2024-2025 Regional Case Set
Ethics Bowl Canada

7 October 2024

Table of Contents

Case 1 | The drag of trying to butt out cigarette sales 1
Case 2 | Should healthcare be culturally sensitive? 2
Case 3 | Fighting for Peace 3
Case 4 | The Great Canadian Potato Rescue and You 4
Case 5 | Collective Punishment 5
Case 6 | Duties to Parents 6
Case 7 | Satire, Memes and Democratic Speech 6
Case 8 | Votes for Young People 7
Case 9 | Leisure and Labour 9
Case 10 | They're Just Not My Type 10

Note to the Coaches and Students

This case set is the collective work of the Ethics Bowl Canada case development committee. We hope that this case set will provide you with engaging avenues for research and fruitful critical discussion.

In your preparations for the regional competitions, please note that there will be a "moderator's question" for each case. This question will often be different from the Discussion Questions listed.

We welcome feedback about the cases, as well as new case ideas from our participants! Please direct any feedback to Cem Erkli (cemerkli@ethicsbowl.ca).

Case Pairings

The Case Development Committee recommends the following match pairings for the cases. Regional event organizers may choose different pairings at their discretion.

Round 1: Cases 1 & 2
Round 2: Cases 3 & 4
Round 3: Cases 5 & 6
Round 4: Cases 7 & 8
Round 5: Cases 9 & 10

2024-2025 Regional Case Development Committee

Anastasia Anderson, Lauren Bialystok, Michael Bodnar, Cem Erkli, Marc Kruse, Helen Han Wei Luo, John Milloy, Emily Muller, Sophia Whicher.
With thanks to: Marit Stokke, Avontay Williams.

Case 1 | The drag of trying to butt out cigarette sales

The British Government has announced plans to create the world's first "smoke-free generation". The proposal would prevent anyone born after January 1, 2009 from ever buying cigarettes or other tobacco products even as adults. Although older smokers could still purchase tobacco, this generation and all subsequent generations would never be able to buy tobacco products regardless of their age.

Supporters of the legislation believe that the best way to deal with smoking is to prevent non-smokers from starting the habit in the first place. By preventing the next generation from legally purchasing cigarettes and tobacco products, there would presumably be a reduced interest in starting smoking. The result would be a significant reduction in disease, premature deaths, and healthcare costs.

Opponents point to the arbitrary nature of the proposal – someone born December 31, 2008, will be allowed to buy cigarettes when they become an adult, while those born the day after will be banned from purchasing them even in their later years. Many believe that such a law would be unworkable, create a black market for cigarettes, and result in a huge loss of tobacco tax revenue to the government.

There is also the question of state interference in our private lives. Many of us regularly make unhealthy personal decisions, from eating fast food to sleeping irregularly to leading a sedentary lifestyle, without any expectation of government interference. Why is this different?

Discussion Questions

1. Does the government have the right to ban one group of adults from purchasing a substance while allowing another group the freedom to choose? Why not ban tobacco products for everyone?
2. To what extent should the government try to prevent people from making unhealthy choices? Does the danger of second-hand smoke make tobacco different?
3. Should the expected presence of a black market deter lawmakers from taking necessary action? Does the existence of a law, even if it is ignored, provide a benefit to the community?
4. Is it appropriate that governments collect significant tax revenue through the sales of a product that they officially identify as deadly?

Further Explorations

"UK smoking ban would have many benefits for public health – but only if it's effectively implemented." Andrew Lee. *The Conversation.* April 23, 2024.
https://theconversation.com/uk-smoking-ban-would-have-many-benefits-for-public-health-but-only-if-its-effectively-implemented-228224

"Pursuing a smoke-free generation." Lawrence O. Gostin. *Science.* May 23, 2024. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adq5006

"The language of freedom in public health: the case of the smoking ban." Alberto Giubilini. *Practical Ethics.* October 8, 2023.
https://blog.practicalethics.ox.ac.uk/2023/10/the-language-of-freedom-in-public-health-the-case-of-the-smoking-ban/

Case 2 | Should healthcare be culturally sensitive?

Culturally sensitive care is an approach to healthcare delivery that aims to respect the unique background of each patient by acknowledging, during the course of medical treatment, the impact of culture on a person's beliefs, values, customs, and lifestyle. This practice is grounded in the assumption that individuals differ in their conceptions of proper medical care and are therefore best served when they can draw upon their own cultural traditions while undergoing treatment. While some methods seem benign and perhaps even practically necessary (such as providing information in a patient's native language, allocating spaces in clinics for prayer, and offering culturally familiar foods in hospitals), other practices, such as encouraging the use of traditional remedies alongside conventional treatments, seem to be more morally contentious. This problem is especially pressing when the prevailing medical consensus is that some such remedies have no positive effect and are sometimes even harmful, such as with certain naturopathic or homeopathic treatments.

In individual cases, a healthcare provider's attitude towards a patient's sincerely held beliefs can seriously impact their willingness to undergo treatment and experience of medical care. If a physician unilaterally discourages a patient from taking a traditional herbal remedy, a skeptical patient may disregard the doctor's advice entirely and forego the prescription, which may further push them towards alternative medicine. Yet, if the physician encourages this practice, the patient may conclude that the prescription is superfluous and rely entirely on the herbal remedy. In such cases, acknowledging a patient's deeply ingrained cultural practices may be misinterpreted by the patient as the healthcare provider's endorsement of such practices.

Patients belonging to marginalized communities, however, sometimes have a sound basis for distrusting mainstream medical care. Longstanding structural injustices have resulted in disparate outcomes in treatment for members of minorities who have historically been neglected, regarded with bias, misdiagnosed, or even subject to unwanted and harmful procedures against their will. Thus, patients resistant to mainstream medical treatment are not always individuals whose religious, cultural, or ideological beliefs differ radically from existing scientific consensus. Rather, patients who resort to solutions rooted in their culture may sometimes do so due to their past experiences of discrimination or otherwise unfair treatment from the mainstream medical system.

Thus, where trust between patient and physician impacts healthcare outcomes, the physician's perceived sensitivity to the patient's existing beliefs is of central importance. But insofar as the prevailing medical consensus and the culturally-based remedy are often incompatible, the physician faces a dilemma in adjudicating the bounds of their duty. Even factoring their own knowledge gaps, can a physician in good faith make allowances for a patient to pursue a remedy they regard as harmful?

Discussion Questions

1. Do healthcare providers have an obligation to correct patients on their beliefs, or does the duty of care not apply unless the remedy in question is established to be harmful?
2. Does culturally sensitive care look different for mental health than it does for other healthcare? Are the ethical issues different?
3. Suppose a patient believes that malevolent spirits caused their epilepsy. The physician prescribes mainstream medical treatment and the patient also undergoes a traditional ritual. If the condition is cured and the patient attributes it to the ritual, is this a bad outcome? How should the physician respond?
4. Should the phenomenon of distrust in the healthcare system ever influence physicians' judgment about medical treatment?

Further Explorations

"Alternative medicine – What are the medico-legal concerns?" *Canadian Medical Protective Association.* December 2021.
https://www.cmpa-acpm.ca/en/advice-publications/browse-articles/2021/alternative-medicine-what-are-the-medico-legal-concerns
"Traditional wellness and healing." *First Nations Health Authority.*
https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/health-system/traditional-wellness-and-healing
"Traditional medicine provides health care to many around the globe – WHO is trying to make it safer and more standardized." Ling Zhao and Paul D. Terry. *The Conversation.* September 6, 2023.
https://theconversation.com/traditional-medicine-provides-health-care-to-many-around-the-globe-the-who-is-trying-to-make-it-safer-and-more-standardized-212502

Case 3 | Fighting for Peace

Pacifism is a broad label that ropes together a family of anti-violence positions. Commitments to peace have roots in many overlapping intellectual, religious, and spiritual traditions. Pacifism is generally a minority and countercultural viewpoint, defended by activists, social critics, and conscientious objectors who aim to model non-violence and resist powerful currents of violence, militarism, and domination widely accepted by others. Whether arguing about rights to self-defense when we are threatened or our justifications for political violence, pacifists generally challenge us to critically reconsider how well (and how often) we have ethical permission to resort to coercive force and domination to achieve our ends. What role does pacifism play in our current discussions of violence, war, and moral integrity?

Absolute pacifists condemn killing and war altogether, without exception. Conditional pacifists, in contrast, broadly aim to limit the 'legitimate' uses of violence, often to quite exceptional circumstances. Pacifists' arguments may rely on strong duties to protect innocent bystanders in conflict, whenever and wherever possible. If all collateral damage (unintended destruction, civilian harm) is outlawed, so is a lot of war. Advocates of humanitarian military interventions force, however, also aim for civilian protection. They could charge pacifists with aiming to "keep their own hands clean" while leaving the hard work of resisting tyrants and injustice to others. A pacifist might respond that commitments to peace are not rooted in passive avoidance of conflicts, but involve serious commitments of their own to long-term strategies requiring work, courage, and sacrifice. How should we think about the benefits and risks of promoting peace or taking a non-violent path when you don't have good reason to think your enemy will refrain from using force?

Pacifism can also be grounded in philosophical skepticism about the usual motivations, impacts, and justifications for violence. The powers-that-be or military industrial complex could be untrustworthy, or even eager to fight for profit or glory in ways that could skew our responses to conflicts. Are we sure that we have to use violence or the credible threat of violence to maintain order, whether on the streets or in the world? What experiments are relevant or possible to gain knowledge about when violence is necessary?

Discussion Questions

1. Given human nature and history, is a world without war even conceivable?
2. Under what circumstances would you kill in self-defense? What principles or considerations justify your choice?
3. Peace may require cultural transformation in our widespread attitudes and tendencies toward violence. Who is able to start or weigh in on that change?

Further Explorations

"Ethics Guide - Pacifism." *BBC.* 2014. https://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/war/against/pacifism_1.shtml

"Canada and the First World War - Peace Activists." *Canadian War Museum*.
https://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/voices-for-peace/peace-activists/

"How can young people become actors of peace?" *UNESCO.* November 8, 2023.
https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/how-can-young-people-become-actors-peace

Case 4 | The Great Canadian Potato Rescue and You

Food waste contributes to food insecurity, while also costing a tremendous amount of money and increasing greenhouse gas emissions. Besides its impacts, we all agree that it is unethical to waste food while others don't eat enough. Yet, we waste food all the time, for many different reasons, from individual household waste due to spoilage to food being wasted while it is being distributed or produced inefficiently. Stopping food waste is also very difficult. In 2023, a Manitoban farmer found that he had more than 10 million pounds of surplus potatoes. It took tens of thousands of dollars and an army of volunteers to distribute the potatoes to soup kitchens and shelters all over North America in an effort CBC dubbed "the Great Canadian Potato Rescue". If preventing food waste from one farm requires this amount of funds and coordination, how can we reasonably expect to curb food waste?

Any proposed solution to food waste should take into account the costs it introduces. One way we might be able to have a lot of impact at a low cost is by shifting the culture around consumption. Most of us are used to having a lot of choice at our grocery stores in terms of the kinds of food available, but this surplus of choice is a major contributor to food waste. North Americans in major cities are also generally selective about what counts as food: for example, internal organs of animals are considered a waste byproduct of meat processing, but many cultures around the world consider them delicacies. Given the potential for tremendous impact on our food systems, should individuals be on the hook for changing their attitudes and behaviours when it comes to food?

Canada has pledged to significantly reduce food waste and has strong reasons to do so: in Canada, at least 1 in 6 children are currently affected by food insecurity. Given the impact of food waste on individuals, societies, and the environment, whose responsibility is it to enact measures to prevent it? And what can we reasonably expect from individual people? In the face of the massive amounts of coordination projects like the Great Canadian Potato Rescue require, are individual changes just small potatoes?

Discussion Questions

1. Should we approach the ethical issues of food waste from an anthropocentric lens, responding to food insecurity in human communities, or from an eco-centric lens, responding to the effects of food waste on the overall environment?
2. Could we scale up volunteer-intensive operations, like the one described in the Great Canadian Potato Rescue, to more consistently use excess food supplies to feed people? Why or why not?
3. What changes in knowledge or attitude do we need to cultivate in order to improve our collective capacity to respond to issues of food waste?

Further Explorations

"Food loss and waste reduction." *UN.* https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-food-waste-day

"Canada's food-waste problem is out of control. Here's how to break the cycle." Josh Domingues. *Maclean's.* October 10, 2023. https://macleans.ca/food-insecurity/flashfood-solves-food-waste/

"A Manitoba farmer had a surplus of potatoes. So he gave millions of them away." Padraig Morgan. *CBC Radio.* May 19, 2024. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/potato-donation-manitoba-1.7206483

Case 5 | Collective Punishment

In the Summer 2024 Olympics, players on the Canadian soccer team were given a significant penalty because of infractions caused by coaches spying on other teams; three coaching staff members were ultimately also given one-year suspensions. Public opinion was divided about whether this punishment was fair, given that players suffered yet did not contribute to and may not have known about the violation. Would it be better to hold individuals accountable only for their own conduct and choices?

In the last several years, the International Olympic Committee has imposed bans in order to enforce anti-doping regulations and oppose human rights abuses. Bans send a strong message that violations will not be tolerated, and all are encouraged to uphold and enforce shared rules. Yet bans leave many individual athletes to suffer consequences for issues that lie outside their powers to supervise or correct. Do the benefits of collective punishment compensate for the sense of unfairness it often involves?

In some cases, authorities may threaten punishment of an entire group of suspects in order to identify individuals actually responsible, so they can shoulder the blame. In other cases, though, whole groups may be held responsible for actions undertaken by a few known members merely by association. Under what conditions are punishments that affect blameless parties either reasonable or required?

Group punishments, like extra push-ups or the denial of privileges, generate incentives for team members to value and enforce one another's careful compliance with shared norms. Horizontal influence between peers may be able to encourage rule-following through communication, modeling and support.

In Hogwarts, in the Harry Potter universe, individual students can earn points and demerits when they excel or misbehave and their fellow housemates are rewarded or punished alongside them. Guidelines on military discipline also recommend the strategic use of collective discipline to create the expectation that soldiers rise and fall together, preparing them to undertake serious responsibilities. In what contexts do our interests in working well together generate compelling reasons for setting individual responsibility aside?

Discussion Questions

1. When is it unfair to reward or punish a whole group for the actions of a few?
2. Are there generally better alternatives to collective punishment available for achieving group discipline?
3. What are the risks or benefits of using peer pressure to help one another avoid shared punishment?

Further Explorations

"Group punishment doesn't fix behaviour – it just makes kids hate school." Jeffrey Thomas. *The Conversation.* July 11, 2019. https://theconversation.com/group-punishment-doesnt-fix-behaviour-it-just-makes-kids-hate-school-120219

"Was FIFA penalty on Canadian women's soccer team fair? Poll shows divide." Anja Karadeglija. *Global News.* August 8, 2024. https://globalnews.ca/news/10687540/canada-soccer-drone-spying-penalty-poll/

"Facing scandal and condemnation, Russia fields tiny Olympic team in Paris." Brian Mann. *NPR.* July 26, 2024. https://www.npr.org/2024/07/22/nx-s1-5048559/russia-summer-olympic-paris-team-small-scandal

Case 6 | Duties to Parents

Is it ethically appropriate to enforce duties of care? Some believe that children 'owe' their parents for the sacrifices and effort involved in birthing and raising them. As children and parents age, the burden of care is often inverted. Do adult children have duties to parents to honour and repay this original debt? Does it matter that we do not enter into such exchanges voluntarily? No one, after all, asks or agrees to be born. Many cultural and spiritual traditions celebrate dutiful, lifelong bonds of care, but we usually don't automatically assume that living up to cultural ideals is morally required. When are we ethically obligated by our family roles?

In 2010, a British Columbia man was served with court papers asking him to contribute to the support of his aging mother under the province's seldom used filial duty laws. But he had not seen his mother in sixteen years, since he was effectively abandoned by his parents when he was fifteen. Can we effectively or fairly enforce care? Not all adult children are in a position to help out financially, and parents have different needs. Not all families remain close and connected. What is owed by someone who supported themselves without much help from parents?

In specifying duties of care, it is important to look at different ways obligations might be met: monetary support, one's own time and labour (care work), and respect, affection, and consideration. Simply writing a cheque to cancel a debt here – or asking someone else to step up to a caring role in that way - may not be the only way to care, and may not be enough. Can we owe someone love? Are there risks to enforcing filial obligations of care?

Despite the issues with framing duties to parents as a "debt", it is important to recognize the role of piety, duty, and intergenerational care in many of our lives. Many adult children are living with their parents longer in North America, and in China, a large portion of older adults live with an adult child in their domestic arrangements. How we choose to live and care for one another intergenerationally influences our daily lives economic, social, and ethical norms.

If children have no special obligations for their parents' wellbeing, then who is responsible for their ongoing care? In his account of Japanese Bushido ethics, Inazo Nitobē explains that "the interest of the family and of the members is […] one and inseparable": rather than "recogniz[ing] separate interests between father and son", life is given meaning by working for the whole family's benefit. Is asking children to care for their parents an infringement on their autonomy, or is there a compelling case for filial obligation?

Discussion Questions

1. How are our obligations to our parents different from obligations to friends or siblings?
2. Do only children bear more responsibility than kids with many siblings for parents' care and well-being?
3. Are we failing to create social institutions and cultures that support ageing people in ways that leave adult children in a bind that's not of their own making?

Further Explorations

"Payback time for parents." Nancy Macdonald. *Maclean's.* June 24, 2010
https://macleans.ca/culture/payback-time-for-parents/

"The Parents' Maintenance Act." Continuing Consolidation of the Statutes of Manitoba.
https://web2.gov.mb.ca/laws/statutes/ccsm/_pdf.php?cap=p10

"Filial Obligation." Brynn F. Welch. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.* https://iep.utm.edu/fil-obli/

Case 7 | Satire, Memes and Democratic Speech

Democracies confront an ongoing tension between rights and the risks that unrestricted freedom of expression could endanger public safety or undermine political discourse. These tensions are amplified whenever we are navigating new territory for sharing and discussing information, such as memes shared through social media. Memes are units of cultural information spread from person to person. Originally, memes referred to a variety of behaviours or styles learned by imitation that carry symbolic meaning. In contemporary usage, memes refer to works of visual humour, generally shared via social media. Do memes create any new challenges for balancing the fundamental democratic tension between free expression and social risk?

Memes emerge from a satirical tradition; cartoons and caricatures are staples of democratic public life. Past generations' political humour, though, was typically created by professionals working for established presses. In contrast, memes are created by a wider range of actors working outside mainstream channels. Creators may remain anonymous. A traditional caricaturist was likely to be a trained artist working with a team in a studio setting, whereas a meme could come from any person with a smartphone.

Critics of the "memeification of politics" worry that these expressions can become weaponized to fuel antagonism and spread misinformation. Memes might be geared to exploit fears merely to gain attention. Defenders of satire can point to how political humour generally 'punches upwards' to power, humbling our leaders, and helping us avoid hubris and over-seriousness. In societies facing censorship, memes can enable grassroots expressions of solidarity and dissent. Memes can also allow a wide range of content-creators to respond quickly and anonymously to unfolding political situations.

Exaggeration, caricature, and in-jokes work both to reflect and to shape political culture. Do we always know satire when we see it? Critics may worry about the unique potential for memes to somehow distort or corrupt our sensibilities. Do memes privilege attention-seeking humour at the expense of opportunities for sober reflection and fact-checking?

Discussion Questions

1. Should on-line satirical content be age-restricted or labelled so it is not mistaken for "real news"?
2. Can memes be effective tools for social movements?
3. Do risks posed from AI generated content, deep fakes make the critics' concerns about memes any more valid?

Further Explorations

"The surprising power of internet memes." Helen Brown. *BBC.* September 28, 2022.
https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20220928-the-surprising-power-of-internet-memes

"The meme-ification of politics: Politicians & their 'lit' memes." Chris Tenove. *The Conversation.* February 4, 2019.
https://theconversation.com/the-meme-ification-of-politics-politicians-and-their-lit-memes-110017

"Satire can spread online as misinformation. Here's why we still shouldn't label it." Robert Phiddian. *The Conversation.* June 13, 2024. https://theconversation.com/satire-can-spread-online-as-misinformation-heres-why-we-still-shouldnt-label-it-232160

Case 8 | Votes for Young People

Why do Canadians currently get to vote at age 18? Recently, for example, Japan has lowered its voting age from 20 to 18 and Austria has lowered its voting age from 18 to16. Both nations have experienced high rates of youth voting participation. Advocates of lowering the voting age point to its potential to increase long-term voter turnout by establishing voting habits early. They claim that 16- and 17-year-olds already have all or most of the necessary civic knowledge, skills, and cognitive ability to vote responsibly. After all, many drive, work, and pay taxes already. Teens are often already interested in politics, and they have high stakes interests in emergent issues, social opportunities, and economic development. Lowering the vote could further the historical march for democratic representation. A significant youth vote could force politicians to address their specific concerns.

At Canada's confederation in 1867, the voting age was 21, which was also the standard voting age for most democracies at that time. Canada experimented with lowered age limits under influential pressure from young people engaged in military service and political life. The voting age was ultimately lowered to include everyone over 18 in 1970, as part of a global movement.

A new demand to lower the age for voting is currently underway. Perhaps younger voters can reverse declining democratic participation. Lowering the age of voters might result in a "trickle up" effect, with younger people energizing their families and communities to become more civically engaged alongside them.

Critics object that 16- and 17-year-olds are not ready, knowledgeable, responsible, or mature enough to be given the vote. Many are still developing cognitive and emotional skills that are relevant to political analysis and decision-making. They lack real-world experience. Besides, voting is only one form of political participation and power. Perhaps there are other forms of expression and influence that should be considered for youth empowerment first.

What kind of credentials do you think should be required of voters? Could a system that privileges votes from those with knowledge and expertise, called an epistocracy, lead to a more effective democratic system? Would letting 16- and 17-year-olds vote make any significant difference to Canadian politics, or to young people?

Discussion Questions

1. How valid is the concern that people under 18 are not mature enough to vote?
2. Would lowering the voting age change the way we approach civic education? Do youth have specific issues to put on the table, politically?
3. Should this discussion be framed in terms of encouraging healthy democratic habits or defending young people's right to political participation?

Further Explorations

"Why the voting age needs to be lowered to sixteen." Aymaan Abid. *The Walrus.* January 24, 2023.
https://thewalrus.ca/teen-walrus-voting/

"Why lowering the voting age in Canada is such a good idea." Christina Clark-Kazak. *The Conversation.* April 6, 2022.
https://theconversation.com/why-lowering-the-voting-age-in-canada-is-such-a-good-idea-180108

"House of Commons debates lowering the voting age for Canadians." Aya Al-Hakim. *Global News.* May 5, 2022.
https://globalnews.ca/news/8808934/house-of-commons-voting-age-canada-elections/

Case 9 | Leisure and Labour

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" You must have heard that question in the past. What kind of work we do, or what keeps us busy, makes up a huge part of our identity, and a huge chunk of our lives. Economist John Maynard Keynes is often credited with the prediction that in 2030, people will work 15-hour workweeks. In 2024, the average Canadian worked 35.8 hours a week, which is a slight decline from previous decades: we are a little closer to Keynes' 15-hour work week, but not by much. Should work play such a central role in our lives?

Of course, we need to work to earn money and afford necessities in life. And sometimes work can be a source of meaning and fulfillment in life, but sometimes it can take time away from activities where productiveness isn't the main goal. If you can imagine that you didn't need to work to afford necessities in life, and if we were to split our activities into two broad categories of "work" and "leisure", in a good life, how much time would we spend on work, and how much on leisure?

"Work" comes in many forms: the typical modern example of work is a job. But it is possible to work outside of a job: for example, many full-time students work to meet their academic goals, even though "being a student" isn't a job in the same way "being a teacher" is. And some activities are certainly laborious, but not always considered work: examples include raising a child, volunteering for a cause, and writing the next great Canadian novel. Even though work is hard to define, we often contrast it with concepts like play (activities whose goal is primarily entertainment) or leisure (free time during which one doesn't have obligations).

Many cultures view industriousness and hard work as signs of a virtuous person. Aristotle compares leading a virtuous life to the work of a craftsperson, requiring a lot of effort to continuously improve oneself. Even in areas of life outside of work, we often think having a hard-working attitude or a "good work ethic" is helpful: if you are learning a language just for fun, or trying to express yourself through painting, having a structured attitude toward it will help you achieve those aims.

On the other hand, a lot of thinkers criticize how work-focused our culture is. In his famous essay, "In Praise of Idleness", Bertrand Russell declares that while working a certain amount is necessary for our existence, it is not one of the goals of human life, so we should spend less time working and more time engaging in leisure. Some modern thinkers, like Elizabeth Anderson and David Graeber, think that a lot of work being done today is not necessary, or even harmful to workers' well-being.

We might be at a unique historical turning point to make work more meaningful for humans. As our society hangs at the precipice of another potential labour revolution brought on by AI, which promises to automate so much of the work being done today, we must examine where work fits in our life. What sorts of work should we be trying to automate? Which jobs are humans doing "just to pay the bills" and which ones fill human life with meaning?

Discussion Questions

1. Is hard work inherently valuable?
2. How do we decide on the value of different kinds of work? Should we pay wages for traditionally unrecognized kinds of labour like house work or child-rearing?
3. What is the relationship between work and leisure? Is leisure something we earn by working?
4. Are you better off filling up your schedule with homework and extracurriculars? Or are you better off not having a lot of responsibilities?
5. Would we be better off if we automated our work? Does it matter what we do with the newly-freed-up time?

Further Explorations

"In praise of idleness." Bertrand Russell. *Harper's Magazine.* October 1932.
https://harpers.org/archive/1932/10/in-praise-of-idleness/

"Rethinking the work ethic: On Elizabeth Anderson's 'Hijacked.'" Helen Hester. *Los Angeles Review of Books.* January 29, 2024.
https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rethinking-the-work-ethic-on-elizabeth-andersons-hijacked/

"Idler Q&A." Joshua Glenn. *HiLoBrow*. September 18, 2011. https://www.hilobrow.com/2011/09/18/idler-qa/

Case 10 | They're Just Not My Type

Most of us have *acquaintances* from all sorts of different backgrounds. But think about your *friend group*: do most of your friends come from a similar background to you? Do you think it matters?

We all look for particular traits in our friends, partners, and other close relationships. Some traits seem universally desirable in all sorts of relationships, such as kindness and honesty. Some traits generally matter more to some relationships, and less to others: it might not matter that much to you that your friend is hardworking, but you might value that trait more in a lab partner. And for some other traits still, they might vary greatly by importance: when looking for a romantic partner, physical attractiveness may matter, or having similar values and experiences. So when it comes to close relationships, such as making friends and dating, what traits should factor into our decisions about who we surround ourselves with? And are there any we should be wary of?

For example, take Jenny. Jenny is a wealthy, white high school student who was born and raised in the city she now goes to school in. When confronted about the homogenous nature of her friend group, Jenny claims that she does not have enough in common with her peers who haven't grown up in the rich part of her town to bond with them. She claims that she 'can't help' where she was raised, or what kinds of traits motivate her to pursue friendship. We might think that there is something 'off' about Jenny's choice in friends. Does Jenny have a moral obligation to diversify her friend group? Why or why not?

Next, take Nova. Nova does not have the kind of privilege Jenny does. Nova is an immigrant, and a person of colour, born and raised - until recently - in Riyadh. She feels that people like Jenny do not understand her experience of the world, and she often finds herself "code switching" in order to fit in. She finds that amongst her white, non-immigrant peers, she either has to hide parts of herself or spend all of her time explaining herself using language that doesn't properly capture her experiences. She can't just *be*. Hanging out with people like Jenny is exhausting for Nova, so she consciously makes an effort to distance herself from her white, non-immigrant peers, and she, like Jenny, forms a friend group of people whose background and experiences are similar to hers. Is there a difference between Nova's situation and subsequent obligations, and Jenny's?

Finally, take Craig. Craig has a diverse group of friends, but he only goes on dates with people who come from one cultural background and have a certain body type, claiming that they're his 'type.' While his friends think there is something slightly 'off' about this, they refrain from saying anything because trying to argue with someone's 'type' seems to have problematic implications.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it generally better to diversify one's friend group?
2. What differentiates Jenny from Nova? Does Jenny have a moral obligation to diversify her friend group? What about Nova?
3. Do we have a responsibility to interrogate where our tastes in people come from?
4. In what cases, if any, do we have a responsibility to challenge our tastes in people? Do Jenny, Nova, or Craig hold this responsibility? Why or why not?

Further Explorations

"Newcomers and Canadian high school students are friendly, but not friends." Xu Zhao. *The Conversation.* July 23, 2019. https://theconversation.com/newcomers-and-canadian-high-school-students-are-friendly-but-not-friends-111453

""Does the heart simply want what it wants?" A conversation with Amia Srinivasan." Adam Ferner. *The Philosopher.* https://www.thephilosopher1923.org/post/does-the-heart-simply-want-what-the-heart-wants