

Why Some Topics are Controversial

JOEL J. KUPPERMAN

There is a fine line between issues that are controversial and those that are not; understanding the difference can help educators walk that line without sacrificing their own values.

It would be absurd for a school to be studiously neutral on every issue of value. It cannot avoid taking a position on the value of, say, theft, or of inflicting needless pain on others; for one thing, it cannot permit such behavior within its walls. On the other hand, there are issues that can generally be classified as "controversial" on which it would be improper and offensive for a school to impose one point of view.

The question naturally arises: how are educators to draw the line between the "uncontroversial" questions to which they can assume the correct answer is known, and legitimately "controversial" questions with regard to which great care must be taken to be fair to various points of view? I will suggest some guidelines that may help.

Controversial, or Not?

While there is considerable philosophical debate about the proper justification of ethical claims, there is far less debate over specific value judgments. The three major types of ethical theory in the last 200 years have been the Kantian theory, the social contract theory (including John Rawls' recent work on justice), and the consequentialist theory (including utilitarianism). All agree that murder, torture, theft, and so forth, are wrong.

This convergence extends to elements of theory. Kant's categorical im-

perative based ethics on what must be designed into an ideal society. The great utilitarian philosopher John Stuart Mill also interpreted a sizable area of ethics (everything that pertains to rights) in terms of the best available design of a society.

One way of designing an ideal society is to ask, as did John Rawls (1971), what we would consider reasonable to put up with if we were a member of a less fortunate group. R. M. Hare (1963) argued that one cannot consistently uphold an ethical judgment without being willing to apply it to oneself; that is, a man who advocates discrimination against blacks should be willing to accept discrimination himself if he were to turn out to have a black great grandmother.

Because of the convergence of views, one can regard any issue of values as essentially "settled" and uncontroversial if it clearly would be impossible to design a society that is tolerable for and fair to all its members without accepting a particular view on the issue. Schools can confidently say that murder, torture, theft, and racial and gender discrimination all are wrong. The fact that some groups may still advocate, say, racial discrimination should matter no more than would a sudden increase in the membership of the Flat Earth Society to schools' teaching that the earth is round.

Extent of Responsibility and Degree of Equality

The major value issues that are controversial and pressing in our society fall

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mainly into two groups. First, suppose we think of society as an interdependent alliance of participating members, who are expected to adhere to moral and legal norms in return for fair treatment and security. But what of those who fall outside of this alliance? Animals are not participating members of our society; neither are human fetuses; and neither are humans yet unborn who will be members of future societies. What obligations, if any, do we have to members of these groups?

Value issues arise, in other words, about whether and how the network of responsibility within our society should be extended outwards. Philosopher Peter Singer (1971, 1979) has argued that much of our treatment of

animals (as in factory farming and in experimentation) is profoundly immoral; and in Britain there is a sizable and aggressive movement whose members think he is right. The controversies over abortion are well-known; many philosophers have been arguing that the moral status of a fetus late in pregnancy is significantly different from that of a zygote early in pregnancy. According to L. W. Sumner (1981), sentience makes the difference. A number of philosophers have argued of late that by depleting resources and spreading pollution, we are being drastically unfair to those yet unborn. All of these are important moral issues and should be treated as legitimately controversial.

It would be the worst kind of shal-

low relativism to deny that some answers to these questions are better than others; but the correct answer as such is not luminously clear to all reasonable people. The words of Cromwell's letter to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1650—"I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken"—are appropriate to someone who takes a dogmatic stand on one of these issues, yet are inappropriate to someone who maintains, say, that it is wrong to torture innocent people.

Special problems arise in relation to living human beings who are members of societies other than our own. For a long time there has been consensus among reasonable people that

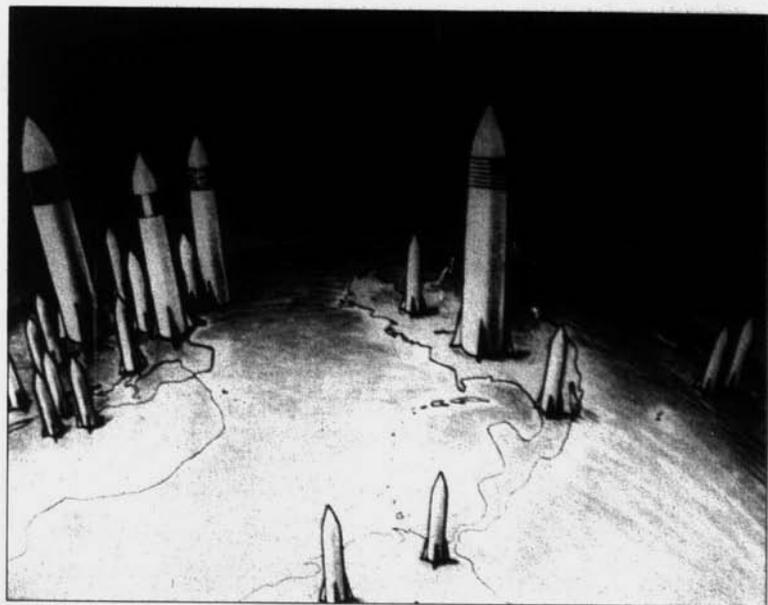


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the core moral requirements that obtain within our society (regarding murder, torture, theft) apply also to our treatment of members of other societies. Controversy arises, though, with regard to other requirements. The government has a responsibility, in planning its policies, to consider the well-being of all of its citizens. What responsibility does it have to consider the well-being of citizens of other countries? What responsibilities do we, as individuals, have to citizens of Eritrea or Bangladesh who are starving to death? Jonathan Glover (1977) has argued that it is difficult to make a moral distinction between acts of omission (such as knowingly neglecting to plug in a respirator that has become unplugged, and failing to send aid to someone starving to death in Bangladesh) and acts of commission (such as unplugging the respirator or murdering the person in Bangladesh). I believe that the distinction between what is morally required and what is supererogatory helps moderate the conflict between the implications of Glover's views and what most people regard as practicable; but it does not entirely solve the problem (Kupperman, 1983).

Finally, there are issues regarding the distinction between just and unjust wars, or whether there is such a thing as a just war at all, or whether the threat to do something immoral (such as destroy the human race) is itself immoral. All of these are legitimately controversial issues.

The second main group of controversial issues centers on the degree to which fair and tolerable treatment of all members of society requires equality. Rawls (1971) argued that economic inequality requires justification in terms of benefits to the least well-off members of society—for instance, by providing incentives to more productive people to accomplish things that would benefit everyone. There has been considerable controversy over Rawls' argument. It is safe to say that there is a general consensus among reasonable people that a just society requires political equality among competent adults, and that it requires



equality with respect to a number of basic rights; but the requisite degree of economic and social equality remains a topic about which reasonable people can differ.

A Case for Controversy

Controversial issues are well worth discussing for a number of reasons. The issues mentioned here are of crucial importance, and it is desirable that as many as possible of our citizens have intelligent and considered views on them. The educational benefits of such argued consideration should not be underestimated. Students need to think and reason about questions that are cloaked in uncertainty and for which there are no answers in the back of a book. Much of what counts as having learned to think, in the real world, has this character. Further, morality itself can benefit. The cause of morality has suffered a great deal because morality has been perceived as dull, a clear awareness that there are some moral issues that are, as it were, up for grabs creates a different perception.

How then should controversial value issues be presented? Respect for

the views of others is compatible with having intellectual standards. Not just anything counts as a reason for thinking something good, bad, right, or wrong. There are, in fact, persistent patterns of argument for, say, considering an action wrong. From a Kantian point of view, the only possible reasons are (1) no one can will it to be a universal law that such actions be performed; (2) such an action involves treating a rational being as a means rather than an end; and (3) in an ideally moral society, such an action would not be permissible. The contractarian view is that no reasonable person would choose to live in a society that allowed such actions. And the consequentialist reasoning is that either the action itself, or the policy of allowing such actions, is likely to lead to more harm for sentient beings than good. These look like five kinds of reason, but arguably they reduce to two. One's standard for a society that one could live in will concern either a standard for how a self-respecting person (such as oneself or others whose lives one affects) should be treated, or will concern the balance of good over harm.

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Thus, in considering the morality of an action or policy, one must ask (1) Would I like to be treated in the way this action or policy treats people? and (2) Do the likely consequences of this action or policy involve more harm than good? If it is obvious beyond doubt that you would not be willing to be treated in a way an action or policy treats members of society, or that an action or policy leads to great harm and hardly any redeeming benefit for anyone, then the action or policy is clearly wrong, and the value issue can surely be regarded as uncontroversial. Conversely, where the primary effect of an action or policy is not on members of our society, and a mixture of benefits (for some) and harms (for others) is at stake, the value issue is at least potentially controversial.

In most cases, the risks to a school in mistakenly treating a controversial value issue as uncontroversial far outweigh the risks of the opposite kind of mistake. A curriculum planner or

teacher might well adopt a cautious general policy of treating value issues as controversial whenever there is genuine doubt as to their status. □

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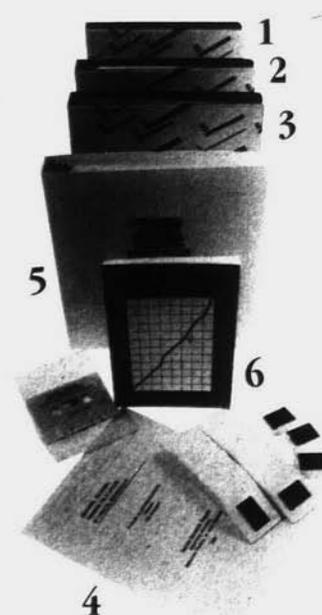
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