

The Culling

In August 2015, the city of Ann Arbor, Michigan, implemented a deer cull. The cull aims to significantly decrease the population of deer, in effort to reduce car accidents, to mitigate the damages to wildlife and horticulture, and to stop the spread of Chronic Wasting Disease, a neurological disease that affects elk, moose, and deer. To achieve this, the city outsourced the job to a company called White Buffalo. Methods used to reduce deer population were sharpshooters, and sterilization. But before these measures were taken, an extensive analysis of the Ann Arbor deer population was done, starting with a helicopter search, then setting up cameras. The cameras captured a total of 2144 deer roaming around the 28.7 square miles of Ann Arbor, which is split up into 5 wards. Wards 1 & 2 were mostly parks and were inhabited by the most deer, as opposed to the other wards that were civilized or not immensely deer populated. The city wished to make as many people happy as possible, but this proved to be very difficult. A lawn sign campaign was launched with the message “Stop The Shoot”.

The people who opposed the cull argued that the detrimental effects on personal horticulture should not be considered as significant, stating that grazed flowers do not warrant killing deer. Another argument against the cull was that we have moved in on the deer’s land, and they are only a “pest” because of our actions. Another concern was how the deer would be dealt with, lethally and non-lethally. There was one case of a deer who was euthanized after showing signs of distress a few days after sterilization.

In their report the hunters claimed that it is hard to hunt in Ann Arbor because of how “built out” it is. There is a seamless marriage with civilization and forest. For example, Nichols Arboretum, a renowned park in Ann Arbor, is in close proximity with downtown campus and a neighborhood. This restricts the amount of huntable land in the arboretum. The cull has killed a total of 236 deer, and sterilized 54. With this being the second year, White Buffalo stopped below the quota, 96 out of 100 deer killed and 54 out of 60 deer sterilized, as meeting the quota was deemed less important by reopening the parks.

This year the cull cost a total of \$258,545 with lethal and sterilization efforts. But if only lethal methods were used, it would have been only \$161,795. This would still have exceeded the original \$145,000 budgeted for the cull, including vendor prices for the lethal and nonlethal methods, shooting up to 100 deer, surgically sterilizing up to 60 deer, plus doing vegetation impact studies and other data collection. These studies will prove the effectiveness of the cull, though it will take a few years before a verdict will be reached.

Should the city continue the cull?

Study Questions:

1. Do the deer deserve any special treatment because they inhabited the land first?
2. Do the current effects of deer justify the cull?
3. Does the deer to land ratio justify the cull?
4. Do the deer have fundamental rights?
5. What “fundamental rights” are of concern here?
6. Is there a “humane” way to kill animals? At all?
7. Is the unsure nature of the cull outweighed by the possible outcomes?
8. What is the urgency of the cull? Should more time be allotted to collect data and theorize effectiveness?

A License for Parents

On August 12 2016, Jennifer Denen and her boyfriend Clarence Reed were charged with domestic battery after Denen's daughter was found bruised and malnourished when police arrived to the family's home in Hot Springs, Arkansas. When asked for her name, the girl replied "idiot", evidently because this was how she was called at home. Denen and Reed were charged with child abuse.^[1]

Child abuse is one of the most prominent social issues in our contemporary society. The National Children's Alliance reports that approximately 700,000 children are abused in the U.S. each year –and that in 78.1% of the cases the abusers are the parents.^[2]

A potential solution for the staggering rates of child abuse may be parental licensing – requiring a license for anybody who wishes to have and/or raise a child, similar to a driver's license. This idea was first introduced by author and philosophy professor Hugh LaFollette in 1980 in his article *Licensing Parents*.^[3]

Proponents, such as authors Peg Tittle^[4] and Andrew Cohen^[5], as well as LaFollette, argue that parental licensing would drastically reduce child abuse cases such as Jennifer Denen's and would lead to better parenting in our society, creating better citizens and minimizing crime. Moreover, both adoptive and foster parents are required to possess certain qualities in order to become eligible as potential parents.^[6] It only seems logical, then, that similar criteria be required of biological parents as well. Advocates of parental licensing also reason that more potential parents would be encouraged to take parenting classes, such as those currently promoted by institutions like hospitals, high schools, and recreation programs, if licensing were required. This argument asserts that a license would increase the number of healthy families and would help both children and parents live happier lives.

Some, however, believe that legalizing a required parental license would be a violation of natural rights, and that it is not government's role to intervene in cases relating to familial issues. In Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it is stated that "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family".^[7] The right to have a family is thus natural, and constraining it would be unethical. Others think the government shouldn't intervene in cases concerning family since government institutions, such as the police and Child Protective Services, lack an understanding of the specifics and subtleties of each case and are unlikely to make good, informed decisions. This point of view is supported by the famous case of a couple in Maryland, Alexander and Danielle Meitiv, who were charged with neglect after a pedestrian called Child Protective Services when they saw the Meitiv children, aged six and ten, walking home from the local park without an adult.^[8]

Lastly, some assert that, although parental licenses may be a good idea in theory, the implementation of licenses would be unethical in practice. A license should, in theory, filter out unsuitable potential parents by identifying those who are not able to pass the requirements, such as tests or background checks. In reality, however, it would be challenging to decide exactly what "suitable parenting" is, and to agree upon a standard that would promote better parenting without excessive conformity. Furthermore, it would be difficult to implement a fair test of parental ability that would not discriminate against any minority groups. Cultural styles of parenting may vary, and the notion that some of those styles may be deemed "bad" is discriminatory and incredibly worrying.

Study Questions:

- (1) Is parenting a natural right?
- (2) What is the exact distinction between conceiving and parenting a child in terms of rights? Is it possible to have the right to conceive but not the right to raise a child?
- (3) What are the obligations of a parent to their child? How does the responsibility of parenting interact with the right of parenting? Do the two ever oppose each other?
- (4) How can we decide upon the definition of good parenting?
- (5) How involved should the state be when it comes to regulating parenting?

Dangerous Liaisons

Recently, you have noticed that one of your friends, Phil, has been acting depressed and making frequent jokes about suicide. When this behavior persists, you decide to report him to Student to Student, or 'S2S', a student run help group. The purpose of this group is for students to help their peers who have shown signs of depression. You go to fill out a report regarding Phil's behavior, which includes behaviors such as aggressiveness and verbal abuse, as well as his attitude towards his girlfriend and his fear that she is always cheating. When you are filling it out you decide not to include your name on the report, for you feel that remaining anonymous would be best for the friendship. About a week later, Phil is called to the S2S office to discuss what is on the report, where they show him the handwritten report. He immediately recognizes your handwriting and later accuses you of reporting him. When he accuses you, he is very aggressive. In the past, he has been verbally abusive to you in a way that has reduced you to tears and caused you to have panic attacks. Out of fear, you deny that you were involved. He ignores your response and continues to be aggressive and abusive towards not only you, but to anyone else who he thinks could possibly have been involved. You wonder if reporting him was the right course of action and whether or not you should remain friends with Phil.

Phil has been your friend for a long time and you want to be there for him, but trying to help him has had negative effects on you. You find the situation extremely stressful and you are unsure of what to do. Because of this, you have had difficulty trying to eat or sleep. You have had difficulty focusing in school and your grades are starting to slip. It has also taken a toll in your sport, where you have been letting down your coaches and team. You have started avoiding Phil altogether.

You and Phil have multiple mutual friends and you wonder how ending your friendship with him will impact those relationships. You feel that the loss of these friends would worsen your already stressful sophomore year. Additionally, you are worried how Phil will react if you confront him about his behavior towards you. It has only been verbal abuse in the past, but his behavior is so unpredictable that you fear that he will not hesitate to cross the line between verbal and physical abuse.

You also feel that S2S did not handle the situation in a way that benefitted Phil. In fact, you feel they negatively affected the situation. Their discussion with him only made him angry and more likely to lash out. They also showed him the handwritten report and you think they should have known that Phil might recognize your handwriting. Not only are you afraid of telling anyone for fear that it may get back to Phil, but you have also lost faith in your school's student aid programs. You feel that S2S is partially responsible for the situation you are in, which is worse than the situation before you tried to get help for Phil.

1. Should you tell Phil that you reported him and try to salvage the friendship?
2. Was it ethical to report Phil or should you have talked directly to him?
3. How would the situation change if you had noticed signs of physical self-harm?

Elections and Legislature

You are a newly elected district representative in your state legislature. You like your job as a legislator and you believe that you are doing meaningful work for your community. Legislators in the United States of America are elected by the popular vote of the citizens. This system is meant to ensure that public policy adheres to the will of the people. It is quite well-accepted and popular, but in many countries, states, and districts, different interpretations of the same fundamental theory come into conflict.

One area where conflict occurs is the controversy over the duties of a representative. The Delegate Model of Representation holds that an ideal legislator is one who acts as a spokesperson for the people they represent. This model contrasts with the prevailing American one, the Trustee Model, in which the ideal representative makes decisions based on what they believe best serves their constituents, regardless of public opinion.

Proponents of different interpretations also disagree over the propriety of allowing a candidate to win with only a plurality of votes. (A plurality is the largest minority within an electorate where there is no majority.) Since most American districts send only one representative to the legislature, it is possible for a district to be represented solely by a legislator who was opposed by a majority of voters. This is often denounced as undemocratic and unfair.

In a few days, your legislature will vote on a controversial policy bill. Your party and voters are in favor of the policy under consideration, and you yourself genuinely believe that it will benefit the citizens of your state. However, you were elected by a plurality in your district's last election, and most of the people who didn't vote for you are opposed to the policy. Because of this, polling indicates that just over half of all your constituents are opposed.

You are unsure of your duties as a representative. Supporters of your political ideology encourage you to vote in favor of the bill, arguing that your district has elected you to vote as you see fit. But others disagree, believing that your opinions are irrelevant; you are obligated to adhere to the will of the people you represent, who are predominately opposed to the bill. Still others argue that your primary duty is to your own voters, who voted for you in part because they believed you were in favor of the policy.

Study Questions:

- 1) For whom should legislators speak? Their constituencies as a whole? Their voters? Themselves?
- 2) How would you vote in the above scenario? Why?
- 3) How would your answer to the previous question change if the majority that opposed the policy you condone consisted largely of your own voters?
- 4) Is it acceptable to allow a minority of voters to elect a candidate? If not, what alternative is preferable?

Family First

Shawn is a successful senior in high school who will be attending a prestigious four-year college. He credits his success to his family who have pushed him to be the best he could be. Shawn is the only child of his family and his parents invest every cent they get to make sure Shawn has a happy and successful future. Shawn recalls how his family would scrape up any extra money just so he could get extra notebooks and pencils. He has much respect and love for all the things his family has done for him.

Shawn was born in the United States, however his family are illegal immigrants from Mexico who risked their lives crossing the border so that Shawn could have a happy life. Shawn's family are uneducated, however they work tremendously hard to scrap whatever money they can to help Shawn in his endeavours. Shawn's family wants Shawn to get a good education and high paying job so that he can support them in the future. They are culturally conservative and want to avoid assimilation to the "American" way; they don't allow Shawn to stay over his non-Mexican friends homes or allow him to date outside his race. They want to make sure Shawn also remains close to his roots, so they frequently take him to Mexican festivals and functions so that Shawn can be immersed in his culture. They constantly tell him to not forget the sacrifices they made for him and that they highly depend on him. They have emphasized that if he tries to break off from his culture and marry into another race or not get a high paying job that he would be shun from the family and disowned.

In high school, Shawn is longing to be free from his family. He enjoys spending time with his friends and has recently started dating a white girl. Shawn also has many friends who are not Mexican, and considers them closer to him than his Mexican friends. Shawn lies to his parents and tells them he is going to study at the library when in actuality he is going to hang out with his girlfriend or friends. Shawn loves his Mexican heritage however wants to assimilate to the "American" way. He wants to pursue a relationship with his current girlfriend and wants to discover his own identity. He is also very passionate about becoming a teacher, however his parents would not approve because it doesn't make a lot of money.

Shawn is stuck, as he doesn't know what to do in his life. He feels that he has an obligation to his family to fulfill their needs as they have sacrificed so much for him. On the other hand he feels he needs to pursue his dreams and live his life the way he wants. He is conflicted as his family really needs him and have invested everything into him. However he thinks he is young and needs to experience life the way he wants and not live in the shackles of his parents. He feels that if he leaves that his parents have no way to help themselves as they can't get government assistance and because of their legal status get a job that can support themselves.

1. Is it morally permissible for Shawn to act in his self interest and disregard his parents?
2. How much does the situation that Shawn's parents in should play into his decision making?
3. How do the consequences of him disregarding his self interest, conflict with the consequences on acting in his self interest?

Financial Aid Across Income Brackets

Sarah is a high school senior from Ann Arbor applying to highly competitive colleges and universities. The daughter of a neurosurgeon and a professor of psychology, she has been taught to value education above all else. Throughout high school, she's worked hard; she's taken numerous AP classes, become a leader in many extracurriculars, and gone to summer academic programs at Ivy League colleges. Sarah's older brother is a student at Oberlin College, and she has a younger sister in 10th grade who is similarly accomplished and collegeminded. In March, Sarah is thrilled to learn that she has been accepted to her top two schools, New York University and the University of Michigan. She is less thrilled, however, when she receives her financial aid packages.

Neither New York University nor the University of Michigan grant Sarah any financial aid, meaning she will have to pay the full ticket price for tuition, room and board. The \$71,754 price tag for New York University is too much for Sarah's family, despite their high income. With respect to Michigan, as an in-state student, the tuition is perfectly feasible for Sarah's family. Sarah's family could pay for her to attend NYU; however, with one child already in college, and another entering college in a few years, it would be incredibly difficult for this upper middle class family to pay for Sarah's tuition without taking out loans.

Within a few days, Sarah commits to the University of Michigan, happy with her decision and her future, but still slightly disappointed that a lack of financial aid prevented her from attending her dream school. At lunch the next day, Sarah expresses her mixed feelings to her friends. One of them, Areej, is from a lower income family, her single mother working two jobs as a waitress and a dishwasher. Areej also got into New York University, but unlike Sarah, her financial aid was good news: NYU granted her so much grants, awards, and work-study opportunities that attending New York University in fact costs less for Areej than attending the University of Michigan, even though the latter is a mere ten minutes away.

In expressing her slight disappointment with her forced college decision, Sarah says, "I just wish that NYU would give me more financial aid. My family can't pay \$70,000 per year; it's unfair that poor people get so much financial aid while I get none."

At this, Areej bristles, and questions what Sarah just said. She points out that, given her lower socio-economic bracket, Areej has not had the same opportunities as Sarah, spending her summers working at the local grocery store while Sarah went on mission trips to El Salvador. She also points out that, while Sarah's family cannot afford to send Sarah to NYU without financial aid, if Areej wasn't awarded financial aid, her family could not afford to send her anywhere for college. Sarah defends herself, pointing out the immense financial strain college tuition is placing on her family and the unfairness of the allocation system, then leaves. Areej is left wondering whether there is any merit to Sarah's argument.

- 1.) Is Sarah morally correct to question NYU's allocation of financial aid? Why or why not?
- 2.) Do colleges have a moral obligation to help make attendance at their college financially accessible for people of all income brackets?
- 3.) From a moral standpoint, should colleges evaluate Areej differently than Sarah because of their differences in upbringings and opportunities? Why or why not?
- 4.) Do we have a moral obligation to give all young people equal opportunities, so that they can be on equal footing in realms like college admissions?

Gun Control

The debate on the right to own a gun was never a new topic: it can be traced back to the U.S. Bill of Rights that was written by the nation's founding fathers. At that time, however, guns were extremely expensive and were significantly less dangerous, taking minutes to load a gun, making the issue much less controversial. Presently, guns can be sold to nearly anyone for cheap prices, and each gun has the capacity to kill a group of people in seconds. News reports continue to be filled with various gun violence incidents, especially those of kids such as Andrew Ames and Dylan Kraenzlein of Bay City, Michigan.

According to the Gun Violence Archive, over 30,000 residents of the U.S. died or were injured due to gun violence in 2015. With the modern era expanding the accessibility of guns, it is apparent that gun control is a prominent nationwide issue. The 2nd Amendment protects the people's right to keep and bear arms, and while these rights are not unlimited, gun ownership rights are relatively unrestricted with few gun control laws being passed. Gun laws such as the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 and the Federal Firearms Act of 1938 only restrict gun ownership rights from citizens who are underage, have a criminal record, have been adjudicated as a "mental defective", or have been "committed to a mental institution".

With an emergence of extreme gun violence cases in the news, many people have separated into those who strongly support or oppose gun control laws. Supporters refer to the increasing number of gun violence death in the U.S., and state that more gun control laws would lower the gun violence deaths and also lower U.S. crime rates by restricting gun ownership, especially mass shootings. Tom Diaz is a prominent public speaker on gun control issues, and in his book, *The Last Gun*, he provides alarming examples of younger kids who play with guns owned by adults in their households, often leading to various injuries and deaths. Gun control advocates also state that children exposed to gun violence become desensitized and increasingly violent, with frequent trauma resulting in negative adult behaviours. A restriction on gun ownership would produce less risks and be beneficial for communities as a whole. However, the opposition points out that the the natural rights of protection each person has is infringed upon by gun control laws, and imply too much unnecessary government power. In addition, they believe that while having gun control may result in a decrease in crimes, gun ownership is able to deter crime much better. For instance, in June 2015, when five men broke into Dietta Gueye's home in Detroit, she successfully defended herself with the 9mm Glock she kept in her house. Cases like this have occurred many times before, and the Detroit Police Chief James Craig has applauded homeowners for their actions, stating that "good Americans" with concealed weapons licenses could lower the crime rate by making criminals reluctant to attack them.

It seems necessary for citizens to own guns in order to protect their rights of self-defense, yet little restriction on gun ownership also poses a risk to the nation as a whole, allowing citizens to own guns that could hurt others. It is clear that gun control needs change in order for society to be safer, yet the difficulties lie on the extent of limitations in the right to bear arms. Heavy restrictions could infringe on personal autonomy, and impose too much government power. However, little restriction to gun control allows citizens to be able to take the lives of others.

Study Questions:

1. Is it acceptable for people to have a right that allows them to take lives for the sake of personal safety?
2. Is a restriction on gun ownership ethical when citizens have natural rights of self defense?
3. What is the extent of government power regarding gun control legislation?

Meat vs Morals

Sarah and John are both high school seniors, and have been friends all throughout middle and high school. They share political, religious, and social ideals, and get along very well. To no one's surprise, they have become romantically involved and are falling in love. Sarah recently decided to become a vegetarian, and has explained to John her moral opposition to meat, especially from factory farms, and he seemed supportive.

One weekend, John invites Sarah over to his family's house to work on a school project, and it will be Sarah's first visit. Sarah immediately notices that the walls of John's house are lined with trophy heads of various game. Sarah asks John, and he says that his parents are avid hunters and overall big meat eaters. While there, John's parents invite Sarah to stay for dinner, as the afternoon is quickly turning to evening and Sarah and John don't know when they will finish the project for school.

However, John's parents are making a special steak dinner in Sarah's honor. Sarah doesn't want to be rude and decline the dinner invitation, but she also does not want to be an inconvenience to John's parents, who are unaware that she is vegetarian. Sarah asks John for advice, and he says that she should just make an exception and eat the steak, since she has been vegetarian only for a few weeks. Sarah believes she should not compromise her moral code just to please John and his family, but she also knows that asking for a vegetarian meal that is not on the menu is rude and may strike John's parents as selfish.

John thinks that Sarah is being too rigid and now disapproves of her newly inflexible diet. John does not understand why Sarah refuses to eat the steak, and Sarah feels like John is being disagreeable and disrespectful of her moral commitments. Sarah feels very strongly about animal rights, and wants to talk to John in more detail about why she is opposed to meat. Sarah points out that John has a moral obligation to think about the consequences of his actions, and what eating meat does to the environment, to his health, and of course to the actual animals that are killed. John disagrees, and says that what matters to him is how the food tastes, and Sarah's good first impression on his parents.

She then points out that according to the USDA, each year 30.6 million cows are killed, along with 8.9 billion chickens, 118.2 million pigs, and 243 million turkeys, just for human consumption.¹ John blows these statistics off, and is adamant that this is not a problem, at least not a problem that Sarah's refusal to eat the steak dinner will solve. There are no ethics involved in deciding what to eat, according to John, because animals don't have rights. However, John does accept climate science and understands that greenhouse gas emissions from anthropological sources are the cause for global warming, and Sarah tries to appeal to this side of the issue. She explains that the agricultural industry, specifically the raising of livestock, is responsible for a conservative estimate of 14.5% of total greenhouse gas emissions, and most of this comes from cattle in the form of methane.² Compared to most other sources of greenhouse gasses like car emissions, livestock produce less total emissions by mass, but methane is a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. In fact, the impact from methane is 25 times greater than that of carbon dioxide by mass, so in Sarah's view beef production is environmentally damaging.³

Sarah seems to like everything about John except for his ignorance of animal rights and his refusal to listen to reason about this particular topic. She is conflicted as to whether she should stay for dinner, or even continue a romantic relationship with John, as this issue is so important to her. John considers himself both moral and environmentally conscious, but Sarah is starting to

disagree, and thinks that she may not be able to continue in the relationship if he isn't at least willing to converse thoughtfully about these topics.

1. What should Sarah do? Should she decline the dinner invitation? Should she compromise her morals and eat the steak, or ask for a vegetarian meal? Does the fact that she is newly vegetarian matter in her decision?
2. Should John and his parents accommodate Sarah's diet and prepare a vegetarian meal specifically for her, despite the added expense and inconvenience? Should the family respect Sarah's moral decision, but not make her a separate vegetarian meal?
3. Is Sarah right in saying that John has a moral obligation to think about the consequences of his actions in regard to what he eats?
4. Should Sarah continue her relationship with John or end it before it develops, because of this large ethical disagreement?

1. <http://usda.mannlib.cornell.edu/MannUsda/viewDocumentInfo.do?documentID=1097>
2. <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/197623/icode/>
3. <https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/overview-greenhouse-gases>

Spheres of Influence

Dylan is an international pop star and has millions of fans around the globe. Dylan's fame makes him a big target for companies that would like celebrities to endorse their products, and who are willing to pay millions for Dylan's support. Dylan, however, does not wish accept these offers as he feels his fans will be easily convinced to buy the products due to his endorsement alone. Dylan likes many of these products and even uses some of them himself, but believes that people should purchase products based on their own assessments of the products' merits and not because he says they should. Dylan has always been a believer in people making choices based on their own beliefs and values. Whether something is a good decision all depends on the person making that decision, and everyone is different. Dylan does understand that most decisions to purchase any product he would endorse does not depend solely on his endorsement but knows that it would be a major factor for most of his fans, a thought that makes him uncomfortable.

However, Dylan is a very charitable person and gives the majority of his money to charities like Make-A-Wish™, Save the Children, and the Polaris Project. There is one charity that is especially close to his heart, Catherine's Corner, a place in Dylan's hometown dedicated to allowing autistic children to experience music. The program almost shut down due to lack of funding but now, thanks to Dylan's support, the program is stronger than ever and able to serve more people better. Likewise, the other charities he funds are able to very effectively help many people due to his generous donations, but many of these survive almost solely on Dylan's support. He knows this and wishes to continue donating generously to ensure their continued success. Every pop star's singing career has an end, and he feels that his time is approaching fast. The millions in endorsement contracts would allow Dylan to continue funding these charities even after his pop career is complete.

While Dylan is considering all these factors, he receives a call from his agent. Dylan has been offered a 150-million-dollar, five-year endorsement contract with Halden Global Systems. Dylan has always admired this company for their fair business practices, including their commitments to equal pay for women and equal opportunity for minority advancement, and their dedication to use only ethically sourced materials in their products. Furthermore, Dylan find the CEO is “a man after his own heart,” so to say. The CEO, Sara Ellis, is known for funding many charitable organizations out of her own payroll including organizations that work against sex trafficking, child labor, and third-world hunger, and along with those that help refugees who have escaped from the rule of tyrants.

The product Dylan is being hired to endorse is a revolutionary personal translation device that is meant to bridge any gaps created by language barriers. Dylan knows that using his influence to promote the product could result in millions of people who can communicate with people they could barely understand before. Yet, Dylan still feels uncomfortable with the thought that his endorsement would be a major factor for people to purchase. Dylan has been given two weeks to decide before the contract is offered to the company's second choice.

Study Questions:

1. Are Dylan's concerns about his influence being the key factor in people's decision making ethical in nature, or are they matters of personal taste?
2. What are the strongest considerations for or against Dylan taking the endorsement deal?

3. How would this case be different if Dylan was being asked to promote a specific social cause?
4. Under what conditions, if any, should people with public influence publicly support products or ideas?

The “Standardized” Test

Standardized tests were created as a fair assessment to accurately measure college readiness. They provide a way to “level the playing field,” especially during the college admissions process. However, vast inequalities still remain in standardized testing. Students in families of affluence, for around \$1,000, can pay to participate in various ACT and SAT prep programs designed to boost a student’s score. These programs teach test-cracking strategies that save time on test day. A less expensive option is the self-study method: students can purchase books for around \$25-30 that include practice exams and strategies. However, this experience isn’t the same as one-on-one tutoring. Khan Academy provides free SAT preparation online, but this requires a steady internet connection and consistent access to an internet-capable device.

John and Hannah are both very intelligent students. They actively contribute to classroom discussion, and have passion for learning. Both students have the same grade point average, and are both interested in attending the same college. They are actively engaged outside the classroom in service work, musical ensembles, and social justice clubs.

John lives in a two-income household. His parents are both professors at a university in the city that he lives in. Living in an upper-middle class neighborhood, John is an only child, and has never had to worry about whether his parents had enough money to pay for the various programs he participates in. During the fall of his junior year, John’s parents decided to enroll him in SAT and ACT prep courses.

However, Hannah is one of five children. Her single mother is currently paying college tuition for her two older siblings. She has a younger brother and a younger sister. While her mother is at work, she watches them, helps them with their homework, and is responsible for household chores. Additionally, her mother financially contributes to the nursing home care of Hannah’s grandmother with Alzheimer’s. Because of these financial circumstances, Hannah decides that she will self-study for these standardized tests instead.

Most colleges require applicants to submit either the SAT or the ACT. It is one of the deciding factors they use when deciding which applicants to admit. Few are what are known as “test-blind” schools, which means that they do not require standardized testing, but do accept it if the applicant chooses to submit these scores.

If a student is not satisfied with his or her score on a test, he or she can choose to retake it. The ACT allows students to take the exam up to 12 times, and there is no limit on how many times a student can take the SAT. However, this poses a financial burden to the family, because each test is around \$50. Fee waivers are obtainable, but students are only provided with up to two fee waivers per test. That means that if a student wishes to take the test a third time, they will be billed.

When John and Hannah are submitting their college applications, they are both aware that depending on their standardized test scores, they will be deemed more or less wanted by the admissions officers at these schools.

Discussion Questions

1. Should Hannah and John’s scores be weighed equally during the college admissions process?
2. Should colleges consider family income and other circumstances when evaluating standardized test scores?

3. Should a lower limit be set on the number of times a student can take standardized tests? What are the potential benefits? The drawbacks?
4. Do College Board (the organization that distributes the SAT) and ACT have an obligation to no longer charge a fee for these exams?
5. Should standardized testing be removed from the college admissions process altogether?

To be Human

Socrates, Plato, Nietzsche, Confucius, and Turing all had one thing in common; they were philosophers. But in the depths of their wisdom and search for truth they were weighed down by the overwhelming prospect of the unknown, and none more so than Timmy. Timmy is a young boy, new to the world and all of its harsh ways. He does not watch news avidly and is more concerned with having fun and getting good grades. Though this all changes when his grandfather gets ill. His grandfather has lived with his family for as long as Timmy could remember, and life just wouldn't be the same if he wasn't around to talk to or hug in the mornings before he went to school. And he most certainly would miss his grandfather's stories of grand ideas being held by tiny men and how they would pass their knowledge onto their students so as to continue the chase for true knowledge.

One day, Timmy decides that he should go to talk to his grandfather before he passes away, as he has just taken a turn for the worse, and say his goodbyes. He walks into his grandfather's room and sees a frail old man huddled under the covers, his frame skeleton thin. Every part of his body was aged and cracked as if he were a desert experiencing a drought. But his eyes were alight. He was staring out at the sunny day and studying a tree as if it were the reason the moon set and the sun rose.

"Grandfather?" Timmy asked, "How are you feeling today?"

Instead of replying, his grandfather sat up slowly in bed and turned his body towards the window.

"That tree doesn't have very long" he rasped, "I'd give it a day or two at most."

At this point he noticed Timmy in the room and he broke into a smile.

"Come on over my boy, I have something to show you."

Timmy gingerly sat on the bed next to his grandfather and gazed out at the tree.

"Do you see this tree?" He made a swooping gesture towards the tree, "It was planted by your father when he was just a boy like you. It wasn't much to look at. I thought it was going to die in a month!" at this he smiled, "Yet, it grew. It blossomed and grew and grew. Eventually it began to plant seeds of its own and they grew and grew. But, harsh winters took them or they were shaded by the branches of their creator, or even pulled up by squirrels for a midsummer snack. Nothing more than cells in the face of the universe."

Wow I've never seen him like this before. Timmy thought.

"Now that tree, which has stood so tall, and loved by all of us, is dying. But what else could it have hoped for? Happiness at seeing its seedlings grow? Power at being a conqueror, powerful over all? Or had it gone through what was required of it and now reveled in the prospect of release from its bonds?"

"I don't really follow you grandpa."

"Well do you see there? Look closely now. The leaves that once gave this tree its energy and food are now the food for the earth. To slowly be swallowed into the soil where it will nurture the hungry roots of saplings that might grow in its place."

"But grandpa," Timmy said, "What was the point if everything the tree did was to die and care for other trees that would just do it all again?"

"Well look at it this way. Let's say you were going to face a really strong soccer team you knew you were going to lose against." He knew how much the boy loved soccer "There is

no conceivable way of winning against them, everyone else says so therefore it must be true. So, you and your team decide to give up and walk away. But how would you know that the people that told you about the odds of the game weren't lying, or were just pessimists themselves?"

"I suppose there would be no real way of knowing, unless you were to investigate the situation and try to come up with an understanding for yourself."

"The same is true with this tree. It knows that it will die, as will everything in this world. But, it at least tried to survive long enough to find a happy creed for itself instead of just quitting and accepting fate."

"But wouldn't its life have been better if it had just tried to forget about a creed and live its life like it was meant to be?"

"That's the question, isn't it?"

With that the last leaf dropped, and his grandfather slept.