

Alasdair MacIntyre and Contemporary Capacity for the Epistemic Criterion

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Abstract

In this essay, Brett Bertucio evaluates the feasibility of employing what various theorists have termed the “epistemic criterion” in identifying controversies to be taught in the classroom. While sympathetic to the epistemic criterion, Bertucio argues that at present its application does not help delineate whether more than one reasonable view regarding an issue is plausible. Drawing on the thought of Alasdair MacIntyre, he contends that the decline of moral philosophy has reduced contemporary moral utterance to the mere re-statement of incommensurable ideologies. The author concludes by proposing two possible remedies. First, the introduction of intellectual history into secondary social studies curricula may help students and their teachers become aware of the contours of contemporary moral debate and examine their own epistemic assumptions. Second, the thought of the late Italian educator Luigi Giussani may provide a foundation to approach controversial issues based not on incommensurate conceptions of rationality but on existential desires.

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Practitioners often report that introducing controversial issues into the curriculum will inevitably raise tensions among colleagues, parents, and the wider community.¹ It will come as no surprise then that the identification of an issue as controversial is itself a site of controversy. In many cases, to declare an issue controversial will validate minority opinions that many consider reprehensible. As a crude example, we might ask whether the present existence of neo-Nazism or the historical existence of moral arguments supporting Jim Crow mean that the morality of racial supremacy should be taught as an open question. Some educators have extended the resounding “No” proper to this query to contemporary issues. In their study of high school social studies teachers, Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy observed that several participants contended that the validity of same-sex marriage should be taught as a closed question, portraying opposition as morally equivalent to racism.² Of course, for opponents of this legal and cultural turn, declaring the question closed is merely another sortie in an open conflict.

1. Diana Hess, “Controversies about Controversial Issues in Democratic Education,” *Political Science and Politics*, 37(3) (2004): 257-261, 260.

2. Diana E. Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 168.

Educational theorists have attempted to clarify criteria for discerning whether an issue should be taught as controversial. Charles Bailey advanced a “behavioral criterion” which identified an issue as controversial if there exist a number of people in disagreement. Controversies should be determined by the “social fact” of dispute and can occur “in any area of knowledge or experience.”³ Seemingly straightforward in its application, this criterion raises problems regarding empirical issues and cannot exclude objectionable questions. Under Bailey’s standard, the historical occurrence of the Holocaust⁴ and the previously mentioned question of racial supremacy would be fair game for classroom debate. Robert Dearden proposed an “epistemic criterion” of discernment. An issue could be taught as controversial if “contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.”⁵ While Hess and McAvoy endorse a “politically authentic criterion,” arguing that students should be prepared for consequential debates even if these involve irrational positions,⁶ Dearden’s criterion has found wide support among educational theorists. Terence McLaughlin, Michael Hand, and others have cited its correspondence with the *rational* project of moral education and its avoidance of the ethical conundrums courted by the behavioral criterion as reasons for endorsement.⁷

Generally, I find arguments for the epistemic criteria convincing. Taken *in vacuo*, it seems an ideal model. In theory, Dearden’s criterion avoids the dangers of relativizing morality and capitulating ethics to the whims of popular opinion or to a morally arbitrary political consensus. However, articulations of this approach unwittingly raise serious questions about the contemporary capacity for its implementation. Dearden and others inevitably appeal to a current “body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures.”⁸ Unfortunately, contemporary moral discourse lacks a coherent “body of public knowledge.” As Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, moral debate is marked by a multiplicity of incommensurable assumptions and the assertive use of moral utterance to close conversation rather than enter into it.⁹ In the absence of a consensus epistemological framework, declarations of epistemic invalidity are simply the proclamations of one’s own preferences. Pronouncing an issue closed merely reflects the conclusions of a partial—and often partisan—amalgam of epistemic assumptions. Such a conclusion is not a universally valid curricular guide, but rather simply one competing position among many. As a result, Dearden’s epistemic criterion is collapsed into Bailey’s behavioral criterion. Contrary to the intentions of Dearden, McLaughlin, and Hand, the opinion of the majority of educators (or of the loudest) will determine which issues qualify as controversial.

3. Charles Bailey, “Rationality, Democracy and the Neutral Teacher,” *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 1(2) (1971): 68-76, 69.

4. Hess and McAvoy cite a 2014 case in which California 8th graders were asked to examine whether the Holocaust actually occurred or whether it was manufactured as propaganda for political and financial gain (*The Political Classroom*, 163-4). Bailey’s behavioral criterion would permit this assignment because of the empirical fact of Holocaust deniers.

5. Robert Dearden, “Controversial Issues in the Curriculum,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 13(1) (1981): 37-44. This article was later reproduced as a chapter in Robert Dearden, *Theory and Practice in Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). Subsequent references will be from *Theory and Practice in Education*.

6. Hess and McAvoy, *The Political Classroom*, 168-169.

7. Terence H. McLaughlin, “Teaching Controversial Issues in Citizenship Education,” in A. Lockyer, B. Crick and J. Annette (eds.) *Education for Democratic Citizenship: Issues of Theory and Practice* (Aldershot, UK: Avebury, 2003): 1419-60.; Michael Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial? A Defense of the Epistemic Criterion,” *Educational Theory*, 58(2) (2008): 213-228.

8. Dearden, *Controversial Issues*, 86.

9. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 3-34.

This essay seeks to draw attention to the spurious feasibility of the epistemic criterion for contemporary pedagogical practice. Drawing on MacIntyre's work, it briefly traces the now imperceptible impoverishment of moral utterance through an intellectual history reaching back to the Reformation period. I hope to show that predominant defenses of the epistemic criterion, most notably Hand's, fail to take into account questions of epistemic foundations and the character of moral discourse in our current historical moment. To be sure, my aim is not to dismiss the epistemic criterion in favor of the political or the behavioral but to recover or rehabilitate the possibility of its use. After delineating the consequences of this inherited history for teaching controversial questions, I propose two remedies. The first calls for secondary social studies and teacher-preparation curricula to engage intellectual history on a more serious level so as to provide students and teachers with an awareness of the peculiar conditions of contemporary discourse. The second draws on the thought of the late Italian educator Luigi Giussani, who proposed an "ascetical" education both to liberate students from reactive assertions of preference and to unveil a potential basis for consensus through reflection on human desires.

Accounts of Reason in Defenses of the Epistemic Criterion

Dearden frames his proposal of the epistemic criterion as a response to the application of Ayers' logical positivism to curriculum design. Under a positivist model, political education, moral education, the arts, and literature would all be discarded. The inclusion of controversial issues, which seem to offer no *certain* knowledge, would likewise disappear. Dearden argues that the social fact of disagreement should not be taken to mean that controversial topics are "an epistemological disaster area into which the responsible curriculum constructor should not care to go."¹⁰ In fact, they can be the site of deep epistemic engagement. Where opposing opinions on an issue are not "contrary to reason," a classroom discussion can commence under rational parameters.

The definition of "reason" Dearden offers is important to note:

By "reason" here is not meant something timeless and unhistorical but the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards and verification procedures which at any given time has been so far developed. It follows that what at one time is controversial may later be definitely settled, as with many opinions about the nature of the surface of the moon and the character of the side that faces away from the earth. At one time these were matters of legitimate dispute in a way which at least some of them no longer are.¹¹

In the realm of scientific or empirical questions, this attitude might be comparatively unproblematic. As experimental design and technological capability advance, open questions become relatively settled. This view might correspond to a scientific education that presents scientific reasoning not as ascertaining incontrovertible truth, but as producing yet-unproven and (hopefully) increasingly more accurate theories. When applied to moral questions, which many controversial issues are, this vision presents problems. By defining reason as historically constituted and socially constructed, Dearden precludes the possibility of an age or body public in which prevailing moral reasoning is poorer than in others. We do not have to dig deep into the 20th century to find

10. Dearden, *Controversial Issues*, 84-85.

11. *Ibid.*, 86.

relevant examples. By defining “reason” as the dominant strands of thinking of a particular historical society, Dearden’s frame risks engendering the very relativism he wished to avoid in discarding Bailey’s behavioral criterion. If the narrow bounds of place and time are removed, the epistemic criterion will be indistinguishable from the behavioral.

Michael Hand provides additional support for the epistemic criterion. Many of his arguments center around a vision of moral education that is decidedly rationalistic and thus primarily concerned with reason-giving. If educators select controversial issues on a political or behavioral basis, this “cannot do other than convey to students the message that epistemic considerations are not decisive. The plain implication of teacher neutrality on all matters on which people are observed to disagree is that consensus, rather than evidence or argument, is the proper warrant for belief.”¹² By subtly eroding the rational basis for moral and political life, the political and behavioral criteria are—in Hand’s view—decidedly miseducative.

Unfortunately, Hand is remarkably silent on the nature of reason, preferring to defer to Dearden’s definition. He even expresses mystification when the possibility of differing, incommensurable rationalities arises. Hand grapples with the position of David Archard, who argues against the use of the epistemic criterion because “the determination of whether reasons are good or bad is itself a matter for rational discussion, and open, in principle, to irresolvable disagreement between sincere, conscientious reasoners.”¹³ Archard intuits the problem I intend to explicate here and helpfully advocates moving debate to the level of competing epistemic frameworks. Hand however, by his own admission, fails to see Archard’s point and dismisses the concern by appealing to a vague confidence in reasonableness writ large. In a statement which seems even empirically suspect, Hand asserts that “in the world we actually inhabit conscientious reasoners are not normally confused or mistaken and have managed to reach rational agreement on important questions in most areas of life, including questions about the goodness or badness of moral reasons.”¹⁴ A perusal of national discourse regarding those questions which are most frequently considered controversial—abortion and euthanasia, the validity of same-sex marriage, the morality of military actions or torture practices—are fraught with disagreement precisely about the quality of different moral reasons.

John Petrovic seeks to marry Hand and Dearden’s conception of the epistemic criterion with the political criterion by appealing to Dewey’s understanding of reason as socially situated and habituated. He helpfully points out that Hand’s work is “mistaken in conflating the natural capacity for reason with the practice of reason, which is always already contained by our social and historical relations and contingencies.”¹⁵ It is exactly the contemporary practice of reason (and the constraints on natural capacity imposed by our particular intellectual milieu) which I wish to examine here. Petrovic’s critique echoes Peter Gardner’s earlier criticism of Dearden. In short, the diversity of epistemic assumptions and indeterminacy of debate will lead students to conclude that reason has no purchase in controversial issues.¹⁶ As an alternative, Petrovic presents Dewey’s notion of pragmatic reason inextricable from social action. This creative philosophical move effects a dissolution of the distinction between the epistemic and the political criteria. For Dewey,

12. Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial?,” 218.

13. Archard David Archard, “How Should We Teach Sex?,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 32(3) (1998): 437–449, 440, cited in Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial?,” 225.

14. Hand, “What Should We Teach as Controversial?,” 226.

15. John E. Petrovic, “Reason, Liberalism, and Democratic Education: A Deweyan Approach to Teaching About Homosexuality,” *Educational Theory*, 63(5) (2013): 525–41, 527.

16. Peter Gardner, “Another Look at Controversial Issues and the Curriculum,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 16(4) (1984): 379–385, cited in Petrovic, “Reason, Liberalism, and Democratic Education,” 527.

what is reasonable is what provides solutions in the common or political life of society. In the issue of same-sex marriage, Petrovic hopes that social interaction with those of differing views (and lifestyles) will rehabilitate opponents' "heterosexism."

To supplement any rational weakness or prevarication in students, Petrovic endorses the adoption of Rawlsian liberalism as a privileged epistemic model. While his proposal may be persuasive as a model for identifying controversy in the official educational institutions of a committed modern liberal state,¹⁷ it is unclear whether such a criterion of discernment should be labeled "epistemic" in Dearden's sense. As a considerable body of scholars have argued—MacIntyre among them—the tenets of modern liberalism are not self-evident or necessarily worthy of the sort of epistemic privilege granted by Petrovic.¹⁸ As such, liberalism should be treated as simply one competing set of assumptions among others. In any case, Dewey's socially constituted definition of reason again collapses into the behavioral criterion—what is controversial will be defined by what a particular society deems controversial. We are left at the same impasse presented by Dearden's conception of reason.

Interestingly, it is Dearden himself who points out the problem of indeterminacy in controversy. He describes a category of controversial issues in which opponents' entire frameworks of understanding differ. In this case, the optimism for consensus expressed by Hand and criticized by Petrovic will be unfounded. Dearden's sober assessment highlights the difficulties of enacting the epistemic criterion in contemporary practice:

I have assumed throughout this discussion that there will be a concurrence of judgment, at least amongst serious inquirers if not amongst the ignorant or merely assertive, as to what *is* controversial. But suppose that that assumption is false...The point here is that serious and mature people can be in disagreement precisely over what is controversial, in the epistemic sense. One party regards the matter as definitively known while the other regards it as controversial. Can there be a rational solution in such cases? Does it just depend on who is finally in a position to enforce his view? Should it, or more pertinently could it, be settled by some such democratic procedure as voting? Should the step be taken of calling in 'experts' to pronounce, in which case what would be the character of their expertise? Perhaps it is fortunate that concerning much that is controversial, it is at least uncontroversial that it *is* controversial.¹⁹

Dearden's glib conclusion offers little in the way of solutions but accurately presents many dangers. In debates where opponents' notional foundations differ, conflict can be resolved by the

17. Hand depicts conceptions similar to Petrovic's as variations of a political criterion. He argues that inculcation of liberal values may be a popular model of moral education but inevitably violates student autonomy. Such a criterion is therefore not based on reason, but on (politically legitimate) coercion. To be sure, Petrovic's notion of reason as politically constituted would downplay this distinction. See Hand, "What Should We Teach as Controversial?"

18. Notable works include the 17th chapter of Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); John Safranek, *The Myth of Liberalism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015); Peter Berkowitz, *Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); John Kekes, *Against Liberalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); and, Patrick Deneen, "Unsustainable Liberalism," *First Things* (May, 2012). Berkowitz's argument—that liberalism is practically feasible only with the practice of positive virtue and the communal pursuit of goods can be taken to indicate that liberalism is incomplete as a framework and needs decidedly non-liberal elements to be enacted. Deneen's larger criticism of the contradictory tenets of liberalism is forthcoming from Yale University Press under the title *Why Liberalism Failed*.

19. Dearden, "Controversial Issues," 92-93.

enforced pronouncement of the powerful or by capitulation to “the merely assertive.” Educators could abandon the epistemic criterion altogether and hold a vote, thereby enacting the behavioral criterion on a smaller scale. The point is that appeals to Dearden’s “body of public knowledge” in an age lacking a consensus moral discourse are inevitably either appeals to majoritarian determinations or coercive prescription. Contrary to the intentions of Dearden and Hand, in our present state, the opinion of the majority of educators (or of the loudest) will determine which issues qualify as controversial.

Alasdair MacIntyre’s Diagnosis of Contemporary Moral Discourse

MacIntyre begins his classic *After Virtue* with a vision of a post-apocalyptic future following some catastrophic destruction of the natural sciences. Perhaps a wave of anti-scientific sentiment might follow a global conflict.²⁰ Popular movements would burn laboratories, execute scientists, and erase the entire edifice of scientific knowledge. MacIntyre imagines that years later, a new generation might seek to revive science from scattered fragments. A crop of new “scientists” would use scientific terminology, often in internally coherent ways, but would be ignorant of the notional presuppositions underlying their proper use. Rival members of the new generation would use the same terms, giving the appearance of a consensus ground for debate. But lacking a comprehension of the conceptual schemes that constitute these terms, the choice of their use would be ultimately arbitrary and disagreements would have no rational solution.²¹ MacIntyre sets out to argue that the status of moral language and reasoning in our contemporary world mirrors this imagined catastrophe.

The indeterminacy of contemporary moral discourse provides a point of departure for this diagnosis. As MacIntyre puts it,

The most striking feature of contemporary moral utterance is that so much of it is used to express disagreements; and the most striking feature of the debates in which these disagreements are expressed is their interminable character. I do not mean by this just that such debates go on and on and on—although they do—but also that they apparently can find no terminus. There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.²²

This indeterminacy follows from what MacIntyre terms “the conceptual incommensurability of rival arguments.”²³ Each position adopts distinct premises and normative claims which yield *internally* coherent accounts but which allow for no rational comparison *between* accounts. Lacking any universal criteria with which to distinguish between competing narratives, citizens seem to select positions at least in part through non-rational, subjective criteria. Ironically, arguments linguistically appeal to impersonal, objective standards. While moral arguments increasingly become

20. Interestingly, entrepreneur Elon Musk has recently expressed fears of this sort, insisting in an interview with *GQ* that Mars must be colonized before the outbreak of a third World War wreaks havoc on popular support for technological advances. See Chris Heath, “Elon Musk Is Ready to Conquer Mars,” *GQ*, accessed January 7, 2016. <http://www.gq.com/story/elon-musk-mars-spacex-tesla-interview>.

21. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 1-2.

22. *Ibid.*, 6.

23. *Ibid.*, 5.

the shrill profession of preference, the impersonal, objective language of discourse serves as a masque either of a forgotten history or of aspirations toward rational moral debate.²⁴ Finally, MacIntyre would agree to an extent with a merely empirical affirmation of Dearden's historical conception of rationalities; it is true that conceptions of moral reasoning differ between historical periods. The problem is that the contemporary plurality of incommensurate narratives draws from a vast array of historical ideas, nearly all of which are now divorced from the contextual realm in which they were formulated. Searching for rational resolution in today's discourse is not unlike trying to complete a single picture using the pieces from several puzzle boxes.

The majority of *After Virtue* is an attempt to construct an intellectual history of the origins of this predicament. After a brief summary here, I point out several consequences for the use of the epistemic criterion. The coherent framework analogous to natural science in MacIntyre's doomsday scenario is the moral scheme represented by Aristotelian virtue ethics and instantiated most notably in medieval Europe. Iterations and variations of this frame all included a teleological conception of the person. There was a clear distinction between "man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature."²⁵ This meant that in moral debate, all parties could agree on what sorts of goods a person was to pursue and what would be the proper hierarchy between these goods. Ethics was then the practical science guiding the transition from "untutored man" toward his rational *telos*.

Of course, even apart from its scholastic reception, Aristotle's metaphysics implied a final, teleological cause, which was necessarily divine. We must remember that for the medievals, the essence of the person and therefore a true system of ethical precepts was at once divinely ordained and knowable by human reason. They lacked the univocal metaphysics and impoverishment of reason introduced by Protestant and Jansenist theology.²⁶ With the introduction of Luther, Calvin, and Jansen's pessimism regarding human knowledge of divine ends, the teleological conception of the person (which again was held by Aristotelianism to be knowable apart from theistic commitment) ceased to play a part in moral philosophy. Subsequent philosophers were left with two pieces of a three-piece puzzle. They retained, as a key principle of Reformation-era theology, a rather depressing view of "untutored-human-nature-as-it-is."²⁷ They also inherited a system of moral injunctions which referred to a vision of perfected nature that had been discarded. The moral project of the Enlightenment inevitably became an attempt to find a rational ground for these inherited principles. By MacIntyre's estimation, the project was doomed to fail.

Several attempts were made to reconstruct a coherent, consensus moral system absent a teleological anthropology, but all proved unsatisfactory. We see this failure in Mill's utilitarian system, which simplifies moral reasoning but raises a host of other problems. Hume's ethics placed the spring of morality in the dictates of the passions of a normal, reasonable person. MacIntyre is quick to point out not only the circularity of this account but also the fact that Hume's "normal" passions bear a striking resemblance to the prescriptions for behavior endorsed by the 17th century Scottish bourgeoisie.²⁸

Kant attempted to ground the same inherited injunctions in abstracted reason. His categorical imperative does vindicate received moral principles, but as it is abstracted from human desire and experience, it also vindicates "many immoral and trivial non-moral maxims... So, 'Persecute

24. Ibid., 8-10.

25. Ibid., 50.

26. Ibid., 51. Also, see Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 2012) for a historical account of the consequences of metaphysical univocity on modernity.

27. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 52.

28. Ibid., 46-48, 62-63.

all those who hold false religious beliefs' and 'Always eat mussels on Mondays in March' will all pass Kant's test, for all can be consistently universalized."²⁹ We can see Kierkegaard's moral thought as a reaction to Kant's failure to ground morality in reason. In the absence of an intellectually compelling case for ethical precepts, morality must be grounded in a radical choice. The individual can grant allegiance to the "aesthetic life" unbounded by moral principles or to the "ethical life," but this choice ultimately lies beyond reason. MacIntyre remarks that the separation between reason and morality is a distinctive mark of modernity.³⁰

This trajectory eventually produced the modern emotivist self, who retains the moral language of Aristotelian ethics but lacks any ultimately satisfactory rational ground. This self may utter sophisticated and internally coherent moral sentences. It may defend its positions by mustering moral terminology and even moral philosophy. But, "whatever criteria or principles or evaluative allegiances the emotivist self may profess, they are to be construed as expressions of attitudes, preferences and choices which are themselves not governed by criterion, principle or value, since they underlie and are prior to all allegiance to criterion, principle or value."³¹ In other words, in rejecting a teleological (and necessarily metaphysical) anthropology, the decision of allegiance is grounded not in any ultimate criteria, but in non-rational preference.

Consequences for the Teaching of Controversial Issues

Because the rational basis for ethics has been eroded and replaced by something akin to Kierkegaard's volitional basis, contemporary moral discourse takes on the dynamics of a Nietzschean scramble for power. As MacIntyre notes, "it was Nietzsche's historic achievement to understand more clearly than any other philosopher...that what purported to be appeals to objectivity were in fact expressions of subjective will."³² It is important to note here that MacIntyre does not intend to adopt the post-modern or post-structuralist position that moral utterances are *necessarily* expressions of arbitrary choice. It is not that they have no objective ground, it is simply that this ground has been lost. But the consequences for our contemporary experience are the same.

Behind the mask of moral language, individuals and parties assert their own incommensurable visions in increasingly shrill and forceful ways. The success or survival of moral positions is based not on rational deliberation but on drumming up popular support and maneuvering ideological camps. For the individual caught in this moral malaise, one of the only resources for clarity is membership in a group professing a distinctive vision of rationality.³³ Of course, opponents will criticize the option for membership as arbitrary and irrational. But to be fair, these same opponents will have selected a camp in much the same way. As MacIntyre puts it, "Fideism has a large, not always articulate, body of adherents, and not only among the members of those Protestant churches and movements which openly proclaim it: there are plenty of secular fideists."³⁴ Absent any ultimately satisfying rational criterion, the individual will decide between camps based on emotivist reasons: uncritical sentimentality, unexamined repulsion, or a simple desire for group membership.

29. *Ibid.*, 43-44.

30. *Ibid.*, 36-41.

31. *Ibid.*, 31.

32. *Ibid.*, 107.

33. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, 4-5.

34. *Ibid.*, 5.

This last element has serious consequences for the use of the epistemic criterion. Ideological camping is often emotivist, having to do with belonging and personal identity. The election of moral positions are motivated in large part by a desire to be “someone who believes X” or to not be “someone who believes Y.” Moral discourse may appear to involve assertions like “I disagree,” but in fact is driven by assertions like “I’m not one of *those* people.” We can see this dynamic in issues of sexual morality. In debates regarding abortion, participants *are* pro-choice or *are* pro-life. An ethical conclusion follows the adoption of a constitutive identity and often membership in a distinctive culture. Similarly, opponents of same-sex marriage are often labeled “bigots,” and their counterparts depicted as “libertines” or “hedons.”

We might put Michael Hand’s insistence that same-sex marriage be taught as a closed issue in this context. Hand argues that there are no valid reasons to oppose the morality of state endorsement of same-sex relationships, therefore teachers should not present the topic as a controversial issue.³⁵ But if MacIntyre’s diagnosis is correct, Hand’s attempt to invalidate the reasonableness of the controversy on the basis of a universal epistemology is at present impossible. Hand’s argument could be paraphrased to read, “The positions opposing the moral validity of same-sex marriage are rationally untenable.” Instead, it should be read as, “These positions are incommensurate with my system of presuppositions.” Indeed, I would suggest that it is ignorance of his own inherited intellectual assumptions that leads Hand to believe his position enjoys universal or objective authority. In particular, his undeclared Cartesian anthropology leads Hand to view procreative union as morally indistinguishable from emotional union and thus summarily dismiss a non-dualist natural law framework as unreasonable. As I will advocate later, understanding of the historical roots of our philosophical assumptions is key to unraveling the confusion of contemporary discourse.

The group-membership dynamics of moral debate may play a significant part in teachers’ selection of controversial issues. As a profession, teaching is highly collaborative, especially at the secondary level. Further, the highly politicized nature of teachers’ professional organizations³⁶ may indicate that the school house is fertile ground for ideological camping. In this case, educators who discern which issues are controversial using the epistemic criterion may simply be imposing the particular incommensurate framework of an ideological group.

Secondary students learning about controversial issues are even more vulnerable in this state of affairs. Their lives are marked by emotional intensity and the desire for belonging, making them particularly susceptible to tendencies toward sentimentalizing or reductive identity-formation. D.W. Dewhurst notes that in his own experience of teaching controversial issues, students were inclined toward emotivism and subjectivist relativism as defenses for their own fragile identities.³⁷ If all opinions are expressions of the self, relativism ensures that no one gets hurt. In a context where the vestiges of rationality have been wedded to self-identification and self-worth, students have a vested interest in mitigating controversy. While this may undermine the entire purpose of teaching controversial issues, from the perspective of a young person it is not an imprudent stance amidst a Nietzschean *mêlée*.

35. Michael Hand, “Should We Teach Homosexuality as a Controversial Issue?,” *Theory and Research in Education*, 5(1) (2007): 69-85.; Michael Hand, “Framing Classroom Discussion of Same-Sex Marriage,” *Educational Theory*, 63(5) (2013): 497-510.

36. For example, a 2003 Harris poll found that the politicized nature of teacher unions is alienating to teachers with minority opinions. See Terry M. Moe, *Special Interest: Teachers Unions and America’s Public Schools* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 69.

37. D. W. Dewhurst, “The Teaching of Controversial Issues,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 26(2) (1992): 153-163, 154.

I hope the irony here is apparent. The epistemic criterion advocated by Dearden and Hand aims to insulate the selection of controversial issues from the discursive impasse created by individualist notions of rationality. However, by appealing to a universal rational foundation that presently does not exist, in practice the epistemic criterion falls into the same trap. Nevertheless, the concerns that bore the epistemic criterion are still valid and imperative. To avoid the relativizing consequences of the political or behavioral criterion, we need a solid foundation upon which to enact the epistemic criterion. This means either refurbishing contemporary moral discourse with supporting scaffolds or discovering a new foundation altogether. As regards the former solution, I offer what amounts to an academic or curricular proposition. With respect to the latter, what I propose is a relation of epistemic notions to existential (and even ontological) ones. The second suggestion may seem hopelessly romantic or woefully abstract. By my own assessment, my argument regarding the fragility of the epistemic criterion is much more persuasive than the potential remedies I am about to suggest. However, I merely hope by proffering possibilities to provoke further and more fruitful proposals.

Intellectual History as a Suggestion for Contemporary Practice

It would be naïve to propose a nostalgic fantasy as a solution to our moral malaise. We cannot return to Athens or to medieval Europe. In our current climate, calls to retrieve a teleological ground for ethical discourse will likely be taken as part and parcel of some religious proselytization campaign. With that said, I would like to propose two suggestions for teaching practice that may point a way to a partial rehabilitation of our capacity for the epistemic criterion. The first involves considering space for the teaching of intellectual history in secondary schools and teacher-preparation programs. This is necessary not only to understand the inherited presuppositions we bring to moral discourse, but to raise the level of discourse to the level of its divergence. MacIntyre argues that the “catastrophe” of moral utterance was made invisible in part because it occurred before the advent of academic history. The modern historian will lack the evaluative criteria to identify moral disorder and will simply observe a marginal change in avowed moralities.³⁸ Further, the populous in general is blind to this past in part because history has been relegated to the domain of the specialist or hobbyist. It is increasingly constrained to the realms of pub trivia, AP exams, History Channel documentaries, and eccentric academics. Historical consciousness is divorced from everyday life, and most students and educators unconsciously adopt the Enlightenment assumption that their modes of thought are a-historical and timeless. While MacIntyre advocates the revival of narrative art in popular life,³⁹ for the question at hand a curricular change may be more appropriate.

Helping students and educators to identify their unexamined philosophical assumptions will aid awareness of the causes of indeterminacy in moral debate. Although participants use the same moral language, because terms carry different meanings in different comprehensive frames, confusion and disagreement abound. By teaching intellectual history in secondary schools and in universities, students and future teachers can begin to identify the sources of their inherited frames and thus the sources of their disagreement. This has the second effect of raising the level of debate to the level of contention—that of philosophical foundations. I suggest that students cannot answer questions like “Should homosexual acts be affirmed as morally permissible or good?” before answering questions like “What is human happiness?,” “What is the human person?,” or “What is

38. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 4.

39. *Ibid.*, 210-212.

the *good*?” Many contemporary social controversies are framed in the language of “rights” and “equality.” What MacIntyre has shown is that these are but the linguistic vestiges of a bygone era and contain no obvious or univocal meaning. Before employing these concepts, more foundational questions—whose answers may give rise to coherent accounts of rights-language—must be answered. MacIntyre laments the lack of an official public space in which to deliberate these foundational questions. I suggest that our educational institutions should seek to create this space.⁴⁰

In the conclusion of a series of university lectures, MacIntyre encouraged academics to recognize “that the lecturer speaks not with the voice of a single acknowledged authoritative reason, but as one committed to some particular partisan standpoint.”⁴¹ His call is a demand that academics identify their epistemic assumptions as a part of introducing themselves.⁴² This might also help teachers and secondary students to avoid talking at cross-purposes. It may also help students to better clarify their own thinking. As MacIntyre has observed, our actual presuppositions are most often not drawn from a single coherent intellectual tradition. Much of our internal confusion comes from the amalgam of potentially contradictory principles we have uncritically inherited.⁴³ The burden of having to introduce oneself may offer an opportunity for conscious self-examination. One may object that the answers to these foundational questions may themselves fail to provide a groundwork for consensus. In fact, we might wonder whether incommensurability will continue ad infinitum regardless of how basic our questioning becomes. First, I do not think this will be the case. Sooner or later, discussion will arrive at the level of first principles.⁴⁴ At this point, interlocutors will simply agree or disagree. Secondly, even if incommensurability persists, at least students will understand the *source* of their disagreements, rather than remaining bewildered at their simultaneous appeal to identical terms and their vehement opposition. At the very least, instruction in intellectual history will make students aware that they operate in the dysfunctional discursive environment MacIntyre describes.

Of course, the feasibility of introducing any substantively new area of study into the secondary or teacher-preparatory curriculum is doubtful. Space in already crowded courses of study is hard to come by and subject to political struggles of the highest order. However, it should at least be said that students’ capacity for this sort of study should not be considered an obstacle. Michael Hand himself has argued that the intricacies of philosophical thought are not beyond the grasp of secondary students.⁴⁵ Many researchers have attempted philosophy programs for students of all ages with considerable success.⁴⁶ We can expect that young people would be more than capable of engaging in questions of intellectual history as a precursor to ethical debate.

40. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, 2.

41. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame, I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 232.

42. Ewa Thompson, “Can We Communicate?: On Epistemological Incompatibilities in Contemporary Academic Discourse” *Colloquium*, 2(1) (2010): 205-211.

43. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Whose Rationality?*, 397.

44. By “first principles,” I am referring to the grounds of philosophical thought, which is to say, metaphysics. Of course, the Cartesian turn placed epistemology at the site of first principles. We might then say that the foundational question is whether *being* or *knowing* is the proper point of departure for all thinking.

45. Michael Hand, “Can Children be Taught Philosophy?,” in M. Hand & C. Winstanley (eds.), *Philosophy in Schools* (London: Continuum, 2008).

46. See for example, P. Cam, *Thinking Together: Philosophical Inquiry for the Classroom* (Sydney: Hale and Iremonger/PETA, 1995); M. Lipman, *Philosophy Goes to School* (Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press, 1988); M. Lipman, *Thinking in Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); and, C. C. McCall, *Transforming Thinking: Philosophical inquiry in the primary and secondary classroom* (London: Routledge, 2009), cited in Michael

An example might help to illustrate how this might play out in the classroom. Let us take the issue of same-sex marriage which forms the backdrop for both Hand and Petrovic's interventions. Before students discuss the issue itself, a teacher might present the historical frameworks corresponding to opposing bodies of thought—either via didactic methods or through discovery activities. Students would be made aware that many arguments in opposition to same-sex marriage reside within an Aristotelian-Thomistic natural law framework. Within this tradition, a “moral” action is wrapped up in an objective or transcendent structure of the human person, which is constituted by a unity of body and its “form” (the soul). Further, what is “moral” is corporal in the sense that every action of the individual person is thought to impact the communal body of persons. Similarly, many arguments in support of same-sex marriage are only conceivable within either classical liberal and post-ontological frameworks in which “moral” decisions are discerned largely in terms of freedoms of action granted, protected, or violated. In contrast to the decidedly corporal conception of the person native to the natural law framework, these traditions preserve individual autonomy as a primary good. Students would be helped to understand on a rudimentary level how historical movements—the Reformation, the Enlightenment, etc.—effected changes in dominant currents of thought. During the subsequent discussion of the issue itself, students would be able to identify opposing uses of “morality” and “rights” not as irrational or reprehensible, but as originating in different comprehensive frameworks. Again, this may seem a burdensome addition to the curriculum, but I think it only necessary if students and teachers are asked to characterize issues as controversial using rational criteria.

Luigi Giussani's “Elementary Experience” as a Potential Universal Foundation

Finally, I would like to propose the pedagogical thought of Luigi Giussani as a possible corrective in our contemporary situation. Giussani writes that education should be “ascetical;” it should assist young people in a process of *ascesis*. This process concerns liberation from two forces. The first is the “crust” of the inherited mentality toward life—and in this case toward intellectual life—common to the modern individual. Not only our forms of life but also the erosion of rationality constrain our capability to see what is true and what makes for human happiness. In Giussani's estimation, as in MacIntyre's, the dominant forms of culture and thought have been—from at least the 19th century—products of power.⁴⁷

The second element of constraint consists of our own preconceptions. Giussani speaks of a “morality of knowing” guiding our consideration of ideas and objects. He observes that “we are inclined to remain bound to the opinions we already have about the meaning of things and to attempt to justify our attachment to them.”⁴⁸ The Enlightenment project and its heir, the modern emotivist self, inevitably selects moral principles on a non-rational basis and then attempts to rationally justify them. Giussani's explanation of what the “morality of knowing” requires in this situation is both humorous and instructive:

When a young man has fallen in love with a young woman, if his mother, trying to be objective and sincere, draws his attention to some of her faults, the young man tends not to pay attention to her viewpoint, throwing at her this or that argument that will reinforce his

Hand and Ralph Levinson, “Discussing Controversial Issues in the Classroom,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 44(6) (2012): 614–29.

47. Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queens Univ. Press, 1997), 10-31.

48. *Ibid.*, 31.

own opinion about the young woman. Applying this to the field of knowledge, this is the moral rule: *Love the truth of an object more than your attachment to the opinions you have already formed about it.* More concisely, one could say, “love the truth more than yourself.”⁴⁹

Amid the indeterminacy and power dynamics of contemporary moral discourse, Giussani’s epistemic morality calls us to at least consider sacrificing our attachment to watertight but incommensurate narratives and our constitutive group identities.

How does one undertake this acesis? Giussani insists that education must begin from awareness of essential desires, a set of needs which he terms “the elementary experience.” While this concept is in some senses identical to the Aristotelian desire for the transcendentals, Giussani observes that “these needs can be given many names. They can be summarized with different expressions (for example, the need for happiness, the need for truth, for justice, etc).”⁵⁰ It is important to note that although this criterion may appear egocentric and thus given to emotivism, insofar as the “elementary experience” is unavoidable and universal, it is experienced phenomenologically as *given* and is therefore not generated by the subject or dependent on emotion or sentiment. For these reasons, Giussani concludes that “the fundamental criterion for facing things is an objective one.”⁵¹ Of course, this *givenness* depends on a certain faith. At minimum, it requires faith in the universality of human nature. In Giussani’s case, this took the form of religious belief, but this is not a necessary condition for asserting an objective human structure. To be sure, such an ontological and therefore teleological frame may be considered objectionable, but MacIntyre has shown that this is necessary for a coherent moral scheme.

An authentic education then involves learning to compare ideas and proposals with the elementary experience. Both students and educators must learn to evaluate comprehensive narratives, what Giussani terms “hypotheses of total meaning,” on the basis of their constitutive desires. If they do not, and evaluate using an external criterion, they “will be like fragile leaves separated from the tree...They will be victims of the strongest wind and its ever-changing shape, a public opinion shaped by the elites who hold real power.”⁵² Again, in attempting to discern whether an issue is controversial without a satisfactory conception of reason, the epistemic criterion will collapse under the influence of power dynamics and mirror the behavioral criterion.

Giussani’s thought is helpful in navigating the issue at hand in several ways. First, its foundation is essentially ontological; constitutive desires point to aspects of *being*. This model of education and reasoning therefore avoids the errors of Kant’s moral theory, which sought to justify principles through reason abstracted from an account of human nature and from desire. Second, a focus on universal human desires leads toward the articulation of an objective good, which is the “home environment” of Aristotelian virtue ethics. A concrete account of human goods provides coherent reasons for moral injunctions. Under a clear awareness of desires and therefore a conception of the good, the ethical project again becomes a science of attaining an already defined vision of the human ideal. It ceases to be an attempt to rationalize injunctions after the fact. Finally, Giussani’s pedagogy relies primarily on an existential process. It thus avoids the fideism of

49. Ibid., 31, emphasis in original.

50. Ibid., 7.

51. Ibid., 10.

52. Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education*, trans. Rosanna Giammanco Frongia (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 8-11.

many incommensurate narratives. Because the language of desires and of experience has not been coopted in the same way as moral language, it may provide a potential ground for consensus.

How might Giussani's proposal be enacted in practice? How might it help educators discern whether an issue should be treated as controversial or as a closed question? Again, what we require for the rehabilitation of the epistemic criterion is a universal foundation for moral utterance. Let us take as an example the issue of undocumented or illegal immigration and for the sake of simplicity, let us consider a rather absurd "hypothesis of meaning." A legal positivist approach—which under Dearden's definition is entirely rational and even makes some claim to being akin to "the body of public knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards" within a narrow domain—would inevitably lead to the conclusion that the issue is uncontroversial. Laws are created for the good ordering of society, and transgressing these laws subverts that order. Giussani's pedagogy would ask educators to examine whether the hypothesis of meaning presented by legal positivism corresponds to their innate desire for justice, for goodness, or for happiness. Only in testing the hypothesis against their own experience could teachers discern whether this framework helps to illuminate life. If it does, then accepting the corollary for the issue at hand—the position that immigration should be taught as a closed issue – would be considered rational. If the hypothesis does not help explain life (and we can imagine that legal positivism has little explanatory power for experience), then its corollary in this matter might also be provisionally rejected. In practice, an issue would only be considered controversial when teachers could imagine several coherent hypotheses of meaning (or in more popular parlance, "worldviews") which seem to correspond with constituent needs (the "elementary experience") and which would imply differing positions regarding the issue.

Admittedly, Giussani's method seems complicated on paper and difficult to enact in practice. It should be said that Giussani's pedagogy is intentionally experiential—it requires students and educators to mature in their capacity to compare proposals to the elementary experience. Simply put, it takes practice—it is more an art of living than a rationalist schema. For this reason, it is intimately suited for decidedly moral questions. Factual controversies, like the question of evolution or debates over global warming, do not need Giussani's intervention—nor Hand or Dearden's for that matter. Again, proposing inextricable desires as the foundation for consensus moral utterance may appear woefully abstract. It may also be likely to devolve into incommensurable discourse. Self-examination risks radical individualism and emotivism, and Giussani warned that both young people and adults are inevitably prone to reduce the elementary experience to mere aesthetic reactions or voluntarist self-assertion.⁵³ However, solipsism is always a risk in both moral discourse and in education, and Giussani's pedagogy—if nothing else—provides a platform for young people and their instructors to grow in discernment of fundamental questions which addresses their fundamental desires as persons and respects their freedom. In doing so, Giussani's method avoids the potentially coercive effects of the wholesale adoption of a privileged epistemic framework, such as positive liberalism.⁵⁴

Conclusion: Recovering the Capacity for the Epistemic Criterion

In my own view, arguments for the epistemic criterion are fairly convincing. Education should be a preparation for civic life, even a civic life fraught with irrationality. But education

53. Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 59-76.

54. See note 17 above.

cannot but be concerned with reason and with truth-seeking. Attempts to move away from rationality when classifying issues as controversial can erode student confidence in rationality and can put educators in morally compromising positions. A behavioral or political criterion may require a teacher to give credence to radically immoral viewpoints. We can even imagine a future in which an immoral legislative policy precipitated the fizzling out of political debate. Teachers would inevitably teach the issue as settled, subtly transforming education into the morally arbitrary coercive arm of the state. Using the epistemic criterion to determine which issues should be considered controversial ensures that education remains a rational and ethical endeavor.

Unfortunately, just as proponents of the epistemic criterion downplay appeals to prepare students for the world-as-it-is, their position ignores the state of contemporary moral discourse. A variety of incommensurate narratives stemming from the cloudy legacy of Enlightenment moral philosophy creates a situation of indeterminable debate. It is difficult then to defend the epistemic criterion in an environment marked by a plurality of competing epistemologies. In this context, the declaration that a question should be considered settled is best treated as simply one moral conception among many. In order to recover the possibility of a universal ground for epistemic moral inquiry, we must both become aware of the historical roots of the contemporary dilemma and seek new frameworks that might generate a worthy universal consensus.

My aim here was not only to illuminate how the present intellectual climate may preclude utilizing the epistemic criterion but to provide some semblance of a way forward. In my own view, Alisdair MacIntyre's portrayal of contemporary moral discourse should convince educators that concerted remedies are needed in order to recover a semblance of rational discourse. What these remedies should look like seems less clear. I have offered two suggestions here. One, the addition of instruction in intellectual history as a precursor to discussion of controversial issues seeks simply to make students aware that they will enter a discursive space which lacks a consensus foundation. The other proposal furthers Luigi Giussani's conception of the "elementary experience" as a potential foundation. While these suggestions may hold debatable appeal, my hope is that this small intervention will convict educators and educational theorists of the need for creative solutions in our present climate and inspire further and more fruitful propositions.