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Abstract

In the years between 1991 and the present, Gerald Bracey and other so-called “contrarians” have called into question the dominant view of schooling in the United States. According to the contrarians, many widely held myths about public education are false, including the view that schooling and the economy are closely related and the notion that the schools are failing. The contrarians provide an exemplary case of public moral argument, one that draws attention to many salient issues in argument criticism: the role of experts in public discourse, the status of facts in public debates, the relative values of consensus and dissensus, and shifting communication practices within the public sphere.

The National Education Reform Debate and the Rhetoric of the Contrarians

So many people have said so often that the schools are bad that it is no longer a debatable proposition subject to empirical proof. It has become an assumption. But it is an assumption that turns out to be false. The evidence overwhelmingly shows that *American schools have never achieved more than they currently achieve*. And some indicators show them performing better than ever. (Bracey, 1991, p. 106)

That most people would read these last two sentences with intense skepticism grants Gerald Bracey’s rhetoric a degree of critical interest. While substantial extant does suggest that Bracey may be right (Sandia National Laboratories, 1993), the claim that American schools are doing just fine merits attention because it contravenes what everyone believes to be certainly true. Since 1991, Bracey has made some version of the *schools-are-doing-fine* argument repeatedly, both in his annual *Phi Delta Kappan* reports, and in his other articles and books. Along with the other so-called “contrarians,” Bracey has attempted a remarkable rhetorical feat by calling into question the dominant view of schooling in the

United States.

Bracey and the contrarians provide an exemplary case of public moral argument, one that draws attention to many salient issues in argument criticism: the role of experts in public discourse, the status of facts in public policy, and shifting communication practices within the public sphere. Drawing upon the “spheres of argument” literature as well as Boothian ethical criticism, this paper explores these themes and develops the premise that meaningful expert contributions to public moral argument can be hindered by an inappropriate confounding of expert and human moral virtue. The “spheres of argument” approach is exemplified in the argumentation field by Thomas Goodnight’s (1982) article, “The Personal, Technical, and Public Spheres of Argument: A Speculative Inquiry into the Art of Public Deliberation.” Drawing on Habermas, Goodnight’s article sets the tone for a variety of later scholarly criticism (Farrell & Goodnight, 1981; Doxtader, 1995; Fabj & Sobnosky, 1995; Fraser, 1989; Olson & Goodnight, 1994; Fisher, 1994; Schiappa, 1989; Sommerville, 1989; Toker, 2002). Wayne Booth’s critical approach is ethical and descriptive in nature. Known as a reader response critic, Booth has been influential in rhetoric since the 1960’s. His (1988) book, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, provides an approach to ethical criticism that complements the spheres of argument approach by directing critical invention toward descriptive and experiential topics that serve to flesh out judgments grounded in more traditional analyses of public argument.

This paper first explores the emergence of the contrarians in recent history, identifying the main issues at stake in the controversy surrounding them. Next, it traces the most prominent subject of contrarian discourse – standardized testing and the evaluation of school performance – in order to describe how the contrarians hinder the potential quality of public moral argument by too narrowly focusing their rhetorical efforts within the technical sphere and failing to engage the broader moral issues surrounding the controversy. Based on this starting premise, the paper provides a more extended discussion of the annual Bracey Reports in order to explore the possibility of a more meaningful rhetorical practice. It finds trace signs of such a potential, but also identifies a systematic myopia in Bracey’s rhetoric that hinders his ability to transcend the constrained virtues of his expertise.

1. The Emergence of the Contrarians

If any one event can be said to have facilitated the emergence of the contrarians,

it was the production of the Sandia National Laboratories report, "Perspectives on Education in America," in 1991. The Sandia Report provoked a great deal of response and controversy by contradicting the commonplace wisdom that the schools were failing miserably. Such contradictory evidence was not welcome news to the Bush administration, which sponsored the research (Jensen, 1994; Tanner, 1993). Indeed, Bush's America 2000 was a national-standards based reform campaign, which heavily relied on the assumption that the schools were generally failing.

The Sandia researchers reported that the schools were doing better than commonly believed, and that many prevalent reform ideas were incompatible with one another. They observed that national standards are incompatible with local empowerment programs, making national standards appear ridiculous in view of the highly decentralized school districting system. Furthermore, they shed doubt on the prevailing belief that there is a meaningful connection between a nation's schools and the condition of its economy. For those with vested interests in harming public education, the Sandia Report was a significant setback. According to Carl Jensen (1994), "the Sandia Report is so threatening to the anti-public-school-lobby that those supporting school choice initiatives still refuse to acknowledge its existence" (p. 57). The Sandia Report might have remained unpublished forever if not for photocopiers. Predictably, it began to serve as an icon around which school defenders could rally.

One account of the contrarians' story starts with Bracey hearing a lecture by David Berliner in 1991 at an American Psychological Association symposium. Bracey advised Berliner to acquire the Sandia Report and, according to David Ruenzel (1995), it "was an auspicious meeting, for these two men would eventually try to do for a nascent revisionist movement what conservative duo Ravitch and Finn had done for the schools-need-radical-repair movement: make so much noise that people would have to pay attention" (p. 30). Two years later, Berliner teamed up with Bruce Biddle to produce *A Manufactured Crisis: Myth, Fraud and the Attack on America's Public Schools*. Five years later, the American Association of *School Administrators* publicly christened the contrarians by publishing a special issue of *The School Administrator* entitled, "The Contrarians: The Leading Defenders of America's Public Schools" (May 1996). During every year since 1990, the contrarians have published articles and books attempting to combat the abuse of schools by opportunistic politicians and the media.

It is important to establish the issue-context within which the contrarians emerged. The most familiar question in education reform discussions of the past two decades has been whether education should be privatized. This question has resulted from a widespread feeling, since the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*, that American schools are not performing adequately, especially in terms of preparing students for contributing to America's international competitiveness. Various choice programs have been advocated, including the giving of tuition vouchers to parents so that they may send their children to any school they choose. According the advocates of choice, if the schools are not up to the job, the incentives of competition naturally will generate higher quality outcomes (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Giving parents the choice of where to send their children to school relates to another important educational question: What is the proper locus of control for education? Letting parents decide is one method. In another development, the federal and state governments have become more involved in education debates by setting standards, providing incentives, and engaging in general advocacy. *A Nation at Risk* was one attempt of the federal government to influence the shape of educational discourse and a host of other commissioned reports have appeared since its 1983 publication. George Bush's America 2000 campaign, Clinton's Goals 2000 program, and George W. Bush's plan to require annual testing of students and minimum proficiency standards are three of the more recent federal efforts. Such programs have significant influence in terms of funding, publicity, and status.

Related to this issue of governance are a variety of other locus-of-control issues. For example, electronic networking has lessened the importance of place to schooling. Distance learning can provide education to more people in geographically larger areas. Home schooling has a whole new meaning given the emergence of electronic networks. Educational debates, therefore, are no longer about a relatively straightforward constellation of terms: schools, students, classrooms, teachers, neighborhoods, curricula, and local property taxes. Rather, the decrease in the importance of place has led to an increasing emphasis on access, which frequently comes down to a question of resources. This question of resources is perhaps the most important educational issue, in spite of how it is handled in the public discourse. Curiously, since the 1966 Coleman Report, it has been a matter of controversy whether education has anything to do with money (Mosle, 1996, p. 31). It has been open to scholarly and public debate whether

money is positively related to educational outcomes, whether we spend enough or too much on the schools, and whether money is being wasted on various components of the educational system. The status of educators has been open to similar differences of opinion.

How substantial a role these issues play in public controversies over schooling depends significantly on political exigencies, and it is difficult to sort out the technical from the political questions surrounding education reform issues. Thus, like many other public concerns education reform is markedly complex. Yet, predictably, the expertise John Dewey (1988) argues is necessary to handle complexity is highly fragmented and politicized in this context. It is important to examine this relationship between the technical and public spheres within education reform rhetoric because the learning processes institutionalized by educational systems are established early in people's lives. As Benjamin Barber (1993) argues, "the 'public' in public schools means not just paid for by the public but procreative of the very idea of a public" (p. 44).

2. The Contrarians' Assault On Standardized Testing

Using multiple strategies concerning a variety of different uses of testing, the contrarians endeavor to establish what appears to be a "knock down" argument that standardized test scores are meaningless and are misused by both government figures and the media. This position's enactment in contrarian writing suffers from too narrow a focus on statistically grounded arguments. My point here is not to declare total rhetorical failure, however, but rather to develop support for the argument that the contrarians confound expert and human virtues. While a technical grounding is one defining characteristic of the contrarian ethos, other elements of a viable rhetoric can be excluded from public view if such practices persistently push such elements aside.

School performance evaluation is a moral issue in several respects. The act of evaluation, like the act of criticism, implies a moral responsibility to evaluate with reference to just and fair standards. Pronouncing judgment upon schools entails a privileged position, and there is a high degree of trustworthiness assumed. Experts are not expected to pronounce unreliable or un-provable truths about schools. Moreover, the school performance issue becomes a matter of ethics to the extent that accusations are made regarding the misuse or abuse of statistical data. Such charges are very serious considering the potential impact on professional careers. Most importantly, evaluation is highly consequential for

teachers, students, and other parties invested in public education. Iris Rotberg (1996) summarizes the situation well:

In recent years, our expectations about what we can learn from testing students have become increasingly unrealistic... Scores on standardized tests are blamed for perceived failures in our economy and in international competition. They drive the debate on school reform. (p. 30)

Performance assessment thus entails moral as well as technical issues. The extent to which these and related concerns are forgotten in the deluge of data and the intricacies of statistical reasoning is the extent to which statistical argument can lead experts to appear disconnected and unpersuasive. The contrarians betray a palpable vulnerability to this problem, often failing to attend carefully enough to developing the underlying issues since their main business is the variegated workings of statistical reasoning. This difference in viewpoint affects contrarian public argument firstly as a pronounced unfamiliarity (Fisher, 1994). In other words, the company offered to laypersons by the contrarians tends to be the company of strangers[i].

Bracey, for example, is especially prone to focus on statistical reasoning topics. For example, he repeatedly reminds his audience that statistical significance is not the same as actual significance (1993; 1994b; 1995b). Since tests of statistical significance were designed for small sample sizes, and many studies of educational achievement use very large sample sizes, even the smallest of differences will be statistically significant. He is also concerned with the misuse of central tendency measures. In the fourth Bracey Report, he asks, "Where can one place a standard that is credible as a 'high' standard without failing a large proportion of students?" (1994b, "New Data" section, para. 8). Harold Howe provides the provocative analogy that requiring all fourth graders to read at the "standardized" fourth grade level is like "requiring all the football teams in the country to win more than half their games" (1993, p. 19).

Another complaint of the contrarians is the confounding of disaggregated data with aggregated data (Jaeger & Hattie, 1996; Jaeger, 1994). As both Bracey and Richard Jaeger have observed, for example, the supposed decline in average SAT scores from the 1970s to the 1990s is an instance of Simpson's Paradox (Bracey, 1994a, p. 11; Jaeger, 1994, p. 28). While the overall average SAT score declined slightly, the means for each ethnic subgroup increased. The overall average can decline in spite of increases in every subgroup, because of changes in relative proportions of representation among different subgroups. As more people take

the SAT, it is remarkable that overall scores remain steady at all. The test was originally given to a group of wealthy, white, college-bound, mostly male students, and has served an increasingly large and diverse group of students since (Bracey, 1991; Berliner & Biddle, 1995, pp. 22-23).

According to the contrarians, standardized test scores get complicated in other ways as well. Careless population comparisons often allow convenient but erroneous conclusions to be drawn from data. For example, the money-doesn't-matter argument has been grounded in the claim that states with the lowest per pupil expenditures have the highest SAT scores. Such arguments mistakenly use per-pupil expenditures as the independent variable while using SAT scores as the dependent variable, but overlook significant differences in SAT-taking population sizes from various states. In attacking one such argument, Bracey (1994b) points out that, "What neither Will nor Bennett bothered to point out, of course, is that in the high-scoring states virtually no one takes the SAT" ("New Data" section, para. 25).

The examples discussed so far illustrate the technical proclivity of the contrarian vocabulary. What remains to be developed is an account of how this technical emphasis might be construed as inappropriate to the contrarians' role in public argument. My claim is that the contrarians play into a vulnerable position by perpetuating an impoverished discourse about schooling. If constricted measurements and an unsophisticated conceptual apparatus gut the meaning of "school", there will be little motive for defending it (Rose, 1995). Jaeger (1994) offers the following sweeping indictment of statistical misuse, which serves to illustrate how easily the meaning of school can become impoverished:

To credit or blame the schools alone for the achievement of the young is to promote the absurdity that schools are solely responsible for the education of youth... Schools do not determine the community and family characteristics that define their constituencies, the expectations that arise in those communities, the resources provided by the communities they serve, nor the capabilities, motivations, handicaps, language facilities, or support systems brought by the students they are to educate. Only if these factors were uniformly distributed throughout the industrialized world, would it be reasonable to attribute differences in educational outcomes to the success or failure of U.S. public schools. (p. 31)

While the underlying issues remain statistical, Jaeger plainly appeals to fairness and practical reason. Unfortunately, such exceptions are unusual, and one should

not read Jaeger too generously here. His claim remains a straightforward appeal to fairness, and his framing of the argument constrains the moral import of education in profound ways. If one holds the position that education creates and sustains a culture (Dewey, 1932), then the assertion that schools are helpless in determining the factors that influence them from the outside rings false. Only in a sharply circumscribed statistical world where characteristics, expectations, and factors are defined numerically would it make sense to draw boundaries the way Jaeger does in the above quotation. This sort of practice can create a rhetorical vulnerability to the extent that the “school bashers” decide the numbers are irrelevant after all (Bracey, 1996, “The Media” section, para. 3).

Even where the contrarians appear to move outside the numbers, a closer look often reveals a markedly uni-dimensional worldview. Booth’s other scales can provide more detail concerning this judgment. In terms of the quantity/concision and breadth-of-range/concentration scales, the contrarians indeed offer “a lot of whatever they are good at” (Booth, 1988, p. 180). They excel in research methods and statistical problem solving, offering a high *quantity* of a very narrow *range* of invitations to their audience. While they generally do not look down upon their audience – the reciprocity scale – their remains an implied hierarchy and they often suffer from being undramatic, offering cool reserve, slack charm and tight coherence where some degree of intimacy, intensity, and disunity might enhance their appeal. Moreover, the shortcoming here goes beyond a problem of translation (Fisher, 1994). No matter how familiar the contrarians’ discourse might be rendered, the meaning it assigns to education is narrow and incomplete, and it is difficult to excuse them this flaw on the basis of their expertise. Howe (1993) is useful in illustrating this point:

In our enthusiasm for testing as the sole measurement of schooling, we have managed to create a new academic industry based on arguing about the meaning of test scores. It is a highly technical enterprise. Many ordinary educators are repelled by its complexity. There are responsible and able people engaged in it, and others whose contributions are driven by ideology rather than objective analysis. The result is that the messages received by the public are frequently without merit. One of the real needs to keep in mind in our future thinking about schools is the need for intermediaries who understand psychometricians and can translate their ideas for the rest of us. (pp. 18-19)

If the objective is to insure that the messages received by the public have merit, it

is uncertain whether more intermediaries or more “objective analysis” will accomplish the transformation. As Howe (1993) notes, ordinary educators are “repelled” by the complexity of the issues surrounding test scores and their interpretation. However, contrary to Howe’s view, I would argue that translation is only superficially the problem. Though misunderstanding can indeed go far in explaining why public argument can break down, the quality of public argument does not turn exclusively upon knowledge of the objective truth, but instead is enacted in the character of its participants and the structure and quality of the company shared.

In this case, knowledge of statistical fact is granted such a superior deliberative status by the contrarians that other components of their characters are rendered invisible. In this sense, the *company* offered by the contrarians may be alienating to other stakeholders in the U.S. system of public education as statistical imperatives edge-out the moral and practical concerns intrinsic to schooling (Habermas, 1987, p. 325). Most people do not understand schooling from a technical standpoint. Instead, we have extensive personal experiences to draw upon from our own educational backgrounds. We are aware of the close connection between our schooling and our life’s meaning and prospects. It requires a leap of the imagination to think of education in strictly technical terms, so the contrarians invite a suicide of the imagination by misapplying their expertise.

The contrarians do make some non-fact-based arguments. One such claim is that ideology drives the misuse of statistical reasoning. Nevertheless, in stating the obvious, this position is arguably a truism. Thus, the contrarians’ total offering is reduced mainly to a set of detailed statistical arguments interspersed with straightforward complaints about the government and the media. Unless one is careful to relish the brief respites from churning the numbers, the company available from the contrarians is markedly circumscribed. On the one hand, they offer an intricate web of technical meaning far removed from the moral import of education. On the other hand, they provide the most simple minded of moral complaints: The media pays too little attention to the good news. The government lies. The misuse of data is unfair.

The rhetorical failing described here is not intended to be read as total. If one is to take education reform arguments seriously from a virtue-based moral standpoint, it makes little sense to hold them accountable to a strict standard of

success or failure. The moral quality of rhetoric is separate from narrow evaluations of its effectiveness. In addition, since the United States has a long history of blaming schools for its problems, very few reform arguments enjoy undisputed success anyway (Cuban, 1990; Bracey, 1995a; Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Hodgkinson, 1996). The public discourse about education may be over-saturated with arguments no one expects to succeed, which lends credence to Barber's (1993) observation that the education crisis stems from Americans not taking education seriously. On the contrary, I would argue that Americans take it entirely seriously, but that this gravity is wasted by many public advocates – like the contrarians – who award expert virtue supreme status in what more properly should be understood as an untidy value-ridden human controversy. My central concern therefore is not the success of contrarian arguments per se, but rather the possibility of a more meaningful rhetorical practice aimed at modifying the widespread paucity of expectations for public argument in this context.

3. Keeping Company With The Bracey Reports

From October, 1991 to the present, Bracey has published an “Annual Report On the Condition of Public Education” in *Phi Delta Kappan*. A separate discussion of the Bracey Reports develops an exemplar of contrarian rhetoric and a means of evaluating it over time. The discussion further develops the idea that translation is only part of the problem with experts in public moral argument, that the problem with experts may be less about expertise and more about a misplaced conception of virtue on the part of experts.

In what became the first Bracey Report, “Why Can't They Be Like We Were?” Bracey opens with “Schools stink. Says who? Virtually everyone” (1991, p. 105). Observing that *A Nation at Risk* spawned a “floodtide” of reports criticizing the U.S. system of public education, Bracey argues that educational failure has become a non-debatable proposition. Following the introduction, Bracey goes on to delineate personal objections to *A Nation at Risk*. The report's findings “didn't ring true to my experiences as an educator, as a parent, or, for that matter, as a student” (p. 106). He observes the curious nostalgia represented in the public complaints about education, arguing that there was in fact no “Golden Age” of education to which we should want to return (p. 106). Additionally, the main standardized test data do not indicate educational decline, nor should these tests be treated as significant measurements of educational factors at all, since the scores are most directly related to demographic variables like “family size,

income level, and so on" (p. 107).

Moving beyond testing issues, Bracey remarks that college attendance is up (p. 110), college admission rates are higher (p. 111), and Americans may be said to have become over-educated for the economy (p. 111). "Overeducation," he writes, "poses queasy social problems because well-educated people tend to shy away from occupations that require them to sweep the streets, unclog sewers, scrub toilets, pick up trash, bus tables, or mop floors" (p. 111). As for educational expenditures, Bracey demonstrates that the high cost of special education is hidden by the aggregate spending numbers used to support the view that the U.S. spends too much on education. Based on this point and others, Bracey concludes "there is little evidence of largesse from any governing body or of increased burden on the taxpayer for general education" (p. 112).

He next argues that comparisons of educational *systems* do not exist and would be overly complicated and meaningless if they were available (pp. 112-113). While test score comparisons among nations are obtainable, he claims that "the comparisons are so flawed as to be meaningless" because the components of various national systems - including students, curricula, test questions, and drop-out rates - are not comparable (p. 113). Comparisons unrelated to international standardized testing show the U.S. leading the world, according to Bracey. The final main section of the first Bracey Report concerns the relationship between education and the workforce. Bracey is careful to point out that "much of the discussion surrounding the future skill levels of the workforce confuses *rates with numbers*" (p. 115). The fastest growing jobs, measured as a *rate*, do require high skills, but only account for a small proportion of the total *number* of jobs available.

Bracey comments that the data he uses are publicly available to anyone, but that people must have heard the bad news about education for so long that they have grown to assume its truth (p. 115). He closes optimistically: "There are plenty of problems in education that we ought to be working on . . . Let's work to make things better. But let's not do it while telling people in the schools what a crummy job they're doing" (p. 117). This optimism appears elsewhere in the reports, but is never accompanied by reflection concerning the relevance of technical reason.

All of these themes are developed in excruciating detail in "Why Can't They Be Like We Were," which is a blueprint for the remaining ten (and counting) Bracey

Reports. Bracey's writing is clearly dominated by statistical issues, though there are some exceptions. His point about the non-debatability of school failure, for example, seems to be a moral complaint about the character of public discourse. His personal account of how the public arguments did not "ring true" with experience is different from statistics-as-usual, as is the view that educational failure is mainly assumed out of nostalgia for a time that never existed. Bracey periodically surprises us with brief sparks of intense feeling that are only accessible after swimming through the mountains of data. We connect with him – because we have already suffered the details – as he provides satisfying bits of transitional understatement like, "Given these complaints, it is interesting to see where business puts its money for training" (1991, p. 115). In this respect, Bracey does find some space to provide a different, even pleasurable, kind of friendship from that typical of the contrarians. The following passage is exemplary:

Are the schools responsible for the management decisions that kept Detroit turning out self-destructing, two-ton gas guzzlers until it lost its dominance of the market? Did the schools' sloppy pedagogy prevent industry from automating until it was too late? Does the schools' failure to teach students to delay gratification explain why far too many businesspeople keep their eyes focused on the quarterly profit sheet and not on the strategic plan?... To reread *A Nation at Risk* eight years after its publication is to see it as a xenophobic screed that has little to do with education. (1991, p. 116)

The passage provides refreshing company in several respects. Firstly, one's engagement with it is more intense. One absorbs the rhythm of the questions while digesting the volumes of data reported on the previous pages. The engagement is heightened by a feeling of disunity as the prose breaks free for a few lines from the tightly structured, step-by-step workings of statistical argument. Instead of the spelled-out, wordy, and tiresome explanations of statistical reasoning flaws, we are offered concentrated meaning in the form of hard driving questions.

In reading the remaining ten Bracey Reports, one can discern several instances similar to this one, where Bracey shows signs of possibly enriching his rhetorical ethos, but such exceptions are never sustained consistently, or are subverted by his commitment to the facts. For example, in discussing the second Bracey Report's handling of social problems in the cities, he writes, "the ensuing year provided additional evidence – as if any were needed – that our cities are in dire straits"(1993, "Events" section, para. 9). If no additional data are needed in

Bracey's opinion, why does he maintain his practice of packing in as much data as possible? In another case, he speculates, "One can also wonder what kind of a Dickensian novel might move American policy makers and politicians to take appropriate action. *Savage Inequalities* is quoted everywhere – but, apparently, to no effect" (1993, "The Cites, Again" section, para. 14). Faced with evidence that the "facts" do not move the world, Bracey's faith in the facts falters not.

I am arguing that this is more a moral failing than a natural entailment of Bracey's expert status. The lapse is most manifest in his treatment of the goals of education. He is fond of quoting Israel Scheffler's definition of education, "the formation of habits of judgment and the development of character, the elevation of standards, the facilitation of understanding, the development of taste and discrimination, the stimulation of curiosity and wondering, the fostering of style and a sense of beauty, the growth of a thirst for new ideas and visions of the yet unknown" (1993, "Events" section, para. 5). He has the following to say about the definition:

The extent to which we accept Scheffler's definition is the extent to which we must realize that, for all the test scores and graduation statistics presented here and elsewhere, we really do not have the appropriate indices of how the system functions or doesn't. The tests we do have – virtually all of them decontextualized collections of multiple-choice questions – do not measure the traits, qualities, values, and habits that we cherish most. It is to be hoped that the new interest in various kinds of performance assessment will carry us toward measurement of these valued outcomes. (1993, "Events" section, para. 6)

It is curious that Bracey places such faith in new and improved assessment since he and the other contrarians extensively critique test scores as school performance measures. More troubling still, Bracey rarely moves beyond the easy step of quoting Scheffler's definition. While he certainly could explore it more detail, he does not. He could report on more fronts of different kinds, but tragically clings to the hope that, if only he is thorough enough in his objective attack, the edifice of school bashing will come crashing down.

Bracey continues to assume his arguments are "knock-down" arguments, but fails to come to grips with why opposition continues to persist. After cataloguing the progress made in all the previous reports, Bracey (1994b) writes, "Conditions now allow us to lay to rest, once and for all, the misbegotten notion that schools are dragging our economy down – or, for that matter, pushing it up" ("Education and

the Economy” section, para. 1). Given the data alone, many contrarian arguments are “knock-down” arguments. Bracey is regularly in a position, technically, to “lay to rest” many commonplace notions “once and for all.” Statements of this kind persist in spite of themselves. If we are in fact in a position to move on to the real problems of schools and to start building a healthier public discourse about education, one wonders when Bracey will start contributing to that vision. Further, ought we to continue thinking of his neglect as a case of technical argument’s translatability in the public sphere rather than as a simple failure in human virtue?

An occasionally enriched company is inadequate to warrant a positive overall evaluation of Bracey’s contributions to public moral argument. Certainly, one can at least recommend more of what is only hinted at in the Bracey Reports. Regardless of how important the facts are, Bracey role as an expert in the public controversy over school reform requires more of him than his training provides, but this is no essential fault of his training per se. Part of what Bracey’s public role does require, in fact, is a closer connection to the depths and nuances of the issues contained within the controversy over schooling, because they are *not* resolvable with straight reference to the numbers.

To that extent, Bracey’s deliberative vision is quite ordinary. As Booth (1988) admonishes, “whenever our descriptions reveal intentions, however obscurely, they will be caught up into the world of values that we all in fact are created by and dwell in” (p. 97). Bracey’s rhetoric draws extensively upon facts, but he decisively narrows the effective moral import of those facts by neglecting the values necessary to ground judgments that a particular fact is extraordinary. The topics most moral in quality for Bracey are such issues as the misuse of data, the imperative toward consistency, and a version of fairness which asks the media to report the good with the bad. Unfortunately, all these are merely straightforward moral complaints. A morally rich public deliberation about school reform is not advanced. In Habermas’ (1987) terms, Bracey lets system imperatives intrude upon the lifeworld but, tragically, these imperatives are not even particularly complex in character.

Bracey’s principal failing is that, as an expert, he serves as a medium of colonization while purporting to fight it. Because he elevates facts to a status superior to values – in a particularly value-laden and highly divisive context – he fails to advance the quality of public deliberation about education. He fails to do so even in the face of success in the technical sphere. One would ideally expect

his communicative practice to develop more sophistication and breadth as the statistical battles turned his way, but something constrains his ability to do so. This is not to say that a desire to see such a change is not induced in reading Bracey. In spite of the constraints identified in this paper, it is difficult to read the contrarians' story without viewing them as heroes. Unfortunately, it seems they are heroes in a tragic narrative, their tragic flaw simply being their inability fully to play the role of heroes in public moral argument.

4. Conclusion

The contrarians defend the significance of what they do by asserting that, in order for us to attend to the real problems of schooling, it is first necessary to protect the schools from capricious abuse by politicians and the media. They maintain that their effort is well spent even if it does not directly aid the schools. In this paper, I have endeavored to identify the limitations of this stance from a moral perspective concerned with the meaningfulness of public deliberation. If public moral argument proceeds as if the term, "moral," does not belong, as if education reform were a straightforward technical problem, than it naturally trivializes the deeper value concerns implicated in any discussion of education.

My central argument was that a confounding of expert and human virtues hinders the meaningfulness of the contrarians' rhetoric. What counts as evidence for the contrarians is usually grounded in statistics or empirical fact, which may be a natural constraint of their field specific training. However, this view's inefficacy is constituted in the complexity of education reform as a moral issue. In a public controversy rife with value commitments, the character of those participating in deliberation should not be systematically constrained by habits of thought generated in their field specific training and loyalties to technical standards. While there may be a context for such a narrowing of rhetorical virtue, the public sphere is no such place.

NOTES

[i] This is a reference to Booth's otherness/familiarity scale. Booth's scales - or spectrums of quality - are: quantity/concision, reciprocity/hierarchy, intimacy/cool reserve, intensity/slack charm, tight coherence/explosive disunity, otherness/familiarity, breadth of range/concentration.

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