

# Fine minds examine today's dilemmas

The first International Ethics Olympiad saw Australian students competing with philosophical mastery.



Santa Sabina "Olympians" (left to right): Sarah George, Rachel Frecker, Sophia Juarez, Andrea Murillo, Naomi Ghosen and Catherine Ryan.

BY FRAN MOLLOY

As hospital intensive care units across the world care for COVID-19 patients, medical staff have sometimes faced difficult moral choices, with reports of doctors weeping in corridors as they determined which patients would receive priority treatment.

Groups of senior high school students from three continents recently considered these dilemmas - pressed to allocate a ventilator to either a 20-year-old or a 70-year-old - in one of the scenarios discussed at the first International Ethics Olympiad.

The international contest, held via Zoom in June, saw students joined by subject specialists from nine time zones.

The event could not have come at a more fitting time: more than 500,000 people across the world have died so far from the COVID-19 outbreak.

The pandemic's broader consequences include mass isolation, economic collapse and severely restricted international travel, closing off many opportunities for collaboration. Yet global co-operation is more desperately needed than ever.

Dr Matthew Wills, the founder and moderator of the International Ethics Olympiad, says the contest emphasises civility, clear reasoning and teamwork as groups work together, building on each other's arguments to form the best possible response to an issue.

## ETHICAL THEORY

How did the student teams choose which patient to save? The Canadians relied on the ethical theory of utilitarianism to choose the younger patient.

"Lives that can be saved more easily and have a greater possibility of being saved are worth more than saving someone

who is very old or very fragile with many symptoms apart from COVID-19," argued the spokesperson for Team Toronto.

Asked the Australian spokesperson, a student from Sydney's Santa Sabina College: "Would you consider changing your position if you considered the concept of 'deservance'? What if the 20-year-old was a notorious criminal and the 70-year-old a Nobel Peace Prize winner?"

## REASONABLE FOLK

Three Australian schools - Adelaide's St Peter's Girls School, The King's School Parramatta and Strathfield's Santa Sabina - joined schools from China and Canada at the international meet.

Each of the Australian schools had competed in earlier rounds of senior student Olympiads held between Australian and New Zealand teams.

"Students defend whatever position they believe is right and win by showing that they have thought more carefully, deeply and perceptively about the cases in question," says Dr Wills.

At the June Olympiad, St Peter's won gold, Team Toronto took silver and King's was awarded the bronze. One of the US-based judges commented, anonymously, that they felt the format holds huge possibilities for strengthening the global community by "building a network of reasonable, thoughtful people in all countries".

For year 12 King's student Tom Cornelius, "the whole discussion around ethics and philosophy is intriguing because these two topics form the fundamentals for what we perceive as meaning in life".

"Questions of morality and humanity explored on a daily basis always have multiple perspectives that aren't necessarily right or wrong," he says. "As such, numerous opinions can be formed

which interests someone like me who likes forming a definite view to topics like these. Ethics requires you to be open-minded and consider all the possible viewpoints in the discussion, even ones that may seem extreme or crazy."

## SMALL BEGINNINGS

Dr Wills began Australian ethics contests in 2013, which have grown to become national senior student events, with a separate national competition for middle-school students.



*"Students get rewarded for respectful dialogue and building on each other's arguments."*

Unlike the upcoming Tokyo Olympics, where videoconferencing just won't cut it, moral debates are tailor-made for screen-based contests. Australia's next Middle School Ethics Olympiad takes place in November.

Kathryn Fraser, head of academic enrichment and extension at The King's School,

has entered teams in senior and middle school Olympiads for the past two years.

"The opportunity for our boys to explore and solve difficult problems using thoughtful analysis and reasoning with students from other schools, and in this case across the globe, is invaluable," she says. "They are able to wrestle with real-life and timely ethical issues affecting society, hopefully giving them more experience and tools to deal with these difficult decisions in the future through respectful, creative and rigorous discussion."

## MEDICAL TREATMENT

At 17, Cassandra Callender was legally a minor. However, her decision, supported by her parents, to refuse chemotherapy treatment for Hodgkin's lymphoma was not recognised in the US state of Connecticut, where she lived with her family.

In 2015, her case was debated by doctors and bureaucrats and a decision was made by a judge to remove her from her parents' care, have her hospitalised and cancer treatment administered.

Her decisions and those of authorities were among several complex dilemmas addressed by senior school students from Australia and Shanghai earlier in the year. That event marked the first time a school from China has participated in an ethics Olympiad with an Australian school.

"There was a sense throughout the event that we were involved in doing something pioneering and important," Dr Wills says. "Scores and medallions mattered far less than the possibility of bridging the geographical and cultural gap that lies between China and Australia," he notes, adding that the Chinese students at that April contest demonstrated skills in philosophy and ethics that would put many older students to shame.

## CONTRADICTORY BELIEFS

Santa Sabina College year 12 student Sophia Juarez, a member of the school's Olympiad team, studies philosophy as part of the International Baccalaureate curriculum.

It has given her a framework to analyse and shift some of her own beliefs, she says.

"I wanted to be able to hold a well-informed opinion on some of these global issues I was hearing about, but I didn't know how to [do that] on my own," she says.

Sophia is one of 30 students in the school's philosophy club. "Each week, we focus on a particular topical case study: for instance, the distribution of resources amid the COVID-19 pandemic; questions of what we eat, and interacting with prominent and contemporary philosophers like Peter Singer," she says. "Our teachers then lead us to consider multiple perspectives and critically discuss and analyse positions."

Year 12 King's student Daniel Gu says an understanding of philosophy and ethics are deeply important. "With so many varying perspectives and stakeholders in every scenario, having a broad mindset and understanding would facilitate one to make more informed and considerate decisions," he says.

Honing an ability to respectfully discuss contentious questions, consider viewpoints and make thoughtful decisions in a collaborative way is a lifelong skill.

Inspiration for the Olympiads came from the US 'Ethics Bowl' competitions, which have taken place at American colleges since 1993 and are highly competitive, says Dr Wills.

However, the competitions Australians participate in are gentler. "Students get rewarded for respectful dialogue and building on each other's arguments," he says.