

Twenty-one Questions for Ethical Dialogue

One of the best ways to promote ethical thinking is to engage students in ethical dialogue. Appropriate selections from the questions below can be used in many settings, including occasions when students confer with educators on topics like choosing a career. Selected student answers to questions--drawn from classes at the University of Maryland (and used with permission)--will appear later.

1. The Declaration of Independence refers to the "pursuit of happiness." Should the word "pleasure" be substituted for "happiness"? Why/why not?
2. The highest happiness for a cockroach probably is _____. The highest happiness for a human being probably is _____. Explain.
3. Are there any causes or principles you would risk your life to defend? If so, what are they? Explain.
4. Do you owe any duties to people in the future? People in the past? Why/Why not? If you recognize such duties, identify those you think most important.
5. Pick a career of interest to you. How might that career shape your character and personality? Explain.
6. What do you want to create with your life? Why?
7. What are the basic components of the scientific method? Can any of them be considered "ethical" in nature? Should any ethical standards associated with the scientific method be applied to other disciplines, including law?
8. The primary aim of education is _____? Explain.
9. If you were managing a group house, would you have any rules? Why/why not? If you would have rules, how would you devise and establish them? Identify at least three rules you would propose.
10. Should there be any general statement of "human rights" applicable across the world--even if it can't be enforced? Why/why not? If such a statement should exist, identify at least three "universal human rights."
11. What qualities do you value in your friends? Do your friends help make you a "better" person? If so, identify the qualities that make you "better." Do you try to help your friends become better people? Why? If so, how?

12. What are the basic traits of good leadership. Are any of those traits "ethical" in nature? Explain.

13. Are there people you admire, even though you disagree with them about controversial issues (like politics or religion)? What qualities of character do they have that you admire?

14. Would you pursue the truth, even if doing so caused you to doubt your basic beliefs and assumptions? Why?

15. Do you learn anything about yourself when you're quiet, and alone? What is it? Do you learn anything about the world when you're quiet, and alone? What is it?

16. Do you learn anything about yourself when you experience beauty? What is it? Do you learn anything about the world when you experience beauty? What is it?

17. From an interview with a University of Maryland student:

Q. Is engaging in cheating fair to honest students?

A. I don't think of it like that. I know some students do. But the attitude is generally, this is the way it is. When they work, a lot of these kids, either their fathers work in business, whatever they do, they get a shortcut--the other guy doesn't. That's the way I look at it. If I'm sharp enough to know the right people to get what I need, and he's not, then that's the point of the whole thing.

Agree or disagree with the student's perspective. Explain your answer.

18. Are there any values or virtues necessary for free economies to flourish? If so, what are they? How can they be fostered?

19. How is a good life defined?

20. How will the career you are contemplating help you lead a good life?

21. Assume an "ethics" pill could be devised that would make people kinder and more self-disciplined. If there were no harmful side effects, would you take such a pill? (Consider two underlying questions: Is happiness found in the process of molding a character--learning from failures and mistakes? Would the world be better off if St. Augustine or Malcolm X had taken "ethics pills" early in their lives?).