

Editorial

It was in 2017 that Matthew Wills, Alan Tapper and I—Laura D’Olimpio—heard the incredible news: our funding bid to promote, support and expand competitive high school philosophy events across Australasia had been successful!¹ Some years before, High school philosophy teacher Matthew Wills had invented the Philosothon in Western Australia in 2006.² He approached the Western Australian Association for Philosophy in Schools (APIS)³ for support and we held the first Philosothon at Hale School in 2007. At the time I was studying for my PhD in Philosophy at the University of Western Australia and I was Chief Facilitator for the event on the night. Ten years later, by which time I was President of the national association, the Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Associations (FAPSA), which was being run by Western Australia at that time, we submitted a funding bid to Templeton Religion Trust and were awarded just over a quarter of a million (Aussie) dollars. It was by far the largest grant ever awarded to philosophy in schools in Australia and we received a mostly very positive response—from both within the P4C community and beyond.

Philosophers in University philosophy departments were incredibly enthusiastic about the Philosothon Project because the numbers of students enrolling in tertiary philosophy programmes was on the decline, putting philosophy departments at risk in an increasingly market-driven HE sector. They hoped Philosothons would grow interest in philosophy, reaching out to pre-college students (and their parents) to raise the profile of philosophy and its associated critical thinking skills. Interestingly, however, there were a few voices of concern raised about the idea of a Philosothon—and those voices came from within the P4C community rather than from without.

Drawing upon the classical P4C literature and based upon the Community of Inquiry pedagogical model, a Philosothon is defined as follows:

A Philosothon is a competition that sees students engaging in a Community of Inquiry, seeking to investigate a complex ethical or philosophical problem in a collaborative manner. Unlike debates, the views of students are not necessarily pitted

¹ <https://dailynous.com/2017/08/21/large-grant-support-pre-college-philosophy-australasia/>

² <https://philosothon.org/2020AustralasianPhilosothon/Aboutus.html>

³ <https://www.apiswa.org.au/about>

one against the other, and students may change their mind or refine their thinking on issues as the dialogue unfolds. In this way, Philosothon promote critical and creative thinking and collaboration skills.

However, it was not too long into the project that Matthew, Alan and I found ourselves facing some questions and criticisms about the nature of the Philosothon and its instantiation in practice. Advocates of P4C expressed two main concerns, with the first being that the majority of schools taking up the idea of, and participating in, Philosothons were elite and wealthy privately funded schools. This was a concern to do with access and inclusion in the event and, by extension, in philosophical dialogue. They (and we) wanted to get philosophy into the schools where it was most needed. Such efforts at inclusion are always tricky in practice for multiple reasons (mostly to do with resources), and yet the funding was designed to help support this effort: by allowing Matthew to travel to remote regional and low socio-economic areas across Australia and New Zealand and train up teachers and support them in running Philosothons.

The second main concern that was raised was to do with the fact that the Philosothon was a *competition*. Some advocates of philosophy for and with children who love the Community of Inquiry pedagogy argued that philosophy should not be competitive, especially not with children and young people participating, and the CoI itself should not be viewed as a competition to be won. We had many conversations about the nature of the Philosothon, how it should best be run and about the marking rubrics that were used to award points and score participants—as individuals and as school groups. There were decisions made such as scoring students on three equal criteria: *critical thinking*, *collaborative engagement*, and *creative contributions*⁴ with marks deducted for dominating the conversation or ad hominem attacks. We also had an independent report commissioned about the Philosothon (Buchanan 2018).⁵ Yet these on-going arguments (which is what they became) pointed to a larger issue.

As various philosophy events expanded and multiplied around the world—many with pre-college students and often including a competitive element—such as Philosophy

⁴ See the marking rubric in the 'Judges kits' Available from: <https://philosothon.org/2020AustralasianPhilosothon/Kits.html>

⁵ Buchanan, R (2018) Australasian Philosothon. *Federation of Australasian Philosophy in Schools Association*. Available from <http://philosothon.org/AustralasianPhilosothonReportBuchanan.pdf>

Olympiads, Ethics Bowls and Philosothon, it became clear that there were important questions to explore about the nature of competition and its relationship to philosophy and to philosophical dialogue. I was surprised by the lack of extensive writing on this topic, and was not convinced that the detractors agreed about what exactly was problematic about competition (is competition per se inherently problematic or only certain kinds of competition, or does it depend entirely on what is being rewarded? Or is it the purported effects of competition rather than the competitive event itself that is under critique here?). And so the theme of this special issue presented itself: *What is the place for competition in philosophy?*

Andrew Peterson and I were overwhelmed with responses to our call for papers and are extremely pleased to have received perspectives and arguments from various countries, points of view, and from people who have differing experiences with pre-college philosophy events, including but not limited to the ones mentioned above. As such, this is the first of two special issues on this topic, and we look forward to publishing further papers, including one by Alan Tapper and Matthew Wills responding to some of the criticisms aimed at Philosothon, in the next issue later this year.

This special issue includes six original articles and a book review. Our first article, 'Competition and its tendency to corrupt philosophy', by Yvette Drissen from the Netherlands, argues that philosophy is not inherently competitive and that competition—particularly for 'external goods' such as academic positions, awards, and status—tends to corrupt the practice of philosophy. Our second article, 'Philosothons: Rewarding collaborative thinking', by Danielle Diver from the UK, immediately offers a counter argument to Drissen's claim, arguing that, 'philosophy may involve a degree of intrinsic informal competition'. While Diver does not defend competition as always effecting a positive influence on philosophy, she does claim that the competitive element in philosophy can avoid negative outcomes if it rewards positive attributes such as collaboration and inquiry, thereby encouraging those traits.

Our third article in this special issue is by Christina Easton, also from the UK, who examines the role for women in philosophy, particularly in light of the competitive atmosphere of philosophy. In her article, 'Winning in philosophy: Female underrepresentation, competitiveness, and implications for inclusive high school philosophy competitions', Easton argues that high school philosophy events are set up in ways that

reward ‘stereotypically feminine’ attributes because they are friendly, low-stakes, and therefore more likely to support, rather than damage, diversity in the discipline.

Our fourth article is by Stelios Gadris from Crete, Greece, and is entitled, ‘Philosophising with children as a playful activity: Purposiveness without purpose’. Fittingly, Gadris transports us back to Ancient Greece in order to defend philosophical activity with children and young people as akin to playing a game and, thus, to be enjoyed for its own sake. This, he argues, does not mean we must eliminate or abolish elements such as ‘antagonism, competition, excellence, etc.—there is no question: the competitive element is there’, he says. Yet, we may keep these elements, and their corresponding significance in this context, as ‘vague or undetermined, implicit’.

Baptiste Roucau, with one foot in Canada and the other in New Zealand (and a wide stance!), is the author of our fifth article, ‘The Community of Philosophical Inquiry as a place of agon: Exploring children’s experiences of competitiveness in philosophical dialogue’. Roucau offers insights into young participants’ experiences of competition when engaging in philosophical dialogues in both formal and informal educational settings in Canada and New Zealand. He draws upon the findings of this qualitative case study to reflect upon the appropriate role for competition in communities of philosophical inquiry as motivational, whilst also being aware of any associated risks.

Our sixth article, ‘What is a philosophical competition?’ is by Jonas Pfister, from Austria. Pfister rejects the simple answer to his titular paper, that ‘a philosophical competition is a rivalry about the best philosophical performance’ and instead defends a richer analysis that ‘defines philosophical competition as a striving play’. Drawing upon the International Philosophy Olympiad and the Ethics Bowl as examples of high school philosophy competitions, Pfister points out that the participants of such events find the events valuable. As such, he defends the value of such competitive philosophy events for both their personal benefits as well as the benefits to be gained by the discipline of philosophy.

Also included in this issue is a book review. Aristidis (Harry) Galatis has reviewed Peter Worley’s latest publications, a two-volume endeavour entitled *Corrupting Youth: History and Principles of Philosophical Enquiry* (Volume 1) and *How to Facilitate Philosophical Enquiry* (Volume 2) published Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2021. These books see the co-

founder of the Philosophy Foundation⁶ provide us with a comprehensive overview of his dialectical method of Philosophical Enquiry (PhiE).

We hope these articles help you to make up your own mind about the appropriate role for competition in philosophy and in philosophical dialogue. And, importantly, we hope these articles will encourage further discussion about the benefits—and risks—of competitive philosophy events in pre-college educational spaces. It seems well-timed that only last month I was Head Judge at the first West Midlands Philothon in the UK, in Birmingham. Organised by Dr Rachael Jackson-Royal from King Edward VI High School for Girls, after having been delayed by two years due to COVID-19, the event was full of obvious enthusiasm for considering philosophical and ethical questions, genuine collaborative enquiry, good manners, and an excitement over dialogue with peers. In the fifteen years I have been involved in Philothon, I can honestly say these are the characteristic markers of all my experiences with competitive high school philosophy events. Long may they continue and I look forward to one day presiding over an International Philothon!

Dr Laura D'Olimpio

Editor

⁶ <https://www.philosophy-foundation.org/>