Inside Conversations: Ethics Bowl and Philosophical Dialogue in San Quentin

Kyle Robertson
Center for Public Philosophy, University of California, Santa Cruz

ABSTRACT: The Ethics Bowl is a debate format that is taking hold in high schools, colleges, and universities across the country. It emphasizes constructive, respectful dialogue about difficult contemporary problems in applied ethics. This paper argues that the Ethics Bowl is a particularly promising program for incarcerated students. Through a discussion of my experiences doing the Ethics Bowl with incarcerated students, a discussion of the transformative possibilities of philosophical dialogue, and an examination of other anti-recidivism programming, I argue that programs fostering philosophical reflection and dialogue, such as the Ethics Bowl, should play a key role in programming for education programs inside prisons.

KEYWORDS: Ethics Bowl, ethics, applied ethics, prison education

I. Introduction

The most powerful part of the experience was this idea of how important freedom of thought and freedom of exchange of ideas, freedom to exchange your ideas with another person, is like very fundamental to our humanity. (Pablo Fitten, UC Santa Cruz Ethics Bowl Team Member, class of 2018)\(^1\)

In February 2018, a team of undergraduates from the University of California, Santa Cruz, travelled to San Quentin State Prison to compete against a team of inmates. They met in an Ethics Bowl, a relatively new debate format that fosters a collaborative, constructive conversation rather than the aggressive adversarial arguments of traditional forensic debate. This was one of the first Ethics Bowls to take place inside a prison, and I was the coach of both teams. This paper argues
that the Ethics Bowl is a powerful methodology for instantiating philosophical dialogue in the classroom. Through an analysis of its power to create transformative experiences for students and an analogy to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, I argue that the Ethics Bowl is particularly well-suited for use with incarcerated students.

Education programs for incarcerated students raise particular challenges that are important, and I will argue that Ethics Bowl is an excellent way to address these challenges. The bulk of this paper, therefore, is taken up with issues surrounding Ethics Bowls with incarcerated students. But the reasons that I offer in favor of Ethics Bowls inside prisons and jails are also good reasons in favor of Ethics Bowl generally. Or as one of my former students in San Quentin wrote, “The humanities can prove a powerful tool in both the rehabilitation of those who’ve broken society’s norms and the habilitation of those who have never learned the norms” (DeWeaver 2016). Arguments for what works in rehabilitation are often good for habilitation, and vice versa.

II. What is an Ethics Bowl?

An Ethics Bowl is a hybrid between a formal debate and a philosophical dialogue. Although it is a competitive format, with scoring and judges, teams win by showing that they have thought more deeply about a set of applied ethics cases rather than by trying to prove that they have the right answer, or their opponents the wrong one. It is collaborative and constructive, not only among teammates but between participating teams during a round. It is, in short, teaching students how to argue in a way consistent with healthy democratic citizenship and civic virtue. It has been growing nationally, with more collegiate and high school events taking place each year.

The Ethics Bowl format can change the way that students argue, as I will show with a few brief examples. The power of Ethics Bowl starts with the judging criteria. When teams present their responses to questions posed about real, applied ethical questions, judges score them on the following three categories, each weighted equally:

A. Was the team’s presentation clear and systematic?

B. Did the team’s presentation clearly identify and thoroughly discuss the central moral dimensions of the case?

C. Did the team’s presentation indicate both awareness and thoughtful consideration of different viewpoints, including especially those that would loom large in the reasoning of individuals who disagree with the team’s position?

Factor C is particularly important. Teams must explain not only their best answer to a question in applied ethics, but they must also give the best arguments
they can against their proffered answer. To do well in an Ethics Bowl, teams cannot dodge or obfuscate opposing arguments.

There are two other particularly important differences between Ethics Bowl and similarly structured formats that keep the rounds constructive. First, when the presenting team finishes its case presentation, the other team provides a commentary on, not a rebuttal of, that presentation. This is a true commentary; teams do not need to take a contrary position, and they should not present their own proposed answer. Judges reward teams for showing constructive engagement with the presentation, and the best teams move the conversation forward in the spirit of collective inquiry. Second, the judges are not passive score-keepers, as they are in forensic debate events. They actively participate in the round by questioning the presenting team about their case. This is important for a variety of reasons. For example, in other debate formats in which the judges do not participate, teams can often gain an advantage by confusing their opponents, or by obfuscating the issues in a way that misleads the other team. Good Ethics Bowl judges can keep teams arguing in good faith because the teams know that the judges themselves can follow up on any such attempts to mislead. Furthermore, it is often easier for teams of students to grapple with difficult questions posed by neutral judges rather than competing teams. The judges’ Q&A is therefore commonly the portion of the round during which teams grapple with new ideas and arguments on the fly.

One theoretical way of understanding the Ethics Bowl is as an educational practice aimed at fostering dialogue, in Paulo Freire’s sense from Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire 2000). In rejecting a ‘banking’ model of education, according to which the teacher aims to deposit bits of knowledge in students as one would put money into a bank, Freire says:

Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world. (Freire 2000, 79)

Ethics Bowl cases are current, and they cover topics and events many students are already thinking about. In the current collegiate regional Ethics Bowl, for example, we have cases about whether felons should have the right to vote, the problem of malicious online comment threads, and the #MeToo movement. Ethics Bowl poses questions that students care about, and gives them the space, respect, and support to engage critically in dialogue with others. In fact, Ethics Bowl is doubly committed to dialogue because it not only respects the agency and consciousness of its participants, but it also explicitly requires its participants to grapple with the agency and consciousness of others who would disagree with
them. This second order dialogic practice is critical to the power of Ethics Bowls to foster healthy habits of democratic deliberation.

In the rest of this paper, I will argue that this format is an excellent model to use with incarcerated students.⁷

III. Transformative Educational Experiences

In her work on transformative experience, L. A. Paul gives a robust account of transformative experience as one that defies the standard model of rational choice theory (Paul 2016; Paul 2015). This model provides an intriguing way to think about what inmates undertake when they begin higher education in prison, and how an activity like the Ethics Bowl could transform their lives for the better.

Paul distinguishes two ways in which an experience can be transformative: epistemically and personally. When an agent is epistemically transformed, she learns something about what it is like to have a particular experience that she did not know before. Paul uses the example of durian fruit—a particularly pungent, sweet fruit from Southeast Asia. This fruit tastes unlike any fruit regularly available in the United States, and is often experienced as difficult to describe by those who try it for the first time. The only way to know what a durian fruit tastes like is to actually try a durian fruit, and when you do, you are epistemically transformed. You now know what durian fruit tastes like (Paul 2016, 15).⁸

Personally transformative experiences are those that change the value system by which the agent judges a situation. For example, travelling abroad and immersing yourself in a radically different culture can be personally transformative, changing the way you relate to and value everyday life situations. This experience is also epistemically transformative when it is novel, but many repeatedly seek out these kinds of radical travel experiences later in life precisely because they already know what sort of personal transformation to expect; these experiences are not epistemically transformative in such cases (Paul 2016, 16–17).

For Paul, a transformative experience is one in which both types of transformation happen in the same experience: it is epistemically novel, in that you do not know what it will be like until you experience it, and also transforms the evaluative standards of the agent. Her paradigmatic example is having a child (Paul 2015): you cannot know what it is like to have a child until you have one, and being a parent changes your evaluations of what matters in the world in ways you cannot know beforehand. This model is useful for understanding the potential impacts of an Ethics Bowl program in prisons because participation in such a philosophical practice can be transformative for inmates.

First, the experience of competing in an Ethics Bowl is epistemically transformative for many of the participants. There are a variety of experiences that students who first participate in an Ethics Bowl in prison may never have had
before: interacting with authority figures, such as college professors or local politicians, for example, who treat them as thoughtful, rational agents with authority to speak about ethics. They may have never experienced someone with authority listening to them as if the person with authority had something to learn. In fact, this is one of the major hurdles to organizing an Ethics Bowl and coaching a team: it takes quite a lot of work to convince the inmate students that when you ask what they think, you actually mean it. So many of our educational practices revolve around figuring out what one is supposed to say to get a good grade; in Ethics Bowl, students have to unlearn that behavior.

Second, engaging in philosophical dialogue can be personally transformative, re-orienting the way that people value their own freedom, their own voice, the opportunities they have been given, and the opportunities that have been taken away from them. In the words of a former student at the Prison University Project at San Quentin,

> Even at 19 years old, I recognized the power of what I was reading. I remember closing Anthony T. Browder’s *Nile Valley Contributions to Civilization*—which for me rewrote the narrative of what it meant to be black—and complaining to my cellmate, ‘Why the fuck weren’t they teaching this in school?’ I was angry because I believed that had I read Emerson and Gibran and Plato in junior high school, I would’ve thought and behaved differently. But there are no do-overs. (DeWeaver 2016)

The activity of engaging in serious philosophical dialogue with others is rewarding in itself, and like many other intrinsically valuable activities, its value is not apparent unless you have experienced it. Engaging in good, sustained philosophical dialogue, therefore, can personally transform participants, opening their eyes to new ways of being in the world.

The potentially transformative nature of the Ethics Bowl helps shed light on how and why inmates might choose to participate. One of the main foci of Paul’s work is to show that transformative experiences resist classical analysis on the basis of rational choice theory (Paul 2016, 30–32). Crudely put, rational choice theory treats choices as expected value problems: we look at our options, determine the desirability of each option based on our value system, and pick the choice that has the most expected value for us. Transformative experiences cannot be chosen this way because we do not know what it will be like to have them beforehand, and undertaking them changes the way we value the world. In such cases, we cannot estimate the value of choosing the experience because we cannot make an expected value calculation. Paul offers an alternative: the only way to rationally choose a transformative experience is to choose it “to discover how your life will unfold given the new type of experience . . . you choose the experience for the sake of discovery itself” (Paul 2016, 120). We cannot know, for example, what it will be like to be a parent, but we can rationally choose
parenthood because we value discovering what it will be like for us to become a parent.

I think this is a compelling framework for analyzing the value of a potentially transformative prison education program like the Ethics Bowl. Many inmates struggle to take the plunge. Every time I visit San Quentin, a handful of inmates want to talk to me about debate, their ideas about ethics, and the latest public scandal, but they generally demur when I encourage them to join the Ethics Bowl course. They do not know what it is like to engage in a formal, philosophical conversation, and their evaluations of whether they should join the team are based on their current scale of value. They do not understand what participation could mean to them once they have done it. Rather than focus on projecting their current desires and motivations onto the inmates they see competing on stage, they should consider the value of discovering what it would be like to be an Ethics Bowl participant.

IV. Ethics Bowl and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Coming into this Ethics Bowl class and debate, I struggled in understanding the concepts of ethics. But doing the exercise of applying them to real life events has helped me better understand them. They are not some abstract concepts, but relevant and applicable in solving life’s problems. (Forrest Jones, 2018 San Quentin Ethics Bowl team member)

The prior section focused on the intrinsic value of Ethics Bowl to inmate students. This may be sufficient justification for such programs, but one might also wonder what effect participation in the Ethics Bowl will have on the inmates’ future behavior. Prison programs often have explicit anti-recidivist aims, and many are judged by their effect on the likelihood that an inmate will end up back in prison after their release. Although I am aware of no empirical data on the Ethics Bowl with incarcerated students, in this section I will argue, by making an analogy between Ethics Bowl and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), that we have good reason to think that this type of philosophical dialogue can produce anti-recidivist effects.

The most empirically validated anti-recidivism programs are based in CBT, a modality that aims to change the way that we think about the world, ourselves, our roles, and obligations in it, etc. (see for example Landenberger and Lipsey 2005). This therapy explicitly aims at “changing distorted or dysfunctional cognitions (cognitive restructuring) or teaching new cognitive skills,” and it involves techniques “designed to affect such cognitive processes as interpreting social cues, monitoring one’s own thought processes, identifying and compensating for distortions and errors in thinking, reasoning about right and wrong behavior, generating alternative solutions, and making decisions about appropriate behavior” (Landenberger and Lipsey 2005, 454).
I cannot grapple with the philosophical topics of free will v. determinism, compatibilism and incompatibilism about moral responsibility, or the is/ought distinction in this paper, and I do not expect the evidence on CBT to change the minds of philosophers who think that free will is an illusion, or that moral actions always stem from affect or emotion. But I think that philosophers—and others—could learn something from this example: when social scientists have studied what sorts of interventions actually help inmates not recidivate, the modalities they find most successful are those that appeal to our reason. Follow the data. It suggests that our capacity to think well about our choices is the most changeable factor that can influence criminal choices.

This also leads to my philosophical payoff: anyone familiar with the Ethics Bowl, or teaching applied moral philosophy in a collaborative environment, should recognize many of the skills included in the goals of CBT listed above, for they overlap significantly with the learning outcomes for a good ethics course. In particular, “reasoning about right and wrong behavior, generating alternative solutions, and making decisions about appropriate behavior” is the main task of an applied ethics case study.

The similarity between CBT and Ethics Bowl is striking and important, but I do not want to overemphasize it. An Ethics Bowl program does not offer any therapeutic techniques designed to teach cognitive skills; rather, it strives to create an environment conducive to serious, respectful, but rigorous dialogue about ethical issues. If there is a cognitive change in students, it arises through a group process that involves grappling with one’s own moral system and articulating it to others. That is, it arises from the processes that humans in general use to develop and moderate their ethical reasoning.

Ethics Bowl has particular features that make it well-suited to this sort of dialogue, discussed in section II above. But more generally, I am not alone in thinking that philosophy helps us think with less distortion and error. To cite an example, consider the “discursive hygiene” account from Brian Leiter (Leiter 2014). “What philosophers—at least those in the broadly Socratic traditions—are good at is parsing arguments, clarifying the concepts at play in a debate, teasing out the dialectical entailments of suppositions and claims, and so on: Socratic philosophers are, in short, purveyors of what I will call ‘discursive hygiene’” (Leiter 2014, 4). Leiter uses the term “hygiene” deliberately, to indicate the power of philosophical practice to clean up our thinking about ourselves and the world. Although Leiter is pessimistic about the possibility of this sort of discursive hygiene to influence public policy, I do not think that the empirical evidence warrants his pessimism.

One way of thinking about Ethics Bowl is as an attempt to turn the teaching of discursive hygiene into a fun, competitive format. In Ethics Bowl we do not teach students a correct account of the good or the right, but rather help them
learn to reason well about ethics, express their reasons well, and engage in dialogue with others about those reasons.

This context also supports one of the more controversial parts of Ethics Bowl: the event itself. Many different people have questioned my desire to teach ethics in a format that culminates in a competitive event. Ethics is not about winning, they say, and of course, on some level, I agree. But ethical reasoning only becomes real, and hard, when it concerns what we care about. The competition provides an external incentive, and it by no means replicates the pressures of a real-life ethical decision; however, it does motivate students to want to find ways of responding to ethical challenges that others will find compelling, and the surest way to do this is to figure out how to articulate ethical viewpoints they actually believe to be true. I have not yet found a motivational substitute for competition, and the challenge of publicly defending one’s ethical viewpoint has consistently compelled my students to do their best philosophical work.

V. Conclusion

On the other hand, dialogue cannot exist without humility.
(Freire 2000, 90)

If a well-run Ethics Bowl does nothing else, it gives students the opportunity to begin to appreciate the difficulty of reasoning well about moral issues, and this appreciation, among other benefits, engenders some level of intellectual humility. Philosophical dialogue should soften certainty and undermine self-righteousness. This by itself is important, for there are good reasons to think that aggression and violence are not done in contrast to moral motives but because of moral motives. For example, Alan Fiske and Tage Rai offer a powerful argument that “people are morally motivated to do violence to create, conduct, protect, redress, terminate, or mourn social relationships with the victim or with others” (Fiske and Rai 2015, 1–2). My experiences working with inmates bear out their thesis.

Although the inmate students’ own crimes are never a topic of my class, some share their experiences and thoughts about their crimes. And while many of them acknowledge that they may have broken the law, they often do not think they did anything morally wrong. Some baldly deny wrongdoing, glossing over the acts they committed and focusing on corrupt police, prosecutors, or public defenders. Others seem to understand that I will believe they have done wrong, and stick to a strong moral relativism position as long as they can. I think that they are motivated to do this because it resolves a clear tension: they know that society views their actions as wrong, but they do not think they have done wrong. The easiest way to reconcile those two beliefs is to argue that there is no right account of “wrong,” and students often figure this out. Those inmates who do take responsibility for their crimes generally do so in the context of changed social relationships that render their prior action wrong to them now. They may have
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left a gang, aged a few decades, seen their children grow up, or studied the liberal arts for the first time. They are different social beings, with different relationships and values, and they often explain their own prior wrongdoing with these terms.

If this view is correct, and violence is generally morally motivated, then sorting out our conceptions of morality could be critical for curbing violence, criminality, and recidivism. Furthermore, critically engaging with our conceptions of morality should become a core anti-recidivism practice. The Ethics Bowl is the best pedagogical tool I have found for helping students sort out their conceptions of morality, and I hope it proliferates. I have a team in San Quentin ready for challengers.14

Endnotes

1. This quotation is from a video produced on the Ethics Bowl at San Quentin by the Center for Public Philosophy at UC Santa Cruz, accessible at https://vimeo.com/274161189.

2. A reader familiar with Ethics Bowl may question whether the event itself lives up to my descriptions in this section. It probably often does not, though I think it can and sometimes does. The reader can take my arguments here as both descriptive and normative, as a statement of what I think the Ethics Bowl should be in practice.

3. The Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl hub can be found online at https://appe-ethics.org/ethics-bowl/.

4. The National High School Ethics Bowl website is at http://nhseb.unc.edu/.


7. I hope that interested readers will learn more about the event and consider joining their local Ethics Bowl community as volunteers.

8. The famous example in the philosophical canon of an epistemically transformative experience is Jackson’s Mary who, upon leaving her room, experiences what it is like to see red for the first time (Jackson 1982, 130).

9. I steal this phrase from Cornel West in his wonderful dialogue with M. M. McCabe on public philosophy, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2GjIwtxzT_0. His comment appears at the seven-minute mark of this video.

10. Emile participated in the Ethics Bowl course at San Quentin in the Fall of 2017 but did not compete for the team in the February 2018 round with UC Santa Cruz.
11. I have recently begun working with the new San Quentin Ethics Bowl team for the 2018–2019 academic year, and the first day’s meeting was an excellent representation of this dynamic. My returning students kept emphasizing how wonderful it was to work very hard on their arguments and then feel like they fell apart under my (hopefully benevolent) questioning. It seemed hard for some potential new students to understand and identify with the glee these returning students felt in the activity of learning about new reasons why their arguments might fail. They clearly missed the experience over the summer months!

12. Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse have a similar, well-developed account of “cognitive hygiene” in their work (2013, 13–14). Aikin and Talisse emphasize the social, democratic aspect of philosophical argument: “Cognitive health requires us to maintain a regimen of cognitive hygiene. In order to be healthy believers, we must on occasion reexamine, reassess, and reevaluate the reasons we have for holding our beliefs. Now, these processes are inevitably social in that our reasons, evidence, and data in large measure derive from the experiences, testimony, and expertise of others. We must rely on others in order to remain cognitively healthy. We need others in order to manage our cognitive lives” (Aikin and Talisse 2013, 14).

13. Leiter cites the extensive empirical work in psychology suggesting that emotions drive moral decisions to the detriment of reasons. I think he is too certain about the current state of psychological science. As a counter-example, see the recent study by my colleague at UCSC, Audun Dahl, which takes the authors Leiter relies on head on: “The findings of the present research show that people do provide reasons for why they think it is wrong to push the person off the footbridge but not wrong to intervene in the switch variant. This finding challenges the dual process claims that responses to footbridge situations are based on unconscious, automatic, and emotional reactions” (Dahl et al. 2018, 85).

14. I would like to thank Michael Burroughs, Daniel Guevara, Roberta Israeloff, and Wendy Turgeon for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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