

Future Ethicist Shield: Case Set 2024

1. Integrated Schools

In Northern Ireland, ‘integrated’ schools are those that take proactive measures to ensure that the school population is made up of staff and pupils from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds, as well as those who share other beliefs, which includes those with no faith. Integrated schools are popular, at least in theory. In a recent Northern Ireland Life and Times (NILT) Survey, 68% of respondents claimed that they would prefer their child to attend a mixed-religion school. In practice, however, integrated school places make up only 7% of the total.

According to its defenders, integrated education plays an essential role in promoting peace, equality, and understanding for difference in what (in many ways) continues to be a divided society. By offering opportunities to work and play alongside children from a range of backgrounds, it is hoped that children will come to respect difference, rather than fear it.

For some, however, simply offering the *choice* of integration is not enough. Instead, *all* school communities should be comprised of students, staff, and governors from a range of cultural, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds. This means not only offering space for children who share in different faiths, but requires taking active steps to ensure that the school population represents society more broadly.

Study Questions

1. Does an education system have the responsibility to prepare children for life as future citizens?
2. How much weight should ‘diversity’ play in designing a school admissions process?
3. Is the preservation of a particular religious or cultural ethos important for a school, and does it require excluding admission from children or staff who do not share in that background?

2. AI and Climate Change

According to *Time Magazine*, the growth of AI technology will prompt “the greatest redistribution of power in history.”¹ With the use of AI, we can, at unimaginable speeds, quickly and efficiently construct business strategies, design cities, invent new and effective cancer treatments, and produce cultural artefacts in a way that human beings have never seen. The potential benefits of such technology for human wellbeing are therefore immense.

Climate activists, however, argue that the vast amounts of electricity and water that AI technology requires pose indefensible risks to the planet, something that tech companies are already struggling to grapple with. Earlier this year, Google announced that their AI datacentres-facilities that host the computational infrastructure of AI technology- had caused their greenhouse gas emissions to rise by 48% since 2019. Microsoft, the largest financial supporter of ChatGPT, also recently admitted that their plans to achieve net zero by 2030 would no longer be met because of the energy demands of the technology.² According to predictions from scientific experts, by 2030 AI will consume twice as much energy as France. As for water, a recent investigation found that the amount required to generate an email on ChatGPT was the equivalent to one bottle of water.³ This risk is exacerbated by the fact that most countries are already significantly behind in terms of building renewable alternatives to fossil fuels.

Study Questions

1. How should we weigh the risks and benefits of AI technology?
2. Is it morally permissible for governments to place restrictions on AI use in order to reduce harm to the planet?
3. Are there good reasons to distinguish between the ethical permissibility of different *kinds* of AI use (i.e., helping with homework vs. developing cancer treatment)?
4. Are companies/institutions/governments that pursue net zero policies acting hypocritically when they endorse AI technology?

¹ <https://time.com/6310115/ai-revolution-reshape-the-world/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/business/article/2024/jul/04/can-the-climate-survive-the-insatiable-energy-demands-of-the-ai-arms-race>

³ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2024/09/18/energy-ai-use-electricity-water-data-centers/>

3. Trad Wives

Around 2018, Google searches for the term 'tradwife' grew significantly, remaining high ever since as the number of tradwife 'influencers' began to explode on social media. Rooted in a 1950s American ideal of the housewife, the tradwife lifestyle endorses a traditional gendered division of labour, religious fundamentalism, and a hyper-feminine aesthetic.

Those who defend the lifestyle criticise feminism for its role in challenging the traditional family structure. They argue that women and their families were better off when they got to fulfil their 'natural' purpose by staying at home to look after their husband and children, and claim that the push for more women to enter the workplace has made them miserable and unsatisfied with their lives.

Critics of the tradwife lifestyle, however, argue that 'traditional' family values and the gendered division of labour do not reflect the 'natural' abilities of women but are instead historical artefacts that were designed to keep women from exercising choice over their lives. The fact that many women are unhappy with their work-life balance, they say, is not because women 'belong' in the home, but because capitalism has forced people of *all* genders to sacrifice an unreasonable amount of leisure and family time simply in order to survive.

Study Questions

1. Does the 'tradwife' lifestyle and aesthetic contribute to the oppression of women?
2. 'Feminism is all about allowing women to make choices. This means that it is wrong to criticise tradwives just because they make a choice that is different to one that you might make'. Is this correct?
3. Is it possible to be both submissive and free at the same time?

4. True Crime

The true crime industry is booming. While a morbid interest in serial killers and unsolved mysteries has long been a source of fascination, the rising of podcast and independent media have, in the last several years, allowed the genre to flourish.

Researchers⁴ have explored the reasons why people enjoy true crime, finding that they enjoy both the mystery element and the realism that comes from learning about a real-life case. These studies also find that white women are the largest consumers of true crime material. This can be explained, they say, by the fact that this group tend to have the highest rates of anxiety about potential threats. Subconsciously, then, this group may look to true crime to work through their anxieties, mentally preparing them for situations they may face in future.

For some, however, the desire for true crime entertainment has raised a number of pressing ethical issues. For stories that involve victims and families who are currently living, true crime entertainment raises issues of privacy and disrespect for those who have suffered trauma. At the same time, it is suggested that our regular exposure to violent tragedies results in a society that is less sensitised to moral harm, causing us to take justice less seriously.

Others contend that the popularity of true crime has encouraged the rise of vigilante investigators. Such true crime 'influencers' broadcast details of ongoing criminal investigations by posting online video streams and social media posts, something which the police say prevents them from doing their jobs of bringing justice to victims.

Study Questions

1. Is the consumption of true crime unethical?
2. Do we wrong murder victims when we produce true crime podcasts/TV shows about them?
3. Do the purported psychological benefits and increases in pleasure that many experience from consuming true crime outweigh the potential threats to privacy of victims and their families?
4. Does true crime further the pursuit of justice or get in its way?

⁴ Vicary, A. M., & Fraley, R. C. (2010). Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers? *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 1(1), 81-86.

5. Unschooling

‘Unschooling’ or ‘deschooling’, a curriculum-free method of homeschooling, has recently been at the centre of heated debates on social media. Unlike traditional homeschooling, whereby parents follow a plan for education that roughly parallels that which takes place in mainstream school, unschooling promotes a form of learning that is predominately led by the child’s desires and interests.

Defenders of unschooling criticise state schooling for damaging the parent-child bond and for undermining the natural learning process of children. Many also express worries about the lack of control parents have over the mainstream curriculum. Their decision to unschool, then, is partly motivated by the desire to have some control over the influences their child is exposed to.

On the other hand, critics have argued that by removing key benchmarks for learning, parents who pursue the unschooling route are failing to prepare their children for adult life. While many children will be motivated to read books and learn mathematics, they argue, there are many others who will not. Critics also point to the lack of socialisation enjoyed by unschooled children, something they claim will also impact their ability to have a successful and flourishing adult life.

Study Questions

1. When (if ever) should ‘parental rights’ trump a child’s right to education?
2. Should the state be permitted to force a family to send their child to school?
3. What role does education have in a flourishing life, and are traditional state schools best suited to provide that?

6. Care Robots

For many countries, a rapidly increasing elderly population, combined with a low birth rate, has resulted in a 'crisis of care', whereby the number of persons requiring elder support vastly outstrips the number of human carers available.

'Care robots' have been touted as a potential solution to this problem. Thanks to developments in the AI and robotics sectors, robots are now capable of carrying out many of the tasks typically associated with elder care work, such as managing medication, lifting patients, offering companionship, and supporting basic physical tasks of patients (e.g., eating and dressing).

On the face of things, the introduction of care robots appears to produce great benefits. Unlike most human carers, robots will be able to fulfil a patient's needs at any time of the day and without tiring. They will also be able to collect large amounts of useful data about the patient. In cases of medical emergency or injury, for example, the robot will be able to contact the emergency services right away, sending doctors relevant physiological data in real time even before they reach the hospital. In a world where human carers are in great shortage, the introduction of robot carers also means that human carers are not overworked and at risk of burnout, something which is harmful both to themselves and their patients.

Critics, however, claim that robots are incapable of providing all of the care that an individual might need. In particular, they point out the inability of robots to satisfy the emotional and social sides of care, part of which a person receives by being recognised for their individuality. Were we to gradually replace human care with robot care, then, we would be disregarding the standing of elderly in our society.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for a state/care facility to deliver 'good' care, and do they have a duty to provide this?
2. Can a robot 'care' for a human in the same way that another human can?
3. If a care robot harms a patient, can it be held responsible?
4. Are there any privacy concerns that might be raised by the use of care robots, and how do these compare to those raised with the use of human carers?

7. What are Universities For?

During the Spring semester of 2024, a wave of high-profile student occupation protests against the war in Gaza took place on university campuses across the USA, UK, Australia, and others. According to protesters, the movement was founded to both express solidarity with Palestinians and as a way of issuing demands upon their university, which included severing academic and financial ties with Israeli companies and institutions.

The protests have sparked heated debates about the limits of freedom of speech and assembly on university campuses. While most universities claim freedom of speech as one of their guiding principles, they are also bound by duties to ensure access to education for all students. At some universities, including NYC's Columbia, some claim this latter promise was broken when disruption led to the cancelling of classes, exams, and graduation ceremonies. Others express concerns that universities are failing to tackle anti-Semitism that they claim has risen because of the protests.

Study Questions

1. While freedom of expression/speech and association are rights typically afforded to public space more broadly, it is thought to be especially important on university campuses due to the 'truth-seeking' mission of the institution. How far should this right be respected, and are there any grounds upon which it can be limited?
2. In contrast, some argue that university campuses ought to remain *neutral* on contentious political issues out of respect for the diversity of views of the student and staff population. What effect would this commitment to neutrality have on a university's response to protestors?
3. Some argue that encampments and other occupations are the wrong way to communicate a political message because they disrespect the rights of others to hold different opinions. Is this argument effective?
4. What is the best way that universities can respond to protesters, and can they do so while still respecting their rights?

8. Weight Loss ‘Wonder Drugs’

Ozempic- a drug originally designed to manage diabetes symptoms- has been hailed as the latest magic solution for weight loss. A number of celebrities- including Rebel Wilson, Stephen Fry, and Oprah Winfrey- have all spoken out about the positive aesthetic and health improvements they experienced from taking the drug. Many doctors have also praised the drug for improving health conditions in those who take it, including diabetes and joint issues.

On the other hand, there are many who criticise such weight loss drugs for imposing harmful risks on patients. Some, for instance, have suffered severe gastrointestinal symptoms after taking the drug. Others, following rapid weight loss, have suffered pancreatitis, kidney, and gall bladder issues. Such critics claim that, for those who wish to lose weight, there are less risky methods that should be pursued instead.

Some of the most vocal critics have included mental health experts, who claim that the widespread promotion of weight loss drugs leads to an increase in body dysmorphia and eating disorders. Similarly, critics of the beauty industry claim that such drugs reinforce harmful and unrealistic beauty standards that many now feel under increased pressure to conform to because of the popularisation of the drug.

Study Questions

1. In what way do drugs like Ozempic contribute to harmful beauty standards, particularly for women?
2. Some argue that, due to the risks posed by the drug, Ozempic should be reserved only for patients whose health is at serious risk because of their weight. Is this correct?
3. From a public health perspective, do drugs like Ozempic overall produce a net benefit or loss for society? On what basis is this balance measured?

9. Quran Burning

In the last few years, a series of organised public Quran burnings have taken place across Sweden and Denmark. Organisers claim to be carrying out the burnings as a protest against Islam and Muslim immigration. While they recognise the offence caused by the burnings, they argue that freedom of speech requires that we protect the right of individuals to use offensive speech. They also point to the historically unjust cases whereby the government has restricted the speech of citizens on the grounds that the speech used was 'blasphemous', thereby limiting the freedom to criticise religion.

As a sacred text, however, the burning of the Quran is a profound offence to many Muslims. The offence of the burnings has been compounded by the fact that many have taken place outside of Mosques or on Islamic holidays. In addition, some claim that public Quran burning is also an act of hate speech against the Muslim community, and therefore should be treated differently to cases of 'mere' offence against religious sensibilities.

Study Questions

1. Is 'religious offence' a justifiable reason to limit freedom of speech?
2. In what way might Quran burning be understood as a form of 'hate' speech, and does this change whether or not its restriction is justified?
3. The public unrest that followed some of the burnings has led to attempts by the Swedish government to restrict permits for potential burners. Are national security concerns valid reasons for restricting rights to freedom of speech?