The Making of an Ethics Bowl Case

Editor's Note

This article is a written interview piece with responses provided by Ethics Bowl Canada's Cem Erkli. A big thank you to Cem Erkli for his time and investment in these responses.

Who chooses the cases?

Cem Erkli: The cases are developed by our in-house Case Development Committee! We have a really passionate, experienced committee. Emily Muller, who has been a part of the Ethics Bowl in Canada since it launched in Winnipeg in 2012, chairs this committee. Committee members bring a variety of expertise: university professors in philosophy, lawyers, graduate students in philosophy (some of whom were once Ethics Bowl participants!) and high school teachers who were among the first coaches to participate in the activity.

This group is mainly appointed by the Board of Directors of Ethics Bowl Canada. We try to have our committee be diverse in many ways—in terms of identities, geographical location, age, and expertise. For example, we try to have each province represented in the committee.

Excitingly, we are also branching out to involve educational organizations. For example, CityHive contributed to the "Sharing Public Space" case. Usually, we approach the organization to ask if we can use some of the resources they developed, and we collaborate on a draft of the case, which then goes through our usual review process. This is especially helpful in cases where we might not have a lot of expertise in the subject matter.

The committee comes up with topic ideas, but we also rely a lot on student feedback about what you are interested in talking about. If you have a case idea, email it to cem.erkli@ethicsbowl.ca!

Is there a specific element of a proposed idea that indicates that it would be a great case?

Cem Erkli: Yes, there are usually a few notable signs! If the committee is disagreeing and bringing different perspectives during the development of the case, that is usually a good sign. If we are having fun discussing a case, often, the students do, too. We look for cases that don't have easy answers: the more you talk about it, the more nuanced and complex the case tends to get. Variety is important, too; we often think no one person will like all the cases, but each of the cases will connect with someone, somewhere!

We also like to bring in current political and social events, especially youth issues, to give students the tools and space to discuss important events that are happening in the world right now and affecting them. Sometimes, news evolves quickly, and by the time the case gets published, the situation has evolved a lot. When that happens, we try to focus on the underlying values and principles, and present the issue with a hypothetical scenario instead of direct reference to news items. That helps the case stay relevant as the situation develops.

To give you a peek behind the curtain, there are also usually themes we try to bring into every case set: environmental ethics, classic philosophy problems, technology… Another one of these is youth issues, giving participants a way to talk about issues affecting them, and using philosophy to understand ourselves.

Finally, we find that a lot of contemporary philosophy is really relevant to our daily lives, so we like to promote and highlight it whenever we can. For example, one of the cases for this year mentions philosopher Amia Srinivasan's work. Another one of my favourites from the 2023-2024 set, "Do Grades Capture Learning?" brings in some philosophy material from C. Thi Nguyen's work. These cases let students discuss the very same topics academic philosophers are discussing today.

How might the Regionals' cases be similar to or different from the Nationals' cases?

Cem Erkli: Usually, the cases in the National and Regional sets aren't fundamentally different. We might save a case for the National slate if we feel like it needs more time. Or we might have a total of 20-25 case ideas, and we will put the cases together into cohesive sets, which means the cases in one set should build on each other, but not overlap completely. It is usually a matter of balancing the cases and making sure that each case set has enough of everything.

Sometimes, a case in the National set is sort of a "sequel" to the Regional set: for example, in 2021-2022, we had a regional case on Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) for chronic sufferers: if someone is chronically in pain, but their death isn't foreseeable, should MAiD be an option for them? For the nationals we had a case on advance directives: if someone, while they are in good health, asks to receive MAiD if their Alzheimer's progresses, should we honor their wishes, even if later on, they seem happy and content? So the National cases may approach the same ethical issue from a different angle, or put a twist on a regional case.

Do you have a strategy for brainstorming your own personal case ideas?

For me, I often come up with case ideas when reading the news or watching a show. Really, any time when I read or see something and I go, "hmm, that's tough, I don't know what I would do..." that is probably the beginning of an interesting case!

Another strategy we use at the committee is to look for things we disagree on. Sometimes it is a conversation we had with someone else, or sometimes it is within the committee that we realize we think differently about certain things. Thinking about the underlying issues when we run into disagreement is another good way to start a case!

What does the case research and writing process look like?

Cem Erkli: In terms of research, we tend to draw on either classic or current philosophy to help us frame the issues and present them fairly. We also research the news items thoroughly.

Generally, one or two Case Development Committee members work on a first draft of the case together. We have a general template that we almost universally use: cases all start with one paragraph describing the basic facts of the situation, and the next paragraph introduces some underlying moral concerns. Then, we try to cover 2-3 arguments from different perspectives, and end the case by summarizing the issue's big themes.

We try to make sure that the case is informative, but not overwhelming. So we try to give exactly the information that is necessary for participants to start discussing the cases; the idea is that, at least at first, you should be able to read the case and come up with your own arguments just based on the information presented, and then evolve your understanding of the case by diving into the further explorations and through conversation.

We also try to make sure that the case isn't framed in a way that is overly binary, by pointing out areas of overlap between different views, and focusing on inviting solutions and creative thinking rather than just picking one of the presented sides.

How are the discussion questions created?

Cem Erkli: Mainly, the discussion questions are there to make the case more nuanced, and introduce more learning opportunities. They can provide an avenue of research, introduce a perspective we didn't have room to include in the case, highlight a tricky part of the issue, or add a twist on the case, something like, "what if this was different, would that change your opinion?"

We are really trying to help participants find their own views. Sometimes, we try to anticipate what different students might think about the case, and include a question that would challenge that view. Other times, we try to invite big-picture, blue-sky thinking about how you would solve a problem. These types of questions don't work so well as moderator questions, but they help students come up with ideas and identify the underlying ethical principles.

Why are moderator questions important to the ethical discussion?

Cem Erkli: There is a lot to talk about in any given case, so the first function of the moderator question is to focus the discussion on a specific aspect of the case. The second is to set up the conversation in a way that will be constructive; otherwise the conversation can become less collaborative, with one team arguing for a position, the other team providing counterarguments, and the first team providing a rebuttal. But we want the discussion to be focused on working together to find a solution, which is facilitated by the moderator question.

Finally, the moderator's question allows the judges to see how well the teams are navigating the underlying ethical principles of the case. To answer the questions well, teams need to have a good handle on how the issues are affected by the ethical values underlying the discussion, and be able to apply these values to the case.

How are the 'further exploration' articles selected?

Cem Erkli: We have a general method for selecting these. First, we want all articles to be very accessible, —nothing behind a paywall, or requiring a membership, or overly technical. Ideally, one or two of these highlight Canadian perspectives on the issue. Finally, we try to aim for a diversity of perspectives. That means if we think one of the items is arguing for one conclusion, we try to include others that argue for different conclusions, or approach the issue from a different perspective. As a whole, they should give a balanced snapshot of the conversation.

Sometimes, when the issues are more technically complex, we will try to include at least one resource that could serve as an introduction.

Increasingly, we are trying to add things that aren't just articles, but also videos, podcasts, or interactive resources. That's actually why we changed the name of that section from "Further Readings" to "Further Exploration"!

What is the timeline for case selection and creation?

Cem Erkli: We release two case sets: one in fall (usually in October) and another in March, when most regionals are over. For the Regional Case Set, we start collecting ideas in May. Usually there are approximately 60-70 ideas that are proposed. The committee meets a few times in the spring and works to discuss the merits of the ideas. Then, over the summer, we try to narrow down about 10-15 of the most interesting case ideas to be developed into full cases. Towards the end of the summer, each committee member has worked on a full draft of a case, and they have commented on all of the other drafts. We do a final review, try to pair the cases up according to their themes, finalize the further exploration resources, and then a representative from the Board of Directors does a final review. After the last comments are implemented, the cases are translated to French by the University of Saint-Boniface. Once documentation is ready, we typeset them, and the cases are distributed!

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