Competitions and Community of Philosophical Inquiry:

Compatible or not?

Félix García Moriyón

Honorary Professor at Universidad Autónoma de Madrid (UAM)

felix.garciamoriyon@gmail.com

Irene Lafuente-Aliaga

Philosophy teacher at Txorierri High School, Derio, Spain

and PhD candidate at University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU)

ilafuentaliaga@gmail.com

Abstract

Philosophy contests proliferate today. The Philosophy Olympiads are the most common. In the International Council of Philosophical Inquiry with Children (ICPIC) community there is some concern about a possible contradiction between the cooperative and community-centred approach to the practice of philosophy in education and the intrinsic rivalry of competitions. The arguments against these contests focus on their main risks. It is thought that they potentially reinforce the particularly harmful meritocratic educational system while simultaneously increasing inequality and reinforcing private education. Furthermore, the belief is that they promote destructive controversy where the goal is winning the debate.

In Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI), however, notions exist that could potentially be favoured in these competitions. CoPI focuses on demanding and cooperative argumentative dialogue and encourage *parresia*, the assertive and reasoned defence of one's ideas in adversarial contexts. Likewise, the Olympic principles promote fair play; the search for excellence and the ideals of *isonomy*, *isegory* and *isokratia*, fostering participant skills and values which are desirable from an educational, philosophical and democratic perspective.

We consider that, from an educational perspective as well as from the Philosophy for Children educational approach, participation in competition is possible and even desirable if the negative aspects it might have are addressed.

Keywords

community of philosophical inquiry, competition, philosophy, teaching

Introduction

Philosophy contests proliferate today in education. In the United States and Canada, dissertation and essay contests have been held for decades in secondary schools. The Philosophy Olympics, which have taken place for eight consecutive years in Spain and in which participation is growing every year, have four official modalities: video, photography, dilemma and dissertation.

There is also since 1993 an International Philosophy Olympiad organised under the auspices of the International Federation of Philosophical Societies and supported by UNESCO, and an Ibero-American Olympiad whose first event took place in 2015. These competitions are mainly for secondary school students but there are some aimed at university students and primary school children.

From the approach of Philosophy for Children (P4C), there are voices that point to a possible contradiction in terms since philosophy is conceived as an open dialogue without strict rules except those related to good reasoning, and this notion does not coincide with the regulated structure of the tournaments. Moreover, it also points to a contradiction between the community-centred approach that focuses on collaborative dialogue (Cassidy & Christie 2013) and the competitive nature of tournaments. When the Spanish Centre of Philosophy for Children played an active role in the organisation of the Philosophical Olympiad, some members spoke out against it.

On the other hand, there are people very committed to the P4C educational program who are in favour of those competitions. Centres of Philosophy for Children in the USA or Australia, for example, back Ethics Bowls and promote the participation of their members in those tournaments (Prior & Wilks 2019), and some organise competitive and non-competitive models of philosophical meetings. In Spain, for example, the Philosophy Olympiad began in 2000 and gradually spread throughout the country, becoming a national competition in 2013. We have been founding members of local and national Olympiad and we are still active members. From the very beginning, we counted on the support of the Center for Philosophy for Children. It is therefore worth reflecting on this controversy. Some members spoke

out against it, arguing that it was contradictory to the cooperative dialogue model, which is essential for the Community of Philosophical Inquiry (CoPI).

Resistances and critics

The International Philosophy Olympiad has a long history beginning with the inaugural competition held in Bulgaria in 1993 and since taking place all around the world. Some oppose these tournaments and offer potentially valid criticisms. The Philosophy Olympiad, like the Olympic Games, is by definition a competition in so much as many people come together in a specific environment and process, governed by specific rules and at the final event there are winners and losers. To be honest, a very few people win, and all others participate, but nobody calls them losers

The guide *How to Write a Philosophical Essay* (Murphy 2016) exists to assist contestants and teachers, through specific criteria and tips, to make their tasks easier. The guide is publicly available and provides the juries with standards for grading the essays objectively. It's a good example of the precise nature of the competition, its rules, grading system, opportunities for feedback (if any) and objectives.

The essays must be written in English, German, French or Spanish; however, they cannot be written in any of the official languages of the student's state or country. Language is a discriminatory and elitist criterion in the International Philosophy Olympiad as very few students are sufficiently fluent in any but their native language. No specific language is favoured; all participants must write their essays in a second language and usually only students of high socioeconomic and cultural status are good bilingual writers. The evaluation criteria are: relevance of the topic, philosophical understanding of the topic, persuasiveness of the argument, coherence and originality.

The essays progress through a three-stage grading process with the final evaluation and determination of winners carried out by a high level committee. The competition is not structured into teams but instead each participant moves through qualifying rounds to a final individual winner.

We can accept that the philosophy teachers who support and organise the Philosophy Olympiad mention the deep relationship between the Olympic Games in ancient Greece and the birth of philosophy. Interestingly, Aristotle says: 'as in Olympic Games it is not the most beautiful and the strongest that are crowned but

those who compete (for it is some of these that are victorious), so those who act win, and rightly win, the noble and good things in life' (Aristotle 1999, p. 13)

Ortega y Gasset, an important Spanish philosopher, wrote very interestingly about the valuable contribution of the Olympic Games because they favoured a sense of healthy competition which is guided by three basic principles: the rules of fair play, the primacy of the participation over the triumph and the self-improvement, and they are essential for democratic life (Ortega y Gasset 1924/1994). Nevertheless, competition can be a risky practice, and sometimes these three principles are empty words that hide a less positive reality. In the Philosophy Olympiad, the quality of argumentation is assessed, but the desire to win can take precedence over argumentative excellence.

This is what Socrates detected in the sophists and confronted through his way of teaching and practicing philosophy. The sophists preferred debate and discourse through which victory is achieved by persuasion, although other means are possible, such as simply using offensive language. But this group of philosophers also specifically shunned deliberation and dialogue in which there is no competition at all as the seeking of truth is their only objective. They were perfect teachers for politicians whose aim, rather than service to the citizens, was the conquest of positions of command, and for lawyers in court, whose sole objective was to win his case at trial. When Aristotle deals with the study of rhetoric, he devotes considerable attention to a series of all kinds of resources for persuading, something that today is studied in detail by psychologists, especially those who focus on the analysis of political psychology and advise politicians, especially in election campaigns.

If we look at the present day, very similar criticisms are still being made (Rey 2012). It is a fact that debate tournaments are a deeply rooted practice in universities and even in secondary education, and they are also highly appreciated in business and law schools. In this case, the fundamental issue is to win the debate, so that the mastery of rhetorical techniques of argumentation predominates. Moreover, in many of the formats, people competing do not necessarily defend their own convictions but must defend a thesis that they may or may not support; it is assumed that they know the arguments for or against and can adopt either of the two options without affecting their argumentative capacity and without feeling bound by truth or truthfulness. This is a perfect example of pure instrumental rationality that is not concerned with ends (Grupo Gorgias 2013), but does not seem to be a beneficial anchor of quality education.

Moreover, sports, amateur or professional, even Olympic Games, are a good example of the rules of fair play not being followed as often as they should be. Doping is a serious problem, so much so that some philosophers such as Savulescu (Savulescu et al. 2004) propose to admit it legally, which paradoxically discards fair play completely. The underlying problem is that practising a sport is reduced to the sole goal of winning, ignoring the sport process. This is an extrinsic motivation for the task and is of less value since the practice of a specific sport has merit only insofar as you win. The same thing can happen with the educational process: learning the ability to argue is good, but the fact that it allows one to win a prize makes it better to the point of considering victory as the only important value at stake. This is what already happens when assessment tests are given: students learn, above all, to pass the exam and only temporarily memorise the content, quickly discarding what they have learned.

David Johnson (2015), a great advocate of collaborative learning, makes a more nuanced but, at its base, somewhat more radical criticism. He believes that the problem is not so much with competition per se, as competition is not intrinsically bad. Collaboration is central, but it is not enough; the presence of conflict and competition is also necessary because, without them, the creative capacities of human beings would not be stimulated and the best solutions would not be achieved. Undoubtedly, according to Johnson, cooperative elements must predominate over competitive elements, but without them, favourable situations are not established either. This leads him to a distinction that is important in this case: controversies and conflicts, which are so attractive to human beings, can be constructive or destructive. Positive controversies seek to solve a problem and are fundamental to any challenge or task tackled by human beings. Together, in cooperation, people join efforts to solve the problem. Destructive controversies pose the opposite: the focus is not on solving the problem but on defeating those who hold positions opposed to ours.

The great success and educational strength of a proposal such as Philosophy for Children lies precisely in the objective of transforming the classroom into a community of philosophical inquiry. Students, with guidance and facilitation from the teacher, deliberate on issues that they consider significant and relevant, but also debatable and complex. The contrast of ideas is constant, as is the demand for argumentative rigour. The process always seeks to reach some answer, or many answers; answers which always remain open to further deliberations in which the search for truth continues. Nobody wins, nobody loses, but the whole community

and each of its members improve their cognitive and emotional competences. There is no room in this context for destructive controversy.

There is an even greater problem which responds to the same logic of competition. The entire educational system is permeated by a system based on merit; it is the approach that links social mobility and personal growth to academic results. Those who go beyond compulsory education and do so at a high academic level, that is, with good grades, will be able to advance and reach the high levels of education that allow access to social power.

This award system is a variant of what Plato and Cicero called the Aristocratic Republic, which is a government of the best and brightest selected from the educational system by virtue of their personal merit. But, in the democracies that revolted against the aristocracy of the Modern Age, they preferred to use the term meritocracy (Bovens & Wille 2017). According to this scheme, it makes perfect sense to participate in competitions, especially dignified with the noun 'Olympics'. Personal merit, based on equal opportunities, is what legitimises subsequent inequalities.

Meritocracy has been receiving strong criticism from several fronts (Sandel 2020) and two of them make perfect sense to reinforce the opposition to participation in Philosophy Olympiads. First, meritocracy conceives academic life as a long-running career, an authentic marathon, so it assumes that some will lose and/or fail in school, while others will win, resulting in only a few becoming members of the social elite. Added to this is the well-documented fact that equality of opportunity is not a reality: genetic endowment and the family and social environment distribute opportunities with absolute inequality and the educational system, no matter how seriously it attempts to tackle the problem of inequality, ends up legitimising a very illegitimate inequality. Additionally, Philosophy Olympiads reinforce school segregation, with the emergence of schools that exclude students who do not have the relevant personal skills and family advantages to have a successful academic career. This is the case of grammar schools in the United Kingdom, to which 25% of the students with the best marks in an assessment test at age 11 are admitted (Furlong & Lunt 2021) and the magnet schools in the USA, which admit only 10% to 20% of the applicants. In some schools, there is also segregation of students with more academic ability, who are grouped in bilingual curricula, or in standard classes, with more attention paid to them than to those who are considered to be academically 'deficient'.

Benefits and pros

Philosophy competitions function as didactic resources at the service of educational objectives and their benefits are many. They are an engine for creativity and progress, they offer personal fulfilment, they promote excellence by generating intellectual role models and leaders, and they foster democratic values and attitudes.

The tendency to compete with and rival an opponent has been found since ancient times. Everything seems to indicate that competition is as natural as cooperation in 'Homo ludens' (Huizinga 1998). In both activities, one learns, grows, and experiences pleasure and amusement.

Competition is therefore something playful but not trivial. In fact, 'the game is delimited by an indispensable respect by the player for the rules ... The player knows that his [*sic*] activity is only play, but by knowing it, by becoming aware of that space and by integrating himself into it, he confers on it an inviolable reality that prevents him from random behaviour' (Lorite 2016, p. 35).

The term 'competence' has a Latin origin which includes a double meaning, as Vigo 2013) points out. On the one hand it refers to the opposition and rivalry between people who aspire to the same end, and on the other, it indicates 'expertise, aptitude or suitability to do something or intervene in a certain matter', in other words, *arethé* (virtue). In philosophy competitions, the meanings converge: there is a competition between competent adversaries.

Seneca, in his *Moral Essays* (1928), affirms that rivalry with an opponent helps us to progress, motivates us to strive and improve ourselves because the ones who have never had an adversary do not know how far their strength reaches. This brings to mind the official motto of the Olympic Games: *citius, altius, fortius*, which arose in 1891 in a lecture by Dominican priest Henri Didon (1897). It is often interpreted in a reductionist way as an exhortation merely of the obsession for sporting improvement and the breaking of records. In reality it promotes the conscious betterment of the human being as a whole and offers an orderly pattern of a progressive improvement within a moral improvement. Among the Olympic ideals we find another slogan: 'The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning but taking part; the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well' (Hill 1996, p. 7), which emphasises the relevance of the process itself even above the result.

The pursuit of goals in philosophy competitions promotes personal development through intellectual challenges that encourage self-realisation. Excellence praised in victory is greater the higher the level of the adversary. Is there any better moment than when '… we reach a goal, overcoming all obstacles?' (Pineda 2019, p. 366). Just as in sports, philosophy competitions enable the development of virtue. The participants strive to improve and achieve excellence, moving away from mediocrity, an element we must avoid in order to 'carry on a life worth living' (Cortina 2010).

What is characteristic of the Olympic spirit, at least in its Greek origin, is that competition is understood as the aspiration to stand out among equals by competing in fair play. This is what is promoted in the philosophy tournaments. This is evidence of the socialising role of competition. 'To compete with others one needs others: no one competes alone. Those who seek at all costs to tyrannize or exterminate are not more competitive than others: on the contrary, what they want is to finish competing as soon as possible ...' (Savater 1992).

It is important to point out that the virtuous and excellent are those who are above average in their achievements, generating awe, appreciation and esteem. With victory, public recognition, prestige and honour are sought and received. This pursuit of excellence is worth aspiring to in the educational sphere for several reasons. On the one hand, societies need inspiration, examples to imitate and citizens worthy of admiration who embody excellence and the social ideal, and who awaken in their fellow citizens a yearning for improvement and individual progress. 'Admiration of excellence springs from the awareness of our imperfection and points to grow' (Arteta 2000, p. 13). Finalists in and winners of philosophy competitions become role models of critical and creative thinking among youth; an ideal to aspire to. On the other hand, excellence 'is fruitful for the community to which it belongs ... a just society cannot be built with mediocre citizens' (Cortina 2010). The citizens who stand out lead in their fields, generating changes and promoting the progress of their societies. Those people are very important for a democratic society to grow, and they also are worthy of admiration because they are valuable models of moral excellence that inspire us all. As Bertolt Brecht (1965) said in his poem *In Praise of Fighters*, `These are the indispensable ones'.

The connection between sports competition and politics is clearly shown in the concept of 'agon', which represents the very meaning of the Olympic spirit: the unity of play and struggle. The agonistic spirit from Greek culture that Jaeger and

Burckhardt talk about is comprised of two elements: 'The good citizen in a democracy, besides being competent in what he [*sic*] does, is also someone with the ability to compete with others and to forge his own character within the framework of healthy competition' (Lorite 2016, p. 374). Competing in philosophy tournaments helps participants to be more competent in philosophical thinking.

Philosophy competitions have an obvious educational value in that triumph depends on talent and effort, and the titles are only applicable until the next competition. Whoever wants to keep the title must continue to strive; new competition means new victories and winners. Inequality resulting from victory and defeat is fair, deserved and time-limited, being the consequence of an equitable competition.

These tournaments function as laboratories of democracy applying the principles of *isonomy* (equality before the law); *isegory* (right to participate in public life) and *isocracy* (equality in access to public office) which are characteristic of the Greek agones according to Miller (2000).

Likewise, in philosophy competitions there is a constructive management of conflict, something especially necessary in our times; difference does not hinder thought but enhances it. They are not reckless confrontations, but, as in the Olympic Games, are institutionalised practices governed by rules of rivalry that are applicable to all participants and which require a prior disposition to cooperate. In ancient Greece during the Olympic Games political rivalries were forgotten and, perhaps, as suggested by Lorite (2016) the game between adults arose in a regulated deviation of tensions and conflicts to resolve and channel them as pleasures.

Moreover, the CPI is based on the ideal of the scientific community in which one cooperates through rigorous and demanding dialogue. That dialogue requires the assertive intervention of the participants who must be able to back their own ideas even in adversarial contexts. In the words of Brenifier (2008.), it is a matter of promoting authenticity, which is an intellectual virtue distinct from sincerity and which is related to courage and will and at the same time be opposed to complacency of opinion. It is what the classics called *parresia*, a concept recovered by Foucault whose origin we find in the Greek terms *pan* 'all', and *reo* 'to say'. That is, to say everything and to speak frankly. According to Fernandez and Manibardo (2015), the *parresiastes* provides a complete and accurate account of what is on his or her mind, so that those listening are able to understand exactly what the speaker is thinking. Practicing *parresia* 'requires the intellectual and moral qualities necessary

to know the truth ... and to transmit it with meaning and without rhetorical resources that disfigure it'. We could say that it also implies a commitment to one's own words and responsibility for what they express: 'It is necessary that the *parresiastés* is endowed with cognitive and communicative skills in order to ethically put the principle into practice. Otherwise, *parresia* becomes charlatanism' (Fernandez & Manibardo 2015, p. 6).

We find, according to Macías Valadez (2013, pp. 85-97), an example of a *parrhesiastic* figure in Socrates, the Greek inspirer and precedent of the CoPI, because he reveals the truth in speaking, and he does it in a courageous and critical way.

Together with argumentative skills, it is essential to forge a responsible and participatory citizenship in democratic societies such as ours and both are specifically developed in philosophy competitions. Ethics Bowls, Olympiads and essay contests are ideal for the acquisition of these skills since the participants have to expose and defend their reasoning before adversaries and judges.

In any case, these confrontations, whether sporting or intellectual and dialectical, promote healthy competition and sportsmanship, which is 'a key factor in the constitution and development of democracy as a way of life' (Frías & Isidori 2018, p. 504)

In fact, as Reid (2020) suggests, it does not seem coincidental that philosophy and democracy emerged within the same civilization that pioneered sporting competitions. It is full accepted that sporting competition is a fundamental educational force in democratic societies, and we propose philosophy competition as a valuable resource for the same purpose. Because competition is inevitable and students have to endure it, the most beneficial strategy is to implement it as a normal element in the educational system, so that students can learn by following the structure of the competition to compete as better citizens.

After all, philosophy is, like democracy, forged from dialogue and both 'can and must be impregnated with the sporting spirit, the spirit of the game, the Olympic spirit, the *agonistic* spirit' (Pineda 2019, p. 378). The Olympiads do not completely align with the ancient Greek concept of debate since their objective of winning provokes destructive controversy.

Between competing and being competent

It is not easy to make a decision or reach an agreement between two positions that are completely contradictory when each has clear boundaries which must not be transgressed. There are those who advocate competitive debate on the one hand, and those who advocate cooperative dialogue on the other. Debates involve a win-lose dialectic; at the end of the process there are winners and losers. Cooperative dialogue and philosophical deliberation involve a win-win approach. In philosophical deliberation we seek to increase our understanding of a problem, to specify and clarify the concepts being analysed and to weigh the reasons favouring the choice of each different solution. Reaching an agreement is a possible goal of these deliberations, but it is not a priority because many times consensus is neither possible nor desirable. Demanding rigour in argumentation, so that we can weigh the argumentative force of each assertion, is always a requirement.

It cannot be denied, however, that the Olympiad is a competition, and that does not seem to align with a defining feature of the philosophical community of inquiry as postulated in the educational proposal of Philosophy for Children. According to Peirce's thesis about the community of scientific inquiry, which is similar to that advocated by Robert Merton, both Matthew Lipman and Ann Sharp considered it essential to make a radical shift from the widespread teaching model in which the teacher transmitted knowledge and procedures and the students had to assimilate them meaningfully and be able to reproduce them at a later time. The classroom was to be more of a community with horizontal relationships between all the people involved. Therefore, there was no competition related to grades and credentials obtained at the end of a process, but rather cooperation and collaboration. At least in the classroom space, in a specific subject, philosophy, an activity was promoted that demanded collaboration and understood the search for truth as a shared and intersubjective task. However, it should be kept in mind that the Philosophy Olympiad is a competition aimed primarily at high school students, an educational period when grades matter in the students' educational future. That is, it is the period of meritocracy, and those with better grades will have more opportunities to access the best universities. Grades in high school are a win-lose situation, and philosophy teachers grade their students, even those who have transformed their classrooms into CoPI.

However, that is only part of the practice. A solid community requires that people who participate in inquiry put into practice certain competencies and end up internalising them as habits of conduct, in Dewey's sense, and also in the sense of the so-called argumentative virtues (Kennedy 2012). Grice's (1989) Cooperative

Principles and the Maxims of Conversation are also relevant rules to guide a collaborative dialogue, and those principles should become habitual in the conversations. If we reclaim concepts typical of public deliberations in the Athenian democratic agora, it is also necessary to develop *parresia*, that is, the ability to speak the truth in public, without being closed to the possibility that another person, with better arguments, may convince us of our weak reasoning or errors. In the same way, we seek to promote argumentative excellence in each member of the community, without incurring fallacies, without being carried away by personal biases or defence mechanisms, and without yielding to the temptation of rhetorical resources that seek persuasion more so than conviction.

That is to say, the whole project of the community of philosophical inquiry is aimed at making people in the classroom, and then outside it, able to think for themselves, capable of not being swayed by dominant political and social ideas and capable of maintaining their own way of thinking and their own ideas and beliefs. This is an aim very close to the best that inspired those men (in that society, women could not participate) who, in classical Greece, competed against the best in their field to obtain the satisfaction of exhibiting their own excellence and eventually to obtain their own personal victory. It was an agonising path in which one sought to give the best of oneself, with victory seen as something valuable but complementary. The philosophical dialogue community includes that aspiration: be yourself, become who you are and do not fall short of what you can achieve. There is, therefore, no contradiction in this sense between the Olympic competition and the community of inquiry.

The most distinctive feature of the theory and practice of community of philosophical inquiry, as promoted by Philosophy for Children, is that it fosters both intersubjective search for meaning and thinking for oneself, which at first glance appears contradictory (Kennedy 1999). In this community, however, it is essential to insist on cooperation and a receptive attitude to diversity and inequality. Of course, the presence in the classroom of people who are skilled arguers can give value to the dialogue in the classroom, but it is just as valuable, even more so, if we are equally clear that it is deeply enriching to listen attentively to those who seem to have less to contribute and to make an effort to share our own convictions with all members of the community. To use common classroom vocabulary, the 'more academically gifted' people gain when they slow down their reasoning and argumentative conversation to help those who do not possess such 'academic gifts'.

Conclusion

The education system is intrinsically marked by a meritocratic approach, but at the same time is the institution in charge of promoting the development of critical and cooperative competences in children and adolescents. The whole issue of qualifications and the impact they have to advance academic life leaves a deep mark whose most harmful consequences are segregation of people according to those qualifications and the legitimisation of inequalities. Tournaments as much as Philosophy Olympiad and Ethics Bowl can promote this negative bias of compulsory education, so some people argue against them and insist on transforming classrooms into real communities of reflection where everyone involved matters and is taken into account throughout the process. The classroom is a space of conviviality in which each person is expected to contribute according to his or her abilities and receive according to his or her needs.

Therefore, it is not a clear-cut dilemma to participate or not to participate in an Olympiad. It is better to pose it as a problem in which the important thing is, above all, to be clear about how and why we participate. We do so because, to a significant extent, we seek something that we share with the goals of the philosophical Olympiad: a celebration of philosophy and personal excellence. In our own teaching practice, we do not change the usual way we work in our classroom according to the guidance of the community of philosophical inquiry. There, everyone learns to rigorously and passionately argue their own opinions in each and every session. Nothing changes, because with the full knowledge and approval of the students, we dedicate a series of classes to the topic proposed that year in the Philosophy Olympiad. After holding a philosophical inquiry on the topic over several classes, we ask the participants, as an evaluation exercise, to write a essay to answer a question related to the theme of the Olympiad. Whoever writes the best dissertation according to the evaluation criteria established in the Olympiad will represent the school in the Olympiad, making it clear that he/she arrived *citius, altius et fortius* because he/she was accompanied and challenged by their classmates.

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