

Are There Values We Shouldn't Question? No

Contributed by [Leora Falk](#)

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Here is KJ Dell'Antonia's rebuttal to James McBryer's blog post.

Motherload: Why Schools Should Undermine Moral Teachings

By KJ Dell'Antonia

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"The curriculum sets our children up for doublethink," he [McBrayer] writes. "They are told that there are no moral facts in one breath even as the next tells them how they ought to behave."

Rather than "dangerous," isn't this exactly what we as a society have decided to ask of our public schools? Which is more "dangerous" to our democratic ideal: agreeing (as a society) to teach students that every value is an "opinion," or allowing some group to do what he describes as the "hard work" of "carefully thinking through our evidence for which of the many competing moral claims is correct?"

As much as we may prefer to line up statements like "killing for fun is wrong" on one side of a line and "cheese tastes good" on the other, history (that bastion of disputed fact, inevitably taught through the lens of opinion) teaches us that such a line is porous. It takes only seconds to come up with "moral facts" we have disregarded in recent years and others that remain in hot dispute.

Professor McBrayer draws a line from the second grader required to deem "cheating is wrong" as "opinion" on a multiple-choice test to a college student, adrift in a world of moral relativism, arguing that "It is wrong to kill for fun" is just a cultural construct.

But one could draw a similar line from the second grader who has learned to check the "opinion" box on "vegetarians are healthier than people who eat meat," who then grows up to make a different dietary choice than his parents — or perhaps one who grows up to hold a different opinion about homosexuality, or race or the beliefs of others, than that taught to him as a "moral fact" at home.

Schools may indeed be undermining the teaching of moral values by declaring them opinions, but the strongest among those values — those that one could argue should get the status of "moral fact" — are those that stay strong because so many of us so passionately choose to share them. The statement among all these examples hardest to relegate to the "opinion" category, "all men are created equal," is anything but fact (moral or otherwise) in much of the world and arguably in our own country. It's a powerful opinion, one that, like Tinker Bell, requires our most fervent belief to keep it aloft. It's also an opinion that, again and again, has required us to set aside beliefs once held so true as to be considered self-evident. It's an opinion — a value — that has itself evolved.

By letting that value, and others, remain opinion, questionable at will by second graders and college students alike, we give those opinions the power to change, and the power to change us. So as a parent, I will teach the morals, the values and my opinions. The schools will teach my children to question me. In that way, we all end up on the right side of history.