BEYOND AGREEMENT: Value Judgements
in Conflict Resolution and Coopera-
tive Conflict in the Classroom

Alfie Kohn

Established in January, 1986, by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan, the Program in Conflict Management Alternatives supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. The Program also establishes links and collaboration among other University research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives. The Program staff's own work focusses explicitly on: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. The Program in Conflict Management Alternatives is housed within the Center for Research on Social Organization, College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. Its main office is Room 4016 LSA Building (Telephone: 763-0472 and 764-7487).

Core Faculty of the Program on Conflict Management Alternatives:

Mark Chesler, Co-Director of PCMA, and Professor of Sociology
Helen Weingarten, Co-Director of PCMA, and Assistant Professor of Social Work

James Crowfoot, Dean and Professor of School of Natural Resources
Elizabeth Douvan, Professor of Psychology and Director of Residential College
Barbara Israel, Assistant Professor of Public Health
Charles Moody, Professor of Education

Alfie Kohn
PCMA Discussion Paper
Spring 1987

BEYOND AGREEMENT:

Value Judgments in Conflict Resolution
and
Cooperative Conflict in the Classroom

It was the moments of profound intellectual dissatisfaction from which I learned the most as a college student. I vividly remember, for example, listening to a presentation about family interaction during my senior year. It occurred to me that the instructor was saying nothing about how he thought a family *ought* to interact even though this normative vision clearly informed his descriptive model. When I asked a question about this, he smiled patiently and said he wanted to "avoid the whole value muddle."

This response has stayed with me because it epitomizes what I have spent considerable time rebelling against. I am at work now on a book that will defend the enterprise of making value judgments. It will also insist, *pace* this instructor, that even if it were desirable to do so, avoiding the whole value muddle (WVM) simply cannot be done. One can only use the clever patter and gestures of a magician to distract an audience from the values that already have been chosen. It is possible, for example, to divert attention from the question of goals (where we're going and why) -- and toward the much safer question of technique (how we're getting there). This is often done by choosing a goal that seems so uncontroversial that one is scarcely aware a decision about values has been made.

In political science, the most widely accepted good is the

stability of a society or government. "Stable" is used so often as an honorific, and "unstable" as an epithet, that few writers are impolite enough to ask how stability is achieved and maintained or who benefits from it. In psychiatry -- or that part of it shaped by the medical model -- the accepted good is the absence of dysfunction. Mental health is implicitly defined as the state of being disease-free. In fact, a close inspection of this definition reveals it to be not merely insufficient (for leaving out any notion of positive health) but quite controversial indeed: it seems to classify as sick those people who risk sorrow in order to love, anxiety in order to create, inner turmoil in order to be morally responsible.

I am arguing not merely that these values are dubious but that they operate invisibly (for the most part) so their dubiousness, like their strength, is not questioned. By relying on a common-sense assumption that it is good to avoid political turmoil or psychological illness, we are invited to act accordingly without further discussion. We are asked, moreover, to pretend that the WVM has actually been avoided rather than simply driven underground.

It seems to me that the same may be said of conflict resolution. My familiarity with the literature on this subject is limited, but my sense is that virtually everyone assumes that disputes are supposed to be settled to the satisfaction of both (or all) parties. When two people have different desires or demands, the idea is to devise a solution to which both can agree. The goal is Yes; the only question is how to get there most expediently.

My point is not to offer a sweeping challenge to the wisdom of this goal, but simply to argue that the goal reflects a value judgment -- as

surely as does, say, political stability. Furthermore, it is a judgment we ought to be prepared to defend rather than to take for granted.

Consider another analogy: utilitarianism holds that acting morally simply means acting so as to bring about the greatest happiness or pleasure (or the least pain) for the greatest number of people. This principle is terribly appealing not merely because it offers itself as fully determinant -- that is, a solution to every possible ethical question -- but also because it eliminates moral ambiguity once and for all. A utilitarian can be stumped only because it's sometimes hard to know which option *does* bring about the most pleasure; this difficulty is a purely factual one. Thus even in moral theory it would seem possible to avoid the WVM.

But along come the deontologists to upset the apple cart with their peculiar message -- peculiar, at least, to those in the English-speaking world -- that moral decisions must be based on more than their consequences. Results must be balanced against certain intrinsic rights or duties of the people involved. If a cost-benefit calculus showed a slave economy to provide more pleasure than pain overall, it would be, from the utilitarian perspective, not merely permissible but obligatory to bring back slavery. And yet slavery is intrinsically immoral on most deontological accounts.

Without attempting to find an analogue for slavery, it seems clear that the teleological, "bottom-line" emphasis of utilitarianism is the dominant force in conflict resolution. A negotiator who gets both disputants to sign off on an agreement goes home whistling. Yet what of cases in which one person capitulates because he or she lacks the resources or the stomach for further negotiation? The negotiator who

asks "Are you *really* happy with this?" -- a question that often seems morally appropriate -- does more than assume a practical risk of upsetting the "Yes." Such a negotiator calls into question the putatively value-free framework of such dispute resolution. Which of us, asked to shape a mutually acceptable compromise, would take at face value a weary comment such as, "I've had enough of this. Give him anything he wants"? Yet to question the motivation behind this decision is to agree in effect that "Yes" is not the last word. Like psychotherapists who embrace some notion of positive mental health -- something beyond the absence of illness -- negotiators who move beyond simple agreement of the disputing parties enter the realm of value judgment. More precisely, they find it harder to deny that they have inhabited this realm all along.

Premature capitulation is only one circumstance that calls into question the common-sense goal of agreement. Consider a situation in which two parties agree at the expense of some other groups or individuals who are not part of the negotiations. (Management and union, for example, may decide on a two-tier wage package that harms only those people who have not yet been hired.) Or consider a scenario in which important questions are brushed aside so as not to threaten a negotiated agreement. (That nuclear weapons may be morally illegitimate and anti-democratic by their very existence are considerations unlikely to enter a negotiation on how many submarine-based warheads will be permitted the two superpowers.) When a difficult dispute is broken down into a series of discrete issues to be addressed, it is particularly likely that broader questions -- particularly moral questions -- will be avoided altogether.

I do not want to be misunderstood. The exigencies of the situation sometimes demand that a limited agreement be hammered out right away. Satisfying all of the disputants, moreover, is normally an impressive accomplishment in itself and all that may be required. But what is "required" or desirable in any situation, exceptional or ordinary, is a function of a value judgment. It may be the case that the judgment enters the picture long before the negotiator does -- back at the stage when the dispute is being framed and decisions are made about who gets to decide. To some extent, this collapses into such macro- issues as the larger social interest in regulating private contracts. But regardless of who has made the decision and how and when, no one involved in conflict management should assume that the objective of getting two disputing people to agree is straightforward or value-free.

The fact that the disputants themselves may be uninterested in such matters does not refute this point, but it does raise the question of how the negotiator or facilitator can justify reaching behind the disputants' utterances and beyond their stated goal. There is no pat answer here, just as there is none when the analogous who-are-you-to-judge challenge is put to the psychotherapist or the teacher, the journalist or the social scientist, who questions conventional goals and dares to expose himself or herself as a valuer. But let us at least be clear that concerning ourselves exclusively with technique does not mean that conflict resolution -- or any of these enterprises -- has been rendered value-free. It merely suggests that we are trying to duck the hard questions.

II

There is one arena in which agreement clearly is not -- or ought not to be -- the objective of a discussion among people who disagree. That arena is the classroom, where the goal is not concurrence but illumination, not "Yes" but "Aha!"

Nevertheless, agreement on the part of students is demanded by some teachers. Others, meanwhile, transpose disagreement into debate. I want now to move to a brief consideration of these two models and to argue for a third alternative, which is to help students engage in cooperative conflict -- what educational psychologists David and Roger Johnson have called "friendly excursions into disequilibrium."

My assumption here, of course, is that conflict does not entail competition. This view apparently is not shared by teachers who adopt either of the first two models. Some who are opposed to competition end up discarding conflict as well; they require consensus in all situations. Others, who value conflict, assume they must promote it in the context of competition. Both have failed in theory to distinguish between the two processes, and both are doing their students a disservice in practice.

Consider first the teacher who artificially tries to suppress conflict by insisting that students reach agreement. I believe that genuine learning does not smooth over or soothe; it does not teach children that disagreement is illusory or bad. Thus I am impatient with exercises, such as those intended to "clarify" students' values, that require a group to reach a forced consensus. Anyone who has watched such groups in action has seen more bullying and coercion -- sometimes overt, sometimes subtle -- than authentic changes in position based on growth or persuasion.

The Johnsons and their collaborators have shown in a series of studies that cooperative conflict is far superior to a forced consensus exercise, which they call "concurrence seeking." In one such study, 84 sixth graders were placed in small groups in order to consider such issues as the advisability of strip mining. Some were told to produce group reports by compromising quickly and trying not to argue. Others were assigned particular positions on each topic and urged to disagree with each other in a cooperative atmosphere. The results were clear: those in the second condition learned the material more thoroughly and were better able to take the perspective of others. They also liked their classmates more and were more enthusiastic about this style of learning. These findings have been replicated several times.[1] Trying to reach agreement, then, is not a particularly useful model in the classroom. Students should be taught that people will not always see things the same way and that this is perfectly legitimate.

But disagreement need not assume the form of debate. If there is something worse than the absence of conflict, it is the presence of competition. Debates are justified as a way of educating students by assigning them to argue for or against a controversial proposition. Specifically, the idea is to (1) force the participants to learn the subject thoroughly by thinking through the arguments and doing research to support their position; (2) teach the rest of the class by exposing them to the give and take of a debate; and (3) require participants to see both sides of a question by having them take part in "swing" debates, an exercise that has them arguing first on one side and then on

----

1. See my review of this literature in *No Contest*, pp. 155-57

the other.

Let us take each of these justifications in turn. First, I would contend that debates do not represent a constructive learning experience for participants. The learning that goes on is instead partial, skewed, distorted. It may be compared to the way an invader learns about a city he is about to attack -- or, better, the way a lawyer learns about a witness she is about to cross-examine. What a debater does is collect information for strategic purposes. What is not relevant for defending a position -- the historical context of an issue, for example -- is ignored. What is left is perceived from an adversarial perspective and then shaped into an argument rather than understood on its own terms. This is much worse than simply learning something half-way.

Second, it is argued that debates are useful teaching tools for those who observe them. If both sides are skilled, a class will indeed learn the arguments for and against some proposition. But there are other, tacit lessons being taught in a debate. Students learn that there are two and only two sides to complex questions. In fact, there may be three or ten possible positions. Debates also socialize students to believe that the adversarial method is the best way of getting at the truth. In the last few years, a literature has begun to accumulate that casts doubt on this assumption. That justice is not really served by an adversarial legal system -- and that the deficiencies and excesses of American law can be traced back to its adversarial basis -- is the subject of a provocative book by Anne Strick[2] and a somewhat tamer

----

2. Anne Strick, *Injustice for All*, (New York: Penguin, 1978)

3. Marvin Frankel, *Partisan Justice*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980)

critique by Marvin Frankel[3]. That the adversarial model may also not represent the best way to do philosophy -- in part because problems are selected in order to conform to this particular analytical technique -- is the thesis of a fascinating recent essay that deserves careful attention.[4]

Finally, we may ask whether switching positions is a useful way for a debater to learn. If I may speak from personal experience here as a veteran of hundreds of high school debates in national interscholastic tournaments, arguing in favor of a proposition in one round and against it in the next actually promotes a kind of cynical relativism. No position is better than any other since any position can be successfully defended if one is clever enough. The emphasis is on tying logical knots, sounding persuasive, and even speaking so quickly that an opponent cannot respond to all your arguments. I remember one of my fellow debaters being genuinely perplexed when asked whether he personally supported a change in welfare policy (which was that year's national high school topic). "Well, that depends which side I'm on," he said.

Debate, then, is neither an innocuous classroom game nor a salutary learning tool. On the other hand, we need not throw out the baby of conflict with the bathwater of competition. Disagreement can be handled constructively, which is to say cooperatively. When it is nestled in fellowship, so to speak, conflict is not threatening to children. It is an effective way to learn about issues that may never be resolved and on

----

4. Janice Moulton, "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method," in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 149-64

which agreement is not really desirable. My larger point, however,
concerns the "real world": I am suggesting that to press for resolution
of a conflict is implicitly and inevitably to endorse a value judgment.
It is a judgment, finally, that may be more problematic than we care to
acknowledge.

Alfie Kohn is a scholar, teacher, and journalist who has become a leading critic of America's obsession with competition. His writings on the subject include the highly praised book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Houghton Mifflin), and articles in *Psychology Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Humanist*, and *New Age Journal*.

Kohn's controversial claim is that any arrangement that makes one person's success depend on another's failure is psychologically destructive, poisonous to relationships, and counterproductive. Focusing on competition in the workplace, the classroom, the playing field, and the family, he draws from a range of studies to refute popular myths on the subject. Contrary to what we have been taught, Kohn argues, trying to beat others is not an inevitable part of "human nature," it does not build character, and it actually holds us back from doing our best work.

Kohn has made his case on nearly 100 television and radio shows across the country, including the Phil Donahue Show and programs on PBS and Cable News Network. His criticism of competition has been featured on the pages of *Vogue*, *Newsday*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Tribune*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Miami Herald*, and many other publications. He has lectured at colleges, corporations, school districts, and community centers.
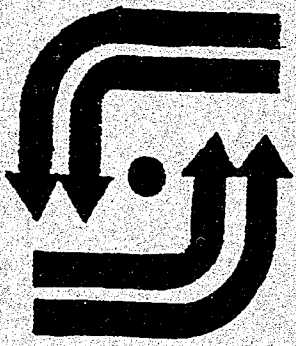
Currently a resident of Cambridge, Mass., Kohn was educated at Brown University and the University of Chicago. He has been a visiting lecturer at Tufts University and Phillips Academy (Andover), among other places, teaching courses about existentialism, abnormal psychology, political theory, guilt, humor, dreams, and, of course, competition.

His work has appeared in publications ranging from literary journals to *USA Today*. He has written for *The Nation* and the *New York Times Book Review*, and he contributes regularly on issues in human behavior to *Psychology Today* and the *Boston Globe*.

CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL ORGANIZATION
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN
WORKING PAPER SERIES

The Center for Research on Social Organization is a facility of the Department of Sociology, The University of Michigan. Its primary mission is to support the research of faculty and students in the department's Social Organization graduate program. CRSO Working Papers report current research and reflection by affiliates of the center; many of them are published later elsewhere after revision. Working papers which are still in print are available from the center for a fee of $2.00 for any paper under 100 pages and $4.00 for papers over 100 pages. The center will photocopy out-of-print working papers at cost (approximately five cents per page). Request copies of working papers, the list of other center reprints, or further information about center activities from: Center for Research on Social Organization, The University of Michigan, 4501 LSA, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48109-1382: (313)764-7487.

PCMA

WORKING PAPER SERIES

BEYOND AGREEMENT: Value Judgements in Conflict Resolution and Cooperative Conflict in the Classroom

by Alfie Kohn

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives
at The University of Michigan

THE PROGRAM ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives was established in January, 1986 by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan. These basic grants were renewed in July, 1988 and again in July, 1991. The Program supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. PCMA also establishes links among other university research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives, and maintains liaison and collaboration with similar efforts in other Universities and Practitioner agencies. The Program staffers own work focuses explicitly on the relationship between social justice and social conflict, specifically: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. These specific efforts are supported by a variety of research and action grants/contracts with governmental agencies, foundations, and private and public organizations/agencies.

The Program in Conflict Management Alternatives is housed within the Center for Research on Social Organization, College of Literature, Science and the Arts, Room 4016 LS&A Building, Telephone: (313) 763-0472.

Core Faculty of the Program

T. Alexander Alienikoff, Professor of Law
Frances Aparicio, Associate Professor of Spanish & American Culture
Percy Bates, Director, PEO, Professor of Education
Barry Checkoway, Professor of Social Work
Mark Chesler, Co-Director, PCMA and Professor of Sociology
James Crowfoot, Professor of Natural Resources and Urban Regional Planning
Elizabeth Douvan, Professor of Psychology
Barbara Israel, Associate Professor, School of Public Health
Edith Lewis, Co-Director, PCMA and Associate Professor, School of Social Work
David Schoem, Assistant Dean for the Freshmen and Sophomore Years and Lecturer
    in Sociology, College of LS&A
Sharon Sutton, Associate Professor of Architeture
Helen Weingarten, Associate Professor, School of Social Work

Alfie Kohn
PCMA Discussion Paper
Spring 1987

BEYOND AGREEMENT:

Value Judgments in Conflict Resolution
and
Cooperative Conflict in the Classroom

It was the moments of profound intellectual dissatisfaction from which I learned the most as a college student. I vividly remember, for example, listening to a presentation about family interaction during my senior year. It occurred to me that the instructor was saying nothing about how he thought a family *ought* to interact even though this normative vision clearly informed his descriptive model. When I asked a question about this, he smiled patiently and said he wanted to "avoid the whole value muddle."

This response has stayed with me because it epitomizes what I have spent considerable time rebelling against. I am at work now on a book that will defend the enterprise of making value judgments. It will also insist, *pace* this instructor, that even if it were desirable to do so, avoiding the whole value muddle (WVM) simply cannot be done. One can only use the clever patter and gestures of a magician to distract an audience from the values that already have been chosen. It is possible, for example, to divert attention from the question of goals (where we're going and why) -- and toward the much safer question of technique (how we're getting there). This is often done by choosing a goal that seems so uncontroversial that one is scarcely aware a decision about values has been made.

In political science, the most widely accepted good is the

stability of a society or government. "Stable" is used so often as an honorific, and "unstable" as an epithet, that few writers are impolite enough to ask how stability is achieved and maintained or who benefits from it. In psychiatry -- or that part of it shaped by the medical model -- the accepted good is the absence of dysfunction. Mental health is implicitly defined as the state of being disease-free. In fact, a close inspection of this definition reveals it to be not merely insufficient (for leaving out any notion of positive health) but quite controversial indeed: it seems to classify as sick those people who risk sorrow in order to love, anxiety in order to create, inner turmoil in order to be morally responsible.

I am arguing not merely that these values are dubious but that they operate invisibly (for the most part) so their dubiousness, like their strength, is not questioned. By relying on a common-sense assumption that it is good to avoid political turmoil or psychological illness, we are invited to act accordingly without further discussion. We are asked, moreover, to pretend that the WVM has actually been avoided rather than simply driven underground.

It seems to me that the same may be said of conflict resolution. My familiarity with the literature on this subject is limited, but my sense is that virtually everyone assumes that disputes are supposed to be settled to the satisfaction of both (or all) parties. When two people have different desires or demands, the idea is to devise a solution to which both can agree. The goal is Yes; the only question is how to get there most expediently.

My point is not to offer a sweeping challenge to the wisdom of this goal, but simply to argue that the goal reflects a value judgment -- as

surely as does, say, political stability. Furthermore, it is a judgment
we ought to be prepared to defend rather than to take for granted.

Consider another analogy: utilitarianism holds that acting morally
simply means acting so as to bring about the greatest happiness or
pleasure (or the least pain) for the greatest number of people. This
principle is terribly appealing not merely because it offers itself as
fully determinant -- that is, a solution to every possible ethical
question -- but also because it eliminates moral ambiguity once and for
all. A utilitarian can be stumped only because it's sometimes hard to
know which option *does* bring about the most pleasure; this difficulty is
a purely factual one. Thus even in moral theory it would seem possible
to avoid the WVM.

But along come the deontologists to upset the apple cart with their
peculiar message -- peculiar, at least, to those in the English-speaking
world -- that moral decisions must be based on more than their
consequences. Results must be balanced against certain intrinsic rights
or duties of the people involved. If a cost-benefit calculus showed a
slave economy to provide more pleasure than pain overall, it would be,
from the utilitarian perspective, not merely permissible but obligatory
to bring back slavery. And yet slavery is intrinsically immoral on most
deontological accounts.

Without attempting to find an analogue for slavery, it seems clear
that the teleological, "bottom-line" emphasis of utilitarianism is the
dominant force in conflict resolution. A negotiator who gets both
disputants to sign off on an agreement goes home whistling. Yet what of
cases in which one person capitulates because he or she lacks the
resources or the stomach for further negotiation? The negotiator who

asks "Are you *really* happy with this?" -- a question that often seems morally appropriate -- does more than assume a practical risk of upsetting the "Yes." Such a negotiator calls into question the putatively value-free framework of such dispute resolution. Which of us, asked to shape a mutually acceptable compromise, would take at face value a weary comment such as, "I've had enough of this. Give him anything he wants"? Yet to question the motivation behind this decision is to agree in effect that "Yes" is not the last word. Like psychotherapists who embrace some notion of positive mental health -- something beyond the absence of illness -- negotiators who move beyond simple agreement of the disputing parties enter the realm of value judgment. More precisely, they find it harder to deny that they have inhabited this realm all along.

Premature capitulation is only one circumstance that calls into question the common-sense goal of agreement. Consider a situation in which two parties agree at the expense of some other groups or individuals who are not part of the negotiations. (Management and union, for example, may decide on a two-tier wage package that harms only those people who have not yet been hired.) Or consider a scenario in which important questions are brushed aside so as not to threaten a negotiated agreement. (That nuclear weapons may be morally illegitimate and anti-democratic by their very existence are considerations unlikely to enter a negotiation on how many submarine-based warheads will be permitted the two superpowers.) When a difficult dispute is broken down into a series of discrete issues to be addressed, it is particularly likely that broader questions -- particularly moral questions -- will be avoided altogether.

I do not want to be misunderstood. The exigencies of the situation sometimes demand that a limited agreement be hammered out right away. Satisfying all of the disputants, moreover, is normally an impressive accomplishment in itself and all that may be required. But what is "required" or desirable in any situation, exceptional or ordinary, is a function of a value judgment. It may be the case that the judgment enters the picture long before the negotiator does -- back at the stage when the dispute is being framed and decisions are made about who gets to decide. To some extent, this collapses into such macro- issues as the larger social interest in regulating private contracts. But regardless of who has made the decision and how and when, no one involved in conflict management should assume that the objective of getting two disputing people to agree is straightforward or value-free.

The fact that the disputants themselves may be uninterested in such matters does not refute this point, but it does raise the question of how the negotiator or facilitator can justify reaching behind the disputants' utterances and beyond their stated goal. There is no pat answer here, just as there is none when the analogous who-are-you-to-judge challenge is put to the psychotherapist or the teacher, the journalist or the social scientist, who questions conventional goals and dares to expose himself or herself as a valuer. But let us at least be clear that concerning ourselves exclusively with technique does not mean that conflict resolution -- or any of these enterprises -- has been rendered value-free. It merely suggests that we are trying to duck the hard questions.

II

There is one arena in which agreement clearly is not -- or ought not to be -- the objective of a discussion among people who disagree. That arena is the classroom, where the goal is not concurrence but illumination, not "Yes" but "Aha!"

Nevertheless, agreement on the part of students is demanded by some teachers. Others, meanwhile, transpose disagreement into debate. I want now to move to a brief consideration of these two models and to argue for a third alternative, which is to help students engage in cooperative conflict -- what educational psychologists David and Roger Johnson have called "friendly excursions into disequilibrium."

My assumption here, of course, is that conflict does not entail competition. This view apparently is not shared by teachers who adopt either of the first two models. Some who are opposed to competition end up discarding conflict as well; they require consensus in all situations. Others, who value conflict, assume they must promote it in the context of competition. Both have failed in theory to distinguish between the two processes, and both are doing their students a disservice in practice.

Consider first the teacher who artificially tries to suppress conflict by insisting that students reach agreement. I believe that genuine learning does not smooth over or soothe; it does not teach children that disagreement is illusory or bad. Thus I am impatient with exercises, such as those intended to "clarify" students' values, that require a group to reach a forced consensus. Anyone who has watched such groups in action has seen more bullying and coercion -- sometimes overt, sometimes subtle -- than authentic changes in position based on growth or persuasion.

The Johnsons and their collaborators have shown in a series of studies that cooperative conflict is far superior to a forced consensus exercise, which they call "concurrence seeking." In one such study, 84 sixth graders were placed in small groups in order to consider such issues as the advisability of strip mining. Some were told to produce group reports by compromising quickly and trying not to argue. Others were assigned particular positions on each topic and urged to disagree with each other in a cooperative atmosphere. The results were clear: those in the second condition learned the material more thoroughly and were better able to take the perspective of others. They also liked their classmates more and were more enthusiastic about this style of learning. These findings have been replicated several times.[1] Trying to reach agreement, then, is not a particularly useful model in the classroom. Students should be taught that people will not always see things the same way and that this is perfectly legitimate.

But disagreement need not assume the form of debate. If there is something worse than the absence of conflict, it is the presence of competition. Debates are justified as a way of educating students by assigning them to argue for or against a controversial proposition. Specifically, the idea is to (1) force the participants to learn the subject thoroughly by thinking through the arguments and doing research to support their position; (2) teach the rest of the class by exposing them to the give and take of a debate; and (3) require participants to see both sides of a question by having them take part in "swing" debates, an exercise that has them arguing first on one side and then on

----

1. See my review of this literature in *No Contest*, pp. 155-57

the other.

Let us take each of these justifications in turn. First, I would contend that debates do not represent a constructive learning experience for participants. The learning that goes on is instead partial, skewed, distorted. It may be compared to the way an invader learns about a city he is about to attack -- or, better, the way a lawyer learns about a witness she is about to cross-examine. What a debater does is collect information for strategic purposes. What is not relevant for defending a position -- the historical context of an issue, for example -- is ignored. What is left is perceived from an adversarial perspective and then shaped into an argument rather than understood on its own terms. This is much worse than simply learning something half-way.

Second, it is argued that debates are useful teaching tools for those who observe them. If both sides are skilled, a class will indeed learn the arguments for and against some proposition. But there are other, tacit lessons being taught in a debate. Students learn that there are two and only two sides to complex questions. In fact, there may be three or ten possible positions. Debates also socialize students to believe that the adversarial method is the best way of getting at the truth. In the last few years, a literature has begun to accumulate that casts doubt on this assumption. That justice is not really served by an adversarial legal system -- and that the deficiencies and excesses of American law can be traced back to its adversarial basis -- is the
subject of a provocative book by Anne Strick [2] and a somewhat tamer

----

2. Anne Strick, *Injustice for All*, (New York: Penguin, 1978)

3. Marvin Frankel, *Partisan Justice*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980)

critique by Marvin Frankel[3] . That the adversarial model may also not represent the best way to do philosophy -- in part because problems are selected in order to conform to this particular analytical technique -- is the thesis of a fascinating recent essay that deserves careful attention.[4]

Finally, we may ask whether switching positions is a useful way for a debater to learn. If I may speak from personal experience here as a veteran of hundreds of high school debates in national interscholastic tournaments, arguing in favor of a proposition in one round and against it in the next actually promotes a kind of cynical relativism. No position is better than any other since any position can be successfully defended if one is clever enough. The emphasis is on tying logical knots, sounding persuasive, and even speaking so quickly that an opponent cannot respond to all your arguments. I remember one of my fellow debaters being genuinely perplexed when asked whether he personally supported a change in welfare policy (which was that year's national high school topic). "Well, that depends which side I'm on," he said.

Debate, then, is neither an innocuous classroom game nor a salutary learning tool. On the other hand, we need not throw out the baby of conflict with the bathwater of competition. Disagreement can be handled constructively, which is to say cooperatively. When it is nestled in fellowship, so to speak, conflict is not threatening to children. It is an effective way to learn about issues that may never be resolved and on

----

4. Janice Moulton, "A Paradigm of Philosophy: The Adversary Method," in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*, (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1983), pp. 149-64

which agreement is not really desirable.   My larger point, however, concerns the "real world": I am suggesting that to press for resolution of a conflict is implicitly and inevitably to endorse a value judgment. It is a judgment, finally, that may be more problematic than we care to acknowledge.

Alfie Kohn is a scholar, teacher, and journalist who has become a leading critic of America's obsession with competition. His writings on the subject include the highly praised book, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Houghton Mifflin), and articles in *Psychology Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Humanist*, and *New Age Journal*.

Kohn's controversial claim is that any arrangement that makes one person's success depend on another's failure is psychologically destructive, poisonous to relationships, and counterproductive. Focusing on competition in the workplace, the classroom, the playing field, and the family, he draws from a range of studies to refute popular myths on the subject. Contrary to what we have been taught, Kohn argues, trying to beat others is not an inevitable part of "human nature," it does not build character, and it actually holds us back from doing our best work.

Kohn has made his case on nearly 100 television and radio shows across the country, including the Phil Donahue Show and programs on PBS and Cable News Network. His criticism of competition has been featured on the pages of *Vogue, Newsday, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Miami Herald*, and many other publications. He has lectured at colleges, corporations, school districts, and community centers.

Currently a resident of Cambridge, Mass., Kohn was educated at Brown University and the University of Chicago. He has been a visiting lecturer at Tufts University and Phillips Academy (Andover), among other places, teaching courses about existentialism, abnormal psychology, political theory, guilt, humor, dreams, and, of course, competition.

His work has appeared in publications ranging from literary journals to *USA Today*. He has written for *The Nation* and the *New York Times Book Review*, and he contributes regularly on issues in human behavior to *Psychology Today* and the *Boston Globe*.