

What is a philosophical competition?

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Abstract

Many competitions call themselves philosophical but the question what makes them philosophical has received little attention so far. The reason might be that it seems to have a simple answer according to which a philosophical competition is a rivalry about the best philosophical performance. In the paper, I argue that this answer is too simple. I suggest a richer analysis that defines philosophical competition as a striving play. I apply the richer notion to examples of contemporary competitions for high school students, the International Philosophy Olympiad and debate competitions, in particular the Ethics Bowl. The richer analysis also serves to counter an argument against philosophical competitions.

Keywords

contest, debate, Ethics Bowl, game, International Philosophy Olympiad

Introduction

Several competitions, old and new, call themselves 'philosophical'. Probably the best known of them are prize essay contests. Many of the modern philosophical competitions are for university students, some of them for high school students or for younger school children. What makes these competitions philosophical? This question, which has received little attention so far, is the topic of this article.

Before starting to answer the question, a worry about philosophical competitions in general needs to be addressed. This worry is sometimes put forward in the argument that there cannot be any genuine philosophical competition because, supposedly, the idea of competition is foreign to philosophy as a search for truth. I will argue that the premise in this argument is false.¹ First, the claim is historically incorrect. Second,

¹ One could also object to the premise by claiming that truth is not the aim of philosophy and that something else is, for example clarity, see e.g. Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'Philosophy aims at the logical clarification of thought' (1921/1961, §4.112). But that objection would be a much weaker than the one I present in the article since I go along with the aim attributed to philosophy by the proponent

competition does not exclude the search for truth. The proponent of the argument might reply that their point is not that there cannot *be* any philosophical competition but rather that a philosophical competition is something that we *should not* engage in, especially not with students. This argument seems to rest on a notion of philosophical competition that is too simple. I will argue against the 'simple analysis' of philosophical competition, and I will suggest a richer analysis instead, according to which a philosophical competition is a striving play. I will then apply the richer notion to examples of contemporary competitions for high school students, the International Philosophy Olympiad and debate competitions, in particular the Ethics Bowl.

1. Genuine philosophical competitions are possible

Some high school teachers are skeptical about philosophical competitions, and some are outright against the participation of students in such contests. Some of them argue as follows: there cannot be any genuine philosophical competition because, they claim, the idea of competition is foreign to philosophy as a search for truth.² I have encountered this argument several times in personal correspondence with philosophy teachers. I argue that the premise in this argument is false. First, the claim is historically incorrect: there are many examples of philosophical competitions from the history of philosophy. Second, competition does not exclude the search for truth. It is precisely the opposite: the search for truth can be incited in a contest because it brings people to think about a particular topic they possibly would otherwise not have thought about, and it inspires them to engage more deeply with the topic. To support the first point, I want to present some examples, a speech contest in a Platonic dialogue and different kinds of essay prize contests.

A famous example of a philosophical contest can be found in Plato's *Symposium*. Eryximachus challenges the participants of the banquet to deliver in turn a speech in praise of Eros, the god of love and desire. It is a friendly contest in which the men (Phaedrus, Pausanias, Eryximachus, Aristophanes, Agathon, Socrates, and Alcibiades) try their best. Of course, these speeches, as all other dialogues by Plato, are fiction. Yet, it is very well imaginable that such a contest could have taken place at a real banquet at the time of Socrates. What is important to note here is the following: no conflict is felt by either the author or the participants between the idea of a contest

of the argument. Furthermore, the proponent of the argument could also reply to the objection that other genuine aims of philosophy such as the clarification of thought are part of the search for truth.

² Another argument might be that the idea of competition is in opposition to the cooperative aspect of philosophy (see Ladenson 2001, pp. 75-77).

and philosophy. Each speaker is trying to find an answer to the challenge, and they give the best they can. The result is a series of speeches that try to catch the essence of love. And even though none of the speeches reaches a complete definition as a final answer, each of them points to important aspects of the concept and phenomenon of love. I think it is fair to say that the participants of the dialogue have thereby learned something. They have thus enlarged their knowledge about the subject. The dialogue is a fine example showing that a contest does not exclude the quest for truth but rather inspires it.³

Other examples are the essay prize contests that became popular in the 18th and 19th centuries. These contests were usually issued by scientific societies. For example, the *Academie de Dijon* asked in 1754: *Quelle est l'origine de l'inégalité parmi les hommes et si elle est autorisée par la loi naturelle?* (What is the origin of inequality among people, and is it authorised by natural law?), to which Jean-Jacques Rousseau responded with his famous treatise *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (Discourse on the origin and basis of inequality among men), which did not win the competition. Another famous example is Arthur Schopenhauer's 1836 prize essay on the freedom of the will. In more recent years, at the height of the so-called 'refugee crisis' in Europe, the German association for analytic philosophy (GAP) issued an essay prize competition on the following question: *Which and how many refugees should we receive?*⁴

These essay prize contests focus the activity of a part of the scientific community on a specific question that is taken to be of scientific importance. Not only is there no conflict between the contest and the quest for truth, but the focusing on a particular question of part of the scientific community increases the probability of answers that are closer to truth.

Many contemporary philosophical essay contests are targeted at students. Some of the contests come with a prize money and prestige for the winners. But the pedagogically important point is that they provide an opportunity for students to develop their philosophical skills.

³ Such dialogue must be distinguished from one in which the participants merely aim at scoring points, even at the expense of others, as Socrates explains (*Theaetetus* 167e). I thank an anonymous referee for reminding me of this important addition.

⁴ The best essays were published in Grundmann and Stephan (2016).

The proponents of the argument against genuine philosophical competitions could agree with the claim that genuine philosophical competitions exist. They could claim that their point is rather that there are no good reasons, especially for students, to participate in such a contest. As before, their argument rests on a claim about the proper aim of philosophy: since in a competition the search for truth becomes secondary, if one wants to do proper philosophy, one should not participate in such a competition. Especially, students who are new to the field should not participate.

I think that the premise in this argument is false: the search for truth need not become a secondary aim in a competition. I think the reason for believing that it becomes a secondary aim rests on an analysis of philosophical competition that is too simple. I will try to show why this is so, and I will suggest a richer analysis instead.

2. Philosophical competition as a striving play

What is a philosophical competition? The simple analysis of the concept runs along the following lines: A philosophical competition is a rivalry between two or more participants (the contestants) about who gives the better philosophical performance. The philosophical performance is demonstrated in a philosophical activity in any of its many forms (e.g. philosophical discussion, essay writing, answering philosophical questions, solving philosophical puzzles).

The simple analysis seems to miss important aspects. It suggests that one could win such a competition without caring about the aims of philosophy and the activity of philosophising itself. That seems to be wrong. One cannot detach oneself from the aims of philosophy and still do proper philosophy. One can perform the philosophical activity (e.g. engage in a philosophical discussion, write a philosophical essay) but one will not be doing proper philosophy if one does not follow the aims of philosophy. Therefore, one would not be participating in a philosophical competition if one was not following these aims. If we take the pursuit of truth as the aim of philosophy, we can put the point as follows: it is possible to write a philosophical essay (investigate a question, search for an answer, give an argument in favour of an answer, etc.) but it will not be proper philosophy if one does not aim at truth, that is, if one does not give good arguments, i.e. arguments that give good reasons for the conclusion to be *true*.

But if the simple analysis is wrong, what is the correct analysis? I would like to suggest that participating in a philosophical competition is like, in some sense, *playing a game*. The kind of game playing relevant here is the one that has been defined by Bernard

Suits (1978) as follows: voluntarily engaging in an activity and voluntarily undertaking the obstacles that make this activity possible.

In this broad sense, the notion of a game includes very many different activities. In fact, almost any activity can become a game in this sense. Among the well-known games that are included one can mention ball games such as football, and board games such as chess and Go, but it also includes all the Olympic sports, from athletics to tennis and artistic swimming.

My claim is that taking part in a philosophical competition—and doing proper philosophy in general—is like playing a game in this broad sense. It will help getting a better understanding of the nature of a philosophical competition by contrasting philosophical competitions with other kinds of games. In football, for example, the aim of the game is to score goals. The winner is the team that scores more goals. One would not be playing football if one was not aiming at this. Analogously, one would not be doing proper philosophy if one was not aiming at truth. One could kick around arguments, but one would not be doing philosophy if the aim of the arguments were not truth, in a similar way as one could kick around a ball without playing a football game if one was not aiming at scoring goals.

The analogy with football ends there. There are no goals to be scored in philosophy. It is not the truth itself that must be attained. The truth rather functions as an ideal one *tries* to attain. It is a regulative idea. What matters in philosophy is foremost the quality of the arguments and of conceptual analyses.

Furthermore, in football as well as in many other sports (athletics, swimming, skiing, etc.) it does *not* matter *how* you do it as long as you *do* it (scoring a goal, being faster, jumping higher, etc.); this is not so in a philosophical competition. Here, like in artistic sports (e.g. figure skating), it *does* matter how you do it. In a philosophical competition as well as in an artistic sports competition the performance is in the activity itself, either the *performing* of the action (e.g. debate) or the *result* of the action (e.g. essay).

Competitions in the arts, such as drawing, music, dance, literature, photography, etc., usually require complex skills. The same applies to philosophical competitions. However, the two differ in the following matter. Usually, arts competitions do not have well-defined obstacles or objective criteria of evaluation. Therefore, these are not games in the sense defined above. To determine the winner, they rely on the intuitive judgements of the experienced practitioners as members of a jury. A philosophical competition does have (more-or-less objective) criteria of evaluation such as the

quality of arguments and conceptual analyses. In this sense, a philosophical competition is more like figure skating for which there is a list of criteria that can be assessed individually—however, I must add, the list in figure skating is immensely more detailed than the list in any philosophical competition.

We can now see why the claim is false that in a philosophical competition the search for truth becomes secondary: if a philosophical competition is seen as a game, and if one of the rules of the game is that one aims at truth, then the aim for truth is necessarily part of what it means to take part in a philosophical competition.

But, one might reply, this is not what is meant by the ‘search for truth’. If the search for truth is seen only as a rule of the game, then one can simply engage in pretense, not really personally caring about the truth. What the participants in a competition care about is winning, not truth. The aim at truth becomes merely instrumental to the aim of winning.

I agree that one could only pretend to search for the truth given the analysis of philosophical competition so far. But I think that the analysis is not yet sufficient and still misses one point. This point has been identified in the earlier analysis of the concept of game: it does not yet include the requirement that the activity is itself worthwhile (see Hurka 2006). C Thi Nguyen (2017, p. 125) adds precisely such a requirement to define ‘striving play’: it is striving play when one plays ‘for the intrinsic value of being engaged in that activity or one’s experience of being so engaged.’⁵ My claim is that we must add this condition to an analysis of philosophical competition. We thus arrive at the following result:

A philosophical competition is a philosophical activity (such as a philosophical discussion or a philosophical essay writing) that satisfies the following conditions: (1) the participants engage in it voluntarily, (2) they voluntarily undertake the obstacles that make the activity possible (which includes aims of philosophy such as truth), (3) they participate in it for the intrinsic value of being engaged in that activity or the experience of being so engaged, and (4) they participate in it to show a better performance than the other participants.

⁵ Many sport competitions are not striving play because the activity it involves is of no intrinsic value. For example, as Cox (2019, p. 15) remarks, the attainment in a sport competition such as the one hundred metre sprint is ‘of no value whatsoever’; all that matters is the ranking, that is the comparison with other contestants.

One might want to object to this analysis that (3) and (4) involve a contradiction. One cannot engage in an activity for its own sake and at the same time engage in it for the sake of something else, in this case with the aim of showing a better performance than the other participants.⁶

To this objection my reply is that the contradiction is only apparent. It is not in general true that the aim of performing an activity for its own sake excludes performing it for the sake of something else. There are three different cases to be distinguished. First, there is the case where the activity one performs *is itself another activity one wants to perform*. For example, following Aristotle, we can say that someone performs an action as an end in itself (e.g. playing the flute) and for the sake of something else (e.g. for pleasure and for leading a good life, see *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a-b). The relation between these aims is as follows: to be playing the flute is *eo ipso* to do something that gives pleasure to the flautist which is *eo ipso* to do something that is part of leading a good life. Second, there is the case where what one does is a *complex activity*. For example, we can say that an actor wants *to perform in a particular role*, or we can say that he wants *to perform in a particular role in front of a public*. Which of these is acting for the sake of itself? One could think it is only the first one but the second one may be acting for the sake of itself too: the activity the actor wants to perform is the complex activity of performing in front of a public. Third, there is the case where someone does something *for several reasons*. For example, the actor may perform in front of a public for the sake of himself and at the same time to earn a living, to impress his boyfriend, or any other reason. These reasons do not necessarily exclude each other: One can want to act for the sake of acting and at the same time for the sake of earning a living. This is not the same as someone doing the acting only to earn a living. In such a case the person would quit acting once a better source of income would present itself, while in the first case the person would continue the acting.

Let's now come back to philosophical competitions. The relation between participating in the philosophical activity for its own sake and participating in it for a better performance than the other participants is not like the one in the first case. To participate for the aim of showing a better performance is not *eo ipso* to engage in a philosophical activity, as the possibility of pretense mentioned above in a different context shows. The relation is also not like the one in the second case. What the participant of a philosophical competition engages in for the sake of itself is not the participation in a philosophical competition but the philosophical activity. The

⁶ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this objection.

relation is like the one in the third case: the two are different reasons to participate. They do not exclude each other, and both are necessary for participation in a philosophical competition.

The richer analysis of philosophical competition applies well to the examples from the history of philosophy described in the first paragraph: the speakers in the *Symposium* present their speech both for its own sake as well as to give a better speech than the other contestants; the participants in the essay prize contests do it both for its own sake as well as to win the competition.

I would now like to apply the richer analysis to two contemporary examples of philosophical competitions for high school students, the International Philosophy Olympiad and philosophical debate competitions. In the first, the competitors do not have direct contact with each other, and what is assessed is the result of the activity, the finished essay. In the second, the competitors have some direct contact with each other, and what it assessed is the performance itself, that is, the debating.

3. The International Philosophy Olympiad

The International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO) is an annual essay competition for high school students. Its objectives are, according to the Statutes, among others, 'to promote philosophical education at the secondary level', 'to contribute to the development of critical, inquisitive and creative thinking', 'to promote philosophical reflection on science, art, and social life', and 'to promote the culture of peace' by creating opportunities for personal contact between adolescents from countries around the world. According to Frank Murphy, the IPO contributes to 'the nurturing of philosophical wonder' (Murphy 2017, p. 49).

The IPO was initiated by the Department of Philosophy of Sofia University, Bulgaria, in 1993 (see Kolev 2017). The initial aim was to use the idea of science competitions such as the International Olympiads of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry and Biology to bring together young philosophers and to give them a perspective of international cooperation in countries of Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin wall and the Soviet Union. The first countries participating were Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Turkey, Germany and Romania. The IPO was recognised by the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Since 2001, the annual competitions have been organised under the patronage of the *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés de Philosophie* (FISP). The number of participating countries had been growing slowly but steadily and received a boost at the IPO 2012 in Oslo, Norway, to

reach around forty countries, a number which has again been growing slowly since then. This means that some hundred students participate each year at the international competition, while there are more than ten thousand students who participate at the national selection competitions. In 2020 and 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to organise a physical event and an online E-IPO was organised by Slovenia.

The participants must write a philosophical essay on one of four given topics—usually quotes by philosophers—in four hours. The essay must be written in one of the languages English, French, German or Spanish and not in an official language of the student's country. This means that the challenge is two-fold: to write a *philosophical* essay in a *second language*. The essays are evaluated according to five criteria: relevance to the topic, philosophical understanding of the topic, persuasive power of argumentation, coherence, and originality. The best essays determined by the jury receive awards: honorable mention, bronze, silver, and gold medals.

The IPO satisfies the conditions of a philosophical competition mentioned above: the participants (1) voluntarily engage in a philosophical activity (essay writing), (2) voluntarily undertake the obstacles (write a philosophical essay that satisfies the criteria of evaluation) that make this activity possible, (3) participate in it for the intrinsic value of being engaged in that activity or the experience of being so engaged, and (4) participate in it to show a better performance than the other participants.

The candidates are eager to deliver their best performance. They prepare in advance, and they develop their philosophical skills alone or in groups and under the guidance of teachers. In the competition, they strive to bring themselves to philosophical excellence. The IPO thus has a direct benefit not only for the candidates themselves but for philosophy in general, for the achievements of the candidates have far reaching consequences beyond the personal level. Their achievements are an inspiration to national organisations and local schools, and they help to create a favourable image of philosophy in the general society, among other things as a domain in which one can train, improve and excel.

One possible objection to a competition like the IPO could be that it runs the risk of demotivating those students who are interested in philosophy but who do not want to participate in a contest with others for various reasons. For example, some people do not want to compete and to compare themselves with others. Some feel inferior to others when they perform less well in one domain. Some feel stressed in a competition and work better when they follow their interests without any external goal to aim for.

These are all justified concerns that need to be taken seriously for each individual student to which they might apply. It is important to consider that the IPO is the culmination of national selection processes. In many countries, selection is organised in several stages: first rounds, regional events, and national finals. In the first round, it is often the teacher's initiative—rather than the initiative of students themselves—that leads to the participation of the students. Possibly, some of these students would rather not participate. This needs to be considered by teachers, and one strategy could be to offer students an alternative task. On the other hand, making all the students in a class write an essay for the competition could have beneficial effects too. For example, some students who thought of themselves as not particularly good at philosophy could discover a hidden talent. Conversely, some who think of themselves as being extraordinarily good might come to realise that their skills are not that excellent after all. A competition like the Philosophy Olympiad, in which the performances of the candidates lead to a relative ranking, can thus have beneficial effects in two directions: it can help some young people discover their talent, and it can help others to become more realistic about their capacities.

Another possible objection is that making such a competition objective and fair requires specified criteria and a grading method, and these would lead the participants to a mechanical way of writing the essay, thus constraining the students' thinking process and their creativity, and leading to a uniformity in the products. Leaving aside the question of whether the IPO is in fact a competition that is objective and fair, I think that the objection is based on wrong premises—specified criteria do not constrain the thinking process (see Pfister 2020)—and it underestimates the creative power of language; of course, there is a certain uniformity that is reached, but such uniformity is welcome because it increases the quality of the essays (see Pfister 2020).

4. Debate competitions

Another kind of contest is the debate competition. I will first say a few things about debate competitions in general, explain why one could argue that these are not genuinely philosophical, and why this view is contested. Then I will focus on a genuine philosophical debate competition, the Ethics Bowl.

In a debate, two parties argue for opposing views, each trying to convince an audience that the one view is in some sense better than the other. People have debated with each other since antiquity, but in the 18th century, especially in England, modern, more formalised forms of debate emerged and debating societies were created. In such

societies questions of public relevance were debated, and sometimes it was determined by vote which side had won. Later, real competitions with strict rules were introduced, targetting university students or high school students. Examples include: the National Speech and Debate Tournament in the USA, established 1931; the World Schools Debating Championships (WSDC), first held in 1988 in Australia; the German language contest *Jugend debattiert* (since 2001) in Germany, and *Jugend debattiert international* (since 2005). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic many of the debating competitions could not be conducted as physical events, and some of them were, very successfully, organised as online events.

Each debate competition has its own format and rules. The topic to be debated is usually a proposition—for example: Homosexuals should have the same rights as heterosexuals—or a question that allows for precisely two answers, for and against—for example: Should the school cafeteria offer only vegetarian food? One side argues in favor of ‘yes’, also known as the ‘affirmative’ or ‘pro’ side; the other side argues in favor of ‘no’, also known as the ‘negative’ or ‘contra’ side. Each side is usually represented by a team of two to three speakers. Team members are usually allowed to speak only in a specific order (for example: Pro 1, Contra 1 Pro 2, Contra 2), with a specific role (for example to argue for the position or refute an argument of the opposite side), and for an exact period, usually just a few minutes. In some contests, for example the Australian style and the Worlds School style debating, the teams can request interruption of the current speaker to bring in new information in the form of a statement or question, known as ‘points of information’. In some contests, for example *Jugend debattiert*, some time is reserved for ‘free debate’, where the contestants are not constrained by a specific order, role or time. The debate usually ends with closing statements. Individual speakers (or sometimes teams) who are judged as performing best receive awards. The assessment is done by a jury, based on certain criteria. For example, in the World Schools Debate Championships, the criteria encompass style, content and strategy. In the competitions of *Jugend debattiert*, the criteria are the contestants’ knowledge of the subject (expertise), their capacity to formulate thoughts (eloquence), their capacity to engage in a conversation with the opposite side (conversational competence), and the rhetorical strength of their arguments (persuasiveness).

Debate competitions are not in general philosophical competitions. The topic may be philosophical, as it is in the case of the examples mentioned above (rights of homosexuals, vegetarian food in the school cafeteria). However, the objective in a debate is to convince a given audience. This can also be seen from the evaluation

criteria, such as 'strategy' and the 'rhetorical strength' of arguments. One may use rhetorical tools 'against' the opposite side. In philosophy the objective is not primarily to convince anyone, but rather to search for truth, and this search is not against anyone but, rather, a common endeavor, according to a widespread view. Even when one argues against a position, the aim is not to win over the other, but rather to find out what is true. In a debate, on the other hand, truth is only a means to an end, and may even be left out when it does not help the aim. Hence, one could argue that debate competitions are not philosophical.

The view is controversial. One could also defend the position that philosophy can be adversarial in nature. Janice Moulton (1980; 1983) famously described the 'Adversary Paradigm' in philosophy. This paradigm 'represents the philosophic enterprise as an unimpassioned debate between adversaries who try to defend their own views against opposition and show how opposing views are wrong' (Moulton 1980, p. 419). The purpose is 'to win the debate, convincing one's opposition is another matter' (Moulton 1980, p. 423), and it 'requires only the kind of reasoning whose goal is to convince an opponent and ignores reasoning that might be used in other circumstances: to figure something out for oneself, to discuss something with like-minded thinkers, to convince the indifferent or the uncommitted' (Moulton 1980, p. 427).⁷

The question whether debate competitions are genuinely philosophical competitions is of less importance if the pedagogical aim is to foster philosophical skills. For this can very well be done in a debate, as I will show now.

In debate competitions, the team on which a contestant must debate is often determined by draw. This means that the contestants do not know in advance which side they will be on, pro or contra. This requires them to take on the *perspective of both sides*. First, if they want to raise their chances of winning, they need to prepare for both sides. Second, during the debate, if they want to be as persuasive as possible, they need to take the other side into account and make adequate reference to it, counter the arguments from the other side, and argue against it. Third, if debaters happen to be on the side of a position they radically disagree with, they might come to realise that there are some more or less good arguments for that side after all and thereby come to better understand why some people might have that view. The capacity to take on the perspective of the other is an important skill for dialogue and co-operation in

⁷ I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out. Moulton accepts the procedure as one among many and criticises its status as the dominant procedure.

general, and it therefore also helps in philosophical discussions. And considering possible counter arguments is also important in doing philosophy.

One central aspect of the format of the debate is that one must argue for a position. When one argues for a position, one may use *philosophical arguments*. For example, one might argue for equal rights for homosexuals based on the premise that what is morally relevant to have a right is only that one is a person. When one uses arguments that are based on moral principles, one philosophises. And so, it may well be that there is a lot of philosophising going on in a debate!

Whenever one argues, one may use the chance to *improve the skills of argumentation*. This can be done in a debate competition, and especially so because of the obstacles that make it a competition: one must focus on a particular topic, one has only a limited amount of time, one must try to be persuasive to an audience and a jury. What better setting could there be to train and foster one's argumentative skills? Debate competitions thus offer excellent occasions to do philosophy and to improve the skills of argumentation.

However, it is important to be aware of the fact that the format may actually turn against the aim of philosophy. When a rhetorical trick is a useful tool in achieving persuasiveness, truth may fall on the wayside. The aim to persuade an audience tends to favor simplification and polemic rhetoric. This is one of the reasons why some students who are interested in philosophical questions show reservation about the debate. It is a danger of the format that teachers, especially, need to consider when they organise debates in the classroom. One way to confront the danger is to raise awareness in the students and invite them to reflect on the format of the debate. Another way to minimise the danger, at least for beginners to the debate, is to choose a topic that has less potential to be used for polemic rhetoric against persons. For example, the topic about vegetarian food in the school cafeteria is probably a better starting topic than the one about the rights of homosexuals. Once students are acquainted with the format and have reflected on it, even the most controversial question can be used as a topic of debate.

There are also debate competitions that are genuinely philosophical. One of them is the Ethics Bowl. The format is relatively new. It was originally developed in 1993 by Robert Ladenson at the Illinois Institute of Technology. The contest rapidly became bigger, and in 1997 the first nationwide intercollegiate competition was held. A few years later it started being organised by the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics APPE (Ladenson 2001, p. 65). The National High School Ethics Bowl, a

competition for high school students modeled on the APPE Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl, was founded in 2012. The first Canadian High School Ethics Bowl followed in 2019. Due to the COVID-19-pandemic, these competitions were organised online in 2021.

The format of the Ethics Bowl is as follows: Two teams of three to five students are asked different questions on an ethical issue by a moderator. The issue is known to the teams a few weeks in advance. The team confers for a minute and then gives its answer. The judges can ask questions to elicit the team's viewpoint or seek clarification. Then the opposing team has one minute to present a response to the first team's answer. The first team can respond to the comments of the opposing team. The judges evaluate the first team's answers and the second team's comments according to the following criteria: intelligibility (Does a team state and defend its position in a logically consistent manner?), depth (Is any consideration which a judge considers ethically important omitted by a team in its statement and defense of its position?), focus (Does the team base its position upon any considerations which the judge regards as off the point?), judgement (Has the team evaluated the considerations it identifies as relevant in a careful and reasonable way which reasonably justifies the weight the team attaches to those considerations?). The format is repeated with a different question for the second team (Ladenson 2001, pp. 63-64).

The criteria make clear that the activity to be performed at the Ethics Bowl is philosophical: the team must defend its position in a logically consistent way and must arrive at reasonable judgements. The Ethics Bowl is a debate, but unlike the traditional debate format its objective is the search for truth (or at least reasonable judgement). The competition satisfies the criteria for a philosophical competition developed above: the participants (1) voluntarily engage in a philosophical activity (defending a position on an ethical issue in a logically consistent way), (2) voluntarily undertake the obstacles (debate according to the criteria of evaluation) that make this activity possible, (3) participate in it for the intrinsic value of being engaged in that activity or the experience of being so engaged, and (4) participate in it to show a better performance than the other participants.

According to Ladenson (2001), the Ethics Bowl is a way to help the students develop their 'capacity for ethical understanding'. It is a solution to the problem 'how to remove the instructor but keep the discussion focused and informed' (p. 69). It also has all the pedagogical benefits of a debate mentioned above.

Finally, I would like to point to a kind of oral philosophical competition that is explicitly not called a debate. The Ethics Cup, founded as the John Stuart Mill Cup in 2019 at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, consists in a ‘collaborative discussion’ about an ethical issue. The performance of the team is evaluated according to the criteria of how well it displays the virtues of insightfulness, thoughtfulness, and civility.⁸

It would be a question of further research to compare the benefits for philosophy of the different formats: the traditional debate, the Ethics Bowl, and the Ethics Cup.

5. Conclusion

I have argued that the simple analysis of the concept of philosophical competition misses out on an important point, namely that the activity is seen as valuable by the participants. I have suggested a richer notion instead that defines philosophical competition as a striving play. Based on this analysis, one can counter the argument that philosophical competitions are foreign to philosophy understood as a search for truth. To participate in a philosophical competition means to do it for the sake of doing philosophy. This distinguishes philosophical competitions from some sports competitions in which the sole aim is to be better than the other contestants. The International Philosophy Olympiad satisfies the criteria of a philosophical competition. Debate competitions can be genuinely philosophical, as the example of the Ethics Bowl shows. Even when they are not philosophical, debate competitions can nevertheless be excellent places to foster philosophical skills. Finally, the Ethics Cup is an oral philosophical competition that is not a debate but a collaborative discussion.

I would like to end the article with a plea for the development of new philosophical competitions. The fact that the mentioned competitions have successfully been organised as online events, combined with the fact that not all the possibilities of digitalisation have yet been tested and investigated, suggests that there is potential both for more and for new philosophical competitions (and for philosophical games in general). Given their benefits on a personal level for the contestants and for philosophy in general, more and new philosophical competitions should be developed and organised.

⁸ See <https://ethicscup.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

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