
3. Why should someone who doesn't rely on that particular theory care about the application of that theory (in this particular case)?

For example, suppose that in a given case, there is some conflict concerning the value and role of promise-keeping. Perhaps this conflict arises as a result of bias (e.g. you really hate the person you gave the promise to). Suppose further that you adopted a consequentialist approach and determined that, given the value of promise-keeping and its utility in that context, it would be right to keep your promise. In this regard, you might offer (something like) the following:

1. *Why is consequentialism a better guide than my own moral judgment?* In this case, I gave a promise to a person that I don't particularly like. I know that I ought to set aside my personal dislike for this person, but sometimes even the strongest willed person may struggle with doing so. In other words, I have good reason to doubt my ability to make an unbiased judgment, and appealing to a theory allows me to make an objective judgment that I can trust (more so than my own judgment).
2. *What would be undermined if I acted according to my own judgment (i.e. without theory or contrary to theory)?* The theory in question yields the verdict that I ought to keep my promise. If I acted contrary to the theory (i.e. according to my own biased judgment), then not only would I fail to act according to my own values, but I may also undermine further things I value, like my credibility and reputation. After all, if I broke my promise under this circumstance, then people might be less willing to trust me in the future.
3. *Why would someone who relies on his or her own judgment (or that of another theory) care about the application of consequentialist theory in this case?* I think any other rational person, in circumstances like this, would have good reason to doubt their ability to make an objective judgment. Moreover, I think that, like any rational person, they would care about making the right calls and would be concerned about bias and prejudice. Thus, I think it follows from these things that any other rational person would use the tools at their disposal to make a judgment consistent with the things that they would care about as a rational being.

**In any case, remember: you don't need a PhD in philosophy to do ethics. Everyone, in their own way, is able to identify what is valuable or what is right and wrong. Additionally, everyone is able, if they make the decision to consciously do so, to reflect on their values and views on what is right and wrong using ethical reasoning. Ethical reasoning is simply an effort to figure out how our values inform our moral judgments about the latter. This lets us all offer moral opinions that are reasoned opinions that can be used in a respectful public dialogue.**



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