

Ethics Bowl vs. Prom

Jake goes to a small midwestern high school. In the Fall of his senior year, in addition to applying for college, he takes on two new commitments. First, he promises to take his girlfriend, Alice, who is also a senior, to the senior prom in the Spring. Secondly, he joins his school's team to compete in the National High School Ethics Bowl. After preparing for months to field a three-person team, he and his teammates, Carly and Dana, who are both juniors, win their regional High School Ethics Bowl and qualify for this year's National competition in North Carolina.

He soon learns, however, that the National competition schedule conflicts with prom, such that there is no way for Jake to *both* go to prom and participate in Nationals. Unfortunately, there is also no one else at the school to take Jake's place in the tournament, so if he goes to the prom, Carly and Dana can't compete in Nationals, as there is a three-person team minimum to qualify.

Jake is friends with Carly and Dana and enjoys ethics bowl a lot, but he would prefer to go to the prom with Alice. In addition, he values his relationship with his girlfriend more and is, accordingly, more concerned about disappointing her than about disappointing his teammates. He did, after all, promise Alice he would take her to the prom, but he never explicitly promised he would participate in Nationals if the ethics bowl team won their regional. So, given all this, he plans to go to prom with Alice, and makes this decision clear to Carly and Dana.

Carly and Dana, understandably, are unhappy about this. They critically point out that he is letting down two people instead of just the one (as he would if he broke his promise to Alice). They argue that participating in the regional amounts to making a tacit commitment to participating in Nationals if you win, even if it doesn't involve an explicit promise. Furthermore, they point out that all this is further complicated by the fact that the school has logistically and financially supported the team this year. They maintain that this fact generates for Jake some obligation to the school to represent it at Nationals, accordingly. Frustrated with Jake's position, Carly and Dana insist that ethics bowl is more valuable than going to a prom—that it is just a more important kind of activity—one that merits more support in cases of conflict. Finally, they argue that, since they won their regional bowl, the team deserves to compete at Nationals, and that Jake's going to prom would prevent them from getting something they have worked hard for and deserve. While Alice would enjoy going to the prom, they maintain, this is not something she earned. They hold that it is worse to deprive someone of something they earned than to deprive them of something which may be nice, but was, in their view, unearned.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Should Jake reconsider his decision to go to prom with Alice? Why or why not?
2. What difference, if any, is made by the fact that Carly and Dana are juniors (and so could try again next year), while Jake and Alice are in their final year of high school?
3. Does the team's composition make a difference? If the team had four members (and could thus still go to nationals without Jake), would Jake's obligations differ? What if Jake's non-participation would lessen the chances of the team doing well?

