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Controversial Issues, Criteria, and Religion: A Radical Perspective on the Criterion Debate and some Remarks on its Relevance for Religious Education

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Abstract: This text offers a radical perspective on the criterion debate and deals with its relevance to nonconfessional religious education. I start with the assumption that two different but related concerns are at the core of the debate. First, the issue of demarcation concerns how to discriminate between issues that are and are not controversial. The second is the issue of teaching, which is concerned with spelling out the normative consequences of the demarcation issue for the practice of teaching. With regard to the issue of demarcation, I argue that it cannot reasonably be construed as a problem that can be solved theoretically, fixed once, and for all by means of theoretical criteria. The stubborn assumption that one can derive from a single criterion what ought to be done in all possible cases is a persistent problem that hampers the debate from making progress and ought to be discarded. To move the debate forward, it would make more sense to view demarcation as an ongoing practical activity that might be pursued differently depending on the context. Regarding the issue of teaching, I similarly argue against the idea that a prioritized highest good exists in education. The upside of rejecting this conclusion is that it provides educators with the freedom to seize upon a variety of educative aims and experiences without seeking to fit them into any one unchanging, all-embracing vision.
Keywords: Controversial issues, criterion debate, religious education, boundary work, ideal and nonideal theory

Zusammenfassung: Dieser Text bietet eine radikale Perspektive auf die Kriteriendebatte und befasst sich mit ihrer Relevanz für den nichtkonfessionellen Religionsunterricht. Ich gehe davon aus, dass zwei unterschiedliche, aber miteinander verbundene Anliegen im Mittelpunkt der Debatte stehen. Erstens geht es bei der Frage der Abgrenzung darum, wie zwischen kontroversen und nicht kontroversen Themen unterschieden werden kann. Zweitens geht es um die Frage des Unterrichts, bei der es darum geht, die normativen Konsequenzen der Abgrenzungsfrage für die Unterrichtspraxis zu formulieren. In Bezug auf die Frage der Abgrenzung argumentiere ich, dass sie vernünftigerweise nicht als ein Problem angesehen werden kann, das theoretisch gelöst und einmalig und für alle Zeiten durch theoretische Kriterien festgelegt werden kann. Die hartnäckige Annahme, dass man aus einem einzigen Kriterium ableiten kann, was in allen möglichen Fällen zu tun ist, ist ein hartnäckiges Problem, das den Fortschritt der Debatte behindert und verworfen werden sollte. Um die Debatte voranzubringen, wäre es sinnvoller, die Abgrenzung als eine fortlaufende praktische Tätigkeit zu betrachten, die je nach Kontext unterschiedlich verfolgt werden kann. In Bezug auf die Frage des Unterrichts spreche ich mich ebenfalls gegen die Vorstellung aus, dass es in der Bildung ein vorrangiges höchstes Gut gibt. Der Vorteil dieser Ablehnung besteht darin, dass sie Pädagogen die Freiheit gibt, eine Vielzahl von Bildungszielen und -erfahrungen zu verfolgen, ohne sie in eine einzige unveränderliche, allumfassende Vision einpassen zu müssen.
Schlagwörter: kontroverse Themen, Kriteriendiskussion, Religionsunterricht, Grenzarbeit, ideale und nicht-ideale Theorie

1. Introduction

In the last 10–15 years, the notion of *controversial issues* has become a focal point for increased activity within different parts of education scholarship. Interestingly, this literature has united a variety of scholars who otherwise have little in common. A point of assembly for a host of contributions to the research topic is what has come to be labeled *the criterion debate* (Anders & Shudak, 2016; Herbst, 2023; Sætra, 2019; von der Lippe, 2019). In this paper, I offer a radical perspective on this debate, arguing against some of its main underlying assumptions. While this perspective is, in some sense, a general philosophical perspective on the debate, it also concerns nonconfessional religious education (RE). In short, this means that while the treatment of the debate is quite general on a philosophical level, I also provide examples that show how considerations apply to RE. I restrict my argument to nonconfessional RE based on the assumption that confessional and nonconfessional RE function in fundamentally distinct ways (Alberts, 2010; 2019).

What is at stake in this debate is, in itself, a possible point of contention. In this text, however, I shall start with the assumption that at least two different but related concerns are at the core of the debate. First is the issue of demarcation. Briefly put, this issue is about how to discriminate between issues that ought and ought not to be regarded as controversial. Second, there is the issue of teaching. To put it crudely, a good chunk of the debate is concerned with spelling out the normative consequences of the demarcation issue for the practice of teaching. As such, the two issues are obviously connected because how one deals with the issue of demarcation is usually taken to have clearly discernable normative consequences for how the practice of teaching is theorized. Accordingly, the relationship between them is central to my treatment of the criterion debate in this text. Analytically, however, I will to some extent separate the two so as to give each its own treatment. In some sense, this is important because part of my argument will be that they are indeed separate issues, and how you go about answering the first issue, demarcation, does not in fact fully determine how one ought to go about the second, teaching.

The text is organized as follows. First, I provide an initial overview of the debate. This is a partial and strategic overview. The aim is not to exhaustively review the entire debate but rather to outline the main positions in the debate in order to introduce conversation partners for my own argument. Then, I move on to discuss firstly the issue of demarcation and secondly the issue of teaching.

The treatment of the demarcation issue has two parts. The first part starts with the basic assumption that demarcation is a kind of boundary work, an ideological style of reasoning that teachers must perform responsibly to protect professional autonomy. Starting from this point of departure, I demon-strate that the criteria proposed in the criteria debate represent different ideological styles of reasoning driven by different ideas and interests. In the second part, I attempt to shed light on how different criteria differ in their degrees of idealism. Relatedly, I assess the likelihood that these criteria qualify as plausible candidates for demarcation in both ideal and less-than-ideal circumstances. The section pertainning to the topic of teaching begins by outlining how Michael Hand's epistemic criterion can be cashed out as a type of prescriptive framework for teaching aimed at fostering rationality. Thereafter, the discussion examines key critiques leveled against it, leading to a concluding argument wherein I advocate for an alternative pedagogical vision.

In order to evaluate and discuss the different criteria, I will attempt to balance two different conside-rations against each other. These considerations concern desirability and feasibility. Briefly, a desirable state of affairs denotes a state of affairs that inhibits desirable qualities. From an ideal point of view, this means that the most ideal criterion leads to the most desirable state of affairs. However, the criterion debate is not an exercise in utopian thinking. A shared premise for the debate is that criteria should be able to guide the actions of real-world educators. As such, the different criteria function as what Tomlin calls problem-solving concepts, conceptual tools that educators can use as guides "to achieve some

independently valuable state of affairs" (2012, p. 42). This means that theorists have to be realistic in the assumptions and expectations they make because ideals that are built on unrealistic assumptions are likely to be impotent or even harmful if taken seriously as a guide to action (Galston, 2010). Consequently, considerations of desirability must be balanced against what is more or less feasible to identify the options that have maximally expected normative value. In this regard, consideration of feasibility can serve two important functions. The first is to rule out proposals that cannot be implemented in practice. Second, it enables comparative assessments of various proposals. As such, the various considerations that feed into the assessment of feasibility allow comparative judgments of proposals according to how feasible they are (Gilabert & Lawford-Smith, 2012).

2.   Overview of the Debate

The criterion debate is a large and multifaceted endeavor. Today's debate can be traced back to the early 1980s. Two articles from that period stand out as landmark contributions. First, Dearden published an article that laid the foundation for what is now known as *the epistemic criterion* (1981). His contribution to the debate can be regarded as twofold. First, he criticized what has become known as *the behavioral criterion* (Bailey, 1975). The behavioral criterion can be characterized as a minimal criterion for counting an issue as controversial, as it only demands some form of disagreement to qualify it as such. Dearden argued that this minimal criterion was inadequate because it gave rise to epistemological relativism: "it encourages the thought that what is true should be collapsed into what some group regards as true" (1981, p. 38). If all that is required to consider an issue controversial is that one offers a conflicting opinion, then even the question of the shape of the Earth becomes controversial. Such relativism would be particularly unfortunate in educational practice involving children, he argued, since children constantly argue about the answer to issues whose correct answers are well known. To avoid this problem, Dearden (1981, p. 85) proposed that an issue should only be taught as controversial if opposing views can be defended in accordance with reason. What this entails had to be assessed in terms of knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures that are available at any given time. It is this criterion that has since become known as the epistemic criterion.

Three years later, Robert Stradling made another significant contribution to the debate. Stradling approached the issue in a different manner. He had just taken part in a 2-year research project, which included observations at 20 schools in different parts of England as well as a questionnaire that was distributed to and answered by a national sample of schools. An important finding in this study was that the issues that were particularly challenging for teachers to teach were not primarily "academic disputes" but issues on which society was divided (Stradling, 1984, p. 121). Based on this insight, Stradling argued that "issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based upon alternate worldviews are controversial issues" (1984, p. 121). This later became known as *the political criterion*.

Stradling also took the opportunity to critique philosophical literature in the field. In his view, there was no shortage of advice on how to teach controversial issues. The problem was that the advice given was based on untested assumptions that did not take into account what was actually happening in the classroom. This is where teachers had to deal with the limitations of each individual school as well as students with different knowledge, values, and experiences, and this was usually left out of philosophical discussions.

More recent discussions often take these two contributions as their points of departure. A particularly influential example of this is the philosopher of education Michael Hand (2007; 2008; 2014). He has taken up the position of advocate for the epistemic criterion. As such, he has further developed Dearden's (1981) work. Hand contributes to the epistemic criterion by providing it with a normative foundation. This foundation comes in the form of a postulate that the primary purpose of education is to equip

students with a capacity for and inclination to think and act rationally (Hand, 2014, p. 79). This postulate is valid, Hand (2008, p. 218) argues, because rationality is both constitutive and an instrument of human flourishing. This postulate further allows Hand to make clear recommendations regarding how teaching ought to be done, linking the issue of demarcation and the issue of teaching together in a deductive structure. If an issue is controversial, writes Hand (2014, p. 79), the issue should be taught openly. Different possible solutions should be presented as impartially as possible. If the issue is not controversial, however, teaching should be prescriptive. Consequently, it should support students' understanding and encourage them to accept the correct answer. What distinguishes these two modes of teaching, then, "is not a pedagogical method or style, but the willingness of the teacher to endorse one view on a matter as the right one" (Hand, 2008, p. 213).

Hand's contribution has taken up a central place in the debate. Other contributors position themselves in relation to his writings. This also applies to contributors belonging to the field of religious education. A critic of Hand's belonging to this camp is Trevor Cooling. His criticism is out of concern for how religious beliefs should be treated in education. Cooling believes that too strong an emphasis on rationality can come with significant costs. The weakness of the epistemic criterion, he argues, is that it overestimates "the decisiveness of reason and failure to attend to the need for fairness" (Cooling, 2012, p. 169). To amend this weakness, he proposes what he calls the diversity criterion:

> [We] should teach as controversial those matters where significant disagreement exists between different belief communities in society where those communities honor the importance of reason giving and exemplify a commitment to peaceful co-existence in society and teach as settled only those matters where there is demonstrable consensus in society which derives from wide agreement and compelling evidence (Cooling, 2012, p. 177).

As I interpret it, this proposition is rooted in two closely related considerations. First, Cooling believes that Hand has a somewhat excessive belief in human rationality, and that this belief should be tempered. Second, Cooling is keen to promote a form of reasonable pluralism that is more attentive to the diversity of people's beliefs. Both considerations seem reasonable to me. Nevertheless, there are some problems related to operationalizing Cooling's proposed criterion, something that Hand (2014) himself has noted. Indeed, it is unclear what counts as a "belief community" or how to decide what it means to "[to] honor the importance of reason-giving?" (Hand, 2014, p. 83). As long as such questions remain unanswered, it seems hard to know exactly how the diversity criterion ought to be applied.

Another critic belonging to the religious education camp is Marie von der Lippe. Similar to Cooling, she claims that the epistemic criterion leads to an overly normative approach to teaching, as it commits teachers to uphold standards of rationality higher than what is common in the public sphere. First, von der Lippe (2019, p. 407) argues that everyone who has worked as a teacher knows that you cannot control how a group of students interpret and react to what is being taught, and that these interpretations and reactions will be based on students' personal experiences and viewpoints. Accordingly, teachers will have to assess how they ought to teach a controversial issue with regard to a particular group. Second, she adds an argument rooted in social constructivist ideas, arguing that Hand does not take into account that knowledge is something that is developed and negotiated between different actors with varying degrees of authority. In light of these considerations, she claims that what Hess and McAvoy (2015) call "the political authenticity criterion" appears to be more appropriate. Their starting point is that issues should be taught as controversial "when they have traction in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts, within political platforms, in legislative chambers, and as part of political movements" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 168–169). In other words, we return here to the issues that divide society (Stradling, 1984).

As a last point in this section, I would like to point out that this line of thinking has a close relative in the German tradition of *politische Bildung*, in the central principle of the Beutelsbach Consensus. This

principle states that "matters which are controversial in scholarship and political affairs should also be presented as controversial in the classroom" (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, p. 1). Importantly, the Beutelsbach Consensus also couples this principle with another principle: the prohibition against overwhelming students. According to this principle, it "is not permissible to catch students off-guard (…) for the sake of imparting desirable opinions, thereby hindering them from forming an independent judgement" (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, p. 3), crossing over from political education to indoctrination. Indeed, a teacher who "loses sight of differing points of view, suppresses options and leaves alternatives undiscussed is already well on his or her way to indoctrinating students" (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, p. 4). In public education, these principles are not restricted to political education but apply to all of the curriculum (Benner, 2018; Rucker, 2021). Thus, they are also relevant in the context of nonconfessional religious education as a form of education about religions that is framed independently of particular religious positions (Alberts, 2019, p. 56). In such a context, I would argue that the distinction between this form of religious education—where religion is presented in a critical, objective, and pluralistic manner—and religious indoctrination is structurally very similar to the distinction between liberal democratic political education and political indoctrination.

3.   Demarcation as Boundary Work

As already outlined, the discussion concerning the issue of demarcation starts from the basic assumption that demarcation is a kind of *boundary work*. Gieryn (1983, p. 789) uses the term in the context of science, suggesting that boundary work is an ideological style that reasoning professionals use to protect their professional autonomy: "Public scientists construct a boundary between the production of scientific knowledge and its consumption by non-scientists." Importantly, however, he adds, "The boundaries of science are ambiguous, flexible, historically changing, contextually variable, internally inconsistent and sometimes disrupted" (Gieryn, 1983, p. 792). In a nutshell, this means that boundary work cannot reasonably be construed as a problem that can be solved theoretically, fixed once and for all by means of theoretical criteria. Rather, it makes more sense to view demarcation as an ongoing practical activity. For my purposes here, it is further crucial to note that boundary work is not limited to the demarcation of science from non-science. Accordingly, I shall propose—and try to demonstrate—that one useful extension and application of the idea is the demarcation of controversial issues from issues that are not controversial within education as an ongoing practical activity that educators perform collectively and individually. In order to earn democratic legitimacy, they must perform this task in professionally sound and responsible ways.

From this point of departure, then, the different criteria proposed in the criterion debate can be investigated as means of demarcation, representing different ideological styles of reasoning driven by different ideas and interests. In the case of the epistemic criterion, this interest is evident from the outset. The motivation underpinning Dearden's (1981) initial proposal was an interest in protecting education from the kind of epistemological relativism that he saw as inherent in the behavioral criterion. More recently, Hand (2007; 2008; 2014) further developed this style of reasoning by giving the epistemic criterion a normative foundation in the form of rationality. Moreover, he used this normative foundation to make an argument for why certain issues ought not to be treated as controversial in education. Indeed, some of the arguments he makes are directly related to religious education. In an early article entitled "Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?" Hand (2007) argued that moral objections to homosexuality based on biblical scripture are morally indefensible, placing the issue outside the boundaries of legitimate controversy. Accordingly, he claims that rival moral positions on the issue should not be presented even-handedly in education. On the contrary, educators ought to promote the view that homosexual acts are morally legitimate or unproblematic.

The political criterion developed out of a different set of concerns. As already stated, Stradling took part in an empirical research project that investigated the teaching of controversial issues in different parts of England. An important finding was that the issues that were particularly challenging to teach were not primarily "academic disputes" but issues on which society was divided (Stradling, 1984, p. 121). It was based on this insight that Stradling defined controversial issues as "issues that deeply divide a society, that generate conflicting explanations and solutions based upon alternative world-views" (1984, p. 121). Accordingly, the primary interest was not to ward off epistemological relativism but rather how educators might successfully teach issues on which society is divided.

4.   Demarcation in Ideal and Nonideal Circumstances

To evaluate the different positions in the debate, I make an analytical distinction between what John Rawls (1999) calls ideal and nonideal theory. In a nutshell, ideal theory is concerned with the theoretical construction of a realistic utopia, and "political philosophy is realistically utopian when it extends what are ordinarily thought to be the limits of practicable political possibility" (Rawls, 1999, p. 11). So conceived, the specific conditions of our world at any given time do not determine our conception of ideal theory. On the other hand, these conditions affect the conception of what he calls nonideal theory (Rawls, 1999, p. 90). The chief characteristic trait of nonideal theory is that it sets out to describe what ought to be done in a world that is not realistically utopian, but where injustices and social evils exist (Rawls, 1999, p. 89). With regard to teaching controversial issues, I would argue that it makes sense to regard some features as typically constitutive of the non-ideal circumstances of practical reality: human agents frequently lack important knowledge, they are biased, sometimes even (willfully) ignorant and noncompliant.

For my purposes here, it is not useful to operate with a sharp distinction between ideal and nonideal theory. Rather, it is more appropriate to start with the assumption that both theory and social circumstances operate on a continuum from more to less ideal. As outlined in the introduction, I will discuss different criteria in terms of both desirability and feasibility. I am interested in examining what kinds of desirable qualities they inhibit as well as evaluating their feasibility in different kinds of circumstances. As already argued, this is appropriate because the criterion debate operates on the shared premise that the criteria discussed should be able to guide the actions of real-world educators. Accordingly, they must "represent intelligently thought-out possibilities of the existent world which may be used as methods for making over and improving it" (Dewey, 2004, p. 20).

In my view, the epistemic criterion can reasonably be described as a form of ideal theory with clearly discernable desirable traits. Most importantly, it is desirable in the sense that it sets out to discriminate controversial issues from issues that are not controversial by means of the knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures that are available at any given time (Dearden, 1981). Moreover, as I will get back to in the next section about teaching, this is effectively cashed out in a form of education that equips students with a capacity for and inclination to think and act rationally (Hand, 2014, p. 79).

For the epistemic criterion to work properly, however, several conditions must be satisfied. First, it demands a high level of agreement within the profession about the relevant knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures that ought to be applied. Second, there must also be a high level of agreement regarding how the criterion ought to be applied in particular cases. If these two conditions are satisfied, educators are well positioned to do boundary work. However, this in itself is not sufficient. The teaching profession also relies on a high level of compliance among different groups in society. They need the approval of society to gain and sustain democratic legitimacy. In my view, the conditions that make up the epistemic criterion are demanding but not impossible to satisfy. It falls

within the bounds of practicable political possibilities. Indeed, for many issues, such decisions might be made rather straightforwardly and uncontroversially (Torres, 2024, p. 701).

In comparison, the political criterion is a somewhat less demanding ideal to follow than the epistemic criterion. This is because the political criterion does not demand much agreement about the knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures that ought to be used, or how all this ought to be applied in any particular case. Rather, it is sufficient to recognize that the issue in question is "controversial in scholarship and political affairs" (Christensen & Grammes, 2020, p. 1); that it has some "traction in the public sphere, appearing on ballots, in courts, within political platforms, in legislative chambers, and as part of political movements" (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 168–169).

From the standpoint of ideal theory, the less demanding nature of the political criterion is seen as a drawback, because it is a blunter, less idealistic tool for demarcating issues that are controversial and not controversial. Accordingly, Michael Hand uncompromisingly rejects it. It is not the role of the public school, he writes (Hand, 2008, p. 224), to instill support for the public values and morality of the democratic state. Indeed, he finds that "the idea that we ought to promote whatever moral perspective society currently privileges is scarcely philosophically respectable" (Hand, 2008, p. 227).

Somewhat less uncompromising in style, Johannes Drerup also found the political criterion to be deficient. He argues that "although Hess and McAvoy's methodological realism convincingly acknowledges the many dilemmas associated with teaching controversial issues, it comes nonetheless at the price of too much political and epistemic flexibility" (Drerup, 2022, p. 336). Like Hand (2007), he uses homosexuality as an example, writing that "when it comes to same-sex marriage, Hess and McAvoy ultimately make too great a concession to ideological opponents of democratic ideals of equality, allowing the issue to be considered controversial when it is not one in fact" (Drerup, 2022, p. 336).

While these criticisms might have great appeal from the standpoint of ideal theory, the less demanding nature of the political criterion is ultimately a double-edged sword. Because it is a blunter tool for demarcation, it is also easier to apply, especially under circumstances that are not ideal. Having a less strict nature, it is less likely to start fights within both politics and the profession about the nature of the knowledge, criteria of truth, critical standards, and verification procedures that ought to be applied. This is important, I would argue, because what counts or does not count as the proper standards of rationality will usually be a matter of contestation in society. As such, negotiations concerning such matters have a political dimension, in the sense that they are embedded in power relations and struggles for power. With regard to RE, this is of great importance, as the subject will usually be characterized by significant disagreements about metaphysical issues, both within politics and the profession.

Even if there is, in fact, a high level of agreement about these standards, disagreements might still arise concerning how the criterion ought to be applied in any particular case. This is usually taken to be true about a broad class of political issues (Drerup, 2022, p. 337), and it is also a clearly identifiable aspect of ongoing scholarly discussion within religious education. To give just one example, some people "hold that theistic beliefs are demonstrably true; many atheists believe that arguments for the existence of God have been conclusively refuted" (Clayton, 2024, p. 139). Indeed, this is also true for professional experts who are generally keen to comply with the highest standards of rationality. As Trevor Cooling puts it in his article on the notion of controversial issues and the treatment of religious beliefs in education: "Richard Dawkins is persuaded, on the basis of scientific reasoning, that belief in a creator God is irrational as far as he is concerned the evidence is decisive. Francis Collins, however, disagrees with him. Both are eminent scientists." (2014, p. 87)

Still, I suspect that a bigger challenge in the context of many school systems today is that the teaching profession relies on a high level of compliance from different groups in society. As already argued, they need the approval of society to gain democratic legitimacy. In my assessment, most social groups are likely to agree with Matthew Clayton (2024, p. 138) that it is illegitimate to force free and equal citizens to pay for and live under a schooling regime that actively promotes ethical and religious propositions they do not believe in. Accordingly, it seems likely that schools must, to a considerable extent, grant citizens political autonomy to "pursue their own ethical and religious ends (what Rawls calls 'comprehensive doctrines'): for example, they are morally permitted to pursue mistaken conceptions of religion or mistaken views about what makes one's life a success" (Clayton, 2024, p. 138).

The problem of compliance for social groups is particularly felt in societies characterized by a high degree of political polarization. As Torres writes in the context of the U.S, "the epistemic environment of political polarization degrades educators' abilities to reliably assess whether a broad class of politically contested issues meet the criteria for directive teaching" (2024, p. 696). This, of course, does not mean that teachers can give up on making judgments about what constitutes a legitimate controversy. However, this clearly indicates that knowing how to draw boundaries correctly can be difficult. As such, there are limits to boundary-drawing responses that have been popular within the criterion debate (Torres, 2024, p. 702). Arguably, the problem is likely to be particularly salient in the case of idealistic approaches—such as the epistemic criterion—in the epistemic conditions of politically polarized contexts (Stitzlein, 2024).

In conclusion, it seems to me that the boundary work in question should not be construed as a problem that can be solved theoretically, fixed once and for all by means of theoretical criteria. Although criteria can usefully serve as conceptual tools in practical problem solving, it ultimately makes more sense to view demarcation as a situated and ongoing practical activity that involves professional discernment. Criteria, then, are more properly construed as tools for practical argumentation and reflective action in open-ended situations rather than as rules to follow. Indeed, the implausible assumption that one can derive from a single criterion what ought to be done in all possible cases is a persistent problem that hampers the debate from making progress and ought to be discarded (Drerup, 2022; Sætra, 2019).

While the issue of demarcation is important, it is, I would argue, in one sense less decisive than much of the criterion debate has set it out to be. As stated in the introduction, this is because how one deals with the issue of demarcation does not in itself fully determine how one ought to deal with the practice of teaching. In the next section, I eventually begin to explore some of the arguments in favor of this proposition by examining some of the arguments leveled against Michael Hand's version of the epistemic criterion.

5. The Teaching of Controversial Issues

As stated in the above section concerning demarcation, part of the appeal of the epistemic criterion is that it can effectively be cashed out in a form of education that supports rationality. As such, the interest does not primarily lie in conceptual clarification but rather in the normative consequences that demarcation ought to have for the practice of teaching. In essence, Hand (2007; 2008; 2014) presents us with a prescriptive theory of teaching consisting of 1) an end, 2) a justification for that end, 3) two different means to the end, and 4) a criterion for discriminating between means. The end is constant: to equip students with a capacity for and inclination toward rational thought and action. The means depend on whether the issue is controversial or not. If the issue is controversial, teachers should teach nondirectively, meaning they should "present different possible solutions as impartially as possible" (Hand, 2014, p. 79). If the issue is not controversial, teachers should teach directively, meaning "to teach it with the intention of guiding pupils toward an approved solution or correct answer" (Hand, 2014, p. 79). The tool intended for discriminating between the different means is the epistemic criterion.

The version of the epistemic criterion presented above is underpinned by three different assumptions. First, what might be called monism is the idea that there exists a prioritized highest good and a context-transcending criterion that can and should determine how teachers ought to teach issues that are and are not controversial. Second, the idea that the prescription of means and ends can be done a priori and universally by means of a single unified theory. Finally, this enables what Tone Kvernbekk (2005, p. 135) calls deductivism: the idea that it should be possible to deduce from a theory what ought to be done in practice. Accordingly, the application of theory to practice becomes an exercise in deductive reasoning (Sætra, 2019, p. 328).

In my view, there is something desirable about this theory. Crucially, it is clearly laid out in a parsimonious manner and arrives at something important about education. If an educator knows what is rationally justified, should they not share that insight with their students? And if they do not know, is it not right that they refrain from indoctrinating them? All other things equal, this seems good. More-over, the argument in favor of doing so is particularly strong in the case of what Tillson calls *momentous propositions*, meaning "those propositions for which the stakes are high regarding the consequences of failing to believe correctly" (2017, p. 175). Especially in such cases, a good case can be made for the argument that educators have a prima facie moral duty to teach students the truth.

Different criticisms have been labeled against this theory of teaching. In what follows, I look at three slightly different arguments against it, starting with an argument made by Warnick and Smith (2014). Their line of attack does not explicitly question the idea that rationality ought to be the prioritized highest ethical good in education. Rather, they take issue with the notion of rationality underlying the epistemic criterion, arguing that it is simply too narrow. Hand's (2007; 2008; 2014) idea of rationality is limited to dealing with rational beliefs about a particular case. In contrast, they argue that rationality is a multidimensional concept consisting of several components (Warnick & Smith, 2014).

To become rational, Warnick and Smith argue, students must become familiar with a wide range of tools, such as content knowledge, understanding, critical thinking skills, and metacognitive aware-ness. They must also learn how to embody important epistemological virtues, such as openness to criticism, respect for evidence, reasonableness, and self-reflectiveness. As part of epistemic virtues, students should additionally "develop a sense of fallibilism and self-criticism," which is sometimes referred to as intellectual humility (Warnick & Smith, 2014, p. 230). Lastly, students must develop confi-dence in rationality as a productive tool, as well as "confidence in themselves as rational agents, that is, a confidence in their ability to employ rationality and critical thinking strategies" (Warnick & Smith, 2014, p. 230). In sum, this complex and multidimensional account of rationality clearly complicates the meaning of what teaching for rationality entails. Accordingly, the categories of directive and nondirective teaching should be refined. In conclusion, then, "recognizing the complex nature of educating for reason ultimately suggests that directive and nondirective teaching should be decoupled from a position's epistemic status" (Warnick & Smith, 2014, p. 229).

Gregory converges on the same conclusion with a different set of arguments. He argued that the purpose of teaching cannot be limited to the acquisition of specific knowledge content (Gregory, 2014, p. 627). Rather, it must also be taught how this knowledge is legitimized by virtue of disciplinary methods. Therefore, teaching should prioritize what he calls procedural aims rather than teaching the knowledge content. The teacher will be able to expect and also intend that the students will find one point of view more correct or reasonable than others, but their commitment to the procedures will still be more fundamental than any such intention (Gregory, 2014, p. 632). Again, then, we are led to the conclusion that the notions of directive and nondirective teaching should be loosened somewhat from the epistemic status of an issue. Gregory adds that "learning about the plurality of moral views in one's community, learning to discuss sensitive topics with careful thinking and mutual respect, and having

the opportunity to self-correct one's reasons (…) is amongst the most important educational benefits of inquiry dialogue" (2014, p. 640). These aspects of the process, I would argue, are fundamental to learning how to live together in a pluralistic and democratic society, irrespective of whether they lead to rational beliefs about the particular issue in question.

Sætra (2022) more explicitly targets the idea that rationality should be given status as the highest prioritized good in education. The starting point for the argument is the empirical study of how teachers and students in Norwegian high schools' construct and experience aims and goods in classroom discussions of controversial issues. In brief, what emerges from the conjoined experiences of teachers and students is the notion that practice comprises multiple aims and drives, such as 1) producing knowledge and becoming knowledgeable, 2) multiple perspectives and perspective-taking, 3) passionate engagement and active citizenship, and 4) being and becoming respectful and tolerant. In confluence with the arguments made by the aforementioned philosophers of education (Hand, 2007; 2008; 2014; Tillson, 2017; Warnick & Smith, 2014; Gregory, 2014), the emphasis given to producing knowledge and becoming knowledgeable in this account gives support to a notion of teaching that supports rationality. The account does not, however, support the idea that fostering rationality should be given status as the highest prioritized good in education. Rather, it expands on a point that was well made by Dewey (2015): "A person does not only learn the particular thing they are studying at the time, as collateral learning in the form of enduring attitudes may be just as important" (Sætra, 2022, p. 660). In addition to the aim of producing knowledge and becoming more knowledgeable, this here pertains to taking multiple perspectives, to passionate engagement and active citizenship as well as to being and becoming respectful and tolerant. Importantly, it should be noted that the justification for giving rationality an exalted status, which is that it is "constitutive of and instrumental to human flourishing," seems applicable to these other goods as well. As such, it is not clear whether rationality should in fact be given special status or why that should be the case.

6.   Concluding Discussion: Pedagogy for Hedgehogs and Foxes

There is a line among the fragments of the Greek poet Archilochus which says: "'The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing.' Scholars have differed about the correct interpretation of these dark words, which may mean no more than that the fox, for all his cunning, is defeated by the hedgehog's one defense. But, taken figuratively, the words can be made to yield a sense in which they mark one of the deepest differences which divide writers and thinkers, and, it may be, human beings in general. For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel–a single universal, organizing principle in terms of which alone all they are and say has significance–and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends, often unrelated and even contradictory (…) seizing upon the essence of a variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, unchanging, all-embracing [vision]" (Berlin, 1967, p. 1).

In this concluding discussion, I argue that the different philosophical views above lead us to different pedagogical visions. The point of departure will be the above quotation by the philosopher Berlin. This was initially used as a way of characterizing different intellectual and artistic personalities (Berlin, 1967, p. 2). However, I would argue that the application might be usefully extended to other domains. Here, I apply it to characterize different types of pedagogies related to teaching controversial issues. Briefly, I would argue that there are hedgehogs, foxes, and different mixes thereof in the criterion debate, and that, in the end, we ought to be more like foxes than hedgehogs.

Michael Hand stands out as the prototypical hedgehog in the literature, the type of thinker who relates everything to a single central vision. As I argued above, he presented us with a parsimonious theory that generates clear principles for how teachers should act in different situations. With regard to

curriculum development, it can be argued that his theory fits well with the Anglo-American curriculum tradition, because it might be helpful for developing a framework that postulates clear guidelines for how a well-ordered curriculum should be implemented by competent teachers. For example, the theory could help to form guidelines for which issues should be taught openly and which issues should be taught in a prescriptive manner. In this way, the theory functions as a defense against epistemological relativism and helps ensure that academic content and knowledge are at the center of teaching.

The single central vision does, however, come at a cost. In a nutshell, it represents two rather complex phenomena, demarcation and teaching, by means of just a few parameters. To say that the vision reduces the complexity of the phenomena in question is in itself, of course, no argument against it. Indeed, all knowledge formation is based on cognitive simplification for the simple reason that we are unable to keep an order and overview of parameters and relationships if there are too many of them (Kvernbekk, 2024, p. 344). What is, in fact, illegitimate, however, is oversimplification, reducing the phenomena in question too much, so to speak, in a way that distorts them and does not do them justice (Kvernbekk, 2024, p. 345). Striking the right balance between legitimate simplification and illegitimate oversimplification is, of course, no easy task. In my view, however, what ends up happening in this case is a form of illegitimate oversimplification of both theory and practice. As I have argued throughout the paper, this means that we are better off discarding the implausible assumption that one can derive from a single criterion what ought to be done in all possible cases as well as the idea that there exists a prioritized highest good in education.

Where does this leave us? Giving up on a single central vision also comes at a cost because it runs the risk of massively complicating things, leaving educators without fixed points of orientation. Inspired by Berlin (1967), however, I would argue that there is an upside to this, as it leaves educators free to approach the task of education according to a different logic. Within such logic, the task of educators is not to maximize rationality. Rather, they are provided with the freedom to seize upon a variety of educative experiences and aims without seeking to fit them into any one unchanging, all-embracing vision. It prevents education generally, and in this case the teaching of controversial issues more particularly, from "becoming a motorway, where all detours and sideways are gone" (Kvernbekk, 2024, p. 345). Ultimately, it might also lead the criterion debate down more promising roads. In my view, the debate would benefit from less armchair philosophy, and more engaged empirical research, taking its point of departure in different contexts, cases, and school subjects. Indeed, that would be to follow the road laid out by Stradling (1984) years ago, testing the assumptions of theory against what actually goes on in the classroom.

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