



NATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
ETHICS BOWL

NATIONAL CASE SET

2023-2024

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CASES FOR NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP COMPETITION

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Discussion Questions provided by the Editorial Board in this set are designed to identify and get students thinking about the various moral issues and potential angles of consideration involved in each case. Discussion Questions do not (and are not designed to) exhaust the range of possible considerations on a given topic. Discussion Questions *will not* be used for officially-sanctioned NHSEB Regional Competitions or Divisional Playoffs. The Moderator Questions asked at each NHSEB-affiliated event will remain confidential until they are revealed in-match to preserve competitive fairness. For more information about competition procedures, please review NHSEB's [2023-2024 Rules Manual](#).

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Cases designed for use in the National High School Ethics Bowl are often directly based on or otherwise inspired by real-world events, debates, etc. Throughout this case set, citations and references are included to provide further context on these events and issues where appropriate. Source materials cited in this document will only be identified once per case, though may be referenced more than once within a given case.

While NHSEB's rules do not actively discourage students from conducting outside research as they develop their arguments for competition, such research is *not* of primary importance when it comes to evaluation under the [NHSEB Scoring Criteria](#). A well-researched and well-cited argument is not necessarily an indication of a good normative argument that displays inventive thinking, deliberative reasoning, or other core features emphasized by the Ethics Bowl format. For more information on the role of research, official match and scoring procedures, and more, please review NHSEB's [2023-2024 Rules Manual](#).

Unequal Cities

Consider a city in the future where the population has grown and the supply of housing cannot meet the needs of the population. The majority of single-family homes are occupied by retired couples who have owned their homes for many decades, and may, in many cases, no longer need the space they once did. The majority of families with young children live in overcrowded apartment complexes in an industrial neighborhood with air pollution from factories and no outdoor parks within walking distance.

To address this problem, the city decides that at age 65, all residents will be moved into high-rise retirement homes in the city center, and all their basic needs will be met for the remainder of their lives. Their homes would then become available to families with young children. This policy is designed to be cyclical, ensuring that all residents under 65 will eventually have their turn in these high-rise retirement homes when they reach the specified age and the next generation will have access to their single-family homes.

Of course, this policy imposes a significant burden on the lives of senior citizens, who are required to leave homes they may have lived in for most of their adult lives. At the same time, the policy seems to offer a fair rotational system. Every member of society has the opportunity to live in their own housing before being moved into the high-rise homes. If implemented equally and well, it seems, over their complete lives, everyone will be treated equally. This scenario may seem analogous in some ways to the situation of social security programs in the U.S., where younger taxpayers pay to support older Americans and expect in turn to be supported by the upcoming generation.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Would the cyclical housing policy described in the case be unjust? Would it wrong those who are required to leave their homes when they age?
2. Should citizens ever give up their claims to some kinds of resources that could be better used by others? Which kinds of resources?
3. Does the fact that every citizen gets an equal amount of time in the premium housing justify the burden it imposes on people whose time in individual housing is up?

Murderous Manifestos

Following the 2023 shooting at The Covenant School—which killed three nine-year-old children and three adults—the shooter’s writings were acquired through a search warrant, making the decision of what and when to publish a complicated one impacted both by law enforcement and public records laws. In response, multiple groups, including a state senator, The Tennessean newspaper, and a gun-rights organization, sued for access. On the other hand, The Covenant School, the church that shares its building, and many of the school’s parents want to keep the writings private.

Erin Kinney, mother of one of the murdered children, filed a statement saying that, though she had not seen the killer’s writings, she did not think the documents contained any answers: “I do not believe there was any motivation other than a desire for death, and there is nothing that could ever make the horrible act of killing children make sense... The public release of these writings will not prevent the next attack..”

It has long been argued that perpetrators of mass violence are seeking notoriety. It is subsequently argued that by, for example, posting not only the names and faces of killers, but also their writings, they are given their desired notoriety, and thus potential copycats are emboldened. Additionally, some argue that care for the victims and their families should be paramount, and that we shouldn’t cause further harm to them and give them the right to control what happens to the information in questions. However, both of these concerns are often countered by noting that in many cases the information is in the public interest and giving victims the right to prevent the publication of a shooter’s writings is deeply damaging to the public.

This case, of course, draws parallels to many similar cases. For example, killers such as Elliot Rodger and Ted Kaczynski have acquired small yet strong followings online; their manifestos have become influential within their respective niches and have had significant ripple effects across the culture.

There were also similar arguments over the journals of the Columbine killers, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, although that time the roles were reversed, as families connected to the Columbine school were arguing in favor of the publication of relevant writings, audio, and video, as they believed local government officials were engaged in a cover-up; in the Covenant case, by contrast, it is the aggrieved families arguing in favor of restricting public access to information.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What degree of control over the publication of sensitive information is licensed to the grieving families of victims of violence?
2. When, if ever, are government officials morally permitted/required to restrict public information in order to shape the public discourse?
3. What are members of the public owed information-wise in cases of immense public interest?

Rejecting the Alternative

The Alternative for Germany (*Alternative für Deutschland* or AfD) is a right-wing political party in Germany known for their opposition to immigration and the EU, which the AfD suggests is restricting the national sovereignty of Germany. Members and leaders of the party hold right-wing social positions such as opposing feminism and gay marriage. Notably, AfD supporters also wish to rehabilitate language of “Volk” and “Vaterland” (nation/people and fatherland, respectively) and reject the policy of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (“coming to terms with the past”), a term referring to Germany’s reckoning with its actions during World War II that is often associated with notions of collective guilt.¹ As of the fall of 2023, they are the second most popular party, with a little more than 20% support in recent polls, behind the center-right party Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschland* or CDU).² In the 2021 elections, the AfD came in 5th, carrying about 10% support.

Recently, there have been considerations by government organizations such as the Federal Office for Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*; similar to our FBI) as well as non-governmental organizations such as the German Institute for Human Rights (*Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte* or DIMR) suggesting that the AfD should be banned from the 2025 elections.³ A recent report from the DIMR suggests that banning the party could be legally permissible because the AfD may, on account of their nationalist positions, pose an existential threat to liberal democracy in Germany.

The proposal to keep the AfD from appearing on the ballot is not the first time there has been discussion of a party being banned from participating in Germany’s elections. The National Democratic Party of Germany (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* or NPD) is a far-right party which routinely carries between zero and two percent support and has nearly been banned multiple times. The AfD, however, is viewed as less extreme and is vastly more popular than the NPD.

Earlier in 2023, a court ruled the Young Alternative for Germany (*Junge Alternative für Deutschland* or Young AfD), the youth wing of the AfD, an extremist group. In 2022, a court called the AfD a threat to democracy and the party has since been under surveillance by the BfV.⁴ Some suggest that banning the AfD is a necessary move to protect liberal democracy in Germany; the AfD’s positions on immigrants and their proclivity for right-wing causes might be incompatible with the fundamental structure of the German constitution. Others suggest that banning such a popular party would be an attack on democracy, inflaming tensions and profoundly damaging faith in elections. As Princeton professor Jan-Werner Mueller put it in a 2013 article, democracies are “damned if they do, damned if they don’t” when it comes to banning extremist parties.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it self-contradictory to ban a political party from elections in order to protect democracy?
2. Under what conditions, if any, is it justifiable to ban a party from an election?
3. Who has the right to ban a party from an election? To decide that a party is a threat to democracy? From where does this right derive?

¹ [New York Times Opinion, “Germany Is Treating a Major Party as a Threat to Its Democracy”](#)

² [EuroNews, “Should Germany ban AfD? What impact could this have?”](#)

³ [Menschenrechtsinstitut: AfD-Verbot möglich \(DE\)](#)

⁴ [The Guardian, “German court rules far-right AfD party a suspected threat to democracy”](#)



Can't Help My Shelf

As a result of an anonymous donation to her state historical center, seasoned manuscript archivist Annie is the first to physically interact with her now-deceased favorite author's diaries. To say that Annie feels an emotional connection with this writer is an understatement: her grandmother read this author's stories to her as a little girl, and Annie does the same with her own daughters. The opportunity to delve into the mind behind the author of such treasured stories is exciting to Annie—she would be able to read the books with greater context of the author's experience and view of the world, potentially unearthing new interpretations from the text. Now, only a pair of gloves separates her from the dusty collection of the exalted author's innermost thoughts.

Suddenly, Annie's exuberance is overwhelmed by the worry that she is violating this author's privacy. As a child, Annie kept a miniature lock on her diary to ensure no one read it, and she once expressed anger after peeking into her sister's room and spotting her mother rifling through her older sister's journal. Last week, Annie's daughter picked up her friend's phone to swipe through the camera roll in search of a photo, and the friend became visibly upset. Annie recognizes that personal anecdotes, whether written or in the form of a photo stream, are private matters.

However, Annie recalls that many authors' in-progress or unpublished novels have been publicly released following their deaths. From the work of Franz Kafka and Emily Dickinson to tales from J.R.R. Tolkien and Geoffrey Chaucer, posthumous publishing has proven itself a hallmark of the literary tradition for centuries. Annie knows that, in some such cases, authors have failed to achieve fame until after their burials—that is, only as a result of the posthumous works' publication—whereas others had already earned acclaim while alive.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the morally relevant differences, if any, between Annie reading her favorite author's diary for a few minutes and publishing it?
2. How, if at all, ought death change how an individual interacts with a person's property, especially those considered "unfinished" or riddled with emotional vulnerability?
3. Is it permissible to publish (unfinished) work if a creator is unable to consent to it?

School's Out Forever?

Increases in political division, secularism, and various social trends have made some parents skeptical of the public school system. For these families, public schooling has embraced ideological currents and practices that go against their own values and promotes them in the area that matters most: their children's education. In response, many families and sympathetic politicians have campaigned for solutions such as a greater variety of school choice, more parental control of children's education, and even the realignment of public education with their values through legislation.

Public education as an institution has a varied history, but its place in the American project is often thought of as that of making responsible future citizens. To that end, some argue that uniform curricula in step with current values are necessary to educate citizens that will be able to cooperate and participate in the national conversation. Against this, some argue that not only does this process subvert their own values, but actually violates their rights as parents. They believe that their role gives them some level of control over what their child learns or, at the least, requires a greater level of transparency from the school system. Advocates for children's rights argue that rather than parents' roles giving them authority over their children's education, they actually have a responsibility to allow their children to find their own beliefs, mirroring a democratic sensibility.

The complaints of families seem reasonable if one favors the traditional role of both the family and the community in shaping a child's future, especially when this balance seems, to them, to have been upset. However, how and if this "traditional" view remains operative—not to mention whether it benefits children—in a rapidly changing world is unclear.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is part of the purpose of public education instilling some shared values in students? Which ones?
2. Do parents have a right to teach their children their own values even in cases where they conflict with broadly-held public values?
3. When, if ever, can the state's responsibilities supersede that of a family's over a child?

Love at First Sight

It's become increasingly common for potential homebuyers to write "love letters" to sellers – short personal notes (sometimes accompanied by photos and videos) designed to create an emotional connection and stand out amongst a crowded field. In an increasingly tight market where houses are sold within minutes of listing, those shopping for a home look for any advantage to ensure their offer stands a fighting chance. One buyer, for example, did a bit of digging on LinkedIn to find that the seller was a reiki healer. In her letter, she wrote about "craving the healing community of the Pacific Northwest" and "lov[ing] the energy of the house" – a strategy that proved successful.

It turns out details like these can help letter-writers secure homes despite offering substantially less money than other bids. As realtors are quick to point out, "sellers are very curious about buyers – some express a desire to find someone who can properly maintain the home or be good neighbors. The buyer letter really scratches that itch for a lot of sellers who wonder about these people on the other side of an offer." It's incredibly persuasive to be told: "I love your home. I want to build a life here. I'm like you." Some extra work and a personal touch go a long way. Ultimately, it may be that doing a bit of research and crafting a compelling pitch is simply what it takes to succeed in a highly competitive market.

On the other hand, there is a worry that the practice of buyer letters further exacerbates housing discrimination. There's already a sizable racial gap in homeownership in the U.S. Imagine being told that your bid was the highest offer, but the seller didn't think you were a good fit for the neighborhood. While the Fair Housing Act forbids discrimination on the basis of things like race, religion, or family, the details casually expressed by would-be buyers in these personal letters threaten to undermine that prohibition ("My twins can't wait to spend Christmas in this house"). Concerns like this have prompted some states to try to outlaw buyer letters. In order to remove the possibility of unconscious bias, perhaps fewer details should be shared about who a potential buyer is.

But is bias really ineliminable? A true commitment to eliminating the possibility of prejudice would require more demanding measures in anonymizing documents, hiding identities, and thoroughly isolating sellers from buyers. That kind of dedication seems impractical in the digital age. The truth is out there. Besides, maybe this is all just an overreaction. What's the harm in providing the seller with as much information as they can get to make the right decision? What's the harm in letting this deeply significant exchange be more than a cold, dispassionate market transaction? Why shouldn't buyer and seller be allowed to bond over something they both love?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it morally wrong for a homebuyer to send a seller a love letter? Why or why not?
2. Should homeowners be free to choose whom they transact with without interference from the state?
3. What are the limits, if any, to state regulation of the housing market to ensure that racial and religious discrimination are diminished?

The Gaylors

Among fans of Taylor Swift, there is a stark divide. Some of her fans, who call themselves “Gaylors”, believe that Swift is queer, while others, calling themselves “Hetlors”, believe that she is straight. These two groups of fans disagree not only about Swift’s sexuality, but also about whether it is acceptable to speculate about the sexuality and personal relationships of a massively popular public figure.

The Gaylors believe that Swift has been in queer relationships in the past and that some of her music explores these relationships as well as the queer experience more broadly. They point to Swift’s support for the LGBTQ community through “You Need to Calm Down” and the documentary *Miss Americana*, to a post on Instagram where she appears to be wearing a bisexual pride bracelet, and to purportedly queer imagery in her songs. Gaylors argue that their speculation about Swift’s relationships is appropriate. Swift is an extremely high profile celebrity whose relationships have been the topic of significant media attention, and they say there’s no difference between public discussion about whether or not she is dating Travis Kelce and discussion about whether or not she is dating a particular woman. Furthermore, Swift has spoken regularly about the queer community, and these fans insist that they are doing no harm by wondering out loud if she is part of this community herself. The belief that Swift might be bisexual has become so mainstream that there was even a New York Times article, “Look What We Made Taylor Do,” that examined the evidence on the subject.

“Hetlors”, on the other hand, believe not only that Taylor Swift is straight but also that the rampant speculation about Swift’s sexuality is invasive and harmful. From their perspective, Swift would come out if she wanted to. They say that if Swift is straight, her fans suggesting that they believe she is queer might make her uncomfortable. Conversely, if she is queer, she has clearly chosen not to come out, and these suggestions are ignoring her wishes to keep her sexuality private. In the prologue of Swift’s re-release for the album *1989*, she stated that she had started hanging out with primarily women because if “I only hung out with my female friends, people couldn’t sensationalize or sexualize that—right?”. To many, statements like this have been clear cut evidence that the speculation about Swift’s sexuality isn’t only false, but hurtful.

Swift is far from alone in being the topic of such conversation - many other public figures, including Billie Eilish, Sufjan Stevens, and Olivia Rodrigo have also been the topic of similar speculation. Billie Eilish and Sufjan Stevens have both since come out, but not before many fans had publicly wondered about their sexualities.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Does being in the public eye warrant increased interest in one’s private life? Does the reason for someone’s fame matter in answering this question?
2. Is speculation about someone’s sexuality objectionably invasive? What is the difference, if any, between speculation about a relationship between two out lesbians and about two purportedly straight people?
3. Does a background of discrimination against people of a particular sexual orientation make a difference to the permissibility of speculating about it? Would it be different if fans were speculating that a gay musician were straight?

Educational Zoos or Moral Taboos?

Two high school teachers, Beth and Ella, are planning field trips for the upcoming school year. Beth teaches biology, and Ella teaches environmental studies. School policy requires that their respective classes go on a shared field trip, so they must make up their minds about where to go.

Beth has the idea to take the classes to a local zoo. However, Ella objects to this idea. Ella argues that zoos are unethical and that financially contributing to them is morally reprehensible. She claims that a small number of zoos have been found to indirectly support the illegal pet trade through the buying and selling of exotic animals.

Beth responds by describing the potential educational benefits that students can gain by visiting the zoo and having first-hand experience with animals they would otherwise never encounter. Being exposed to a variety of animal species and learning about their habitats and natural behaviors is a great way to connect classroom lessons with real-life experiences. In addition, zoos are fun. Beth frequently attends the local zoo with her family, where her young children enjoy feeding the giraffes and hearing the lions roar. Finally, she notes that zoos can raise awareness for the conservation of endangered species and can teach students about ecological concepts such as the importance of keystone species.

Ella acknowledges some of the educational benefits, but remains steadfast in her view that zoos are morally indefensible. She urges Beth to consider the moral implications of housing animals in zoos against their will, stressing how valuable freedom is for wild animals. "How would you feel if you were forced to live in a small enclosure?" she asks. Additionally, she points out that human-animal interactions that occur in zoos can be extremely stressful or physically dangerous for animals. For example, activities such as "animal rides" may cause harm or infringe on animals' sense of safety in their enclosures.

Ella suggests an alternative lesson plan, in which students would take a field trip to a nearby state park and then research a local animal, presenting their findings to the class. Both teachers want to provide the best education possible for their students. However, they must weigh the moral implications of the field trip they choose with the educational benefits that could be gained.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do zoos violate the rights of animals? Do they involve mistreating animals in some other way?
2. Do the benefits of zoos outweigh the potential harms done to animals? Do they outweigh the potential violations of animal rights?
3. How does the ethics of keeping animals in zoos compare to the ethics of keeping animals as pets?

Tip Creep

If you've ordered a sandwich or coffee recently, you were probably faced with the question of whether or not to tip. Your order is in, you've swiped your card, and your barista flips a tablet displaying a slick graphical interface with "a few questions." There are customers in line behind you, your barista is waiting, and you've got to make up your mind: 20%, 15%, or nothing at all?

Recently, a number of articles have been published lamenting the phenomenon of "tip-flation."¹ More businesses than ever seem to be asking for larger and larger tips, and critics worry that American tipping culture—once confined to sit-down restaurants and countertop jars—is spilling over into places it does not belong. Tipping is standardly used to compensate employees who make less than a living wage. Waiters, waitresses, and bartenders often have exemptions from minimum wage laws, and tips make up for the difference between their low hourly wages and take-home pay.

Despite the long-standing customs surrounding who to tip, businesses have recently started soliciting tips for employees who make regular hourly wages as well. Customers report being prompted to tip cashiers, mechanics, and online vendors.² In some cases, it isn't even clear which employee (if any) will be the recipient of customers' generosity.

Although tipping is fully optional, some customers also take exception to what they see as emotionally manipulative presentation of their options when it comes time to leave a tip. The digital interfaces on payment machines often suggest relatively large tips as a default, and customers looking to leave less than the recommended amounts (which often run up to 25% of the total bill) need to navigate additional menus. Even these relatively small design choices can "nudge" customers in the direction of larger gratuities, and opponents of "tip-flation" claim that these nudges are objectionably manipulative. Moreover, customers are often asked to decide how much to tip by the employees who receive the money, and some worry that this puts social pressures on consumers who would otherwise decline.³

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do we have a moral obligation to tip service employees whose wages are set with tips in mind? Do we have a similar obligation to employees who make regular hourly wages?
2. Are payment interfaces that suggest large tip amounts by default objectionably manipulative?
3. Is a system of compensation that relies on tips unjust? Why or why not?

¹ NPR, "The driving forces behind 'tip-flation'"

² NBC, "Prodded everywhere to tip, Americans often say no"

³ Vox ReCode, "Everyone wants a tip now. Do you have to give them one?"

Spokes of Controversy¹

Every year, millions of bicycles are stolen in the United States, and while many are recovered, the majority never return to their rightful owners. Theft is obviously wrong, but what about auctioning abandoned bicycles? [SS1] At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, bicycles that are left unattended or confiscated are collected and then auctioned off. UNC Transportation and Parking boasts the availability of “[m]ore than 100 bicycles, ranging in condition from poor to excellent,” including over 25 brands such as Trek and Schwinn.² The proceeds of the bike auction are used to provide bike racks on campus, to maintain campus bike repair stations, and to support the university’s bike share program.

Such is university policy, but the mere fact that the bike auction complies with university policy does not on its own entail that it is ethical. Critics have alleged that the policy is not attuned to the realities of student life. Undergraduate and graduate students are not likely to have storage options available. They might move or leave campus for long periods of time before returning.

Critics argue that the university’s ethical responsibility to its community members extends to caring for and attempting to return their lost property. The act of auctioning off these bicycles, particularly without a thorough attempt to find their owners, is arguably a betrayal of this responsibility. One could also argue that given the revenues it generates, this practice creates a perverse incentive for the university not to more effectively reunite lost items with their owners.

On another hand, the bikes UNC auctions are technically abandoned. UNC’s Transportation and Parking Ordinance stipulates that a bicycle is abandoned if “it has been parked illegally for more than ten days or which is determined to be ‘derelict’ or inoperable...”³ It also stipulates that “Bicycles that remain stored on racks for more than 30 days at the end of any academic term, including summer sessions, will be deemed University property.”⁴ So long as these rules are clearly promulgated, the University seems well within its rights, since they are merely collecting abandoned items, not confiscating the belongings of others.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

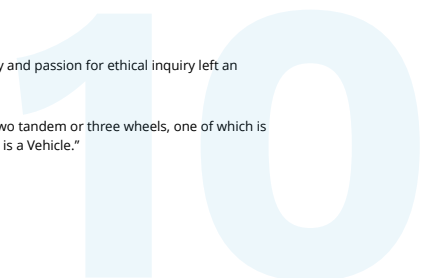
1. At what point does unclaimed property, such as a bicycle, lose its connection to the original owner?
2. Does UNC have a moral obligation to exhaust all possible means to reunite lost items with their owners before opting to auction them?
3. Setting aside UNC’s obligations to bike owners, are there any ethical problems associated with purchasing abandoned bicycles?

¹ This case was initially authored by, and is dedicated to the memory of UNC student and Parr Center Ethics Scholar Jonathan (Colby) Maynor, whose curiosity and passion for ethical inquiry left an indelible mark on our community.

² [UNC Chapel Hill, “Bike Auction”](#)

³ The [policies](#) continue: “Bicycle’ means every device propelled, at least in part by human power, upon which any person may ride, and supported by either two tandem or three wheels, one of which is sixteen inches or more in diameter. For the avoidance of doubt, Bicycle includes ‘electric assist Bicycle’ or ‘e-bike’. For the purpose of this Ordinance, a Bicycle is a Vehicle.”

⁴ [UNC Chapel Hill, “2022-2023 Parking Ordinance”](#)



Xeno(transplant)phobia

Xenotransplantation, the transplantation of organs across species barriers, primarily from genetically modified pigs to humans, lies at the forefront of biotechnological advancement. This procedure is nearing clinical application and may present a promising solution to the chronic shortage of human donor organs.¹

While many researchers and bioethicists view xenotransplantation as a breakthrough with direct human-life-saving potential, public opinion nonetheless reflects discomfort and opposition. Many people have a visceral or emotional aversion to xenotransplantation—call it an ‘ickiness factor.’ Surveys reveal that xenotransplantation is one of the most opposed forms of biotechnology, despite its potential to save lives.² This opposition persists across various demographic groups, including religious and dietary preferences.³

Some researchers argue that technology often outpaces public opinion and that the key to acceptance lies in educating the public about the scientific and ethical aspects of xenotransplantation. However, the ethical dilemma extends beyond mere knowledge gaps. Recipients of allotransplants (human organs) often report feelings of "altered subjectivity," such as changes in appetite or a general sense of unease, attributed to the foreign organ. These subjective experiences are sometimes dismissed by medical professionals, but they raise significant questions about the psychological and emotional impacts of receiving an organ from a different species.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is the ethical responsibility between individuals, such as doctors and patients or researchers and the public, in understanding each other's perspectives on biotechnology like xenotransplantation?
2. To what extent should public opinion influence policy making in biotechnology? Does public opinion represent genuine ethical concerns or a lack of understanding?
3. Should attitudes like disgust play a role in moral deliberation?

¹ [Transgenic Research, "Xenotransplantation becoming reality"](#)

² [Animals \(Basel\), "Ethical and Societal Issues Occasioned by Xenotransplantation"](#)

³ [Medical Humanities, "Dirty pigs' and the xenotransplantation paradox"](#)



Something to Phone Home About

In recent years, much attention has been paid to students' smartphone usage and its impact on their social and academic development. Since roughly 2012, smartphones and social media have become a fixture of social life for America's teenagers. In the years since, researchers like Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, have presented data showing that student well-being has dropped substantially in western democracies across several measures. Many, including Haidt, see these things as not only correlated, but causally connected.¹ They encourage parents to curtail students' social media usage, and have recently started to seek bans on smartphone usage in schools.

Available data has certainly noted correlations between an always-connected lifestyle and teens' mental health outcomes. The CDC's most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey detailing behavioral trends from 2011-2021 shows that American teens (teenage girls, in particular) suffer from substantial mental health afflictions at a higher rate, including social and generalized anxiety, persistent sadness or hopelessness typically indicative of depression, and consideration of suicide.² A study in the UK found yet more connections, linking excessive social media usage with disruption to sleep patterns, experiences of cyberbullying, and the correlated disruption of self-esteem, satisfaction with body image, etc.³ Whether these correlations amount to poor outcomes being causally attributable to smartphone and social media usage, however, is a subject of ongoing debates. One thing is agreed upon by nearly all parties—more research into what is still a comparatively new phenomenon is needed.

Those who would seek to ban smartphones in school note that existing rules regulating usage are insufficient and seldom followed consistently by students. Many now advocate barring students' physical possession of a phone during the school day, due to the purported effects on students' health, learning, and development. They suggest that students' academic performance and socialization suffer as much as their mental health. A recent open letter to Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona urging bans for these reasons has been signed by over 100 academics, educational leaders, and others.⁴ Editorial Boards from Bloomberg and The Washington Post have joined the debate as well. As Haidt offers, "all children deserve schools that will help them learn, cultivate deep friendships, and develop into mentally healthy young adults... All children deserve phone-free schools."⁵ Limited smartphone bans with similar justifications have already gone into effect in France and China.⁶ In February 2024, the UK Government announced a "crackdown" on phones at school, providing guidance to teachers around the country on preventing student usage during instructional time.⁷

Critics of such policies point to a dearth of research on the phenomenon, and a lack of clarity about where the data we do have points us. And many of the people implicated by such bans offer their own doubts. Many cite problems with enforcement and accountability—in short, recognizing that teachers don't desire to spend their time policing phone usage, as such interactions can be awkward and infantilizing, to say nothing of the potential for escalation. Many parents and guardians insist that always-on channels of communication are necessary in an era of increased tension and threats of gun or physical violence at school. Others, seeing smartphone usage emerge as a site for punishment by school officials, cite well-documented worries about significant disparities in the administration of school discipline along vectors of race, class, and other demographic categories.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Under what circumstances, if any, should schools be able to ban smartphone usage by students?
2. Should parents' wishes be given consideration in debates over school smartphone bans?
3. Can smartphones be used to good educational effect in classrooms? What would that look like?

¹ After Babel, "Social Media is a Major Cause of the Mental Illness Epidemic in Teen Girls. Here's the Evidence"

² CDC, "Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Data Summary and Trends Report"

³ Center for Longitudinal Studies, "Heavy social media use linked to depression in young teens, new study shows"

⁴ Phone Free Schools Letter (2023)

⁵ The Atlantic, "Get Phones Out of Schools Now"

⁶ Library of Congress, "France: Government Adopts Law Banning Cell Phone Use at School"; BBC, "China bans children from using mobile phones at school"

⁷ UK Government, "Government Launches Crackdown on Mobile Phones in Schools"

Ghost Protocol

Walt is enjoying texting with his new romantic interest when, suddenly, he receives a text from his ex, wanting to rekindle their relationship. Walt turns him down cordially but starts unpleasantly reminiscing about how things ended and how abandoned he felt when the relationship broke down. Given his recent feelings, he resolves to cancel an upcoming coffee date with his new friend, but he is nervous about hurting his date's feelings. A day passes, then another. But Walt is having trouble working up the courage to break the news to his date. He is worried that their feelings will be hurt, or that they will get angry at him, and he fears that explaining his reasons for canceling the date will make him feel foolish and immature. His date is still texting, wondering where Walt has been and why he hasn't been replying. The day of the date comes and goes, and eventually Walt no longer receives any texts.

Michelle has just finished her second date with a boy she met on Tinder. He was pleasant enough, paid for the food, and drove her home, but she's just not interested anymore. He talked a little too much about how much he liked The 1975, made an offhand comment about her vegan dinner, and was a little rude. She begins to consider these factors a few days after her date, though she has already agreed to see him again. She decides she can't really be bothered to text him back: she just doesn't really like him anymore. He asks where she's been, says that he had a fun time on their date, but eventually he too stops texting.

Ghosting is a somewhat common phenomenon in the age of texting and social media. Some justify ghosting by claiming it's easier to not respond rather than to tell someone you aren't interested in seeing them anymore. Perhaps some ghosters really do intend to text their dates back, but forget. Many probably feel embarrassed about a long gap in responses and prefer to simply let the connection die. Whether ghosting is morally permissible is a controversial matter. One might worry that ghosting is selfish, and that it sacrifices the feelings of another person for a momentary relief from an uncomfortable social situation. Others could claim that some "ghostees" deserve to be ghosted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is ghosting in either of these cases morally permissible?
2. Do we have a duty of communication towards others, especially if that communication is a desire to cease further communication?
3. Under what circumstances is it okay to prioritize our own convenience and comfort at the expense of others?

Fly Me to the Moon

When planning for their deaths, many people leave their families straightforward instructions for memorialization and for the treatment of their remains. Common practices after a memorial service include internment and burial in a cemetery or other dedicated location, cremation and subsequent spreading of remains in a location meaningful to the deceased, etc. A decidedly less common practice has emerged in recent years with the increasing privatization of space exploration and travel: space burial. This involves sending a small sample of human remains (usually cremated ashes and/or a sample of the deceased's DNA) and other small mementos into space—either as additional payload for a previously-scheduled flight, or on a dedicated flight specifically for memorial purposes. While the idea of honoring the deceased by jettisoning their remains into the reaches of space has been a fixture of sci-fi for decades, it has only recently become a practice that promises to be meaningfully accessible to average people.¹

Providers and proponents of space burials say that the process offers a one-of-a-kind experience for those looking to meaningfully memorialize their deceased loved ones. Space burials, they offer, are unique, forward-looking, and hopeful, in striking contrast to typical funerary practices, and the industry is growing accordingly. Many people are seeking creative ways to honor their loved ones as increasing funerary costs drive more and more families to consider options like cremation. Space burials, they offer, start at prices well below that of the average internment. For their part, companies aim to earn customers' trust by highlighting their unique duty of care based on the solemn nature of their task—the handling of human remains. They also claim attentiveness to the environmental footprint of their memorials, seeking to minimize them insofar as possible. Beyond Burials founder Dan Peabody sums it up: “No matter what accomplishments or failures I have in my lifetime, no matter what happens to me during my life, I have a very comforting feeling, knowing when I pass away, I get to go to space. Nothing can take that way from me.”²

Critics, however, have raised environmental and pollution concerns, even over the companies' insistence that they're careful. They argue that even small quantities of foreign materials can disrupt extra-terrestrial environments about which we still know comparatively little. Others worry that this practice expresses an inappropriate attitude toward that which has conventionally been thought of as “unowned” space. Buu Nygren, the President of the Navajo Nation, points to the moon as a particular instance of a space which is best kept wild and unowned: “We view it as a part of our spiritual heritage, an object of reverence and respect. The act of depositing human remains and other materials, which could be perceived as discards in any other location, on the moon is tantamount to desecration of this sacred space.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it morally permissible for private companies to sell access to space burials? Why or why not?
2. Does any one person or entity have a reasonable claim to control over extra-terrestrial space?
3. How (if at all) does the fact that the Navajo regard the moon as a sacred space impact the moral permissibility of space burials on the moon?

¹ Cf., Neil Jones, “The Jameson Satellite” (1931), Tony Richardson, *The Loved One* (1965), Gene Roddenberry's *Star Trek* series and films, etc.

² [Beyond Burials, “About”](#)

The Cow at the End of the Universe

The second book in Douglas Adams' famous series, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, starts out with the main characters entering an establishment called "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe." After being seated, a cow comes up to their table and advertises itself as one of the options on the menu. The cow has clearly been bred to be hyper-intelligent, with capabilities far more impressive than those of a normal cow. It has also been bred to want, more than anything, to be eaten. The cow suggests particular body parts to the patrons, such as its shoulder braised in white wine sauce, and brags that it has been force-feeding itself for months to fatten itself up.

Some of the patrons seem to feel that there is something wrong with eating this cow—either because of the cow's clear intelligence, or because the cow's alleged preference to be killed and eaten feels perverse. Perhaps desires like the cow's desire to be eaten should not be treated in the same way as more standard preferences like a desire for more open space or a desire for something to eat. Usually, we respect a person's preferences on the assumption that they are rational and aware of basic facts. Maybe offering oneself up to be eaten is evidence that these conditions are not met. Someone also might think that there is something wrong with intentionally making a cow with these preferences in the first place, so, on principle, the cow shouldn't be eaten.

On the other hand, other patrons suggest that it would actually be much better to eat this cow than to eat a cow that doesn't want to be eaten and that you are depriving the cow of what it really wants by refusing. Perhaps a being could genuinely and legitimately desire to be eaten. If they insist that this is what they want, and if we have no other evidence that they cannot control their actions or understand what they are agreeing to, who are we to say that its preference has been formed under inappropriate conditions?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it acceptable to eat this cow? Is there a difference, morally speaking, between the choice to eat this particular cow and the choice to create more such cows?
2. Should we take the cow's preferences seriously? It is obvious that the cow has not freely chosen to believe what they believe, but what is the significance of this lack of freedom?
3. What is required in order for a being to be able to consent to something?



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