

## Book Review

### *The Ethics Bowl Way: Answering Questions, Questioning Answers, and Creating Ethical Communities*

Edited: Robert Israeloff and Karen Mizell

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Review by Richard Morehouse

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This edited volume is chocked full of insights that increase as each chapter leads the reader to a richer understanding of what an ethics bowl is, how it works, and what has been learned and applied to thinking and learning skills as well as what organizers of critical thinking programs can learn from the Ethics Bowl program. This book has three sections: Part I: Ethics Bowl Basics, Part II: The Best Practices, and Part II: Expanding the Research of Ethics Bowl.

As I started reading this compact book of a mere 141 pages, I thought The Ethic Bowl was about a thing, but to my great pleasure, it is about ways of teaching and learning and a way of thinking. Beginning in the first chapter, I had already radically changed my mind. With that mind shift, the review begins in the middle of the book in Part II. Way. A hint as to why this unusual starting point is found in the title – *The ethics bowl way: Answering questions, questioning answers, and creating ethical communities*. I draw your attention to the word “way.” Reading *The Ethics Bowl Way*, my thoughts were directed toward The Buddha’s middle way and Aristotle’s phronesis. The Buddha thought was between extreme asceticism on one hand and sensual indulgence, while Aristotle taught about phronesis. Phronesis implies both good judgment and excellence of character. The Buddha’s and Aristotle’s teachings were about a way of being and doing. The ethics bowl way is about disposition and methods.

Before exploring the book as it unfolds, allow me to begin with Chapter Eight, ‘Beyond argument: Learning life skills through Ethics Bowl.’ Early in this chapter Andrew Collision, the Director of the Cincinnati Ethic Center at The University of Cincinnati, presents some of the skill sets that are in harmony with other communities of inquiry.

- **Ethical awareness** – the process of identifying an *issue* is itself an *ethical issue*.
- **Ethical reasons** – the ability to identify all the different positions that reasonable people may take with respect to an ethical issue and identify all the reasons and arguments they might have for that decision.
- **Ethical decision-making** – the ability to weigh those reasons in a thoughtful manner to decide what to think about or do about an ethical issue.
- **Ethical Dialogue** – the ability to engage in thoughtful, deliberative conversations with other people about an ethical issue [particularly people with different backgrounds and perspectives] (p. 66).

These skill sets are not only life skills but, with reference to the book's title, indicate a "way," that is, a disposition and a method in which the Ethics Bowl program may be understood. In conversation, within each student team and within the competitive arena of an Ethics Bowl, ethical awareness, ethical reasoning, and ethical decision-making occur while engaged in ethical dialogue. The ethics bowl way appears to be about both attribution and method.

### **Part I: The Ethics Bowl Basics**

There are three chapters in Part I; Chapter one: The idea of an ethical community, building democracy; Chapter two: Debating Democracy: Building argument programs for good citizenship; Chapter three: Optional but suggested: The role of ethics theory and research in Ethics Bowl preparation.

This brings us back to a brief chapter-by-chapter look at *The Ethics Bowl Way* (EBW). The goal of the ethics bowl program, operating within a complex community with differing political views and mindsets, is to teach students how to think through ethical issues *together* (pp. 3-4). As presented in this chapter, there are three main elements to the ethics bowl way: (1) format, (2) procedures and (3) rules. The three elements of The Ethics Bowl Way may begin with a community conversation about ethics constructed around the four principles presented in the paragraph above [format]. The conversations happen in small teams facilitated by a coach. This team practice is identified. Defining and articulating the multiple meaning of an ethics issue [procedure]. Eventually, this preparation stage ends in local, regional and potentially national competitions, which are scored by judges [rules].

Debating Democracy is a somewhat misleading title. Citing W.V.O. Quine, Kyle Roberson, a lecturer in Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz, cautions that debate teaches compelling thought and persuasion at the expense of the pursuit of truth. Robertson's point is that Ethics Bowl Way is a better approach to debate as a method for teaching persuasion and critical thinking. Debate is undemocratic in Roberson's view if persuasion is valued over thinking together to resolve the ethical issue. In the ethics bowl format, all debate forms "inculcate norms of argumentation that influence our everyday notions of what a good democratic deliberation looks like" (p. 12). Specifically, a dialogical debate is collaborative, 2) it is truth-seeking, and 3) it encourages open-mindedness (p. 14).

"Optional but suggested: The role of ethical theory and research in Ethics Bowl preparation," the title of Chapter three, is emblematic of the open-ended form, procedures, and rules of EBW.

Richard Greene, assistant professor at Weber State University, makes two points in this chapter. First, while it may be helpful for coaches and judges to have some knowledge of theories of justice, that knowledge is not required. If theories of justice are used poorly, they may detract from the struggle of coaches and students to orient the presentations toward an argument about ethics theory rather than sorting through and supporting or criticizing ethical choices. Using or ignoring ethical theory in preparation for the Ethics Bowl is closely connected to the research in preparation for the Bowl. The answer to the question of whether there should be extensive research before debates, on the surface, seems intuitive. However, as the reviewer is beginning to learn, the point of EBW is to engage students and coaches in “homegrown” thinking about what is ethical and how to evaluate and make a case for good ethical choices. It is thinking for oneself with peers that are the hallmark of EBW; thus, knowing ethical theory and doing extensive research may or may not help reach the goal of the EBW, that is, teaching students how to think through ethical issues together.

## Part II: Best Practices

Jeanie DeLay’s “Values of ethics bowl design” opens the book’s second part. “Using the values at play design framework, we focus on describing for ethics bowl, game elements, and their company, values, (1) venue and equipment, (2) narratives, (3) reward, structure, and (4) goals” (p. 30). There is open access to participation in the Ethics Bowl competition, and the only equipment required is a pen and paper. Case study narratives are readable and accessible. The reward structure is both intrinsic and extrinsic, that is, one gains self-gratification by learning to speak better, listen more carefully, and think more clearly within a supportive group structure, and there is a public award at the end of the competition with an award in several categories.

“Coaching: Winning isn’t everything” begins by explaining that the main task of an Ethics Bowl coach is to teach within an atmosphere that encourages teamwork while imparting knowledge and encouraging independent critical thinking. In the process, students also gain confidence in researching, speaking, and writing. Marcia A. McKelligan, a professor of philosophy at DePauw University, has coached Ethics Bowls at the college level for over twenty years. She states that the tasks of a coach are to recruit a team and prepare a team for competition. As a part of the preparation, she writes, is a syllabus that someone else prepares, “the case study drives the course content, and their cases are primary texts. Research provides secondary source material” (p. 52). Case analysis is one of the pivotal elements of preparing students and takes time to acquire, but close reading and clear, careful thinking are essential (p. 52). McKelligan describes the event, the bowl, and the celebration and debriefing after the bowl. The last section of the chapter addresses the subtitle of this chapter “Winning isn’t everything.”

Regular readers of *Analytic Teaching and Philosophical Praxis* will recognize the person writing Chapter Seven, Wendy C Turgeon. Dr. Turgeon teaches at Saint Joseph’s College in New York, where she is a philosophy professor and the department chair. Dr. Turgeon’s chapter points out that the Ethics Bowls began in colleges and have moved to high school and recently to middle schools. Her introductory paragraph points to the hours of work required by students, coaches, and judges. The workload’ for participants has become evident to me, but this reader welcomes a specific

recognition of what is required to field such an enterprise. The work of the judges is presented in her chapter, beginning with a section entitled “Who can be a judge?” The qualifications are not based on position or credentials but instead on skills and disposition:

- an interest in preparing for the presentations and in ethical reflection,
- a willingness to be objective, fair, supportive,
- an ability to listen carefully to arguments presented,
- the skill of formulating helpful questions (p. 58).

Each of these skills and dispositions is addressed, followed by a primer on ethical theory, a presentation on what the day of judging is like, the nature of scoring the teams, and the purpose, role, and value of feedback. The final section addresses the rewards of judging.

“I think that Ethics Bowl is one of the best educational experiences a student can undergo,” (p. 66) states the author of Chapter seven, “Beyond argument: Learning life skills through Ethics Bowl.” Andrew Cullison is now founding executive director of the Cincinnati Ethics Center at the University of Cincinnati, a former student at DePauw University, and a former participant in the Ethics Bowl, at DePauw University in 1999. He compares EBW metaphorically to CrossFit, which simultaneously tones the mighty mind and soul together. Collison’s focus is on ethical reasoning skills which he lists and defines. These skills are more or less sequentially developed. The first is ethical awareness, followed by ethical reasoning. Then comes ethical decision-making, which ends in ethical dialogue. Ethical awareness is the ability to identify an ethical issue. Ethical reasoning identifies all the different positions that reasonable people might take. Ethical decision-making weighs those reasons in a thoughtful manner. Ethical dialogue engages one in a community of people of different backgrounds and thoughtful, deliberative conversations. He continues by discussing the life skills involved in public speaking and how the Ethics Bowl Way encourages one to approach dialogue in a non-competitive manner. This move is a step toward gaining self-confidence and becoming resilient. These cognitive, emotional, and communal efforts result in the encouragement of ethical leadership.

Chapter 9: “Room for all: Inclusivity and the high school Ethic Bowl” written by Jana Mohr Lone, director of PLATO (Philosophical Learning and Teaching Organization and an affiliate professor of philosophy at the University of Washington). Some readers of *AT & PP* might recognize her for her contributions to this journal and her work with the Washington Center for philosophy for children.

From best practices to innovation is a good way to characterize this chapter. Best practices include high school students involved with assessing and evaluating the program, teacher/coach suggestions for improvement, adjusting to covid-19 pandemic, and modification of team membership numbers, all in the service of increasing student and school involvement and the number of multiracial teams. The format, procedure, and rules approach discussed in Chapter one is flexible, as the “Open Dialogue” section of Dr. Lone’s chapter indicated. Her team added an open dialogue element to the final round of the Bowl by adding an open dialogue element. In 2019, Dr.

Lone writes that we instituted an open dialogue section in each round. After the presentation, commentary, and response and before the judges' questions, "the team had five minutes for a self-moderated open dialogue" (p. 77). Dr. Lone's "open dialogue" innovation expands the EDW within the overarching orientation of format, procedure, and rules.

Part II might have been called "How the rewards for all of those involved in EBW are manifested." The students, coaches, and judges are intrinsically rewarded for making an Ethic Bowl successful and contributing to participatory democracy.

### **Part III: Expanding the reach of Ethics Bowl**

In Chapter Ten: "The Turn to Reason: Ethics bowl in the Classroom" is informed by the setting of the staff and the students in EBW. Stanford Online High school is a private independent school located at Stanford University for academically talented students worldwide. The three authors who teach philosophy at Stanford Online High School, William M. Beals, Christina Drogalis, and Morgan E. Wallhagen, are all Ph.Ds. in Philosophy. The authors write, "Our school is unusual in a few ways: we are an online institution with an international student body and require that full-time students take a sequence of year-long philosophy courses called core classes" (p. 83). The connections between the views of the authors and their perspectives on this class are stated by the authors as important for two reasons, (1) their students in the Ethic Bowl program have been taking philosophy classes for a number of years, and (2) they have found that their students apply what they are learning in Ethics Bowl support to the general curriculum of Stanford Online High School and vice-versa. The authors divide their comments into three sections: (1) the turn to reason, (2) how what we teach in class supports Ethics Bowl, and (3) what we practice in Ethics Bowl impacts students in class. In an attempt to summarize the three sections of their chapter, it appears to this reviewer that a key may be the attention paid not only to thinking clearly for oneself but also listening and hearing another's point of view within the context of the "others" clear alternative thoughts. For example, the habits of critical reading learned in the students' philosophy classes help students listen and criticize more fluently and attentively, and listening to presentations during Ethic Bowl sessions Improves students' critical and careful reading.

Chapter 11: "Deliberating Across the Lifespan" is by Michael Vazquez. Dr. Vazquez is an Assistant Professor and Director of Outreach in the Department of Philosophy and the Parr Center of Ethics at the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill; he writes about "flipping the script." The same attitude that the Twentieth Century pioneers of Philosophy for Children movement led to dismantle educational prejudice toward children should animate our efforts to collaborate with folks beyond the schooling years (p. 91). Education might be a beginning place for implementing the EBW approach into adult venues, Vazquez Senior Ethics Bowl with local communities, Ethics Bowls for education professionals, Ethic Bowl in the workplace and for public servants. He also argues that intergeneration Ethics Bowls offer unique opportunities for modeling lifelong learning.

Chapter 12: "Ethics Bowl at San Quentin" is an example of the reach of the Ethics Board Way. The Ethics Bowl program is sponsored by mount Tamalpais College, a recently formed college whose

only campus is inside San Quentin State Prison. A debate program had been started by Kathy Richard at the request of the students for extracurricular activities to develop their critical thinking skills (p. 102). After introducing the program authors, Connie Krosney and Kathy J. Richards discuss one of the unexpected strengths of the Ethics Bowl program at San Quentin. The authors make a case for the value of a lack of internet and library resources. Perhaps this absence of voluminous resources pushed San Quentin's team members toward deeper reflection, encouraging them to use their own minds and those of their peers as resources (p. 103).

Dr. Alex M. Richardson's chapter invites the reader to explore what is on the horizon for the Ethics Bowl Way. Chapter 13: "Meeting the Challenges: The Future of Ethics Bowl," creates a space for students and others at a time when the bonds of social and civic community are strained. A pandemic, the social and cultural questions of race, identity, and belonging and a coercive political climate have highlighted the need for critical and creative thinking around the ethical issues raised in our current milieu. The growth of the EBW has moved up and down the age ladder: moving down to middle school and potentially to elementary school and up past adulthood to include the elderly population. It now serves around four thousand students with a program in at least six countries. This growth has also been toward being more inclusive.

"From Ethics Bowler to coach: Lifelong learning through Ethic Bowl" is the next chapter. Racheal Robertson-Green, now an assistant professor of Philosophy at Utah State University, shows how coaching Ethics Bowl was part of her lifelong learning. Her introduction to Ethics Bowl is perhaps emblematic of the diversity of the participants in an Ethics Bowl, which is best said in her own words,

In the fall of 2002, I sat around a table with four friends, talking about Dance Safe – a program that provided free drug testing at raves. The program was designed to prevent people from seriously hurting themselves or dying by taking drugs cut with harmful chemicals. Yet perhaps because the five of us were on an ethics bowl team, we were tasked to decide whether the Dance Safe mission was ethically feasible (p. 119).

This encounter with a diverse group of students led to her reading philosophers who theorized about ethics within social contexts. Rachael Greene now coaches an Ethics Bowl team. She illustrates the intersection of Ethics Bowl and ethical issues that were part of her lived-experience as manifested in regional and national social and political events. Those experiences led her to instruct her students that they should recognize the Ethics Bowl as a call for further reflection and that Ethic Bowl could help them sharpen their skills in checking out beliefs for coherence. The Ethics Bowl experiences ignited and maintained her commitment to lifelong learning.

This book ends with an appendix, a sample of high school Ethics Bowl cases and study questions, notes, references and sources, and a short biography of the editors and contributors.

Lifelong learning is one of the undercurrent themes of this book; whether intentionally or coincidentally, all the authors appear to commit to passing on their core belief in lifelong learning and are working to pass that love for learning to all engaged in Ethics Bowl.

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