Cooperation and Competition in the Philosothon

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Abstract

Philosothons are events in which students practise Community of Philosophical Inquiry, usually with awards being made using three criteria: critical thinking, creative thinking and collaboration. This seems to generate a tension. On the one hand it recognises collaboration as a valued trait; on the other hand, the element of competition may seem antithetical to collaboration.

There are various possible considerations relevant to this apparent problem. We can pose them as seven questions. One, do the awards really recognise the best performers? Two, do the students and teachers see the awards as fair and reasonable? Three, do the awards recognise cooperation as a valuable contribution? Four, do Philosothons generate enthusiasm and goodwill? Five, might awards motivate students to try harder to do well? Six, if competition is normal in society, does it follow that it is justified as part of the Philosothon? Seven, do awards have a role in bringing the event to a climax? In this article, we will develop and evaluate the arguments suggested by these questions. Our conclusion is that the competitive element in the Philosothon is not antithetical to the collaborative ideal of philosophy.

Key words

Community of Inquiry, competition, cooperation, Philosothon

Introduction

A 'Philosothon' is an extra-curricular interschool event in which students engage in Community of Philosophical Inquiry with a view towards attempting to solve, as best they can, philosophical questions. Philosothons follow the 'Community of Inquiry' pedagogy that originated with Matthew Lipman, and which is now practised in many countries as part of the 'Philosophy for Children' (P4C) movement. Usually, a Philosothon is a competitive event, with awards being given at the end of the event for best individual and school performance. In competitive Philosothons performance

is typically assessed by philosopher–judges according to three criteria: critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration, and overall awards are made based on the judges' scoring of each student and of each school's team performance. (For the origins and development of the Philosothon, see Prior & Wilks, 2019, pp. 192–193.)

Philosothons originated in Perth, Western Australia, in 2007, specifically as a high school event. Since then they have been replicated in many places, including all Australian states, New Zealand, Mauritius and the United Kingdom. Judges are usually tertiary–based philosophers, PhD students or people trained in P4C. Some Philosothons involve teams of five students from each school; others involve teams of eight students from each school. Some Philosothons are hosted by schools; others are hosted by universities. Most are face-to-face, although some are run online. There are Philosothons for junior schools, middle schools and senior schools. Here we are focussing on secondary school competitive Philosothons, but much of what we argue is more generally applicable.

Our purpose in this paper is to reflect upon arguments we have heard put in discussion about the competitive element in the Philosothon. At the heart of the philosophical enterprise is the idea that philosophers work together to come up with good answers; philosophy is a collaborative discipline, or at least it holds to that ideal. Co-operation is also at the heart of a Philosothon as students work together to come to the best possible solution to some given problem or stimulus. Students come to the Philosothon as a member of a school team, but in the event itself they work in groups made up of individuals from other schools. Philosothons involve cooperating with strangers to bring about the best possible answer to a philosophical question. Students who might not otherwise hear the word 'Philosophy' are exposed to a rich and important world of arguments, ideas and language.

Why then are Philosothons usually also competitive events, with awards for performance? Would they not be better without the competitive element? Wouldn't a non-competitive Philosothon be truer to the cooperative spirit of philosophy? These are valid questions which we will pursue in more detail and depth. We will pose for consideration seven arguments for and against the competitive approach, and we then evaluate those arguments.

A sceptic might question whether the Philosothon does much to develop an understanding of philosophy, a subject which is often abstract and intellectually very challenging. In this article we leave that question aside. Our focus is not on the intellectual value of the Philosothon, but on its ethical dimension.

We bring our experience to these issues. The authors have been involved Philosothons since their inception in 2007. Matthew Wills was one of the creators of the first Philosothon. He has been the leading force in the expansion of the Philosothon since its inception. Alan Tapper has been a philosopher–judge of about eighteen Philosothons in Western Australia. We acknowledge that this involvement may bring with it some risk of bias. (The immediate context for this article is a controversy arising in Australia in 2018–19 about the role of competitive Philosothons in schools, which is described in D'Olimpio 2022, pp. 1–2.) The topic we are addressing is one that has no academic literature (i.e. a search of Google Scholar and PhilPapers returns no relevant published articles). So our aim must be to open up a topic for discussion, drawing on our own experiences, while looking forward to hearing other perspectives, if the issues attract other writers.

Competitive and non-competitive Philosothons

Philosothons need not be competitive events. One main aim of the Philosothon, whether competitive or non-competitive, is to cultivate intelligent and critical discussion, without generating animosity or ill-feeling. This is an important consideration given that social media has a tendency to reward point-scoring and cheap personal attacks. To participate in any Philosothon is to experience the value of such discussion.

Another way in which any kind of Philosothon fosters cooperation is that students participate as members of a school team. Typically, much of the work is done before the event by students and teachers as they prepare. They may meet regularly, having been given the stimulus material months before the Philosothon. In this setting, the better students have a motive for helping the less able or inexperienced students. Teams are made up of one or two students from each of the year groups, so cooperation within a team is also cooperation across year groups.

These points apply equally to competitive and non-competitive Philosothons. Students preparing for either kind of Philosothon are being trained in the art of cooperative discussion. However, in competitive Philosothons, awards are given for school performance as well as individual performance, and team success at the end of the event is a shared enterprise.

We turn now to consideration of factors that might be seen as counting for or against the competitive version of the Philosothon.

1.   Awards recognise good performance

One potentially strong argument against competitive awards is the claim that those awards do not reliably pick out best performance and thus the awards may often be given to students who don't deserve them. The claim might be that in actual practice awards are based on nothing much more than judges' opinions, and those opinions carry little weight. It follows from this—so it might be argued—that the only justifiable form of Philosothon is a non-competitive Philosothon.

According to this view, judging in a Philosothon is nothing like judging an athletic competition, where results are clear-cut, or judging performance in team sports, where players' contributions are rankable in fairly reliable ways. Rather, it is much more like judging an art award or a music event, where taste is the only criterion, and taste varies too much to justify picking out best performers.

Two points can be made against this argument. One is that the judges who take part in Philosothons are normally well-qualified for the role. They are usually academic philosophers, who have years of experience in judging student performance at the academic level, not just student essays but also student performance in tutorials, which are relevantly similar to the Community of Inquiry.

A second point is that the judges are normally following explicit criteria, and they have been given introductory training in how to apply those criteria. The Philosothon marking key is the judges' guide to the evaluation process. It has undergone several incarnations over the past 10 years.

The current marking key for the Australasian Association of Philosophy Philosothon and for regional Australian Philosothons evaluates students on their critical thinking skills, their creativity and their collaboration with other students. Table 1 shows the itemisation of these three categories.

Table 1: Philosothon marking rubric.

Philosothon Marking Rubric		
Critical Thinking	**Creative Thinking**	**Collaboration**
Grasped philosophical problem Crafted an argument Evaluated others' arguments Distinguished beliefs and reasons in own or others' arguments Identified assumptions in others' arguments	Contributed original ideas Made interesting links between ideas Provided examples, analogies or thought experiments	Contributed appropriately to philosophical discussion Encouraged peers Supported and/or developed others' reasons or views Showed intellectual courage Asked thought-provoking questions

Thus, we contend, evaluation in the Philosothon is not haphazard and is not a matter of personal taste. It does involve judgement, but it is judgement guided by well-specified criteria. And it is carried out by competent judges. This, we think, adequately counters the objection that competitive Philosothons cannot claim to evaluate student performance objectively.

2. Students see the awards as fair and reasonable

We can imagine a scenario where performance evaluation is conducted by well-qualified judges in accordance with appropriate criteria, but participants commonly come away from the Philosothon feeling that the awards went to the wrong students. This would be reason to question the appropriateness of having such awards.

In reply, we can agree that this is possible, but question whether it is actually how students feel about the awards process. This is of course an empirical question. Our experience of many Philosothons, mainly—but not only—in Australia, supports a very different picture. Typically, in our experience, award-winners are clapped and cheered with enthusiasm by all participants. Students get extra pleasure at seeing their school-fellows getting awards, but they are fair-minded in recognising students from any participating school as worthy winners. We have almost never seen students or teachers questioning the judges' decisions. What we have experienced may not be always the case; our sample may be biased in some way. Whether it is very often the case can only be determined by empirical studies.

3.   Awards are in part recognition of cooperation

It is critical in this discussion to be clear about the criteria in play when judges are evaluating student performances. We take it to be definitive of a Philosothon that what is judged is not just philosophical ability and understanding, nor just creativity in student dialogue. It is intrinsic to any Philosothon that students are evaluated on their collaborative contribution to the Community of Inquiry. In the normal case, this counts as of equal value to the critical and creative components of the performance. This is shown in the marking rubric above, with detailed suggestions about how 'collaboration' is to be identified. Thus, one-third of good performance is explicitly cooperative. It would be quite difficult, perhaps almost impossible, for a student to win an award while also being uncooperative in his or her behaviour. Given the number of participants eligible for any award, to do well overall is almost certainly to do well in all three criteria.

This argument shows that the competitive Philosothon does not support or encourage any student who seeks to win by putting down or upstaging fellow participants. Though we have not seen them, there may be students like this; nothing can prevent them from taking part; but the Philosothon is structured so that they will not do well in the sense of winning awards.

4.   The Philosothon generates enthusiasm and goodwill

We have considered above the possibility that students might find the awards process unfair and unreasonable. In our experience, this is not the case. But there is a wider question about the spirit of the competitive Philosothon as an event. Do student participants enjoy taking part? Do they enjoy it because it provides a different challenge from their usual studies? Do observers feel the event is uplifting? Are observers enjoyably surprised to see students grappling with the topics being discussed? Our experience is that these questions are answered affirmatively. But, again, these are empirical matters. Survey evidence is needed.

An evaluative study by Dr Rachel Buchanan from Newcastle University (Buchanan 2018), based on the 2018 Australasian Philosothon, provides some such evidence. She reported on perceptions of the Philosothon experience by students, facilitators and judges. All three commented favourably on the experience. Note that the Australasian Philosothon is a competitive event, so her evidence is applicable to the point at issue in this article.

Buchanan reports that students saw this Philosothon as

a chance to gain skills such as: imagination; 'greater confidence in group discussion'; argumentation and communication; listening skills; critical and lateral thinking. Other students identified the experience itself as being the positive factor: it was fun, it was a challenge; it was new; the friendships; the development of, and exposure to new perspectives; the sense of community that occurs; and access to 'amazing' discussions. (Buchanan 2018, p. 7.)

Facilitators saw the benefits to students as

> critical thinking, problem solving, collaborative conversation; cross peer-group interaction, development of cultural capital and verbal skills, the opportunity to meet students from across the country and to have meaningful discussions. (Buchanan 2018, p. 10.)

Judges commented on the students gaining

> critical and collaborative skills, support of, and cooperation with their peers, their ability to identify philosophical problems, their ability to articulate complex thoughts and advance discussion through clarifying questions. (Buchanan 2018, p. 12.)

Buchanan adds that 'From their exposure to and experience of philosophy most students (80.3%) stated that they felt 'confident' (44%) or 'very confident' (36.3%) to explain what philosophy is.' Given that one of aims of a Philosothon is to provide stimulus for students to select Philosophy at high school and tertiary institutions it is important that the majority of students (72.5%) could see themselves choosing to learn philosophy in the future' (Buchanan 2018, p. 7).

Buchanan's overall conclusion is worth quoting in full:

> The research here shows clear enthusiasm from all participants: students, teachers/facilitators and judges. That participants believed that participation in the Philosothon offers a range of benefits; intellectual, social, experiential and life-long was clear from analysis of the responses. The event itself was very positively perceived (minor organizational suggestions for improvement aside). Students enjoyed meeting fellow students from around the country and participating in high-level philosophical discussions. Facilitators and Judges saw students performing well and were impressed by the level of

collaboration, creative thinking and communication skills that students were able to demonstrate via the Community of Inquiry process. There is little doubt that Philosothons in general, and the Australasian Philosothon are seen as worthwhile enterprises. The Australasian Philosothon raises the profile of both Philosothons and philosophy. Participants; students, facilitators and judges alike; all enjoyed and felt that they benefitted from their involvement. (Buchanan 2018, p. 15.)

Buchanan's report is valuable support for the claim that the Philosothon experience in its competitive format generates enthusiasm and goodwill not only amongst students, but also amongst the judges and facilitators who take part. It is of course only one study. Others studies are desirable.

5.   Awards might motivate students to try harder

A possible argument in favour of a competitive element in Philosothons is based on the commonly-made claim that competition generates motivation to perform well and such motivation improves performance. The conclusion drawn from this is that a non-competitive Philosothon would be (*ceteris paribus*) of a lower standard than a competitive one.

The argument from competitive motivation is one that supporters of the competitive Philosothon need not enter into. At best it is a weak argument. For all that we know, non-competitive Philosothons might generate performances as good or better than competitive Philosothons. (The comparison might be made by scoring performance in both kinds of Philosothon, without making the scores part of the non-competitive version). We should adopt a trial-and-error approach to that proposition.

In any case, as noted at the outset, we are not here arguing about what model produces the best performance intellectually. We are focusing only on the ethical dimension.

6.   Competition is normal in society

Another possible argument arises from the observation that students will graduate into a competitive society. One might infer from that claim that there is nothing to be concerned about if the Philosothon also includes an element of competition. It could be added that competition in the Philosothon prepares students for later entry into a competitive world.

This argument might have some validity when applied to school sporting competitions. A student taking part in inter-school sports will see how the best individuals and teams perform. He or she will be better able to judge their own place in sporting competition. He or she may be a talented individual from a disadvantaged background, and they may see that they measure up against the best of their age group, especially if they get an award for their performance. Experiences like this can be life-changing.

Something similar could occur through participating in a Philosothon. A student from a disadvantaged background might find, to their surprise, that they are as good as the best amongst those who take part. They may thereby raise their self-expectations. Awards could work to benefit students in this way and better prepare them for adult life.

In our view, however, this is not a strong argument for the competitive Philosothon, since it is unlikely to describe a very common occurrence. But it is not a negligible point. We think it counts in favour of competition and awards. In a non-competitive Philosothon it would be less obvious that our hypothetical student had performed outstandingly.

7.   Awards have a role in bringing the Philosothon to a satisfying conclusion

It is important to think of the Philosothon as a performance event. It is in this respect not like a routine university tutorial or a secondary school class. Without overstating things, we think that as an event it is a highlight of the year for many students. Students usually prepare for the event over many months and schools come together for it from around the region. Teachers are seen by students as providing leadership outside of their regular classroom situation. Many parents and other community members attend the Philosothon as observers. Academic philosophers take part. Such an event has a dramatic structure, and dramatic structure is enhanced when there is a suitable conclusion. One type of dramatically suitable conclusion is the handing out of awards.

Concluding thoughts

The aim of this article has been to pose and evaluate seven arguments for and against the competitive element in Philosothons. Here we review these arguments.

The first argument seeks to show that the Philosothon, as normally practised, is a fair competition. The evaluation process by which awards are decided is conducted by

well-qualified judges trained in philosophy and in the Community of Inquiry pedagogy. We show a standard Australian marking key as evidence of the criteria by which student performance is evaluated. We take these criteria to be fair and reasonable.

The second argument offers evidence that the Philosothon is perceived as fair by the participants. Our own experience of many Philosothons is that students do not complain of bias or unfairness. Award winners are generally applauded enthusiastically at the end of the event.

The third argument shows that cooperation is built into the competitive Philosothon as an integral part of the event. One-third of all marks are awarded for cooperation in the Community of Inquiry. Cooperative discussion has always been a key aspect of the tradition of Community of Inquiry. The Philosothon is an extension of that tradition. Students who do poorly in the cooperative element of the Philosothon are almost certainly not going to do well in the judges' eyes.

The fourth argument considers how competitive Philosothon participants—students, facilitators, judges, observers, family members, and host schools—experience the spirit of the event. This requires empirical evidence, and we provide this from a study of the 2018 Australian Philosothon. The evidence from this study is strongly positive. We accept that this is only one study, and other studies are desirable.

The fifth argument replies to a possible contention in support of competitive Philosothons that awards generate motivation to do well. We reject this argument as both weak and irrelevant to the ethical issue we are considering.

The sixth argument considers the claim that competition is normal in society, so competition in the Philosothon is good preparation for later life. We think this is a weakly supportive argument. We imagine a scenario where a socially disadvantaged student does well in a Philosothon, and thereby sees the possibility of a better future than was previously imaginable. This scenario is probably not common.

The last argument is to emphasise that the Philosothon is an event, and events need a dramatic structure. Awards at the end of the event provide a dramatic climax. Other ways of ending the event might be tried and found to work well. All we claim is that awards for performance are a good way to bring the event to a suitable conclusion.

Overall, our position amounts to a defence of the standard competitive version of the Philosothon. We see no good arguments against the competitive element in the standard version.

Two general points can be added in conclusion. One is to emphasise that participation in Philosothons is voluntary, so no student or teacher who dislikes competitions or who finds competition ethically problematic is required to participate. In this regard the Philosothon is not at all like normal schooling. The Roman maxim *Volenti non fit injuria*—to a willing person, no injury is done—applies here. Even though the persons are young adults, they are old enough to make competent decisions on participation. The second point is to note that non-competitive Philosothons are quite possible and perhaps should be tried out more often. Nothing said in this article rules them out. They may be especially appropriate for younger students, not yet accustomed to participating in competitive events.

The issue we have been discussing focuses on a specific event, but it engages with a very broad and perennial ethical question, namely the relation between cooperation and competition. Cooperation is of course central to ethics. A recent cross-cultural analysis concludes that 'cooperation is always and everywhere considered moral' (Curry et al. 2019, p. 59). It is competition that is sometimes seen as ethically problematic, and with some reason (see Galinsky & Schweitzer 2015 for a popular but insightful discussion). As we see it, competition may seem more problematic than it need be if we fail to distinguish between fair and unfair competition. Unfair competition is, by definition, unethical. Fair competition is, by definition, ethical. Philosothons as normally practised are, we have argued, fair competitions.[1]

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