

The mission of the Winning Words Precollegiate Philosophy Program is in keeping with this description of a public ethics program from Peter Singer, one of the world's most important and influential philosophers:

We all make ethical choices, even if we never think about ethics, so a Public Ethics program will play a valuable role if it can take ethics out of the university and bring it to everyone, encouraging them to think about values in a reflective and methodical way.

A Public Ethics program should bring discussions of the nature of ethics, of important past ethical thinkers, and of key ethical questions to the wider community, and help to engage them in issues that they face on a daily basis. How can we think about ethics, and get beyond habit or conformity?

Too often, people assume that ethics is about prohibitions - the "thou shalt not..." approach to ethics. But we fail to think about the good we can do to others less fortunate than ourselves -- including not only people in our own community, but people in extreme poverty in developing countries. We also need to think about future generations: what kind of planet are we leaving for them? And ethics extends beyond our own species: what do we owe to animals?

A Public Ethics program should therefore raise not only the obvious questions about treating people close to us well, and about the inequality in our society, but also about helping the distant poor, about what we eat - both in terms of how the animals we eat were treated, and in terms of the greenhouse gas emissions for which we are responsible.

Finally, a Public Ethics program should ask young people what they want to do with their lives: how will they find fulfillment and purpose? That question leads to reflection on our ultimate values.

Peter Singer
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