

Ethics Bowl Session

Case Analysis

Case 3 Billionaire Backfire

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On April 15, 2019, the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris was greatly damaged by a fire.¹ Large donations to help rebuild the cathedral, totaling more than \$1 billion, quickly flooded in from wealthy individuals and major companies. Many people saw these donations as a good thing. After all, it seems important to preserve and protect things with major cultural, historical, and artistic significance.

However, these donations were not universally praised. Critics argued that the wealthy donors should have spent this money on solving larger socioeconomic problems, like homelessness and poverty.² Carl Kinsella expresses this sentiment: "With a click of their fingers, TWO French billionaires have given 300 million to restore Notre Dame. Just imagine if billionaires cared as much about uhhhh human people."³ Proponents of effective altruism (EA) concur with this assessment. According to effective altruists, resources should be directed to charitable causes that will do the most good. In particular, resources should go toward charitable organizations that focus on an issue that meets three conditions: "It's important (it affects many lives in a massive way), it's tractable (extra resources will do a lot to fix it), and it's neglected (not that many people are devoted to this issue yet)."⁴ So, an effective altruist might be inclined to donate to high-impact charities that address homelessness or water quality over rebuilding Notre Dame.

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Some people respond that critics are presenting a false choice between donating to the rebuilding of Notre Dame Cathedral and helping the poor, and that it's reasonable to donate to both. Julia Wise, for example, argues that a person can have many goals: in addition to altruistic goals, we can have personal goals. When it comes to donating to charities, we can donate to causes for personal reasons or altruistic reasons. For example, donating to a friend's fundraiser for a sick relative serves a personal goal of supporting a friend, rather than the goal to make the world a better place in some bigger, impersonal sense. One should not have to feel bad about donating to something that is personally meaningful.⁵

But still, critics might respond, the fact that these philanthropists made such significant donations toward restoring a building when this money could have made a large impact on (and possibly saving) many people's lives does demonstrate that their priorities are misplaced.

How will the judges
score your presentation?

Find Central Moral Dimensions

B. Did the team clearly identify and thoroughly discuss the central moral dimensions of the case? (5 points)

What are “Moral Dimensions”?

—Values or principles
in conflict

Find conflicts in the
case description

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Finding Conflicts

Spending money to solve “larger socioeconomic problems”

V.S.

Spending money to “to preserve and protect things with major cultural, historical, and artistic significance”

“Values” or “principles” in conflict
— *Generalize* the two sides of the
conflict

“Equally meeting basic needs
for all”

V.S.

“Emphasizing quality of life for
a privileged few”

Different ways to generalize
—there you find more
dimensions

“Caring about something
of historical significance”

V.S.

“Caring about something
in the present world”

Don't be too general

Too General:

Altruism

v.s.

Egoism

What makes it too
general?

You need to be able to
argue for both sides with
reasonable arguments.

1. Identify conflicts
2. Generalize them into values and principles
3. Don't be too general

Use study questions to
expand your thoughts

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Study Questions

1. When is someone morally praiseworthy for donating money to a charitable cause? What makes this praiseworthy, when it is?
2. How does one compare the value of artistic, cultural, or historical artifacts versus the value of human life or wellbeing?
3. If you had a million dollars to give to charity, how would you spend it? Does someone who is making a charitable donation have a moral obligation to make sure that their donation will do the most good? Why or why not?

A. Did the presentation clearly and systematically address the moderator's question? (5 points)

Sample Question

Is donating billions to an artifact instead of the poor in the society morally justifiable?

If so, why so? If not, why not?

1. Answer
“the question”

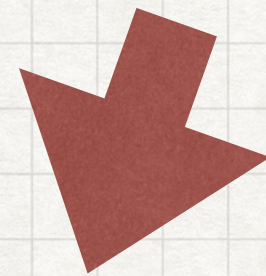
2. Argue for your
position

Your position in Ethics Bowl
doesn't necessarily have to
be your personal opinions.

Example:

- Our team believes that it is morally justifiable to donate billions to the Notre Dame Cathedral instead of the poor.
- The Notre Dame Cathedral is an artifact of great historical and cultural significance which has already lasted and will last for millions of years as a masterpiece of human civilization. The priority should be saving one of our greatest symbols of human civilization, and we surely don't want it to be destroyed because of a failure in our generation. We should consider the big picture.

- Moreover, in theory, forcing the elites to distribute their wealth to the poor doesn't necessarily give a desirable outcome. Consider *Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion*.



You can use moral theories to support your arguments.

If you consider using moral theories, you'll need to explain what the theory is and how it can support your arguments.

For *Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion*: <https://www.ethicsbowl.org/2020/01/07/billionaire-backfire-nhseb-2019-2020-regional-case-11/>

For some other ethical theories: read the
THSEB Moral Reasoning Primer in the Group
Chat

Acceptable:

Personal anecdotes/
statistics/fact check/
research/moral theories...

Consider different viewpoints

C. Did the team's presentation indicate both awareness and thoughtful consideration of different viewpoints, including especially those that would loom large in the reasoning of individuals who disagree with the team's position? (5 points)

Consider to what extent people
with different values or
principles can disagree with you.

Commentary

Response

$Q+A$

Be respectful and
collaborative

Thank you!