



2020-2021 Regional Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

The following eight cases are from the National High School Ethics Bowl Case Archives. Special thanks to the UNC Parr Center for Ethics for providing the virtual platform for this year's regional events.



Case #4: Dining out during a Pandemic

In early March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States economy began shutting down. To control the spread of the virus, states limited the operation of businesses deemed non-essential, and instructed their citizens to not leave their homes unless absolutely necessary. One of the major industries affected by these shutdowns was the restaurant and bar industry. By April, restaurants and bars had lost 5.9 million jobs, and this number was surely an undercount, as it did not include undocumented employees, or the many more who filed for unemployment since this data was collected in mid-April.¹ In May, states began easing restrictions and allowing restaurants to open, but many were forced to close again just weeks later as surges in cases were attributed to bars reopening.² By the summer, most states allowed outdoor dining to limit transmission, with some allowing limited indoor dining. But for many businesses, this came too late, or sustaining themselves with limited capacity was too difficult. Many had closed their doors for good before the reopening even started, and it's likely that many more will not survive this Fall.

Before the pandemic, going out to eat and exploring new restaurants was a favorite pastime of Megan and Andy's. They loved trying new foods, and were always among the first with a reservation at the new hot spots. When the shutdown began, they tried to support some of their favorite places by ordering takeout and buying gift cards, but they knew it was a drop in the bucket. What's more, they really missed going out! They enjoyed cooking out home, but it wasn't the same as experiencing the creations of other chefs, and having a chance to get out of the house.

When the reopening started, they were eager to visit one of their local favorites. It felt strange to be back after so long, but they felt more or less comfortable and safe, and they followed all of the appropriate safety rules. After they ordered, Megan asked Andy if he thought that it was right of them to be dining out. She was comfortable with the risk of possibly catching the virus herself, but if she did catch it, would she spread it to others? What about the staff at the restaurant? Even with the best safety protocols in place, the staff were being put at much higher risk than any of the patrons—and what about their family members? But, Andy offered, people need work, especially amidst ballooning unemployment rates. Andy and Megan knew that some were happy to finally be back working. Though unemployment benefits were available, many, such as undocumented workers, did not qualify. A lot of the staff were probably happy to be able to earn an income again, and, Andy thought, they could supplement that by leaving a big tip. The restaurants need to do business. If a place closes its doors forever, what looks like temporary unemployment for workers will become permanent.

It was obvious, Megan thought, that businesses and their employees were struggling, and if they took safety seriously the risk was probably low. But what if the staff don't actually feel safe, but felt like they had to work anyway? With so many unemployed, maybe they feel compelled to work. She wondered: Are we doing more harm than good by going out and being around strangers? Are we putting our enjoyment above the health and safety of others?

Question: Is it ethical to eat out during a pandemic?