

## Case Studies

The purpose of case studies is to give students an opportunity to apply the theoretical and practical tools they are learning in their ethics courses. The wise use of case studies is also a powerful tool to teach and practice logic and reasoning skills in the context of moral decision-making. When done thoughtfully, case studies can help students increase their empathy for others and even uncover their own unexamined assumptions, implicit biases, and harmful stereotypes.

Case studies can be effectively used to generate class discussions, or as content for individual or group projects and presentations. They can be used to provide topics for research papers. Case studies are also effectively used to set up in-class debates between students. Perhaps more importantly, case studies can teach students collaborative ways to find creative solutions to moral issues and create greater human flourishing in both the present and future.

Below is a template that I have successfully used to prepare students to compete in the Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. It can be used to help students think through case studies and prepare and make effective presentations. The template helps students analyze the case and suggest possible courses of action by identifying the morally relevant facts, stakeholders, and ethical issues involved in the case. Of course, there are many different approaches to analyzing cases, and this is just one suggestion. An excellent article on using case studies is “Creative Case Studies in Ethics” by Michael Strawser, in *Teaching Ethics* 11.1 (Fall 2010).

Before presenting the template, a few definitions are in order:

Here are some definitions to help us see the moral dimensions of our experience of being human and to help us understand where we have obligations and what we ought specifically to do in any particular situation.

**Moral Ought vs Prudential Ought:** a binding obligation vs a good or useful idea.

**Moral Patient:** Any being who deserves moral consideration, and so whose welfare counts when it comes to ethical decision-making.

**Moral Wellbeing:** The preservation and extension in a positive way the life of the moral patient. To do so essentially means to guarantee to each moral patient safety, security, respect, and meaningful freedom.

**Moral Stakeholder:** A moral patient whose welfare will be benefited or harmed in this specific case.

**Moral Agent:** Any moral patient who can have moral obligations, can give consent, and can make moral choices.

**Moral Community:** The community of all moral patients.

**Moral Issue:** A dispute, or conflict with at least two distinct sides, sometimes called stakeholders, whose interests are in conflict, and each side has a real interest in the resolution of the dispute or conflict in their favor. The distinct sides (stakeholders) can refer to separate and independent entities or the present and future interests of a single ontologically distinct entity. An interest refers to the present or future wellbeing of some ontologically independent entity. Two conditions generally evoke a moral issue: one, where the action or inaction of a moral agent will either benefit or harm the moral welfare of a moral patient. Two, the moral patient has an interest in having its existence preserved and extended in a positive way.

### **The Template**

**I. Get the Facts:** What are the three most relevant facts of the case? Which facts might need to be researched?

Fact 1:

Fact 2:

Fact 3:

Facts to be researched:

**II. Identify the Stakeholders:** What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Find three key stakeholders. Generally, there are two obvious stakeholders with an obvious conflict, but think outside the box for the other potential group or individual with a stake or interest in the successful resolution of the issue. Do some have a greater stake because they have a special need or because we have special obligations to them? List the stakeholders and identify any with a privileged position. A stakeholder may or may not be a moral agent, but they

are moral patients.

Stakeholder 1:

Stakeholder 2:

Stakeholder 3:

### **III. Identifying the Moral Issue:**

A. What's wrong from the point of view of each stakeholder?

Stakeholder 1:

Stakeholder 2:

Stakeholder 3:

B. What are the all the competing moral values of the stakeholders? List all relevant values.  
(See list of moral values below)

C. What moral value does each stakeholder seem to prioritize?

Stakeholder 1:

Stakeholder 2:

Stakeholder 3:

D. Where is the conflict or clash of values?

### **IV. Identify some approaches:**

What are three possible options for acting? What are three pros and three cons for each option?

Option 1:

Pros

Cons

Option 2:

Pros

Cons

Option 3:

Pros

Cons

If you were to show your list of options with pros and cons to someone you admire, what would they say? Would they add or subtract anything?

**V. Evaluate Alternative Actions from Four Moral Criteria:** Apply the moral criteria to each option to determine the most morally defensible response to the moral issue question. Keep all stakeholders in mind. (Note you may have the students apply any or all of the moral theories they have been studying in class in place of these generic norms.)

**Respect** (rights approach)

- Honor the autonomy of all—don't interfere with anyone's freedom or rights unless to protect others—each stakeholder can choose for themselves with informed consent and should be treated as an end and not merely as a means to some end.

**Fairness** (justice approach)

- Treat everyone equally and impartially according to some universal and impersonal standard and any unequal treatment must be defended by appeal to some fair standard.
- Avoid extremes and seek the outcome that is good for everyone and benefits the least advantaged.

**Beneficence** (consequences)

- Ensure that the good done outweighs any harm that might result

**Trust** (common good approach—strengthening social bonds)

This response will do the most to increase trust and demonstrate compassion to all affected stakeholders and serve the common good of healthy social relationships.

**VI. Answer the case question.** What is the right thing to do? Why?

**VII.** Determine how to implement the best moral choice with care and attention to the concerns of all stakeholders

Values

Life	Promise-keeping	Responsibility
Liberty	Freedom of opinion	Loyalty
Pleasure	Freedom of religion	Civility
Happiness	Right to Property	Reverence
Honesty	Right to Assembly	Truth
Ability	Right to own firearms	Trustworthy

Order	Safety	Dependable
Equality	Security	Tradition
Family	Education	Self-reliance
Choice	Health care	Independence
Beneficence—helping others	Profitability	Gratitude
Non-maleficence—not harming others	Productivity	Equal rights—equality before the law
Autonomy	Tolerance	Nondiscrimination
Fairness	Ambition	Self-improvement
Opportunity	Beauty	Respect for the law
Merit	Respect	Public Safety
Preference—satisfaction	Dignity	
	Purpose	

### Additional Resources on Case Studies

You can find many excellent case studies that have been prepared for both the Collegiate Ethics Bowl and High School Ethics Bowl at the following sites:

Parr Center for Ethics, UNC: <https://nhseb.unc.edu/case-archive/>

Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE):  
<https://www.appe-ethics.org/cases-rules-and-guidelines>