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The Merits of Controversy

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INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

The Merits of Controversy

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In contemporary societies that value speedy, efficient, and effective solutions to problems, ordinary citizens are prone to view controversy as a waste of time or even as an obstacle to achieving their chosen goals. In this sense, controversy is taken as something to be avoided or something that must be overcome in the pursuit of the “good life.” Thus, it is not surprising that common reactions to controversy include a refusal to acknowledge that a particular issue is controversial (a partisan defensive response), a general retreat from engagement (a response due to fear of escalation), a sense of resignation that the issue can't be solved (an apathetic response), or an impatient demand for remediation (a “fix it” response).

Upon closer examination however, ordinary citizens may be surprised to learn that on some views, controversy is neither an obstacle nor something to be avoided but rather, a necessary and meritorious part of the “good life” which they seek. For example, Michael Oakeshott points out that controversy is part of our everyday lives from the moment we are born. On Oakeshott's view, to avoid controversy is to live a life devoid of what it is to be human. He notes that human life is a “predicament” and advises us that,

Thinking in practical terms can easily make us blind to the thought that, because we are mortal beings, life cannot be transformed into a ‘problem’ with a ‘solution’. Life cannot be manipulated to deliver a succession of predictable satisfactions. *The human condition is a predicament, not an itinerary.* ¹

However, Oakeshott acknowledges that to understand and engage with controversy requires that we develop sophisticated educational understandings. Lacking such understandings, people tend to assume that controversy is a vice and respond accordingly. Such responses leave the important controversial issues of our time unexamined for the most part and serve as reminders of Socrates' implicit caution that, “the unexamined life is not worth living.”²

To better understand the merits of controversy it is useful to examine what can be learned *about* controversy. A first step might be to distinguish between what controversy “is” and what it “is not.” For example, Deardon notes that, “a matter is only controversial if contrary views can be held on it without those views being contrary to reason.”³ Deardon's distinction points out the further significance of understanding reasons and reasoning (justification for our beliefs), an area of examination that has significant epistemological merits in and of itself.

The reasons people use to justify their positions on an issue depend in large part on their particular *perspectives* or world-views. Therefore, a worthy second step might be to learn about the development of perspectives and the influences of experience, language, knowledge and social institutions on an individual's perspective. In this sense, to understand controversy is to learn to think about controversial issues from *alternative points of view*. To do so, we might consider adopting a position of “Verstehen”, which is described by Max Weber as “seeing from someone else's point of view.”⁴

Another significant step is to examine the central or “pivotal” concepts that lie at the heart of a particular controversy. Such concepts may not be fully understood by advocates of the various perspectives, may be misunderstood or may be understood differently. Thus, it may be the case that what we assume to be a controversy is little more than different interpretations of a concept, or simply a case of misunderstanding what it is that we are talking about in the first place.

Of particular merit is that the study of controversy can illustrate the value of epistemic independence – the ability to consider issues for ourselves rather than relying on the authority or expertise of others. Finally, the study of controversy can lead to an understanding of the difference between empirical and conceptual questions and promote an attitude of inquiry, the “critical spirit” so necessary for critical thinking.

Much can be learned *from engaging in discussions* of controversial issues. First, when we give serious attention to the merits of controversy, we can learn about the sources of our fear of disagreement and the historical problems associated with the human need for certainty. Next, the engagement can help us to develop an appreciation for complexity and ambiguity and to acknowledge the importance of questions that don't have “answers.” Although understanding controversy will not give us “answers” or “solutions” to problems that arise from controversial issues, such understanding *does* provide us with the means to evaluate the various answers (solutions) that may be proposed. It is also noteworthy that engaging in controversy can lead to questioning whether something *is* an “answer” rather than simply accepting and

defending it.

Further, an examination of the central concepts embedded in particular controversial issues usually leads to an examination of related concepts and eventually may change our own "perspective" dramatically. Thus, engaging in controversy can promote the development of an open-minded attitude of inquiry, rather than the more common responses of belligerence, arrogance, and self-righteousness noted previously.

Finally, controversial issues are often central to political policies and debates. Political decisions are "tested" in the court of public opinion by polls. In this sense, an informed and reasonable citizenry can influence the extent to which such decisions are "considered judgments" rather than "unexamined reactions" to public demands in order to secure high ratings.

In summary, with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the merits of controversy, it becomes clear that controversy is not a vice to be avoided at all cost, but more like a worthwhile set of educational virtues. The new *Journal of Educational Controversy* recognizes those virtues and has the potential to provide valuable educational opportunities for its readers. The journal can provide opportunities to examine some controversial issues central to education and our contemporary society, to consider alternative perspectives on the issues, to think critically about the issues and perspectives, and, to further investigate issues and concepts in the spirit of epistemic independence.

In developing our understanding of controversy and engaging with controversial issues, we have the opportunity to work towards fostering a citizenry capable of and willing to examine controversial issues in a thoughtful and reasonable fashion. Perhaps most importantly, we also have the opportunity to learn more about ourselves as educators and as individual persons who enjoy the "examined" life of which Socrates speaks.

Notes

1. Oakeshott, Michael (2001) "A Place of Learning", *The Voice of Liberal Learning* Timothy Fuller (ed) (IN:Liberty Fund) 11 (italics added)
2. See Plato, *Apology* (38a)
3. Deardon, R.F. (1996) "Controversial Issues and the Curriculum", *Philosophy of Education*, second edition, Hare, W. and Portelli, J (eds) (WA:Temeron Books) 132. Deardon discusses several kinds of controversial issues in order to arrive at this definition
4. Kasler, Dirk (1988) *Max Weber: An Introduction to His Life and Work* (Ill:University of Chicago Press) 151