

Case Debates: An Overview

Overview

The goal of case study debates is to bring to bear the ethical theory and arguments from the readings to a complex, real-life moral case. Two teams will go head-to-head in each debate. The teams will be asked to carefully consider a case related to that day's topic and to take a stance on the key question. The key question will be a yes-or-no question like "is person x morally blameworthy for doing y?" or "is person x morally obligated to do y" or "is option x morally superior to option y?"

One team will be the pro-team and the other team will be the con-team. The pro-team will defend the "yes" answer to the key question and the con-team will defend the "no" answer.

This isn't about being right or wrong. This also isn't about rhetorical flourishes or being persuasive. This is about making good arguments. This is about applying theory to practice, working as a team to come up with a thoughtful and reasoned-based stance, and trying to see a hot-button moral issue from a side you might not take yourself.

Teams

At the beginning of the course, each student will sign up to participate in a certain number of debates, the number being dependent pending on enrollment in the course. On the day of the debate, participating students will be assigned to one of two teams. Two teams participate in each debate. There will be eleven debates throughout the course.

Outline of Debate Procedure

1. Distribution and reading of case
2. Coin flip
3. Presentation of positive cases (11 minutes)
 - a. 3 minutes: conferral period
 - b. 4 minutes: presentation of pro-team case
 - c. 4 minutes: presentation of con-team case
4. Presentation of responses (8 minutes)
 - a. 2 minutes: conferral period
 - b. 3 minutes: presentation of pro-team response to con-team case
 - c. 3 minutes: presentation of con-team response to pro-team case
5. Concluding statements (5 minutes)
 - a. 1 minute: conferral period
 - b. 2 minutes: presentation of pro-team's concluding statement
 - c. 2 minutes: presentation of con-team's concluding statement
6. Q&A from audience (10 minutes)

Explanation of Procedure Components

Distribution and reading of case: The two participating teams will sit facing each other in the front of the classroom. The moderator will distribute a copy of the case to each member of the participating teams. The moderator will then read aloud the case and the key question.

Coin flip: The moderator will flip a coin. The team who wins the coin toss will get to decide whether they are the pro-team or the con-team.

Presentation of positive cases: Each team will have 3 minutes to confer with each other in order to come up with a positive case in favor of their stance. After the conferral period, each team will have up to 4 minutes to present their positive case during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 4 minutes to present their positive case first. Immediately following, the con-team present will have 4 minutes to present their positive case second.

Presentation of responses: Each team will have 2 minutes to confer with each other in order to come up with a response to the other team's positive case. The pro-team will come up with objections and challenges to the con-team's positive case. The con-team will come up with objections and challenges to the pro-team's positive case. After the conferral period, each team will be given up to 3 minutes to present their positive case during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 3 minutes to present their response first. Immediately following, the con-team will have 3 minutes to present their response second.

Concluding statements: Each team will be given 1 minute to confer with each other in order to come up with a concluding statement. The teams may use the concluding statement for whatever purpose they see fit. Teams can reiterate the strongest points in favor of their stance, respond to an objection or challenge raised by the other team, or offer a new argument in favor of their stance. After the conferral period, each team will be given up to 2 minutes to deliver their closing statement during which any member(s) of the team may speak. The pro-team will have 2 minutes to present their closing statement first. Immediately following, the con-team will have 2 minutes to present their response second.

Q&A: Audience members (students on non-participating teams) will have the chance to ask teams questions. The Q&A will be supervised by the moderator. The first audience question will be directed to the pro-team, the second audience question will be directed to the con-team, and so on until the 7 minutes are up. Teams must keep their answers to less than a minute. Any member(s) of the team to whom the question is directed may answer. Audience members are asked to make their questions pointed and short. No follow-up questions will be permitted.

Roles

Moderators: The instructor will serve as moderators for all of the debates. Their job is to distribute copies of the case study to members of the participating team, oversee the coin toss, keep time, and distribute and collect scorecards, and calculate scores.

Participating teams: Two teams (8 to 10 students) will participate in each debate. Their job is to follow the procedures outlined above.

Scorekeepers: All students who are not on one of the two participating teams will be scorekeepers. Each scorekeeper will be given a scorecard, which they will use to evaluate the two participating teams along several dimensions. Scorekeepers will fill out scorecards during the debate, and turn in the scorecards to the moderator at the end of the debate. Scorekeepers must be critical and active listeners throughout the debate in order to be able to proficiently evaluate the participating teams.

Questioners: All students who are not on one of the two participating teams will be allowed to ask questions to the teams during the Q&A period at the end of the debate.

Scorekeeping and Scorecards

Scorekeepers will evaluate each of the participating teams in five categories. Each team can earn up to five points per category. A total of 25 points is up-for-grabs for each team. The moderator will collect the scorecards at the end of each debate and add together all the points each team has earned. The team with the most points will be the winner of the debate.

Case Debates: Scoring Guidelines

Clarity and coherence of positive case

A score of 5 means that the team presents strong initial arguments in favor of their stance during the four minutes they have to make their positive case. Strong arguments indicate both breadth and depth of thought. The team's line of reasoning is clean, crisp, and easy-to-follow. There are no glaring inconsistencies or gaps in reasoning.

Points should be deducted in this category to the extent that a team's line of reasoning is hard-to-follow, the team puts forward conflicting claims while making their case, or there's an obvious objection to or gap in the team's reasoning.

Strength of response to opposing team

A score of 5 means that the team has thoroughly understood and analyzed the positive case of the other team and pinpointed its weakness and troubling implications. Their response indicates thoughtful and charitable consideration of the other team's positive case. The team's objections and challenges to the other team's positive case are pointed, clear, and thought-provoking.

Points should be deducted in this category to the extent that the team overlook an obvious challenge to the opposing team's positive presentation, their objections and challenges are weak (easily-answered) or unclear, or their response demonstrates either a lack of charity towards to other team or a lack of understanding of the other team's positive case.

Quality of answers during Q&A

A score of 5 means that the team's answer to each of the audience's questions were insightful, complete, and composed. All pressing points raised by the questions were addressed.

Civility and respectfulness

A score of 5 means that, at all times during the debate, every member of the team is civil and respectful to their fellow team members, and to members of their opposing team.

Points should be deducted in this category if a team member takes a sharp or harsh tone while speaking, a team member unduly raises his or her voice, a team member interrupts another team member, a team member is unduly dismissive or displays arrogance, or a team member behaves rudely or impolitely in any way (eye rolls, facepalms, etc.).

A score of 5 means that – taking into account all four components of the debate (presentation of positive case, response to opposing team, concluding statements, and answers during Q&A) – the team has mounted a formidable case in favor and defense of their stance and raised doubts for the opposing stance. Throughout the debate, their reasoning has been nuanced, strong, and clear. The team also demonstrates a sensitivity to the moral complexity of the case – their defense indicates an awareness of the many various morally-relevant features of the case, including the subtle ones.

Case Debates: Sample Case

But We Want a Big Family!

The Case¹

Jack and Jill have two biological children and are considering having more. They both come from big families and want one of their own. But they are also both environmentally-conscious – Jack is an environmental lawyer and Jill runs a non-profit that works to increase wind and solar energy production – and they take seriously the threat that overpopulation makes to the health of the earth.

The human population has risen dramatically over the past century and it shows no signs of slowing down. In the 1800s, there were less than a billion people on the planet. Now, about 200 years later, there are more than seven billion people on the planet. Population experts predict that this number will keep rising until it reaches nine or ten billion by 2050 and, possibly, ten or eleven billion by 2100.

Many people – including Jack and Jill – believe that this increase in human population will place too many demands on our planet. As the population rises, humans will consume too many natural resources, emit too many greenhouse gases, and generally make the world a worse place for people in future generations.

Jack and Jill wonder what if anything does this mean for their own procreative choices. In particular, they wonder if they have a moral duty to limit how many children they bring into the world as a way of addressing overpopulation. They feel the pull of two conflicting thoughts when they think about it. The first thought is that if it would be bad for all of us to have, say, more than two children, then it would also be bad for each of us to have more than two children. And this makes sense: after all, is it really fair for Jack and Jill to have, say, three or four or five children if they know that it would be unsustainable for everyone who also wanted that many children to have them?

The other thought is that while it might be bad for all of us to have more than two children, it is not necessarily bad for one couple in particular to do so. And this makes sense too: whereas a lot depends on how many children we all have, not much depends on how many children one couple has. And if Jack and Jill care a great deal about having a large family, as they do, we might find it implausible that morality could require them to sacrifice that goal.

Key Question

Do Jack and Jill have a moral obligation to limit the number of children they bring into the world in order to address the environmental threat of overpopulation?

Pro-team will defend the stance that they do have such an obligation.

Con-team will defend the stance that they do not have such an obligation.

¹ This case was modified from a case written for the 2016 season of the Regional High School Ethics Bowl.