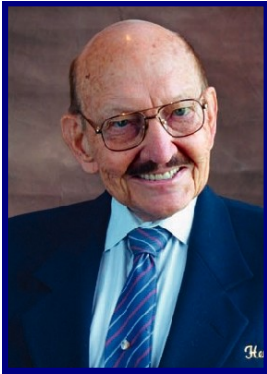


Rotary International District 5300

# George R. Hensel Essay Contest



## Ethics

*That branch of philosophy dealing with values relating to human conduct, with respect to the rightness and wrongness of certain actions and to the goodness and badness of the motives and ends of such actions*

## George R. Hensel Ethics Essay Contest Finalists

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I am of the opinion that ethics is a learning process in which human beings begin to develop a social conscience. As we mature we absorb the morals, social behavior, and values of the significant people in our lives. We learn what is appropriate for our society, culture, or religion, according to where we find ourselves, geographically or socially. Not all social groups, countries or religions follow the same code of ethics. Being in my senior year of high school, and having lived my entire seventeen years in the United States of America, I have formed my own definition of ethics. I believe that ethics is similar to conscience; it is knowing and understanding what is the right behavior, and what is wrong, treating others fairly and dealing objectively with their needs and opinions.

There are numerous insignificant, and also tremendously impactful, ethical decisions made every day. There is not always a clear cut answer to every problem, which is why, for example, hospitals form ethics committees. These types of groups allow the patient, or family members, to benefit from the experience and insight of professionals who have their best interests at heart. I recently wrestled with a dilemma that doctors and nurses encounter frequently during their careers.

In December I finished applying to multiple universities with the hope of obtaining a four year degree, and going on to medical school. The cost of higher education made my heart sink. I realized that I will graduate in four years with an inordinate amount of debt. To this end I have been researching scholarships that might apply to me. I have discovered that it is not easy, there is fierce competition from other college bound seniors. One scholarship was particularly lucrative, but besides maintaining the usual high *CPA*, and participating in volunteer activities, it required an essay on the right to die.

The organization sponsoring the scholarship believed in dying with dignity, and allowing the individual the choice of when and how to leave this world. In the essay I was to detail why I believed in assisted death, and provide a convincing argument against prolonging life when there is no desire to continue living. I have attended church since I was little and I do believe that the only person who should decide when a life is ended is God. I believe that everyone has a purpose on earth; leaving before time is cheating ourselves and God.

I do agree that prolonging life artificially, or continuing to administer painful treatment, to a terminally ill person is a different matter. I would be comfortable in following the patient's wishes, and not performing heroic measures in such a case. Everyone should have the option to die in comfort when their time is at hand. I could not be instrumental in shortening a patient's life though. My friends encouraged me to write the essay for the scholarship; who would know that I didn't agree with the values of the organization? It wouldn't matter in the end because I would not be required to end a life, all that was needed was my approval, and I might earn two to three thousand dollars in the bargain.

I considered the application for a couple of weeks. Should I pretend to agree with the values of this group of people in order to earn money for college? In the end I couldn't write the essay because it was contrary to my beliefs. The finished essay would probably not have caused any

ripples or changed many opinions, but I would have known that I had been the responsible party, and my conscience would not allow it. From an ethical standpoint I feel justified in not applying for the scholarship. Ethics exist for a reason; if ethics were ignored whenever it was convenient to do so, the human race would have no code of conduct, no trust.

If the committee reposted the scholarship with an extended deadline I would still not apply. I am comfortable with my decision. The consequence of my inaction is that I did not receive a scholarship, but I feel at peace with myself about that.

Ethics is understanding right and wrong, and using that knowledge to guide our behavior in dealings with one another. It is about treating each other, and situations, with fairness and honesty. Closely tied to conscience, ethics is relevant in all walks of life, cultures and societies.

## A Lunch to Remember

Field trips make up some of the most memorable days of my life. They are the pinnacle of a student's school year, second only, perhaps, to receiving the rare snow day in the desert of Apple Valley. Sitting in the same classrooms, staring at the same walls, the same kids, with the same monotonous schedule makes any change in pace a welcome relief. So, as an 8th grader en route to the California Science Center, I clutched the cracked vinyl seat beneath me in anticipation of what the day would bring. Surrounded by the familiar buzz of excitement and chatter, I peered through the smudged window that separated me from the world passing by in a blur of browns and blues, thinking about the way the sky mixed together with the ground until the two could no longer be distinguished. Little did I know, I was heading toward an educational opportunity unmatched by anything I could learn by merely sitting in a classroom.

For hours I wandered about, gazing at the magnificence of each exhibit of outer space. Shuffling about in small groups, I was careful to never get lost in the crowds. Everything went according to plan, moving from one scheduled event to another with smooth transitions and flawless timing. And then lunch happened.

Perhaps this goes without saying, but my teachers never taught me how to react to a woman hiding from the police beneath my lunch table. It all happened so quickly; I was caught in a moment of indecision, a moment that could determine someone else's fate. Should I call attention to myself and point her out to the police? Should I help her hide? Would this count as aiding and abetting? I was most definitely *not* juvie material. All these thoughts ran through my mind in quick succession. One after another they struck like lightning, leaving my brain tingling with the decision I had to make.

My first thought when I looked down mid-bite and saw the woman, who had just illegally sold my friend a popsicle, was not about her own well being, but mine. If I could go back, if I could rewind to that day, I would have thought about that woman's well being first. If given a second chance, I would think about the hungry mouths she was trying to feed at home and the hard times she was probably going through. I would have thought about the difference between doing what is good and what is right, between what is moral and what is ethical before making a decision.

Yet, sitting on that bench eating a semi-squished peanut butter and jelly sandwich, I did not choose to think about such things. Not saying a word, I slowly rose to my feet, taking on the weight of my decision. Her face crumpled in despair as she watched me rise. Before I even took my next breath, she was up and running down the sidewalk, dragging her cooler of popsicles in tow. Speechless, I watched as she was chased down the street and out of sight. A cacophony of confusion and excitement rose as a crowd of my classmates gathered to gape at the scene unfolding. Joining them and their laughter, I watched the spectacle as the police tried to catch her. Untactful racial slurs and jokes were made, all in jest. Yet, our laughter and fun came at the expense of that woman. Yes, she broke the law, and yes, the situation was somewhat comical and bizarre to watch on a field trip. But her unethical behavior does not excuse mine. If I could

have a second chance, I would undo all the jeering, laughing, and joking. However, with a heavy heart, I would still stand up and do the ethical thing of turning her over to the law.

On the way home from that field trip, I sat on that same cracked vinyl seat, looked through that same window, and saw the same things, but I saw them in a new light. Ethics are the basic principles of appropriate and decent behavior, but they are not always black and white. They tend to fall into this grey area where lines blur together and a distinction cannot be made between what is or is not ethical. While ethics remain fluid because they can change depending on the context, they play a key role in this situation and society in general by setting a standard for behavior based on the time period. This keeps people accountable for their actions and behavior.

However, it should be noted that ethics are rules of conduct set by a society that govern people externally and are not always moral. Therefore, there must be a balance between the two. Standing up and revealing the woman to the police was ethical because she was breaking the law, but morally it felt wrong to not help her out in her desperate situation. This conflict and paradoxical nature between ethics vs. morals and good vs. right is what keeps ethics flexible according to the circumstance and therefore resilient over time.

When I think back on that day, I do not remember the facts I learned about deep space or the history behind various space shuttles. In fact, I am fairly certain that those facts may have been the least important thing I learned that day.

### The Bystander

Autumn in LA is steady and casual. Having shed their eager green hue, dark-red leaves gently cascade to the ground. Birds chirp in the early morning breeze while squirrels scamper to nibble on fallen acorns. Backpacks are filled with literature and science textbooks. Between the hours of 8:00AM - 2:00 PM, classrooms are padded with the sounds of pencils scratching and paper rustling before filling up with lively conversations. When Autumn visits, everyone around here knows that school is once again in full session.

The year I entered high school began just like any other. I met my new teachers, joined a couple of campus clubs, and scribbled my name on the basketball try-outs sheet I had been practicing the sport for years and felt ready to take my game to a higher level of competition-so, naturally, I was excited to begin pre-season training with my new teammates. Our team quickly established a tight bond. Between practices, scrimmages, and bus rides, we seldom let the sound of laughter and squeals leave us.

However, the tight bond did not last. As Winter rolled around, an exclusive clique of a few girls had developed within our team. They called themselves the "Wolfpack" and often singled out one of the other players, whom I will call Bethany to protect her privacy. There were quite a few instances when they would conspicuously snicker at Bethany's braided ponytail or at her choice oft-shirt color. They never passed the ball to her during games, but would blame her for not contributing on the court. It was common to spot Bethany practicing shooting alone at the opposite end of the court, because no one dared to defy the "Wolfpack" by keeping her company. Slowly and steadily, it became evident that Bethany began to hate not just the players on our team, but basketball as a sport as well.

I wasn't sure why the "Wolfpack" chose to treat Bethany this way, and although I understood that what they were doing was completely wrong, I was also afraid of losing what was left of the team bond and even more afraid of becoming the next target-so I kept silent. By doing so, I unknowingly developed an isolation from the crowd, speaking to no one during practices and going home immediately after workouts ended. The bullying only worsened as season progressed. Our coach fully ignored the situation, so the "Wolfpack" got the impression that it was okay to continue tripping Bethany during conditioning drills. Bethany began skipping practice a few times a week. Her parents were unaware of her absences until one late January afternoon, when she was found drugged and unconscious outside of campus during practice hours. When our coach told us the news the next days, most of the girls acted indifferent. With this shred of news, the guilt began to claw even more heavily at my churning stomach; yet I still acted against my greater conscience. I still did not conjure up the courage to stand up against the "Wolfpack"- and just like everyone else, I did nothing.

I was so filled with the collusion of guilt and fear that I chose to focus all of my energy on ball, in hopes that maybe it .could alleviate some of the emotional pain. My mind became so focused on the game that I lost sight of what was going on around me; or rather, I chose to lose sight of it because the game was less painful to face than the reality of what was happening to Bethany. It took me a while to realize that my frustration with the bullying situation led my bond with my

teammates to ultimately vanish completely. I no longer knew when the post players were expecting my pass or when to clear space for the point guard to sprint for a layup. Eventually, my deprecated performance led me to lose my starting position altogether, even though there were only a few games left in the season.

With my increased amount of time spent on the bench, I watched from afar as Bethany struggled on the court-until it dawned on me: this whole time, I acted like a perfect bystander, deliberately avoiding action when it was clearly needed. I soon stumbled across Franz Kafka's "Before the Law," a brief story that brought me to the startling realization of what it truly means to be a bystander. "Before the Law" tells the tale of an unnamed man who seeks entrance to some sort of law. To achieve this, he has to pass through a guarded gate. The man sees that the gate stands wide open, but he decides to wait for the gatekeeper to grant him permission before he enters. The gatekeeper acknowledges the open gate-yet never gives him a signal to go in. Instead, he taunts him with tales of even more powerful gatekeepers that lie ahead and swipes offerings from the hopeful man.

Years pass and the man grows weak, until one day the gatekeeper finally shuts the gate and leaves the man with one parting thought: "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entrance was assigned only to you. Now I'm going now to close it." In that final thought, my mind got lost in the brilliance as the truth came crashing down: the man was supposed to have gained access to what he was searching for; all he had to do was challenge the gatekeeper. When the gate closes on the man, the opportunity for the man to fight is also taken away...forever.

When I finished reading those last words, I was completely stunned by the message-stunned by the fate of the man and stunned by its striking relevance to my own bystander attitude. Rather than sitting passively on a stool waiting for the gatekeeper to change his mind, the man should have confronted him, strutted through the gates, and fought off all of the other gatekeepers to come-because there is no way to obtain what he deserves other than to overcome the challenges. As for me, rather than dribbling my basketball away from the conflict, I should have defiantly shot baskets with Bethany on the other side of the court; I should have firmly reached a hand out when she tripped on the court; I should have been true friend when no one else would. For each of the times I kept silent and pretended that nothing was wrong, I was only letting the situation worsen. I thought that as time passed everything would clear up on its own-but in reality, it was just ticking closer and closer to the closing of my own gate.

In the end, Bethany and I sat next to each other on the bus rides for the few remaining games. We didn't speak much; but by the time season officially ended, we developed some sort of mutual understanding, a sort of silent friendship that we were both glad to have established. We were now in this together; and this time, we had each other. In the future, if I ever encounter another bullying situation, I'll know exactly what to do: fight for what is right and not let anyone discourage anyone else. Indeed, it is important to play by the rules...but if the standards are wrong, I need to bring about the change that is due.



### The Definition of Ethics

What are ethics? Well, if one researches the definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, this comes up: "rules of behavior based on ideas about what is morally good and bad." But is that all there is to ethics? Could ethics be more than just the guidelines one creates for oneself? I believe that while ethics are essentially "rules of behavior," there is an importance and a quality about them that defines who a person is.

Ethics can be challenging things to stay faithful to. In everyone's lives people face ethical challenges every day, having their faiths and morals tested. Thankfully they often overcome those challenges. In my life, for instance, I have had many internal conflicts that challenge my ethical principles. One day, for example, my family and I were returning from a fun-yet tiring-day from many activities, the most recent being dessert at Marie Callender's. It was already getting late-around 8 o'clock-and we were almost home, crossing the bridge that runs over the freeway. We noticed on the side of the road a ragged man, clearly homeless, who carried nothing but what looked like a mostly empty black trash bag. Now it has always been in our nature to help the homeless when we encounter them, but that night we were tired and drove past him. We soon, however, began to discuss turning around. While my brother did not care. My mom preferred to go home, but my step-dad wanted to turn around, so the decision was left to me. I was exhausted and we had already driven a ways past the man, but I began to think of him. I thought of how tired and worn he had looked; I thought of that sad bag that most likely held all of his possessions: and I thought of all the extra food in our car that could be sustaining him instead of rotting in our garbage can.

So-as one could guess-I decided to have us go back. We quickly sped back to him before he finished crossing the bridge and pulled over to hand him quite a few Quaker oat bars, half a liter of 7-Up, and some extra cupcakes that I had baked a couple days before. The look on his face made it worth it. When we honked at him he was completely bewildered, but when we handed him that load of food his face said it all. He looked surprised at how much it was, then happy. Finally a look of the deepest gratitude came upon his face like he was about to cry, and he said "God bless you" before we drove away. That is why it is within my ethics to help the homeless when I can. Not because I want the praise or credit or because I feel obligated to because I have more than they do. I help them so that I can see that look on their face. That happiness and gratitude that only misfortune can bestow upon a person. Given a second chance I might not have waited to drive all the way back; I would have stopped the minute I saw him. In my situation ethics helped me decide whether to put my needs first or sacrifice a bit of my time and energy in order to make a man's day.

I believe that ethics are so much more than the textbook definition. Yes they are rules that we make up for ourselves based on what we believe to be morally right or wrong; but they also say so much about us. Ethics are what define the quality of one's character. They are what makes a person good or bad, righteous or unrighteous, virtuous or wicked. Possessing the correct ethics can ensure that one knows joyous fulfillment rather than empty pleasure. Ethics are what makes a person a human being. Without ethics one would act like an animal and the world would be chaos. It is imperative that we learn and keep the right ethics that will guide us through our lives.