



Prolegomena to the Discussion on Teaching Controversial Issues

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Abstract

Numerous articles and books focus on questions about teaching controversial issues in the classroom, and these controversial issues are on the educational agenda in many countries.

The modest goal of this essay is to lay the necessary groundwork for a discussion and study of the goals for teaching controversial issues in schools, in order to examine the practicability of achieving them in the educational reality, and to study possible ways for raising such subjects in the classroom.

It refines and adds to the concept of “controversial issues” from a particular, timely, perspective. The rise of “fake news” and “illiberal democracy,” including empowered illiberal subgroups in liberal democratic polities demands a reconsideration and new delineation of some of the major tenets proposed by previous scholarship.

The delineation that is proposed here moves through three stages. The first stage separates and distinguishes between the controversial issues and the assertions that according to the criteria that logical positivists have coined are meaningful. The second stage proposes the main criterion for defining a topic as controversial, and this is the epistemic-rational criterion, as defined in this essay. The third delineation stage proposes seeing a subject as being controversial if it is currently relevant for social and political life. Moreover, the essay asserts that the result of the examination of these three stages is dependent upon the context – time and place – in which the educational act occurs.

Keywords Political education · Teaching controversial issues · Teaching in a multi-cultural society

Introduction

Questions concerning the issue of teaching controversial issues (CIs) in the classroom have been discussed in recent years in books (Hess & McAvoy, 2015; Noddings & Brooks, 2017;

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Pace, 2021; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) and in articles in professional journals and books (for example, Hand & Levinson, 2012; Ho et al., 2017; Levy, 2019; Libresco, 2018). In 2018, the topic was the focus of a special issue of the journal of the American National Council for the Social Sciences, *Social Education* (volume 82, number 6). These questions are also on the educational agenda in Israel, in the context of topics that arise in the classroom (Halperin, 2016), in particular, in civics classes (Cohen, 2016, 2017, 2020; Cohen, 2018). These are especially interesting questions due to the fact that many teachers in Israeli society – a polarized society in terms of beliefs and opinions – attempt to distance themselves from dealing with CIs in order to avoid confrontations with students, parents and politicians (Gindi & Ron Erlich, 2018). This distancing from discussing CIs in the classroom, and focusing on acquisition of consensual technical civic knowledge, which represents formal structures and political institutions, is not unique to Israel: it also characterizes the western world (see, for example, Crittenden & Levine, 2016; McAvoy & Hess, 2013; Merry, 2018; Shapiro & Brown, 2018; Vincent, 2018). Therefore, teaching CIs is not a hypothetical issue that only concerns people who deal with educational thought in theory, but rather is a concrete question that reflects indecision and difficulty that concerns teachers, people studying teaching, parents, politicians, and the wide public in the western world, in general, and in Israel, in specific.

Due to the questions and indecisions, there is a need to determine the goals of teaching CIs in schools and to examine the feasibility of achieving these goals in Israeli reality, to research the possible ways teachers can raise CIs, to train future teachers for teaching CIs and to construct programs for this training.

As a result of this need, the Minister of Education appointed a public committee, charging it with the mission to decide the significant questions concerning the character of discourse between a teacher and her class on loaded and CIs in Israeli society, including the right of the teacher and the students to express their attitudes toward these questions. The committee was comprised of people from the arts and education, who represented different and wide populations in Israel and its results and recommendations were presented in an obligatory document (CEO's communication, 2016).

While this document attempted to deal with some of the demands presented above, it was lacking the pre-conditions for rationally dealing with all aspects concerning clarification of the topic. Such clarification is necessary, in order to overcome the difficulties posed by the preliminary and intuitive definition of the topic, which is ambiguous, varied and comprised of different meanings. Clarification is not only necessary for theoretical purposes; it is necessary for guiding and demarcating the practical framework for engaging in classroom discussions of CIs, and in order to prevent wandering or arguing about how to engage in such a discussion.

Given the above, the modest goal of this essay is to propose the first and necessary platform for the discussion and study of the goals' needs, and the ways and reasons for dealing with CIs in school. To begin with, this platform provides characteristics of the concept, "CIs," so that it can serve as a shared basis for discussion and study: I will argue that CIs deal with questions of public importance that connect to value, political, and social issues, in which the stances of the different sides are mainly based in reason and valid knowledge.

I do not only intend to provide the basic philosophical need for clarification and delineation of the concepts that are at the center of the (educational) discussion: by dealing with

the clarification and delineation of the concept, this raises important questions about how to teach CIs in the classroom and answers some of these questions.

Although I focus here on the Israeli condition this analysis has clear universal applications.

CIs: Delineation and Clarification of the Concept

The Ministry of Education CEO's Communication, which deals with the "educational discourse of CIs" (CEO's Communication, 2016) neither defines nor explains what are CIs. The document only presents general statements, such as that it deals with "emotionally loaded and CIs in Israeli society" or that about which "arose divisions," and topics that are "found in public divisions." While it does provide an example (only one), according to which, "one of the conspicuous fields in CIs is the political discourse [...] both in relation to local government elections and in relation to the elections for the central government," it does not interpret, expand or explain the meaning of this example.

It is possible that the lack of definition in the document teaches us about the difficulty in defining the term and might even teach us about the attempt to avoid this difficulty. After all, the general definition that reflects the term, "CIs," and that defines the desired way to teach such subjects in the classroom, is itself a controversial issue (Ho et al., 2017). In any event, it is clear that the question concerning a controversial topic is not a linguistic issue to be resolved, but rather a normative question in the field of educational thought (Hand, 2008).

Since there is a lack of a general definition, and overall disagreement concerning the meaning of the term, I will attempt to set some limits and justify the delineated character (or a kind of definition) of CIs, in order to provide a needed platform for study and discussion of engaging in CIs in schools. I will do so by presenting three spiral circular delineation of characteristics of divisiveness. In the end, I will arrive at the inner circle that holds what I have termed "CIs."

To begin with, I will use negation, based on logical positivism thought, in order to determine which topics are outside the borders of CIs. I will then adopt a critical look at the epistemic criterion of CIs (Dearden, 1981; Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017) – the essence of which I will explain below. Then, I will narrow the contents of the CIs to topics that are important, from a general public aspect (that is, topics that are authentically political, as set forth by Hess & McAvoy, 2015) – a delineation with universal characteristics. I will then add the local, Israeli context that influences the instilling of the concept "CIs."

The First Delineation

In the first delineation, I will present the wide content space, in which CIs can be found, as well as the issues and questions, which are not CIs. When sketching the borders of this first space of content, I will use a stance grounded in logical positivism. I am aware of the criticism directed toward this school of thought and the inadequacies which this criticism raises. But I will use it here, as recommended by Ludwig Wittgenstein (even if the proposal was used in a different context), not as a valid instrument of truth or as a means of central importance in this essay, but rather as a metaphorical ladder that I can disregard after I climb up and arrive at the content of the searched-for space. In other words, I will use some criteria

of the logical positivism thought without being obliged to adopt all the implications that can be derived from these criteria.

Moreover, in order to simplify things, for myself and for the explanation, I will use the method “delineation by negation.” That is, I will first point to what is *outside* of this primary delineation, and from this negation, it will be clear what topics are found *within* the delineation.

The philosophers, who adhere to logical positivism, determined criteria, according to which, it is possible to determine if a sentence in a language has significance or lacks meaning. An educational attitude, in the spirit of logical positivism, will acknowledge instructional topics (including topics that are consensual and those that are controversial) as having significance and as legitimate for teaching in school, if they belong to one of the two kinds of content.

The first kind, the **analytic-a-priori** type, includes assertions whose correctness is not derived from experience or dependent on the senses, but rather from considerations that are derived from the definitions of the concepts or from the consequences derived from the definitions of the concepts. Those are, for example, algebraic and geometric sentences, rules of logic, and rules of grammar and syntax. The second type, the **synthetic-a-posteriori** type, includes arguments that add information about the world, beyond the information contained in the concepts’ definitions. Here, the addition of information is derived and created from experience and from the senses. This addition of empirical knowledge, whose source is in human experience and senses, is expressed, for example, in laws and theories from physics, chemistry, biology and geography (Dearden, 1981).

An educational stance, in the spirit of logical positivism, will not accept other topics that do not belong to one of these two types of content – the analytical-a-priori or the synthetic-a-posteriori – as having significance or meaning, and will not view them as legitimate content for teaching and learning in the school classroom. Therefore, in the (imagined) logical-positivistic high school, they would not teach theories or arguments in the classroom that do not belong to one of these two kinds, and that deal, for example, with moral, political or religious education or metaphysics or different types of artistic-cultural education, which express contextual opinions or attitudes. It is actually in this space of other topics – that would certainly be rejected by the logical positivistic approach to education – are found all the topics that I will term “CIs.”

I will make it clear: I am not asserting that all the topics included “in the space of the other topics” are completely connected to pure value issues and that they have no place in the significant logical arguments or empirical arguments rooted in the students’ experiences or the experiences of others. In contrast, I argue (as different from Dearden, 1981) that in each one of these subjects there are *also* value or ideological judgements.

I have chosen not to discuss CIs for school classrooms, in terms of synthetic-a-posteriori content. This is not because such content is free of controversies: it is well known that physicists and biologists have had in the past, and continue to have, disagreements about different topics. However, these disagreements require that the people participating in these arguments have deep knowledge in these fields, which is not found among high school students, in order to hold a real discussion about the disagreements. Moreover, it can be assumed that, in many cases, the teachers do not possess such knowledge either. It is possible that raising CIs found among scientists in science classes in the schools may indeed prepare students to be citizens with a scientific orientation (as Owen et al. 2017, asserted). It is also possible that

disagreements among participating sides could be presented in physics classes. However, the science cases are not similar to the CIs to be discussed in the classroom: they contain “closed information” that the teacher needs to communicate to her students. This is also true of my choice to forgo discussion of the analytical-a-priori content, about which there are infrequent public disagreements, since these topics demand that the people holding different views have professional knowledge that goes beyond students’ and teachers’ abilities.

I have, so far, delineated the first space. Moreover, even though the characteristics of CIs have not yet been presented, not all the other topics, which are perceived as meaningless by people holding a logical positivist approach, are necessarily controversial. Even concerning these other and rejected topics, it is necessary to determine which ones may be, or need to be, of interest for the educator and the curriculum, and therefore it is important to raise them in class discussions, and which will not be discussed in school.

The Second Delineation

In order to clarify how to extract the CIs from the “space of other (rejected) topics” that I presented above, I propose to choose the topics that Zimmerman and Robertson (2017, p. 54) defined as “maximally controversial.” These are topics about which the disagreements are *also* mainly rational; that is, the different sides’ arguments are based mainly on insight (and *not*, for example, *only* on faith, mystics or emotions). Or as Karl Popper put it, this is.

[A]n attitude that seeks to solve as many problems as possible by an appeal to reason, i.e. to clear thought and experience, rather than by an appeal to emotions and passions. [...] an attitude of readiness to listen to critical arguments and to learn from experience [...] In short, the rationalist attitude [...] is very similar to the scientific attitude, to the belief that in the search for truth we need co-operation, and that, with the help of argument, we can attain something like objectivity (Popper, 2020[1945], p. 431).

This idea is based on the assumption that during discussion of these issues, the discussants will have good knowledge or, at the least, reasonable knowledge, concerning all aspects connected to the topic of discussion. This second delineation is, in fact, the adoption of the epistemic criterion of a controversial topic, proposed by Dearden (1981). For him, a topic is controversial and is legitimate for class discussions, when: (a) the topic is not “closed,” has not been settled once and for all, and there are at least two opposing opinions about it; (b) if these attitudes do not contradict reason; and (c) if room is given for discussion in the classroom.

Dearden used the term, “reason,” to reflect everything that is accepted in the public, during a specific time, as valid knowledge, as a criterion of truth, as a way to express appropriate criticism and as an appropriate way to verify the arguments. It is easy to see that Dearden’s epistemological criterion is context-dependent: the topic that is controversial during certain times or in certain places might not be controversial in another time or place. I will return to this issue in the last section of the essay.

At this point, it is important to remember and emphasize the criticism raised against Zimmerman and Robertson (2017), for adopting the epistemic criterion. According to this criticism, what is accepted by the public as valid knowledge, is not necessarily true, and could be influenced by fake news being spread throughout the media (Iber, 2020). Moreover, another critical point is raised here that casts doubt on having strong confidence in the epistemic

criterion of finding reason in the accepted viewpoints of the public concerning controversial questions. After all, there are current attitudes being nourished by pseudo-scientific sources in the public sphere, in general, and by some teachers, in particular, and these attitudes often collide with scientific consensus. For example, there are questions about the factuality of the climate crisis and the impact of the Covid-19 vaccination on people being vaccinated. Therefore, determining when a subject is “closed,” “scientifically decided” and no longer disputable, and when it is “open” and, thus, can be discussed in a classroom, is itself fairly “open” and not always clearly determined (McAvoy & Ho, 2020). When examining if we should place a topic in the second delineation, we need to take note of these two warnings: the veracity of the knowledge that is perceived as being valid and the certainty of the aspect of reason in the arguments.

I can set here a kind of pre-condition for the discussion of CIs in the classroom. The condition asserts that, in this particular classroom, and at this particular time, the concepts of reason and rationality are clear and understood by the students and the teachers who are discussing the controversy. Furthermore, the discussions are based on reason.

The Language of Disagreement

I would like to add a linguistic aspect to Zimmerman and Robertson’s concept of “maximally controversial” issue.

There is no need for the disagreeing sides to agree upon all the basic assumptions that are at the basis of their arguments. For example, a person can hold the basic assumption that “people are basically good at heart,” while the person that s/he is disagreeing with can think that people are inherently evil. In spite of this disagreement, and even though the arguments they raise in the discussion are based on their contradictory basic assumptions, the two can have a rational discussion, held in a language that is understandable to both of them, and they can attempt to persuade the other or explain to the other their basic assumptions. In other words, a discussion of CIs in the classroom has the characteristic that the language of disagreement is understood and accepted by the disagreeing sides.

Therefore, when people holding opposing views do not understand the language of the other, their disagreement has no place in the school classroom.

The Israeli philosopher, Yeshayahu Leibowitz, used to give an illustration of such opposing and unnegotiable views. He quoted Eleanor Roosevelt who (in 1944) envisioned “a world in which human society will daily provide a glass of milk to any child, regardless of religion, race, nationality or class.” In the same year, however, General Hideki Tojo, Japan’s ruler during World War II, believed that “the supreme value and the highest good is dying for the Emperor and for the sake of honor.” (see Hellinger, 2008, p. 266). It is clear that Mrs. Roosevelt’s and General Tojo’s opposite value-systems could not be negotiated even if she could speak fluent Japanese and his English was perfect. And indeed, it is unrealistic to expect their ethical successors to participate in an attempt to convince one another about the truth of their claims.

In this context, Richard Rorty distinguished between normal and abnormal discourse. “Normal discourse (a generalization of Kuhn’s notion of ‘normal science’) is any discourse (scientific, political, theological, or whatever) which embodies agreed-upon criteria for reaching agreement; abnormal discourse is any which lacks such criteria” (Rorty, 1979,

p. 11). So, in abnormal discourse these agreements are abandoned or do not exist and the discourse cannot become rational and critical. Therefore, the abnormal discourse cannot be regarded here as a discussion of CIs in the classroom.

I am not arguing here that settling the controversy, reaching an agreement or compromising on the matter at hand are the only desired results of an examination of CI in school. A lesson that ends with a Socratic aporia, that is to say that reaches a dead end, is not necessarily a teacher's failure but a possible natural dimension of any discussion. So, aporia is not always a negative educational outcome and it can be productive and positive (Buck & Longa, 2020). It also reflects a common outcome of real life polemics.

However, I do argue here that understanding all participants' language is a prerequisite for allowing CI to enter the classroom. As Charles Taylor (1985, p. 18) put it:

[...] we can only convince an interlocutor if at some point he shares our understanding of the language concerned. If he does not, there is no further step to take in rational argument; we can try to awaken these intuitions in him, or we can simply give up; argument will advance us no further.

Therefore, an Israeli controversial discussion on the legitimacy of Jewish settlements in the West Bank satisfies the second delineation as long as the debating parties raise and disagree about questions regarding historical rights, human rights, civil rights, historical narratives, security and terror and so on. Although in the Israeli reality such a conversation ends many times in an aporia (see for example such a conversation in Pavón-Cuéllar, et al., 2019) the participants do understand one another's arguments. The discussion exceeds the line of this second delineation when, for instance, a religious party's arguments rely on God's promises, while secular party members do not understand the meaning or the relevance of these promises for the discussion.

Questions about belief are excluded from the space of CIs, as defined above, since, to begin with, when we deal with them, we encounter problems in language. The concept, "belief," means something different for the believer than it does for the non-believer. We learned from Martin Buber (2011) that there is a need to differentiate between "belief *in*" and "belief *that*." Whoever believes *in* God, puts her/his trust in God, and sees God as being true. A person, who does not believe in God, can believe (or not believe) that the sun will shine tomorrow, that in the next elections, a certain candidate will win, that, in the future, s/he will become rich and be happy with what s/he has, and that God does not exist (or does exist). Whoever believes *in* God, speaks a different language than the person who does not believe in God and the language is even different from the language of a person who believes that *there is* a God.

The language of the former is an existential-belief language. The person, who believes in God and trusts God, speaks the language of "believing *in*." This is not an academic language that aims to establish proof in an academic-logical-rational fashion. This is not the language of a discussion of CIs. In comparison, the language of the other person is a language of contingent facts in the world. In the language spoken by the latter, there can be arguments about CIs. These are arguments, in which, for example, the stance of the person who believes that something existed, exists, or will exist, is positioned against the stance of a person who does not believe in this. Arguments, such as these, may even reach a determination concerning which side is right, and then excluding the question from the realm of CIs, at least for the discussion participants. Then, the disagreement about the question of creation – creationism or evolution – will not belong to the realm of CIs, since the creationist stance speaks

a language of belief, while the evolutionary stance speaks a scientific language. To a great extent, these two languages are incommensurable. That is, they lack a common standard for holding a joint discussion.

I will note that, in contrast to my stance, many scholars who write about the issue of CIs in education actually aver that the disagreement about creationism and evolution is a good example of a controversial topic.

Critical Examination of the Epistemic Criterion

Adoption of Dearden's epistemic criterion makes it impossible to be satisfied with the "behavioral criterion" (Hand, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 166–167), in which Dearden found his main ideational opponent. According to the behavioral criterion, we can reflect on the way people relate to a specific topic and, according to this, examine if the topic is indeed controversial or not. In other words, it is enough if a large number of people do not agree about arguments and assumptions connected to a certain topic, in order to decide that the topic should be defined as a controversial topic. This criterion is unsatisfactory, however, since disagreement can arise concerning what needs to be the number of people, who disagree about the arguments and assumptions, that will be considered "a large (enough) number," in order to determine if the topic is controversial and appropriate for raising in class discussions.

A wide disagreement among students is not enough to warrant raising a topic for class discussion. After all, it is possible that the students, like adults, will not agree on things about which they have no idea. They might fight about the topic, out of ignorance, continuing to hold on to unfounded attitudes, even in an unbending manner, and make arguments that do not follow one another, or are erroneous, in terms of the facts. They may also raise explanations, in their attempts to advance personal interests.

Some people assert that the epistemic criterion is too narrow and is unsatisfactory when the disagreement is a moral one. Even if, according to the first delineation, a moral disagreement is found in "the space of other topics," and, therefore, is a candidate for being included in CIs, according to the epistemic criterion, it needs to be excluded, since it is not necessarily based on reason. According to those who ask to expand the epistemic criterion, it is not enough to accept rational, conscious arguments in class discussions that deal with determining ethical and moral decisions. In these cases, those, who believe in expansion, aver that we require a wider and more pluralistic relational framework – a framework that has room, for example, for "community ethics" that find ethical importance in the prosperity of the community of "us." These ethics are positioned against liberal ethics that, first of all, emphasizes individuals' interests and advocates for non-involvement in another's business. At the center of "community ethics," we may find belief or God's commands, and it might even leave room for intuition (Bezalel, 2020). Therefore, we need to decide if we wish to expand the epistemic criterion and to include moral issues that deal with "community ethics" in the realm of CIs.

The criticism that I raised above, about the epistemic criterion being context-dependent, remains relevant, perhaps even more so, when considering "community ethics." This is because a certain community's ethics may differ from another community's ethics. In particular, in the same classroom, we may find a number of different ethical cultures, and they

may even be opposed to one another. The ethical disagreement between different ethical communities is a situation in which the participants share their views without actually listening or acknowledging one another. As a result, topics of disagreements of this kind are not suitable for being included in CIs.

This criticism, concerning dependence due to the context of the community, is also relevant for “ethics of holiness” – that is, ethics whose source is religious and that may be at the center of the disagreeing sides’ arguments. Ethics of this sort may undergo change, depending on the character of the belief among members of a specific group and in a specific place. There may be students who hold different ethical beliefs concerning holiness in the same class, and other students, whose sense of ethics has no religious shade. Therefore, there is no place, in what has been termed here as CIs, for a discussion about views on holiness.

The criticism is also relevant for those who wish to extend the epistemic criterion to make it possible to hold class discussions about CIs when the sides’ arguments are based on intuition: in other words, the criticism is aimed toward people who wish to allow discussions that also use intuition as a legitimate means for such discussions. And, indeed:

Intuition is a stance that is a product of the internalization of cultural values, due to a socialization process that the person, who has the intuition, underwent in her/his culture. The thing, therefore, that makes intuitive coping with the questions unique is that the answers are not a product of conscious thought and of conscious use of thought for addressing the questions, but rather a product of cultural-historical processes (Moutner, 2000, p. 29).

As a result, intuition can also change, for example, according to community, belief, gender and culture of the person, due to the state of affairs in a society during a certain time, or due to personal life experiences of anyone who discusses a controversial moral issue.

There is another line of possible criticism that initially was directed toward deliberative democracy and seeks to extend the epistemic criterion and my second delineation.

It includes a feminist critique of the unequal possibilities open for the different feminine voice to be heard in the discussion (Gilligan, 2011; Haraway, 1988).

Another critique in this line points to the disadvantage of members of marginalized groups who lack deliberative competency and deliberative reasoning standards:

Some critics [...] suggest that deliberative competency, along with the style and standards of deliberative reasoning, further disadvantages already disadvantaged citizens. These critics appear to assume that the educational disadvantages suffered by members of marginalized groups have diminished their capacity for deliberation, both as participants and as spectators (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004, pp. 49–50).

Multiculturalists follow this line and argue that the discussion might, itself, be discriminatory in itself, since language and communication cannot be neutral (Sant, 2019). In the same vein Chantal Mouff has an agonistic critique toward the emphasizing of reason and the deemphasizing emotions in a democratic deliberation theory, as proposed by Rawls, Gutmann or Habermas (Ruitenberg, 2009). Other critics demand leaving room in a rational discourse for rhetoric, narratives, emotions, and for the self-interests of the participants (Allen, 2004; Mansbridge et al., 2010).

A possible response to the above-noted claim that the epistemic criterion biases marginalized groups can be extracted from Gutmann and Thompson’s answer to the critics of deliberative democracy:

The lack of political success of marginalized groups does not stem from a lack of deliberative competency, but rather from a lack of power [...] deliberation can diminish the dis-

criminary effects of class, race, and gender inequalities that rightly trouble critics (2004, p. 50).

A participant in a rational discourse that follows the requirements of this second delineation should know that she cannot use coercion or manipulation and should not exclude any people involved or suppress relevant opinions (Habermas, 2018).

The description of this second delineation emphasizes that it is “mainly rational”. Mainly and not exclusively rational because rational discourse rarely occurs in its pure form and it is used here as a regulative ideal, similar to Habermas’ “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 2018). As such, this “mainly rational” discourse can contain a certain amount of rhetoric, emotions, and self-interests, or in Habermas’ words:

Narratives have an intelligible propositional content, as do the passions and desires to which they give expression [...] Even moral discourse must start from the interests of the individual parties to the conflict before one can ask from the perspective of justice what is in the equal interest of all affected (Habermas, 2018, p. 878).

Habermas was not the first to admit it, and there is a long history of recognizing the “legitimacy of modes of persuasion in politics that combine reason and passion” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 51).

However, the “rational discourse” that fits the second delineation should be led by reason and it cannot be exclusively directed by self-interests of the participants, or by certain narratives, emotions or rhetoric. I argue that an attempt to disqualify the epistemic criterion or my rational second delineation is an attempt to throw the baby out with the bathwater, since the alternative to a rational discussion, as Gutmann and Thompson put it, is appealing to (political) power. So, this second delineation agrees with them that “we should value reaching conclusions through reason rather than force, and more specifically through moral reasoning rather than through selfinterested bargaining” (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 80).

Based on these criticisms and the responses to them, I will summarize and aver that, according to the second delineation of the character of CIs suitable for classroom discussions, there is a need for a shared, rational basis that can logically explain the main points of the different stances that led to the disagreement. This is because engaging in a class discussion about a controversial topic, which is derived from different perspectives concerning community ethics, the ethics of holiness or intuition, will most likely lead to a conversation between people who speak different ethical and intuitional languages, and even oppose one another. We will have a difficult time holding a rational discussion about a controversial topic if, in my community, a certain action is considered ethical and, in your community, is considered unacceptable, if my community runs according to Hassidic ethics and your secular-liberal community leaves no room whatsoever for anything religious, if in your community, intuition is a decisive factor when there is a disagreement, and in my community, intuition is considered to be unscientific and, as a result, is not to be used in order to validate an argument. In contrast, the second delineation requires that the basis for relating to a discussion of a controversial topic is mainly rational; however, this does not mean that the arguments of the sides will claim to be essentialist and universal.

I propose holding discussions of CIs in which public discussion can lead to decisions that are actually valid, taking into consideration the specific time, place and context, in which the decisions are made. This kind of public discussion has the potential to be deliberative and meet the conditions of the epistemic criterion. When it is held in an optimal manner, the discussion participants are attentive to the others’ arguments, and examine and check their

different arguments, based on relevant data, presented in the discussion. The participants do not perceive themselves as obligated to adhere to a guiding line of any particular political party or a closed attitude that was decided upon ahead of time. As a result, they are willing to change their first attitudes if they can be persuaded by the other's counter arguments.

The Third Delineation

The first two delineations create a space of disagreements, in which the arguments are neither analytical-a-priori nor synthetic-a-posteriori. Furthermore, they fit the epistemic criterion. That is, they do not negate reason. The third delineation continues to narrow the range of possibilities of CIs, and proposes to include in this realm only those topics that are currently important to the general public, and about which there is not very wide consensus. Hess and McAvoy (2015, pp. 168–169) call this delineation, “politically authentic.” Zimmerman and Robertson (2017, p. 49) call it “matters of public concern”, borrowing this expression from Eduard Thorndike (although they connect it to the “maximally controversial” issue discussed above in the second delineation while I have chosen to attribute it here to a separate third delineation).

The topics in this third circle are also (mainly) important outside of the classroom. These are very concrete and practical topics that are found in social reality: they are not abstract topics, about which the discussion is theoretical. Therefore, the disagreement can deal with a topic from recent history (in Israel, for example, we can ask: Did the disengagement from the Gaza Strip, in 2005, improve Israel's security situation?); with a constitutional-principled topic (in Israel, for example, it can be asked: Is the constitutional-judicial idea that “everything can be judged” a fitting idea?); with a political-current events topic that has yet to be decided (for example: Should the State of Israel implement sovereignty over the territories of Judea and Samaria?); or with an ethical-personal topic (for example: Should I once again vote in the elections that are frequently re-held?) (For categorization of this kind of disagreements, see Ho et al., 2017.)

We can concisely describe the disagreements over these topics as disagreements over the answer to the social-concrete-existential question: How should we live together? (Hess & McAvoy, 2015). I will emphasize and distinguish here between a deliberative *discussion* of a controversial topic that has importance for the general public and *preparatory training* for a discussion of non-consensual questions.

One of the reasons that scholars give, who justify teaching CIs in the classroom, is that it is very important to train students to engage in a civic, practical, democratic, direct and attentive argument (see, for example, Noddings & Brooks, 2017). It is easy to agree about the pedagogical importance of acquiring the ability to engage in argumentation, as an ongoing social progress, in an enlightened society, in general, and in a liberal-democratic society, in particular. This is a process in which the different sides present their arguments in a dialogical conversation and try to persuade one another of their arguments' validity (Schwarz & Baker, 2017). On the one hand, learning how to make an argument in class discussion, under the guidance of a teacher, can provide students with the real possibility of having the opportunity to express themselves and their opinions. On the other hand, it can encourage students to try and understand the other (Kuhn et al., 2016). In this way, this kind of learning

has educational value, due to its contribution both to students' personal development and to the construction of an infrastructure for civic, democratic and cultured discourse.

Another way to teach argumentation, based on the desire that the students will become rational citizens, who are active and engage in discussion in a democratic country, is through use of philosophical inquiry with children. This nurtures children so that they will be able to engage in Socratic questioning on topics of public importance. "Typically, some philosophical texts will provide a jumping-off point—and the dialogues of Plato are second to none for their capacity to inspire searching, active thinking, with the life and example of Socrates up front to inspire" (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 55).

However, even though I acknowledge the importance of practicing argumentation and the acquisition of the ability to enter into discussion and philosophizing with students, not every controversial topic is suited for this practice, and not all content, which is suited for this practice, falls within the realm of CIs. Moreover, learning the techniques of discussion and teaching philosophy with children, despite their clear contributions to the educational act and to the personal development of the students, is neither directly connected nor necessary for the main objective of this essay – the discussion of CIs that have political authenticity.

CIs, according to my understanding, do not possess any materials for preparation for learning morals. They are different than subjects taught in schools that work as just communities, in the spirit of Kohlberg – communities in which the students (and their teachers,

Table 1 The Three Stages of Delineation and their Educational Implications

The delineation	What is included in the delineation?	What is not included?
The first delineation	Subjects that involve value and ideological judgements; topics that deal with morals, politics and society, religion, metaphysics and art; "open" information.	Algebraic and geometric sentences; scientific empirical knowledge, such as laws and theories from physics, chemistry, biology or geography; "closed" information, for example, when the historical facts are clear and indisputable.
The second (and important) delineation, based mainly on Dearden (1981), Zimmerman & Robertson (2017).	maximally controversial issues; there are at least two different stable, founded stances, based on reason; the stances and basic assumptions are reflected in a language understood by all discussion participants.	Belief, mystic or emotional topics; CIs that reflect attitudes based in different languages, for example, the disagreement about the origin of human beings – between those who believe in science and evolution and those who hold religious beliefs and believe in creationism.
The third delineation, based on Hess & McAvoy (2015).	Topics that have current public importance that are clearly divisive, mainly outside of the schools; topics that have practical and concrete relevance.	Topics that are either irrelevant or not current that serve as tools for practice for students in discussions of CIs; theoretical discussions about morality; internal school issues that are controversial for people connected to the school.

staff members and parents) gather together on a permanent basis in order to discuss, in a deep and thorough manner, topics that are relevant for school life, and make decisions in a democratic fashion. Teachers, who hold such discussions, which focus on ethical, internal school matters, which do not need to be agreed upon by the school community (and are not general topics, which divide the public, outside of the school), prefer structure over content, from a pedagogical aspect. In other words, in the classroom, they emphasize the structure of the discussion of topics about which there is not consensus, instead of the content of the topics. For example, they stress the importance of having a theoretical discussion about rights and obligations instead of concrete action, which, usually, is a result of coming to a decision, when dealing with a controversial topic (Osera et al., 2008).

CIs also differ from questions and topics that are prosaic, internal, and frequent, which arise in the everyday life of public educational institutions, and about which people connected to the school might disagree (such as, questions concerning the school style; for example, the bell that announces recess or the picture that appears on the yearbook). While discussions about these questions and topics can be held in the classroom, for example, as a good way for reaching decisions, as exercises in how to make democratic decisions, or as preparation for having a discussion about a controversial topic, they are not CIs, as they have presented in this essay, since they do not have wide public significance outside of the school walls.

The following table summarizes the three stages of delineation that can lead to determination concerning CIs that are worthy of discussions in school classrooms, and evaluates their educational implications.

Below, I will assert that it is not enough to relate to delineations on the general and universal level. The study of CIs in education demands special attention, especially concerning the contexts in which they arise – an issue that has not been addressed enough in the professional literature.

The Context: The Time and the Place in Which CIs may Arise in the Classrooms

Based on the delineations presented above, CIs deal with questions of public importance that connect to value, political, and social issues, in which the stances of the different sides are mainly based in reason and valid knowledge. As I will show below, the values, social and political perceptions, the valid knowledge, as well as the public importance of the CIs, are dependent upon time and place.

The meta-values of society, as well as the educational ideology that guides society and the social groups' values, which comprise it, may change over the years, at least partially. This is because new empirical data are constantly being added to knowledge, and, afterwards, society's values, needs and aspirations also change. As a result, it is clear that CIs that concern society, its ideology and its values, are dependent on history. In other words, they alternate and change with the time, the place and with the overall context.

In Israel, the ideology changes and with it the topics that are controversial and of public importance. The rational arguments and explanations that the sides raise also change. For example, when Naftali Bennett replaced Rabbi Shai Piron as the Minister of Education, he decided that the educational program that his predecessor wanted to promote – “The

Other is Me” – was to be cancelled and with it the intention of having the students become acquainted with the cultures of other groups and nationalities. Instead of this program, the new minister wanted to promote the deepening of the identity of each cultural group (Dahan, 2018). Among those who disagreed with the universal and humanistic ideology that the former minister, Piron, wanted to promote, were those who argued that education with the values he emphasized are mainly slogans that do not really have influence outside of the schools’ walls. Furthermore, they saw this program as blocking the creation of any real connection to CIs (see, for example, Avinun, 2018). When Bennett became the minister, an argument was raised against the ideology that he promoted – that is, deepening the unique identity of each group. The argument was that while there was a real need to educate for deeper identity, the plan was to do so in a way that would actually empower the self-identity of the weak populations in society and not the strong sectors (Avisar, 2019).

Controversies that are Not Educational Topics

Changes in the modes of the disagreement, caused by time, are also found in topics that have been at the center of public, political disagreements, which deviate from the world of education, even if they reach the classrooms. Among the current CIs in Israel are the disagreements that have unique political and social characteristics (for example, disagreements concerning the way the State of Israel should treat its neighbors to the south and the north, or inward, for example – to its Arab and Charedi (ultra-religious) citizens, or to members of its gay community). In contrast, it has been found that other CIs that concerned and inflamed Israeli public opinion in the middle of the twentieth century (for example, the disagreement about the dismantling of the underground after the establishment of the IDF, or the disagreement about accepting reparations from Germany, as compensation for Nazi crimes during the Second World War).

Time is not the only important variable relevant for the image and importance of CIs in educational activities; place also has a decisive impact on their degree of relevance. Today, there are CIs that are clearly Israeli and that are of special interest in Israeli public schools (even though they may be of public interest in other countries, as well). For example, the question of religious conversion in Israel is one such topic – a topic that has been controversial, from both religious and political aspects, since the early days of statehood (Fisher, 2013). The significance of the “Basic Law: Israel: The Nation-State of the Jewish People,” about the Arab minority (Waxman & Peleg, 2020) and the appropriate treatment of the Israeli settlements in the Judea and Samaria territories are two other examples (Lustick, 2018).

The centrality of the exact place in the world, concerning discussions of CIs in classrooms, is derived from the differences that exist in the educational (and social-political) state of affairs between countries and between the groups within them. Indeed, the Israeli educational system has unique characteristics that influence discussion of CIs in the classroom. For example, as a rule, there are different, separate educational systems for different cultural groups in Israeli society. This separation divides the education system into sub-systems: Jewish public schools, Arab public schools, religious public schools and Charedi schools. These educational sub-systems are further divided into cultural-belief-ideological

schools and there is not necessarily agreement within each sub-system concerning questions and issues that are disputed in the wider public.

It is important to emphasize that the strength of the divisions that threatens the feasibility of teaching CIs in Israeli schools does not only teach us about the difficult disagreements found *between* the groups and cultures in the multi-cultural society (about disagreements of this sort in Israeli education, see Agbaria, 2018 and Gross, 2015, for example), but rather it testifies to the disagreements *within* each cultural group (for example, see Elgad-Klonsky & Tamir, 2019, about the disagreements within the religious public educational stream).

It is interesting to clarify, remember and understand that the Israeli institutions of higher education present a different picture: for the most part, in this system, students from different cultures study together. It appears as if this multi-culturalism on the campuses is what usually leads to the fact that the CIs, which have the potential to be politically explosive, are excluded from the discourse in the joint classes, due to both the lecturers' and the students' initiatives (Golan & Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2017). Of course, this difference, between the schools and the colleges and universities, has important pedagogical implications, especially when training future teachers to use controversial issue in the classrooms when they become teachers and when they themselves are trained in an environment that is free of discussion of CIs.

While I presented examples of unique CIs in the Israeli case, there are, of course, CIs, which are not only relevant for discussion in Israeli schools, but also in schools in other countries. Hess and McAvoy (2015) discussed CIs in American schools that are also well-known in Israel (for example, the issue of using torture during security investigations or the question of legitimacy of same-sex marriages). However, even the difficulties that Hess and McAvoy have in determining if these examples fit the definition of legitimate CIs to be discussed in American classrooms, as well as possible arguments that they raise about the CIs, are derived from their intimate acquaintance with the American social context. This is a society that is characterized, for example, by a rift between a traditional perception (in 'Republican' states and regions) and liberal perceptions (in 'Democratic' states and regions). Similarly, when students in Israel participate in discussions of CIs, they raise arguments that have clear, local characteristics.

Local Context: Ideological-Social-Cultural-Belief

Of course, teachers cannot relate to all CIs, which exist in the public discourse, in their lessons. Therefore, teachers need to decide what to discuss. The decisions that they make concerning the topics, which will not be raised, are also dependent upon their ideological perspectives of these topics (Libresco, 2018). Moreover, not every controversial issue is suitable for a class discussion, since the mere marking of a certain subject as controversial, depends on ideology. If a teacher raises certain CIs, there will be students who will say that the mere raising of the topic is indoctrination, while others will say that if the teacher decides not to raise a certain topic, this will be indoctrination. For example, in the American reality, the right of same-sex couples to get married might be a controversial topic in a Republican community, while in a Democratic community, there is no question at all about this right, since members of this community see the right to marry as being basic and a given human right. Therefore, no justification is needed for it (Hess & McAvoy, 2015, pp. 158–160).

Questions, which are controversial for only one, specific social group can also be found in the Israeli context. The former president, Reuven Rivlin, in his very influential speech, “The Four Tribes,” that he gave at the Herzilya Conference in 2015, asked:

Are we, the members of the Zionist population, able to accept the fact that two significant groups, a half of the future population of Israel, do not define themselves as Zionists? They do not watch the torchlighting ceremony on Mount Herzl on Independence Day. They do not sing the national anthem with eyes glistening. Are we willing to give up military service, as an entry ticket into Israeli society and economy, and settle for civilian or community service? (Rivlin, 2015).

Each one of the tribes, related to by the former president, has CIs that are not controversial in the other three tribes. For example, there is no doubt that the president’s question concerning military service is not a controversial topic in the Charedi population, since Charedim completely denounce coercing military, civilian or community service. In contrast, the secular Jewish population and the national-religious population are divided on the issue if the Charedim should be forced into such service and help carry the burden in an equal manner (Hostovsky-Brandes, 2018). Moreover, in Israel reality, bringing CIs into the classrooms of Charedi students (who comprised approximately 20% of the students in the first grade in the 2017–2018 school year, according to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, 2016), is an unrealistic matter since Charedim do not accept any of the ideas of democracy (Brown, 2012). As a rule, the Charedim, even though they are diverse and include many variations, heed the instructions of the rabbis, whom they consider to be their leaders: the public acknowledges them, seeing these rabbis as expressing rabbinic authority concerning what is the truth and the appropriate way to live life, whether it be questions of Jewish law, or public and private questions of everyday life (Zicherman, 2014).

The question of civil or community service in Arab society is a controversial topic in the Israeli public. While the Jewish-Israeli public is divided over the question if there is a need to demand from the Arab population to serve in the military, or to undertake alternative civil service, as an expression or proof of their loyalty and obligation to the state (Hostovsky-Brandes, 2018), the Arab public is divided over a different question: is civil service, and even community service, actually a kind of security service in disguise (Hilou & Haim, 2014)?

Indeed, many scholars, who have written about teaching CIs, began from the assumption that they are interested in schools that stress the values of a liberal-democratic society (for example, Hand, 2008). However, it is not only that more and more countries see themselves as illiberal democracies (Muller, 2015), but rather that in Israel, that sees itself as a democratic-liberal country, large groups do not see themselves as holding a liberal ideology. One can assume that a school that is committed to free and open liberal-democratic values will have enough self-confidence to invite outside speakers to express unpopular views in a CI discussion. This will probably not happen in illiberal ideological community schools in Israel.

The Local-Personal-Unique Context

The local context that characterizes the classroom and prevents discussion of some CIs, and allows others, also connects to the specific composition of the class, to the character of the

students and to the cognitive spirit found in the class at a specific time. This is the local-personal-unique connection that may narrow the space of the CIs that are open for discussion of the teachers and her class.

Forrest (2009) proposed the concept, “sensitive controversy,” to describe a topic that is controversial and that has an acute impact on a specific student, due to her/his personal, emotional involvement, because of an experience the student had. As a result, the students might relate to the controversy in a deep manner. The teacher, thus, needs to determine if it is appropriate to have the discussion in the classroom, when the topic is a “sensitive controversy,” which may unleash traumatic experiences and emotions on the part of some of the students.

For example, a discussion about the legitimacy of abortions is a “sensitive controversy,” especially if there is a girl in class, who was pregnant or had an abortion (see Bloch, 2017). Another example of “sensitive controversy” is a discussion of the controversial topic of expulsion of asylum seekers, in the Bialik Rogozin School in Tel Aviv, in which there are many children who are asylum seekers or children of asylum seekers (for example, see Vardi, 2019).

Summary

In the above, I provided an outline of CIs that can be discussed in the classroom. At their core, the outlines are universal and relevant for all classrooms in all schools, throughout the western world. Furthermore, I also proposed narrower outlines, since there is a need to narrow the scope of the universal lines, according to time and place, in which the educational activity occurs. In other words, there is a need to temper and taper the kinds of possible CIs to be discussed, dependent upon the context, in which they are raised. The context of a given country, the social context of the group, to which the teachers and students belong, the context of the education system, in which discussions of CIs are to be held, and the context of the specific school – the teacher, the class, and the students – are all important. After the outline of the overall character and borders was drawn, it becomes possible to discuss how the ideas presented in this essay can contribute to opening up discussion of CIs in Israeli schools, make them relevant for the current Israeli reality, and tie them to practical actions.

Based on the delineation and characterization proposed here, it is possible to update the CEO’s Communication, and to gradually clarify and define the objectives for bringing discussions of CIs into the classroom. After the update, the educators will have a much clearer idea what is the educational framework that is appropriate for such discussions, when they are required to hold such discussions. On the bases of the delineation and characterization, it will be possible to research, develop and propose practical, concrete programs and ways for optimal teaching of CIs that will help educators achieve these objectives. Later on, the formal frameworks of the teacher training programs, in the universities and the colleges, will be able to develop and put into practice preparations for future educators to teach CIs in the schools.

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