

Teaching Controversy in Moral Education: A Critique of the Epistemic Criterion

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The question of what should count as a controversial issue poses a difficult problem for educational theorists and practitioners alike. The problem relates to two approaches that educators may take toward moral education. The first approach seeks to provide students with moral guidance and encourages students to endorse a substantive moral position; that is, to teach the matter as uncontroversial. The other approach seeks to pose the moral assessment of a question as open, an approach which has two consequences: it encourages students to consider various ways of answering the question, and (as much as possible) it also inhibits the teacher from influencing students' conclusions as to what is the right answer. To approach moral education in this second way is to teach an issue as controversial.

Some people have defined a controversial issue as one that prompts disagreement among members of society. Following this line of thought, teachers should treat any matter on which people disagree as an open controversy. In this view, the decision of what to teach as controversial is divorced from normative considerations about the matter that is being taught. Philosopher of education Michael Hand criticizes this lack of normativity and instead argues for using an "epistemic criterion" to determine what issues are legitimately controversial.¹ According to the epistemic criterion, "a matter should be taught as controversial when contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason."²

In this essay, I raise three problems with the epistemic criterion. The first is that Hand's argument for it is inadequate. Hand attempts to ground his case for the epistemic criterion in the claim that education's central aim is to promote rationality. I argue that it does not follow from this that educators should be compelled to adopt the epistemic criterion. The second problem I raise is that rationality is, at best, only one consideration among many that affects the choice to teach a matter as open. To make this point, I discuss a classroom example of teaching in which political philosopher Lawrence Blum chose to teach an incident of racial stereotyping and bullying as a controversial issue. Finally, continuing with this example, I draw upon an idea that Blum calls racial or moral asymmetry; that is, that the rightness or wrongness of a race-related incident, or at least the degree to which it is right or wrong, depends on racial identities. I argue that this challenges the framework Hand takes toward evaluating moral issues and their status as controversial issues. I conclude by arguing that moral education would be better served if theorists focused on the kinds of qualities and skills that enable teachers to engage well with moral issues, rather than on the demarcation of the issues themselves.

Before I make these three critiques, a more substantive discussion of Hand's case for the epistemic criterion is needed. In the next section, I sketch out the development of the epistemic criterion and then move to Hand's defense of the

criterion based on its alignment with what he takes to be the core educational aim of promoting rational thought and action.

THE CASE FOR THE EPISTEMIC CRITERION

In “Neutrality and Rationality in Teaching,” Charles Bailey offers the following characterization of a controversial issue: “that an issue is controversial is, of course, a matter of social fact. That is, an issue is controversial if numbers of people are observed to disagree about statements and assertions made in connection with this issue.”³ Bailey’s definition of a controversial issue is not only plausible, it is often implicitly accepted within the educational community. For example, The Crick Report, an influential framework for citizenship education in Great Britain, reaffirms this take on controversial issues: “A controversial issue is an issue about which there is no one fixed or universally held point of view. Such issues are those which commonly divide society and for which significant groups offer conflicting explanations and solutions.”⁴ On this account, controversy lies in its empirical existence within society at a given point in time.

Robert Dearden labels this view of controversial issues the “behavioral criterion,” and argues that it has two pernicious implications for education.⁵ The first is that following the standard of the behavioral criterion potentially renders everything controversial. If one looks hard enough, one is likely find some number of people who hold an opposing view on almost any topic, despite the fact that the view may be plainly false. Dearden rejects the idea that social disagreement about questions for which there is a correct and known answer constitutes a controversy or merits being taught as an open question.

The second problem that Dearden raises against the behavioral criterion is that it disposes students to relativism. Dearden states: “[the behavioral] criterion could give undeserved encouragement to relativism ... [It] encourages the thought that what is true should be collapsed into what some group regards as true, with epidemic relativism and a sociological carnival as a result.”⁶ For Dearden, these two problems are resolved by adopting an epistemic criterion. That is, “a matter is controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.”⁷ On the one hand, the epistemic criterion avoids the relativism of the behavioral criterion by preserving standards of truth and justification, and on the other, it renders only reasonable disagreement controversial.

Hand adopts the epistemic criterion for moral education, but he finds Dearden’s account to be a “rather thin and unsatisfactory justification” (WS, 214). For Hand, Dearden’s first point is right, but he draws the wrong implication from it. That a disagreement exists over a question with a known answer should not imply that it is not a controversy. The word controversial means “disputed” and a dispute *is* controversial when public opinion is divided, regardless of the reasonableness of the views held by either party. It does, however, imply the need to distinguish the quotidian use of the word controversy from what should be *taught* as controversial.

With this distinction, Hand suggests a “positive” argument that supports the epistemic criterion for deciding how an issue should be taught. The normative

premise of Hand's positive argument is that education's central aim is to provide students with the ability and inclination to think and act rationally. This normative premise is justified on the grounds that rationality is both intrinsic to, and foundational for, human flourishing. As Hand writes, "engagement in practical and theoretical reasoning is both intrinsically rewarding and the most effective means of securing a wide range of individual and social goods" (WS, 218).

Hand thinks Dearden's second argument against the behavioral criterion provides the most promising case for the epistemic criterion in light of the central role of rationality in education. For schools to promote rationality, Hand argues, they must, *inter alia*, support teaching in which students are encouraged to form beliefs on the basis of *good* reasons. In practice, this means that teachers need to help their students weigh evidence for competing views and discourage them from adopting views that are not supported by "epistemically adequate" evidence (WS, 218). Furthermore, Hand suggests a slight revision to the charge that the behavioral criterion encourages relativism. A relativist may teach her students to adopt beliefs on the basis of supporting evidence but hold that what counts as justificatory evidence is relative to a group or community. The behavioral criterion, however, grounds teaching a right answer in social consensus. This sends the message to students that the truthfulness of a belief should be evaluated on social agreement or consensus, rather than epistemic considerations.

In light of the additional normative premise and the revised version of Dearden's second argument, Hand sums up his case for the epistemic criterion as follows:

Because the central aim of education is to nurture rational thought and action, and because this involves actively encouraging students to accept claims when, and only when, they are supported by epistemically adequate evidence and arguments, the issues we ought to teach as controversial are precisely those on which contrary views can be held without those views being contrary to reason. (WS, 219)

Hand's argument thus asserts that the epistemic criterion follows from a normative claim about the purpose of education and a factual claim about what it takes to realize that purpose. The normative claim is that the central purpose of education is to promote rationality; the factual claim is that this is only realized if a matter is taught as controversial when, and only when, two or more conflicting views are rational.

One final point about Hand's argument needs to be made. The framework for this argument is predicated on a distinction between two types of teaching: teaching something as controversial and teaching it as settled. Hand often refers to these as "directive" and "non-directive teaching."⁸ Hand argues that issues that are "settled" based on the epistemic criterion should be taught *directively*, meaning that a teacher should endorse a particular answer and present it to her students as the correct one. Issues that are legitimately controversial, by the standard of the epistemic criterion, should be taught "non-directively," and students should be encouraged to decide for themselves how they want to view the issue. I am skeptical of this dichotomy, particularly when it concerns moral education. In the critique that follows, however, I adopt these terms and the distinction they imply as they are an important part of Hand's framework.

THREE CRITIQUES OF THE EPISTEMIC CRITERION

My first case against the epistemic criterion addresses Hand's claim that rationality is the central aim of education. The meaning of "central" is ambiguous — its definitions include "constituting something from which other related things proceed or upon which they depend," such as a central office, as well as "principal; chief; dominant," such as central character in a novel.⁹ On the first definition, rationality is not only the most important consideration for educators, but it is the only consideration. That is, everything proceeds from and is reducible to the goal of developing one's students' rationality. This overemphasizes the role of rationality in schools. Unless Hand is willing to say that educational goals like encouraging creativity or civic participation are ultimately a means of developing rationality — or alternatively, that such things should be left outside the classroom — then he must be using the latter definition of central.

Defining "central" in the second way, however, implies that there are competing and distinct aims that may inform the way education is structured and practiced, though none are as important as rationality. It is consistent to hold rationality as the primary aim of education generally but not find it to be a particularly important aim of moral education. Alternatively, we may hold that rationality is important to teaching controversial moral issues — even principally so — but it still needs to be balanced against other aims. Indeed, Trevor Cooling proposes a "diversity criterion," arguing for the need to balance fairness against rationality as educational aims.¹⁰ Cooling notes:

Developing rationality is clearly important ... so too is learning to behave well towards other people. Hand's focus on rationality as the *central* aim ... is too restricted because it does not address the totality of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for being a positive contributor to the civic community in the context of a diversity that can easily generate conflict. There should, surely, be another central aim if fairness matters in education.¹¹

Whether or not Cooling's diversity criterion is correct, the point remains that it does not follow from Hand's claim that rationality is central to education and that educators should adopt the epistemic criterion. Of course, it also does not mean that they should not. A more substantive case against the epistemic criterion rests on showing that it fails as a method to demarcate candidates for directive and non-directive teaching.

To make my second case against the epistemic criterion, I will start with an example from Lawrence Blum's book *High Schools, Race, and America's Future*.¹² In the book, Blum, a white philosophy professor, describes his experience teaching a course on race at a Boston-area high school. Teaching in a racially diverse classroom, Blum asks his students to write down a "racial incident" and then asks them to pick one to discuss in class. The students pick the following incident: "In elementary school I (a Latino) went to a Latino-themed dance. A white couple was there dancing and some Latino kids made fun of them for their 'stiff hips.' Other Latino kids laughed at this statement" (*HS*, 47). Notably, Blum treats this as an open question and asks his students to discuss what they *would* have done and what they think *should* have been done in the situation.

In what follows, Blum describes a complex back and forth, with a number of students starting from the position that no moral wrong has been done and shifting away from this position as the discussion progresses. A summary cannot fully capture the subtle maneuvering that takes place during the course of the discussion, but I sum up several interpretations that students have of the situation:

1. A black student, Jacques, feels that since stereotypes like this are often used on “Comic View” (a show on BET), there is nothing particularly troublesome or wrong with using them.
2. A Latina student, Cristina, responds that it would be alright if they were just laughing at their “stiff hips,” but linking their dancing to whiteness, or white people as a whole, makes the action wrong.
3. A white student, Hannah, proposes that there needs to be racial or moral symmetry — if it is wrong for whites to make fun of students of color, then it should also be equally wrong the other way around.
4. Norris, a black student who had originally proposed that teasing the white couple was fine, backs off from his claim. He suggests that he “won’t just make fun of somebody,” but if there is good reason to think they are not dancing well, then it may be alright to insult the white couple. (*HS*, 50)

Hand explicitly rejects non-directive teaching for matters such as “bullying, prejudice, and racism” because “these are matters on which only one view is epistemically justifiable: namely, the view that they are morally bad or wrong.”¹³ If Blum’s decision is justified, then there is reason to doubt, if not reject, the epistemic criterion.

While I agree that racism and bullying are wrong, I think a narrow-minded focus on the “epistemic status” of a view obscures a more complex picture about what is happening in this classroom. Blum’s analysis reveals a multiplicity of aims that are part of his approach to discussing this racial incident. The most important aim is to have students unpack the territory of race and racism and to interrogate its moral implications. One thing that students are doing is working out what is salient to moral judgments and how this contributes to, and informs, their understanding of what has gone wrong. Blum reminds us that the stereotypes that white people cannot dance and that blacks and Latinos are good dancers, while seemingly harmless, “[are] historically linked to the notion that... [blacks and Latinos] are closer to nature, more uninhibited, more physical, possibly less civilized, and whites are more intellectual” (*HS*, 57). Moral education cannot ignore the salient racial aspects that are at play. The problem with determining the correct moral interpretation of the Latino dance and teaching this directly is that it abstracts away the moral complexities of race.

Additionally, Blum encourages an empathetic approach to the question. He hopes that his students approach the question by considering the various perspectives of the parties at the dance and is heartened by the fact that many students come to appreciate the vulnerability of the white couple as a minority at the dance. Blum notes, “The Latino dance conversation suggests that discussing racial issues in a

focused and *comfortable setting* can lead students to see for themselves that *empathy* has to be directed toward all groups” (HS, 58, emphasis added). A distinctive downside to directive teaching is that it creates an inherently uncomfortable space where alternative perspectives are challenges to the teacher’s position and possibly seen as an implicit challenge to the teacher’s authority.

Finally, despite Hand’s concern about undermining rationality by using non-directive teaching for an issue like bullying, encouraging good reasoning seems to be an important aim in Blum’s discussion. Blum tells the reader that he is proud of his students as they begin to realize that “what [they] say about moral questions needs defending” (HS, 48). Blum also notes that many of his students, such as Norris, begin to change their minds. They are compelled by the kinds of reasons their fellow students bring up.

A potential concern for Hand may be whether these students are changing their minds on the basis of epistemically good reasons. Norris, for example, seems to change his mind because he accepts, as Cristina noted, that it is wrong to link bad dancing and whiteness. I assume Hand would think such a reason is epistemically justified. But some students leave the discussion unsure whether the teasing is appropriate, and at no point does Blum try to defend a particular view. In teaching non-directively, Blum seems to prioritize the process of reasoning together and moral reflection over the development of rationality. As Anthony Laden argues, reasoning well is not (or not only) about following rational principles and weighing evidence. Reasoning is an activity that is done with others and entails being open to criticism and being responsive to others’ reasons.¹⁴ Entering into a moral discussion requires that one be willing to change one’s mind in light of good reasons, and Blum’s students are doing exactly that. In this way, rationality is being developed, but so are skills like empathy, reflection, and reasoning.

In light of the three aims just discussed, Blum’s decision to pursue non-directive teaching is justified. More importantly, however, the example demonstrates that rationality is far from being the only aim that informs the teaching of a moral question. It is clear that if Blum had attempted to persuade his students of any particular interpretation of the Latino dance through presenting his own argument, his students would have lost out on the process of reasoning together, empathizing with the vulnerability of others, and the recognition of racial complexities.

One final objection to the epistemic criterion emerges near the end of the students’ discussion. Jacques, who first offered the opinion that the comments toward the white couple were harmless because stereotypes like this are often represented on TV, argues that not only were the Latino students justified, but that it was also wrong for the white students to be there in the first place. He says, “I can see where the Latinos are coming from ... These whites are intruding on this scene” (HS, 55).

Blum tells us that Jacques approaches him after class to clarify what he was saying. Jacques’ comment was not so much about making fun of the white couple but the need to protect minority spaces from the majority. He was saying that it may

be wrong for whites to “intrude” on a Latino-themed dance. Blum notes that Hannah’s and Jacques’s comments represent a distinction between moral symmetry and asymmetry. Moral symmetry “says that whether any act or practice that involves race is morally right or wrong is independent of the racial identities of ... [those] involved,” while moral asymmetry “says that the wrongness or rightness, or at least the degree of it, does depend on those racial identities” (*HS*, 56). Blum suggests that Jacques’s concern is indicative of an “asymmetry in the wider world of cultural exchange and appropriation” (*HS*, 57).

We can see Jacques as introducing a new moral position: it is morally acceptable for blacks and Latinos to exclude whites from a minority-centered dance, but it is wrong for whites to exclude blacks and Latinos from a white dance. This view can be justified in the following way. Elsewhere Blum argues that the idea of “discrimination” is constituted not by one wrong but by a “plurality of wrong-making characteristics.”¹⁵ Only one of these wrong-making characteristics is unfairness in the selection or inclusion of participants. Others might include demeaning, stigmatizing, and contributing to the subordination of a person or group. While an instance of one or more of these characteristics may provide reason to believe some wrong has been committed, it may be outweighed by other morally relevant factors. For instance, the current policies of affirmative action in higher education are an instance of unfairness in the selection process (insofar as they incorporate a selection criterion that is outside of an applicant’s control) but do not exclude, demean, or subordinate whites. They are, I think, justified by other morally relevant considerations such as an attempt to right historical wrongs and the benefits of having a diverse campus community.

An important point here is that moral asymmetry places the determination of wrong or right within the social and historical context in which the action takes place. Due to the historical legacy of racialized subordination in America and the present institutionalized forms of racism and inequality in social positioning, denial of blacks and Latinos to a primarily white dance would (most likely) demean, subordinate, and stigmatize them. On the other hand, the same does not hold true for denying whites entry to a minority dance. Blum explains:

Value pluralism helps us to see how there can be such asymmetry, and something of the character of those asymmetries. Given that different ... races are differently socially positioned, have very different histories as groups, and (partly as a result) have different social meanings attached to actions that affect them, they are differentially vulnerable to the various (plural) wrongs of discrimination.¹⁶

There are at least two ways in which moral asymmetry undermines the epistemic criterion as a method of demarcating controversial issues. For one, as the example of discrimination shows, discrimination on the basis of race is neither a controversial issue nor a candidate for directive teaching. A precondition of judgment is an understanding of the relevant historical and social context. Without this, there simply is not much to say about whether the issue should be taught as controversial or not. The other reason moral asymmetry undermines the epistemic criterion is the supposition that an action may have a different social meaning for

different groups and that it is social meaning that instantiates wrong-making characteristics. This is true at least some of the time. The act of excluding black history from the curriculum, for example, connotes not (or not only) a simple error of judgment, but black history's irrelevance and lack of value as a subject of study, potentially reinforcing myths of "inferiority" and "primitiveness" about people of African descent.¹⁷ That is not a meaning that can be drawn from the exclusion of white or European history from the curriculum. Alternatively, Hand wants to ground moral assessment and directive teaching in the action itself, claiming "some kinds of action we know to be right and others we know to be wrong" (WS, 226). Yet, to say that "X is a kind of action that is wrong" is not, strictly speaking, correct, because it is the social meaning derived by an instance of X that makes it wrong, and in a circumstance of moral asymmetry, that social meaning is different for different social groups.

CONCLUSION

I conclude by advocating for a change in the terms of this discussion of moral education, akin to the change from standard ethics to virtue ethics. The common practice among philosophers is to approach ethics by asking which actions and principles are right and which are wrong. This kind of approach requires that we devise a theory or a set of rules that will render the right moral answer. This paradigmatic form of approaching ethics, which takes as its unit of analysis the particular action, event, situation, or moral issue, is characteristic of both the epistemic and behavioral criteria.

Another approach is virtue ethics, which takes the elements or characteristics *intrinsic* to acting virtuously as its starting point. One characteristic of virtue might be sensitivity. The virtuous person is not always sensitive, but she is sensitive when the occasion calls for it. Importantly, it takes time seeing others act in sensitive ways and "practicing" sensitivity to cultivate this disposition and to gain a sense of when a situation calls for this kind of reaction.

The same kind of transition is possible for teaching controversial issues. Instead of asking, what kind of moral issues should be taught as controversial?, we can ask questions like, what does excellent moral education look like?, or, what characteristics do excellent moral educators embody? To the former question, I think Blum is an example of what excellence in moral education looks like, and thinking through why that is the case is a helpful starting point. To the latter question, I can only speculate, but one characteristic may be sensitivity to diverse social contexts and the ideological frameworks of one's students. These are obviously cursory responses, and whether they are correct is not of particular importance. What is important is to begin reimagining the approach we are currently taking toward controversial issues in moral education, and I suggest we will find a useful tool in "virtue theory."

1. Hand develops his argument in two papers: Michael Hand, "Should We Teach Homosexuality as a Controversial Issue?," *Theory and Research in Education* 5, no. 1 (2007): 69–86; and Michael Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial?: A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion," *Educational Theory* 58, no. 2 (2008): 213–228.

2. Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial?," 214. This work will be cited in the text as *WS* for all subsequent references.
3. Charles Bailey, "Neutrality and Rationality in Teaching," in *Values and Authority in Schools*, eds. David Bridges and Peter Scrimshaw (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 122.
4. Bernard Crick, "Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools" (London: Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998), 56.
5. Robert Dearden, "Controversial Issues and the Curriculum," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 13, no. 1 (1981): 37–44.
6. *Ibid.*, 37.
7. *Ibid.*, 36.
8. Hand, "Should We Teach Homosexuality as a Controversial Issue?," 69–86; Hand, *WS*, 213–228; and Michael Hand, "Moral Education and the Idea of a Reasonable Moral Pluralism" (keynote lecture presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, Oxford, UK, March 2010).
9. "Central," *Dictionary.com*, <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/central>.
10. Trevor Cooling, "What Is a Controversial Issue? Implications for the Treatment of Religious Beliefs in Education," *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 33, no. 2 (2012): 169–181.
11. *Ibid.*, 176 (emphasis original).
12. Lawrence Blum, *High Schools, Race, and America's Future: What Students Can Teach Us About Morality, Diversity and Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012). This work will be cited in the text as *HS* for all subsequent references.
13. Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial?," 217.
14. Anthony Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
15. Lawrence Blum, "Moral Asymmetry: A Problem for the Protected Categories Approach," *Lewis and Clark Law Review* 16, no. 2 (2012): 650.
16. *Ibid.*, 655.
17. Carter G. Woodson, *The Mis-education of the Negro* (Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008).

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