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GoodWeekend

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COURAGE AND CHARACTER



Ethical conundrums are a dream contest

From classes to international competitions, students grapple with contemporary ethical dilemmas.

The middle school ethics team at St Andrew's Cathedral School in Sydney walked away from the International Ethics Olympiad with a gold medal earlier this year, winning against more than 250 schools competing for the top prize.

St Andrew's team member Bronte Parkin says the group had particularly knotty moral dilemmas to work through, including, "Should we tear down statues that memorialise historic figures of questionable ethical integrity?"

Her team questioned whether a statue's purpose was to celebrate or to remember, arguing that erecting a statue naturally glorifies its subject because it "does not effectively convey the complexities of history".

Other cases put before the competitors included whether artists can ever justify their creation of unethical or illegal artworks, and the moral validity of Australia Day as a national holiday.

"The Ethics Olympiad provides the perfect opportunity to discuss these concepts with others," says Bronte, a year 10 student.

In an Ethics Olympiad, unlike a debate, competitors can be in furious agreement about various aspects of the issue at hand – but it's the strength and clarity of their argument that counts.

Students develop the ability to work through difficult questions and teams collect points during heats for clear, concise, critical thinking and respectful discourse in response to questions about each ethical case.

Bronte's teammate, Rama Chadda-Harmer, enjoys the opportunity to pitch and hear a range of philosophical arguments.

"There is something really special about being able to engage in thought experiments, create philosophical constructs and critique and remodel arguments together – everyone is really polite, but also full of amazing ideas



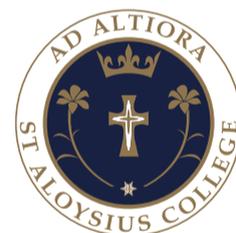
WESTBOURNE
GRAMMAR'S
PAUL ROSE.

which often contrast with your own," he says.

This year's event – delayed for four months due to COVID-19 – was held virtually, with public and private school teams from Australia, Hong Kong, New Zealand and Singapore invited to think deeply and develop multiple perspectives in response to 10 complex moral dilemmas.

The Olympiad was founded in 2013 by Australian philosophy teacher Matthew Wills and has grown to include separate junior, middle and senior school competitions as well as a new tertiary-level event.

Philosophy teacher Dr Jonathan Hall mentored the St Andrew's team and co-ordinates a lunchtime student philosophy club.



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A grounding in philosophy lays a solid foundation for students competing in the Olympiad, Hall says, adding that students in the ethics team usually also study philosophy.

“They need to be familiar with a range of different ethical frameworks and viewpoints so that they can apply those in useful ways to the different situations that come up,” he says.

Student also unpack past competition cases to help them develop these skills.

“Learning philosophy as an academic subject won’t necessarily cover the ethical frameworks and ways to negotiate these, so we develop that further in our preparation sessions,” Hall says. “Another critical part of their knowledge is gaining a nuanced understanding of the strengths and limitations of those different ethical frameworks.”

Paul Rose, deputy head of senior school at Melbourne’s Westbourne Grammar School, is helping to embed the school’s new Inspire learning and teaching model, where ethical skills

THINK BIG

(ABOVE, FAR LEFT)

WESTBOURNE GRAMMAR’S INSPIRE PROGRAM PUTS STUDENTS FRONT AND CENTRE.

(ABOVE)

ST ANDREW’S DR JONATHAN HALL WITH ETHICS OLYMPIAD WINNERS (FROM LEFT) STELLA BROWNE, LOIS ARTHURSON, BRONTE PARKIN, RAMA CHADDA-HARMER AND CALVIN NEWLING.

underpin both the curriculum and student wellbeing programs.

“Westbourne’s Inspire model puts the student at the centre of everything and promotes ideas of student character and agency in everything the school does,” he explains.

At Westbourne, “character” involves thinking and acting ethically and with integrity and responsibility, while “agency” refers to autonomy, ownership of your own actions, decisions and learning.

Rose says the model helps students have a voice in the expectations of the school, a clearer understanding of their own behaviours, self-awareness and control around the decisions that they make.

He gives the example of a common issue in schools everywhere: graffiti in the toilets. “Students could be invited to discuss what happened, reflect on the thinking behind doing it and the impact that it could have on others,” he says.

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At the heart of ethical practice is acting with integrity and empathy, Rose says – giving students a foundation to act with inclusion and respect in the diverse communities and workplaces they will face in their future.

Thinking deeply can begin with reading about thinkers and at Sydney’s Newington College students from kindergarten to year 12 take philosophy classes.

Specialist staff at the school’s newly launched Critical Thinking and Ethics Quarters help weave explicit critical thinking into many of the school’s core and elective subjects.

The school has led a trend of hosting philosophy classes for students, either as extra-curricular or elective subjects.

In Victoria, students sitting the VCE can select a philosophy elective under the humanities umbrella, with a curriculum that includes Descartes and Locke while, in NSW, philosophy is now a stage 5 elective course, with students reading key thinkers from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt and exploring areas such as epistemology, metaphysics and ethics.

International Baccalaureate schools in Australia can also offer philosophy as a subject in the IB Diploma Program, with students studying authors as diverse as Plato, Lao Tzu and Martha Nussbaum, and engaging in the nature, function, meaning and methodology of philosophy.

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