

Reading Task: Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?

Hand, M (2007) 'Should we teach homosexuality as a controversial issue?',
Theory and Research in Education, 5, 69-86

Reading Guide

NB the paper begins (p69 – p70 para 1) with a distinction between *directive* and *non-directive* approaches to teaching moral questions: make sure that you get this distinction clear. This is not a distinction between active/ enquiry based vs direct instruction/ rote learning so much as about **whether or not we intend in our teaching to commend - or guide students toward - a particular moral stance or belief.**

Hand argues that we must decide our approach to moral questions issue by issue, since some issues are controversial where others aren't, and that the issue under discussion here is whether homosexual acts are right or wrong (p70 para 2).

The principle here is that 'controversial' questions must be taught non-directively (since these are questions where we as educators are not certain what is right), and uncontroversial moral questions are to be taught directly (since where we *know* what is right, we have a duty to encourage our students in pursuit of it).

In order to decide whether our approach should be *directive* or *non-directive*, we need a 'criterion' or a means of determining whether or not the issue is controversial. So Hand then sets out (p70 para 3) his task in the paper: firstly, to work out what the criterion should be for determining whether a particular question should be treated in a directive or non-directive way, and secondly to apply that criterion to the particular issue, namely the rightness or wrongness of homosexual acts.

The Criterion of Controversiality

Hand considers *three* possible criteria – behavioural, epistemic and political - and argues that the appropriate criterion is the epistemic.

Behavioral Criterion (p70 last para – p71 para 3)

There are those who would argue that a moral issue must be approached non-directively if there exists a disagreement about the truth of the matter. Hand does not spend long dismissing this criterion on the grounds that 'it lets in too much'. There are, for example, those who disagree that the world is round, but we would not consider teaching this issue non-directively. We would, in fact, seek to commend to our students or guide them toward the belief that the earth is not flat.

Epistemic Criterion (p70 para 3ff)

The core of this is that the fact of disagreement is not enough. There are irrational people who might disagree with just about any proposition you might care to name. So for an issue to count as controversial, there must be *reasonable* or *rational* perspectives on both sides of the disagreement. The views of both parties involved must be 'rationally defensible'. This is the criterion that Hand advocates.

Political Criterion (p70 final 2 paras – p76 para 2)

Hand does not commend this criterion but discusses it *at length* because (he argues) it is in fact the criterion that has been applied by those who have previously argued that we should teach directly that homosexual acts are not wrong. In other words, although he agrees with their overall recommendations, Hand wants to distinguish his own reasons from the different reasons that they have offered. According to the political criterion, *moral questions are controversial if the public values of the state (i.e. a commitment to basic rights and liberties) neither commend nor condemn them* – in other words, if they are 'private' rather than 'public' matters.

Hand firstly argues (p72 para 2ff) that philosophers are divided about which values the state commends or condemns, but argues finally (p 73 final 2 paras ff) that we should reject this criterion because although the public/ private distinction seems to be an appropriate limit on the *coercive* powers of the state (it enables us to determine whether the state should enforce or prevent a particular form of sexuality), this does not seem to hold for *educational* contexts. A good example (p74 para 1) is in the area of healthy eating or exercise (I would add smoking). These are private matters, and rightly the state should not force us to eat in a particular way, but nevertheless it would seem a good idea to commend or encourage healthy eating in schools (in other words, to teach – as we do – issues of exercise and healthy eating *directively*, as non-controversial issues).

Hand then considers (p75 para 1 ff) *why* the educational criterion for controversiality has tended to be equated with a political one, and argues that directive education has been *confused* with a form of coercion or indoctrination. His key clarification of this matter is on the final para of p. 75 into the top para of p. 76: provided that we are confident that the belief we are commending is the rationally defensible option out of the range of alternatives, we do not need to *coerce* a child into accepting it. We hope the child will accept our view because they see it as the stronger of the alternatives, not because they fear what will happen to them if they do not agree. Coercion would, however, be necessary if the belief we sought to commend was not rationally defensible.

Is Homosexuality Morally Controversial? (p76 ff)

Having commended the epistemic criterion, Hand must now apply it to the issue of homosexuality. In other words, he must ask whether we can find a rationally defensible position on both sides of the disagreement about the morality of homosexual acts. He considers three different arguments for the moral illegitimacy of homosexuality (or the view that homosexual acts are morally wrong) and argues that none are rationally defensible. Here he is making a bold move in ethical philosophy, and you should examine his arguments carefully. If he is right that there is no rationally defensible argument for the wrongness of homosexuality, then the conclusion follows on clearly: the belief that homosexual acts are morally acceptable is rationally defensible, whereas no rational case can be made for homosexuality being wrong. Therefore, applying the epistemic criterion, homosexuality is **not** a controversial issue. Thus homosexuality should be approached *directively* in educational contexts: in other words, **it is part of the teacher's moral duty (at least on appropriate parts of the curriculum) to seek to encourage in students the belief that homosexual acts are morally acceptable.**

Questions:

There are different ways to approach a critique here. We could argue that Hand is wrong, which would seem to require (i) that we reject his criterion for controversiality in favour of another one (perhaps have a look at the Steutel and Speicker paper that Hand references - <http://dare2.ubvu.vu.nl/bitstream/handle/1871/33732/173631.pdf?sequence=1>) or (ii) that we find a rationally defensible argument for the wrongness of homosexual acts (you could look at the Finnis paper Hand references - <https://www.princeton.edu/~anscombe/articles/finnisorientation.pdf>). Either of these would be interesting approaches.

Another interesting thing to do would be to apply Hand's epistemic criterion in another area. I think I may have had a stab at applying it here (<http://davealdrige.brookesblogs.net/2012/11/03/what-should-we-remember-in-schools/>) to the issue of what we should do with events of remembrance in schools. You could choose this or another issue: how might it apply, for example, to teaching religion (find an attempt here: <http://www.philosophy-of-education.org/uploads/papers2012/Tillson.pdf>), or to the issue of cheating in tests that Sommers discussed in reading one?