

Ethical Problems and Dilemmas for Discussion

School and Education Cases

THE CASE OF THE PURITY RING

Lydia Playfoot, a 16-year-old school girl, has gone to the High Court to accuse her school of discriminating against Christians by banning the wearing of "purity rings" (which symbolise chastity).

Miss Playfoot's school said her ring broke uniform rules and ordered her to remove it.

When she refused, she was taken out of lessons and made to study on her own.

She told reporters: "In the Bible it says you should remain sexually pure and I think this is a way I want to express my faith."

Miss Playfoot is seeking a judicial review under Article Nine of the Human Rights Act which guarantees freedom of religious expression.

She says that should protect her right to wear the ring.

The school denies breaching her human rights, insisting the ring is not an essential part of the Christian faith.

Miss Playfoot says Sikh and Muslim pupils can wear bangles and headscarves in class and that other pupils regularly break the uniform code with nose rings, tongue studs, badges and dyed hair.

Human rights barrister Paul Diamond told the High Court the school's action was "forbidden" by law.

"Secular authorities and institutions cannot be arbiters of religious faith," Mr Diamond said.

He said a question the judge would have to answer was: "What are the religious rights of schoolchildren in the school context?"

If you had been the head teacher, how would you have handled the issue?

THE CASE OF THE SEX-CHANGE TEACHER

You are the head teacher of a state-comprehensive school (somewhere in Kent, UK).

Just before the summer holidays one of your teachers, John Smith, requests a private conversation with you. At this meeting he informs you that he is intending to undergo a sex-change operation the following year and that as a part of this process he needs to establish himself as a woman. To this end he says, the following term he will be returning to school dressed as a woman and wishes to be referred to as "Jane" by staff and "Miss Smith" by the students. What do you do?

THE EXPERT CHEAT

Recently, an undergraduate student from the University of Kent published 'Cheating: a Guidebook' to help students learn how to cheat. What moral issues do you see associated with publishing such a book? Should the university bookstore carry it? Should the student newspaper and website carry advertisements for the book? Similarly, should the student newspaper carry advertisements for companies that will write students' essays for them?

Life and Death Cases

THE DYING PASSENGER

Mike Nolan had been piloting 747s across the USA and around the world for over 18 years. On this particular day he was flying from Detroit to Seattle when the flight attendant came forward to the cockpit to tell him that there was trouble in the back: a passenger had suffered a severe heart attack and needed immediate medical attention. While a doctor aboard the plane had been able to help a hospital was needed quickly - or the patient would likely die.

Transferring control to his co-pilot Mike took to the radio calling Denver air-traffic control to seek clearance for an emergency landing. From the other end of the radio Nolan heard a pained response: permission denied. The Denver controller explained that weather conditions were very bad making a landing inadvisable and unsafe for Nolan's crew and passengers. With extreme regret, the Denver tower told Nolan to provide what medical care he could - but to continue his flight as prescribed.

The weather WAS a problem, Mike admitted, but not one he wasn't ready to meet. Nolan felt sure he could land the plane but he wasn't prepared to risk the lives of his crew and passengers - breaking the conservative standards of airline safety regulations - without their full and informed consent.

The patient's condition was worsening. The rest of the flight crew had been told of the emergency and had - with only one fleeting hold out - signalled their wish to land the plane immediately.

Should Mike Nolan try to land the plane?

SOPHIE'S CHOICE

In the novel and film 'Sophie's Choice', set in WWII Europe, the eponymous heroine is standing in line with her two children waiting to board a train that will take them to a concentration camp. Nearby, other Jews are boarding a train which will take them to the gas chambers. A Nazi officer, to amuse himself, pulls Sophie and her two children out of the line and demands that she chooses one of her children to go to the gas chambers. He tells her that if she does not choose he will put both of them on the train. Sophie thinks quickly and pushes the boy away saying, "Take him". The boy is dragged to his death away knowing that his mother has betrayed him. Later in the story Sophie loses the girl too. What would you have done?

TOUCHING THE VOID

"Touching the Void" consists of an extremely well written poignant and heart stopping account of a climb on Siula Grande, in the Peruvian Andes, that went desperately wrong.

Having successfully climbed the west face, Joe Simpson fell off a small ice cliff and badly fractured his right knee. In the dark with a blizzard raging, Joe's partner, Simon Yates, successfully lowered him thousands of feet down the mountain by belaying from snow seats, climbing down and repeating the process. Then, with communication impossible between the climbers, Joe is lowered over an overhanging ice cliff with a crevasse below.

Eventually, Simon is forced into the agonising decision to cut the rope in order to save himself from being pulled off the mountain from his collapsing snow seat to an almost certain death.

Is Simon Yates guilty of murder?

FUR IS MURDER

I recently confronted a stranger in public for wearing a fur coat, denouncing her for the violence and cruelty that went into making her unnecessary garment. The friend I was with said what I did was wrong but I think I was simply speaking out against an evil. What do you think?

Health cases

EXERCISING CAUTION

A woman who works out at my gym is skeletal to the point of appearing deathly ill and yet she exercises for hours. I can't know for sure that she has a problem but she appears to be wasting away possibly killing herself. Does the gym have a responsibility to intervene? It could be sued if it denies her membership. Should I just watch her get thinner and thinner or should I confront her?

HEART TRANSPLANT

A 70-year-old man, I weigh 20 stones, little of which is muscle. I don't exercise, I do smoke, I enjoy fried eggs for breakfast and a nice thick steak for dinner: and let me tell you, I love my life! Except for this - I'm on the waiting list for a heart transplant. Some doctors at the hospital don't want to give it to me. They say it would be a grotesque squandering of medical and financial resources, that the money and the skills would save a lot more lives if applied to, say, a neonatal clinic. I say they've got the heart and the talent; my insurance company will pay for it: let's do it. Why should they play God? What do you think?

ROAD AGE

My mum, a recent widow in her mid-70s, wants to start driving again. She hasn't driven in years, had many accidents when she did, is hard of hearing and arthritic and has a history of alcoholism. While we (her children) object her therapist has told her that she should make her own decision and has encouraged us to be supportive. What's the right thing to do?

THE COSMETIC SURGEON

While there are dermatologists who do important medical work, helping burn victims for example, I'm not such a physician. My practice mostly comprises cosmetic treatments for rich folks. Some say that in a world where so many poor people are desperate for medical care my professional life is a shameful waste of my expensive training. I agree that the care of some kid in Senegal is a real problem but it is not my problem. What do you say?

SICK CAT

How much is a cat worth? My affectionate and obedient pedigree cat needs a procedure that will cost £300. My instinct, of course, is to pay for whatever she needs but I can't help thinking it's wrong. Wouldn't the cash be better spent on sick humans?

HERBAL MEDICINE

I have HIV and use cannabis to alleviate nausea and lack of appetite. A friend grows and provides it at no cost. I distribute the remaining cannabis to 15 or so other people who either have HIV or are undergoing chemotherapy. We all know this is illegal but feel that our lives come first. Are we not being ethical?

UMBERTO THE PLASTIC SURGEON

Umberto is a plastic surgeon specialising in the repair of birth defects. He lives in a part of the country where there is no-one else with his skills and qualifications. Umberto has two children, whom he sees very little of because he spends long hours at the hospital. He is a nice father and his children want to see more of him. He would not earn significantly less money if he decided not to work at weekends and to take holidays with his children. And his children would be happier. But hundreds of other children would then not get the operations that they need in order to live normal lives. What should Umberto do?

Money and Work

FAT CAT SALARY

As the Chief Executive of a large multinational corporation I'm paid about 20 times the salary of an average employee. My predecessor made only about 8 times the worker average and certainly did no worse a job than I do. I don't really need the large salary and I'd happily do my job for a lot less but if the board of directors wants to pay me this amount am I wrong to accept it?

LATE BID

Is a supplier who submits a bid after the deadline entitled to have it considered? Recently, my company sent a letter of intent to the successful bidder. Learning this another bidder submitted a new bid drastically reducing the price, which would, of course, benefit my company. Is it ethical to accept this new bid?

THE CASE OF THE UNEMPLOYED SCIENTIST

George is a scientist who is out of work. He is offered a job in a laboratory which does research into chemical and biological weapons. George is strongly opposed to the manufacture of chemical and biological weapons. If he does not take the job, his wife and his children will suffer. And if he does not take the job, it will be given to someone else who will pursue the research with fewer inhibitions. Should he take the job and compromise his principles?

THE POLICEMAN'S DILEMMA (based on a scenario from Coronation Street)

You are a sergeant in the Manchester Police force out on Panda car patrol in Weatherfield. You are accompanied by a subordinate, Mick, who is currently dating a married woman called Janice. Janice separated from her husband, Les, some while ago before she met Mick so Mick is in no way responsible for the break-up. Nevertheless, Les is still very hurt by the separation and is very hostile to Mick whenever he meets him, insulting and goading him at every opportunity.

While you are driving along you both see a car jump the red lights. You hail the car to stop and are surprised to discover that Les is the driver. Mick goes over to talk to Les but on seeing it's Mick that's stopped him, Les throws a few choice insults. This is just one too many for Mick who finally snaps and beats up Les even going so far as to knock him to the ground and start kicking him.

Following the incident Mick is utterly remorseful. He admits that what he's done is wrong and apologises to you for losing control. He asks you to back his story that Les started the fight.

Les is a local ne'er-do-well who is no stranger to the courts. He has been found charged several times with minor offences and on occasions has managed to get away with some due to lack of evidence. It is therefore unlikely that anyone will believe Les' story that Mick started the fight. Furthermore, you are the only witness. Mick has an outstanding record as a police officer, having won several awards and during one incident faced personal injury in order to save your life. If found guilty of beating up Les he will lose his job and pension.

So what do you do? Take Mick to a disciplinary tribunal and tell the truth or tell a lie and help him keep his job but be instrumental in sending Les to prison for six months?

GOING BACK ON A JOB OFFER?

I recently received a job offer which I orally accepted. When I approached my current employer with my resignation he made a counteroffer. I now wish to remain with my current employer. Is it correct to revoke my acceptance of the original offer?

Money

LOST PROPERTY

I am travelling in Egypt during my gap year with a small group of friends. While in a restaurant I go to the toilet and find an envelope containing money. There is about £300 in various currencies and the envelope is printed with the logo of a clinic but otherwise contains no clue as to the owner. Knowing how corrupt shop-keepers and law-officers are in this country I am reluctant to hand it in as lost-property as I pretty sure it will simply go into the pocket of the person to whom I give it. Similarly, if I leave the money where it is I am sure the next person to enter the toilet will take it for themselves. Either way it will never get returned to its owner. My friends and I are very short of cash at present. Are we justified in keeping the money?

DIRTY MONEY

I am on the board of a health facility raising funds for a much-needed extension. A local businessman with known ties to organized crime has offered a substantial donation. Should we take the money?

THIEVING GRANNY

While I was waiting at the supermarket checkout the other day I noticed a charming woman in her seventies pay the assistant and then pop a box of cereal, which had not been scanned, into her bag. A cheery "Good-bye" and off she went. I wanted to ask, "Did you forget to pay for that?" but I couldn't. What was my responsibility?

The Polical Sphere

RICK ASKS...

I live in a city under military occupation where I've got myself into hot water and need to get away. Fortunately, I've acquired two letters of transit which would make that possible. But here's where it gets tricky. An ex-lover showed up in town with her new husband, a noble man, a real freedom fighter. I think my ex would come away with me if I asked her but maybe I ought to give the letters to her and her husband so they can escape instead. What should I do?

ELECTORAL ETHICS

I am the leader of a large Western nation (you'd recognize the name) that trumpets its devotion to democracy. In the election that brought me to power I received far fewer votes than my opponent but our peculiar rules made me the victor. (It's a wild story.) For me to continue in office is legal but is it ethical?