Are There Two Sides to Every Question?

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Presenting two views does not always provide objectivity or intellectual balance, because each view can contain serious errors that may not be corrected in the presentation of the other view. A well-worded, well-reasoned, and careful statement of one view often can provide more solid understanding of an issue than opposed presentations of two different views, even when an issue is quite controversial. In addition, for many issues there may be more than two important positions. When we select two views and claim to give “both sides,” we imply that every important position is represented, which is not so.

In January 1984, an Alberta social studies teacher, James Keegstra, was charged under Section 281.2 of Canada’s Criminal Code with willfully promoting hatred against an identifiable group. Eventually Keegstra was found guilty and fined $5000. Many fascinating themes surfaced at his trial, which was surely one of the most bizarre spectacles in Alberta’s legal history. Keegstra had lost his position as a teacher due to the strange anti-Semitic views he had been promulgating in his social studies classes. The trial provided a platform for him to continue his exposition of an account of modern history according to which a conspiracy of communists, Jews, Zionists, and bankers has worked since 1776 to promote violence and revolution, with the ultimate goal of Jewish domination of the earth. The Holocaust never happened, on this analysis. Adolf Hitler was a hero who perceived real dangers others did not see.

In the face of Keegstra’s testimony, sensible commentary was hard to come by. A division director in the Alberta educational system said that his concern was with the one-sidedness of Keegstra’s teachings. He reported having written to Keegstra to warn him not to teach one interpretation of modern history as though it were fact. This strangely understated view presumes a model of objectivity as a balance between two opposed sides. The director suggested that the problem was not with the content of Keegstra’s position—according to which Franklin D. Roosevelt was a lackey of Communists and Zionists, bankers
collude with Communists, Jews persecuted in the Soviet Union are in league with their persecutors, and the testimony of hundreds of thousands of people about World War II experiences is an orchestrated plot to deceive the world about Hitler. Rather, the problem arose because Keegstra taught only this view. He was one-sided and ignored other interpretations. Taking the director’s comment literally, we could conclude that if Keegstra had offered an alternative to his highly idiosyncratic view of the world, there would have been no problem. Thus, a rival analysis attributing all the same world events to the efforts of a secret conspiracy of Japanese thugs and African tribesmen would have given proper balance to the teaching.

There must be more to balance and objectivity. But our liberal institutions and ideas often seem to presume such a model, according to which fairness and lack of bias will result when both sides of an issue are presented by advocates. In the fall of 1985, Bill Cosby nearly walked off the set of his television series “The Cosby Show” because NBC was nervous about the appearance of an “Abolish Apartheid” sign he had placed in the household of his television family. The network did not wish to be seen to advocate a controversial position about apartheid in South Africa. Cosby insisted that for American black families such as the Huxtables depicted in the show, there are no two sides to South African apartheid. The network apparently worried that it would be accused of bias if something else did not appear on the show, advocating apartheid! Objectivity would have meant equal play for both sides.

An official in the Canadian Department of External Affairs revealed a similar commitment to the “two sides for balance” model when he articulated a requirement that groups and activities funded under a special disarmament fund administered by his department be “balanced.” If sponsored groups have someone speak out against Star Wars, he said, they must have someone else speak out in favor of it. That is what balance means: Both sides must be presented. The analysis seems to work towards self-annihilation for sponsored groups. If one person argues for X and is followed by another who argues for not-X, what has been presented is, in effect, X and not-X. This is everything or nothing—depending on how we look at it.

Something is seriously wrong with the idea that a balanced objective account is one in which two sides of an issue are represented. It does not force us to look at the quality of hypothesis, evidence, and interpretation within an account (Keegstra); it suggests misleadingly that for any issue one side is as credible and worthy of attention as another (Cosby); and it can function to disempower institutions and groups (the disarmament fund). This model is seriously flawed. We need to understand objectivity in another way. However, let us consider briefly some of the factors that may have functioned to make this model seem plausible.

**Factors Supporting the Two-Sides Model**

The idea of balance is, at root, metaphorical. The image suggests that of an old-fashioned scale, where items are placed on each side. If the items are of equal
weight, the scale is balanced. A state of equilibrium has been reached. Similarly, we might think we can reach intellectual equilibrium by balancing opposed accounts. When one advocate presents a number of considerations indicating one thing, and another presents an equal number of considerations indicating the opposite, we can weigh these and reach equilibrium. The popular idea that the truth is usually some kind of compromise between two extremes may well be related to this underlying metaphor.

Much political life, especially in North America and Britain, has been organized primarily around two opposed parties. Given this framework, fairness in political contexts means giving equal time to each. When there are two parties that take opposing positions, this strengthens the idea that issues have two sides, each of which must be heard in approximately equal measure. We can easily confuse fairness in politics with objectivity in intellectual matters.

The advocacy system in law courts may have a similar impact. Each of two sides is represented and argues as strongly as possible for its own case. The idea is that this procedure will best enable judges and juries to find out the facts of the matter, ascertain what are relevant laws and precedents, and resolve the issue. The system is based on the belief that such advocacy will ultimately result in a fair trial with an optimal chance of arriving at a legally correct decision.

Logic itself is founded on the basic duality between truth and falsehood. Each well-formulated statement must be either true or false. This format suggests two sides for every issue: either a statement S is true, or its denial, not-S, is true. If the statement really is well-formulated, it looks as though this is all there is to say.

Such background phenomena no doubt affect our thinking and our social institutions so as to reinforce the two-sides model. However, if we think about it, it is clear that this support is less than compelling. Debate and discussion are not similar to a weigh scale. Many countries have more than two political parties, and existing parties often fail to represent all reasonable opinions and beliefs on issues of social importance. The courts are a special case because the question they address has been restricted very specifically (Is the accused guilty or innocent, according to the law?) and their procedures also are carefully specified.

Logical dualities exist, of course—but only provided that the statement in question is accurately formulated. For many real issues, the precise formulation of a problem, with proper qualifications respecting context, predicted ramifications, and degrees of knowledge is a major part of the difficulty.

There is a more plausible defense of the idea of a two-sides balance. Often a strongly committed advocate is biased in favor of a single position. Learning this from experience, many of us become suspicious of strongly committed people. Hearing them, we think "There must be another side to the issue," and we react skeptically. On any topic, a vast number of facts can be brought forward and can be described in numerous ways. Different facts, and different descriptions of facts, will suggest different approaches and resolutions to problems. Alternate explanatory hypotheses can be proposed. The significance of objections can be weighed differently. Counterarguments known to an advocate can be omitted. The possibilities at so many points are endless. Knowing this, we may suspect the strongly committed advocate of having selected just those

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interpretations, explanations, and premises that will support the case being advocated. The presentation of an opposed view can provide an opportunity to see how some of these choices might have been made. If facts are prejudicially selected in one case, and then again in another but with a different prejudice, we may be able to correct each account in terms of the other. Surely, we might think, there is a greater likelihood of detecting bias, selectivity, special pleading, and error in an account if we have a competing account available. (More on this later.)

There are many problems with the two-sides model. It remains to be seen whether the idea that one prejudiced account can serve as the basis for correcting another retains sufficient plausibility to serve as a good reason for adopting this model. The incidents described make it clear that something must be wrong with the idea that presenting two sides makes for objectivity. What has gone wrong?

There Are Often More Than Two Sides to an Issue

On many issues—scientific, political, ethical, interpretive—there are more than two reasonable positions. This fact becomes obvious when we consider an example. Consider the issue of the role of religion in public education. Informed and conscientious people hold a number of distinct positions on this question, all of which can and have been defended by arguments, and all of which, if understood, can contribute something to our understanding of the issue as a whole. Here are just some of the possibilities:

1. Religion has no place in public schools.

2. Religion has no place in public schools except in programs about world religions (descriptive comparative religion) or about the history of some major religions.

3. Religion may occupy a minor place in education in public schools, but parents should be able to remove children from any classes on religion in a way that will not embarrass them.

4. Religion has a large role in education. In a pluralistic society, public monies should be given to a variety of religious groups so that each can sponsor its own educational system within which religion will have what that group sees as its proper educational role.

5. Religion has a large role to play in education. Only the religion of the majority can and should be taught in public schools. Minority religions can opt for private systems to teach their own religion in schools.

6. Religion has a large role to play in education. There is only one true religion, and it is that religion that should be taught in public schools.
(Our example is moral and political, but its point holds true for more purely intellectual issues as well.)

Obviously these positions do not exhaust the possibilities. Cramming the question of what is the proper role for religion in a pluralistic society with public education into just two opposed positions would omit a great many possibilities. In fact, such a move would severely restrict and prejudice the nature of inquiry and debate into the problem. The many possibilities here could not all be explored with equal seriousness, perhaps, for practical reasons. Yet when a selection is made, there is no magic about the number two. The great variety of possible and actual positions reveals how important is the agenda of inquiry and debate.

Identifying a position as a possible one that is held by someone does not automatically give it equal credibility and intellectual respectability with other positions that are held. A major concern about such trials as that of James Keegstra is the apparent respectability conferred on the theory that the Holocaust did not occur. That theory had to be discussed at length in court and, apparently, taken seriously by serious-minded and well-educated people. The legal necessity to discuss the view seriously in court might suggest that it was a reasonable position as a matter of history. But such status in a legal forum should not be confused with logical or historical integrity. The fact that a position is held by a significant individual or group may be sufficient reason to discuss and examine it seriously. It is not in itself a reason to think it has logical or intellectual integrity equal to that of other positions.

Many liberal-thinking people take pride in understanding and communicating the two sides of an issue because they see this as an advance on the dogmatism of others who can see only one side. Often it is an advance; but it is only a partial advance. Selecting two sides can oversimplify and falsely polarize debate. Sometimes it gives pseudocredibility to outrageously implausible positions. Usually, understanding two sides is better than dogmatically sticking to one—but it is not enough in itself.

The Two-Sides Model Includes No Restrictions on What Is Presented by Either Side

Two advocates of opposed positions may both speak or write very prejudicially—using distorted facts, loaded language, false statements, questionable hypotheses, inappropriate authorities, fallacious arguments, tendentious rhetorical questions, and much else. If so, neither can offer a correct account of a problem. Many people think that two incorrect accounts will somehow balance and cancel each other out, leading to a roughly correct compromise. However, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. Juxtaposing two opposed but biased accounts often leads to confusion, skepticism, a perpetuation of previous ignorance, or even persistence of dogmatically-held convictions. Those antece-
dently convinced of one of the positions may sense only the inadequacies of the
opposed one and rest even more secure in their dogmatic beliefs.

The naïveté of thinking that one prejudicial account can serve to highlight
the errors of another can be illustrated by examining imaginary speeches by an
atheist and a fundamentalist on the issue of religion in education.

**Atheist:** Religion is all superstition, and superstition has absolutely no
place in modern life. Religion has caused the suffering and death of
millions of people in gruesome wars. Religious people are bigots who
think that others who do not share the one true faith will suffer eternally
in hell for a matter of belief. The sooner religion disappears from the
world, the better. There is no need or place for it in the modern scientific
age. Keep it out of the schools. No modern citizen should have to
support bigotry and superstition with tax dollars.

**Fundamentalist:** The humanists are trying to play God by preempting
God’s knowledge and claiming it for themselves. They condone pornog-
aphy, child abuse, and abortion. They are evil incarnate as they do not
recognize the need of mankind to be saved from sin. Education based
on secular humanism is no education at all. Teaching is meaningless
unless we save our children from the fires of hell. There is only one true
religion, and it is the primary function of the schools and the rest of
society to teach it to our children. No aspect of life is intelligible unless
it is understood in the aspects of God’s creation and God’s rules for
man.

Imagine the Atheist and the Fundamentalist on a panel. Superficially, the
panel is balanced; two sides of an issue are represented. But not only do such
spokespersons fail to represent a broad range of opinion, both their accounts
are extremely inadequate judged from an internal point of view. Both use loaded
language. The Atheist uses such terms as “superstition” (for religious belief),
“bigots” (for religious believers), and “modern” and “scientific” as emotionally
positive words to label his own secular position. The Fundamentalist uses “evil”
and “playing God” to brand his opponents and “true religion” as a tendentious
phrase to select his own religion as the single correct one. Both the Atheist and
the Fundamentalist make very questionable, even false claims, unsupported by
any argument. The Atheist links all religion with superstition, though some
theological systems are carefully reasoned and articulated and disassociated
from magic and even from miracle. The Fundamentalist says that humanists
seek to play God, ignoring the fact that those humanists who do not believe in
God cannot possibly be trying to fill a role they do not think exists at all. Both
use facts in a misleading way. The Atheist says that religion has caused wars
without acknowledging that many religious people have worked for peace and
that there have been many nonreligious causes for wars—economic and
nationalist causes, for instance. The Atheist ignores the fact that some religious
believers see heaven as an open possibility for nonbelievers and others do not
believe in heaven and hell at all. The Fundamentalist ignores the fact that many
humanists oppose pornography, child abuse, and abortion. The Fundamentalist fails even to consider ways of understanding human life that would find meaning and intelligence in nondivine aspects.

Given such gross internal flaws, we cannot advance our understanding of the role of religion in education by listening to the Atheist or to the Fundamentalist. Nor can we advance our knowledge by listening to the Atheist followed by the Fundamentalist—not even if both look and sound important and appear on television! The rhetorical tricks and cognitive failings of these accounts are seen by looking at them with a critical eye, scrutinizing the language and use of facts, looking for the presence and quality of argument, and bringing our own background knowledge to bear on the account. In this case, though, nothing in either account can serve to correct the other. The correction comes from a critical hearing or reading of the account by an alert audience—not from the opposed account. Hearing an atheist suggest that religion has caused all war does not correct, or even help to correct, the misleading suggestion by a fundamentalist that all humanists condone child abuse!

This is an extreme case, of course. But the imaginary statements are not entirely unrealistic. In two real cases, the content is much better, but there is little contact of opposed views, and confusion and skepticism are the net result.

On May 15, 1986, at about 8:30 AM, the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) FM network in Calgary broadcast a discussion of the safety of North American nuclear reactors in Hanford, Washington. This discussion took place in an atmosphere of public concern about the safety of reactors in the aftermath of the Soviet disaster in Chernobyl, April 1986. Patrick Moore, chairman of Greenpeace in Vancouver, was interviewed. Representing "the other side" was Steve Irish, a spokesperson for UNC—nuclear industries in Hanford, Washington, where there are a number of nuclear reactors, some dating back to the Manhattan Project in the forties. Moore said that there was corrosion in these reactors, that there could be and have been fuel leaks, that $81 million has been requested to fix these leaks, and that a disaster comparable to that at Chernobyl could happen in Hanford. (Calgary is about as far from Hanford as Warsaw is from Chernobyl; citizens in Warsaw were throwing away fresh fruits, vegetables, and milk in the wake of the Chernobyl disaster.) Irish said there are some problems with fuel lines at Hanford, but these are quite routine. He said that as many as ten leaks at a time can be easily repaired, and that the reactors have been checked by inspectors from the United States Department of Energy and found to be all right. He also said the reactors will be checked by an independent (sic) committee of scientists and engineers again in four months. The reactors have been working safely for twenty-five years and are differently designed from the Chernobyl reactors, Irish said. A disaster like that in Chernobyl could not occur in Hanford, according to him.

Despite the fact that I listened carefully to the discussion and—having by coincidence read several books about nuclear developments in Hanford—was almost certainly better equipped to absorb details than the average listener, I gained little information. An interviewer questioned both people; they did not debate directly with each other. Moore was not asked to defend his analogy between Hanford and Chernobyl. He was not asked to explain how the fuel
leaks could lead to a disaster as serious as that in Chernobyl. Irish was not asked about the $81 million, what makes leaks "routine," or about the matter of natural aging of reactors. The audience is left with one party saying "it could happen here" and another saying "it could not."

Radio, television, and film are typically heard or seen only once. (Taping is changing this, to some degree.) The product is gone when we come to reflect and analyze it. With print media, we have an opportunity to look back, to see exact statements made, to find arguments, and to compare evidence. Even so, the combination of two opposed accounts often produces little real contact between them, and the net effect on our understanding may be as trivial as with more ephemeral media.

An example appeared in the _Herald Tribune_, June 7–8, 1986, concerning Kurt Waldheim's candidacy for the presidency of Austria. An essay "Why the Critics are Unfair," by Gerhard Waldheim, son of the candidate and active in his presidential campaign, was printed beside another, "He Shares in the Collective Guilt" by Menachem Rozensaft, founding chairman of the International Network of Children of Jewish Holocaust Survivors. Both concerned the issue of whether Kurt Waldheim, then a candidate for president of Austria (elected the next day), was guilty of involvement in war crimes because of his connections with the German army during the World War II. Gerhard Waldheim urged that his father had not deceived the public about his military service, though he naturally did not like to discuss this aspect of his past. He claimed that Waldheim and his family had, prior to 1939, been against the Nazis and had been penalized for their protests. Kurt Waldheim was an interpreter and liaison officer to the Italian army. He had no combat role, according to Gerhard Waldheim, and no involvement in atrocities. Furthermore, he said his father consistently showed sympathy for Jews after the war. He was not a Nazi and was not guilty of war crimes. In contrast, Rosensaft stated that Kurt Waldheim was a willing and apparently enthusiastic servant of Hitler between 1939 and 1945. He closed his eyes to deportations and atrocities he must have known about. He was accused by the United Nations War Crimes Commission of having participated in atrocities. Rosensaft argued that all who supported Hitler by allowing his government to function share guilt for the annihilation of European Jews. Rosensaft said Waldheim was involved and bears responsibility for a regime that was one of "absolute evil."

The accounts were both well written and contained plausible arguments. They did not really contradict each other as to facts, in the strict logical sense. They were based on different interpretations and selections of facts and differed in their concepts of citizen responsibility for government atrocities. Both authors could be said to have interests prejudicing their credibility. More information about what Waldheim knew and did and more reflection on the options citizens had and the responsibility they bear for involvement in the Nazi regime would help to resolve the issue. As presented, the two accounts were interesting and articulated key historical and moral issues. But as stated, they offered the reader no resolution and no indication as to how to go about finding one.

These examples indicate that diametrically opposed accounts will not always serve to correct each other. In general, there is no good reason to believe that
the truth or anything close to it will emerge from a consideration of two such accounts.

Institutions Seeking Balance May Restrict Their Roles as Conveyors of Information and as Political Agents by Communicating Nothing

A familiar kind of anthology can soothe the hearts and minds of anxious educators: pro and con. One author argues that genes cause criminal behavior, followed by another who argues that the cause is environmental. A third author argues that genes cause behavior differences between the sexes; followed by a fourth who argues that they emerge due to environmental factors. And so it goes on. In the hands of students and instructors willing to sift through the arguments and reach an independent stance, such anthologies can serve a purpose. But much analysis is necessary to avoid pure confusion and ignorance as the result of such a treatment. "There is no real answer. These people are experts, and obviously, they disagree," readers will say. The two-sides treatment can lead to unreasoning agnosticism, to a nihilistic kind of effect intellectually.

Unconsciously, such endeavors are often conservative in their impact. No stance is demonstrated; no one has a basis for disagreeing with what is actually being done; hence things may as well be left as they are. When ostensibly critical and independent institutions and individuals are compelled to present both sides of an issue, to achieve balance and objectivity, skeptics may well suspect that such a requirement severely will limit the political and educational impact of the endeavors these agents undertake. When established policy is X, and would-be critics have to balance their materials and presentations by arguing in effect for X as well as for not-X, the eventual effect is likely to be no effect.

This is not to say that media presentations and educational materials should never present several sides. They should frequently present several sides—often, more than just two. However, this will not be sufficient for objectivity and will not necessarily lead to a careful rethinking of issues. Whenever possible, steps should be taken to provide for critical analysis of each case and efforts made for genuine cross-dialogue. In addition, we should be sensitive to the implicitly conservative effect such approaches may have in some contexts.

Two Views May Both BeFounded on a Mistaken Assumption and Thus May Both Be Mistaken

People sometimes argue as to whether the United States should exercise world leadership by military might or by political and economic influence. What is ignored here is the assumption that the United States should exercise world leadership at all. This assumption, which may be difficult for many Americans to question, needs to be critically examined. Perhaps the world does not need leadership from any one country. It is possible that aspirations to leadership role
by various countries (for example, Britain in the nineteenth century and the United States and the Soviet Union presently) only serve to make global problems worse. Or perhaps, leadership is necessary, and some country other than the United States is best fit to exercise it. Scrutinizing the background assumption is useful. Even if eventually we wish to endorse it, we are forced to see other alternatives and to understand that reasons are needed to back up a previously unexamined idea.

This kind of example reveals again the crucial role of the setting of agenda, both in inquiry and in public debate. If two sides are identified and share a common assumption that is either controversial or just plain wrong, then following a debate or inquiry based on that idea is unlikely to serve us well.

Examples seem obvious if we look at another time or place. In nineteenth-century Europe and America, considerable debate raged as to how masters should treat their slaves. Some said they should treat them kindly and educate them well; thus the slaves would be healthy, competent, and loyal. Others said slaves should be treated brutally to exploit their labor for maximizing profit and that they would only take advantage of kind, indulgent masters. Nearly any modern citizen looking at this debate would regard it as crazy: We deny the assumption that masters and slaves should exist at all. Perhaps in another century the current debate as to whether nuclear weapons should be targetted against military installations or against cities will appear similarly bizarre.

Presenting two sides of an issue is clearly not sufficient to provide an accurate, objective understanding, free from bias, prejudice, propaganda, and distortion. It may in some contexts be better to do this than to present only one side, but we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that we have corrected for selectivity and represented a full range of positions. Important positions may be omitted; bias and distortion internal to accounts may go uncorrected; confusion, ignorance, or dogmatism can naturally result; and key underlying assumptions may go unscrutinized.

What Factors Make an Account Fair and Balanced?

In fact, a single account, even an advocacy account from someone with a committed stance, can often better serve the ends of objectivity provided it meets certain conditions. We gain a better, more just understanding from a fairly-worded analysis that allows for and reasonably handles alternative interpretations and counterarguments than we do from two or more propagandistic accounts. “Balance” can be achieved within a single discourse that expresses fair and careful thinking.

Can an advocate think fairly? I submit that this is possible. To think it is not is to presume that judicious, fair, and rational analysis will always lead one to a skeptical or neutral position. There is no reason to think that this true. In fact, in practical life, we all presume the opposite.
I suggest that an account is fair and balanced when it satisfies all or most of the following conditions:

1. **The language used is relatively neutral.** (Example: a speaker opposing religion in public schools refers to religious people as believers or adherents, not as bigots or fanatics.)

2. **Facts that would tend to support an interpretation or evaluation different from that of the speaker or writer are acknowledged.** Their apparent impact is either recognized or argued against and accounted for. (Example: A speaker defending religion as making a contribution to human progress acknowledges wars in Ireland and Lebanon as an apparent counterexample to his thesis. But the speaker contends that broader economic and political issues exist behind these conflicts so that, appearances notwithstanding, they are not fundamentally religious conflicts.)

3. **The point is acknowledged where expert opinion is cited and the relevant experts differ from each other.** Either the case developed does not depend entirely on citing expert opinion or good reasons for selecting particular experts are given. Those experts whose views are not accepted are not attacked on irrelevant personal grounds.

4. **Controversial interpretations of events or texts, explanations for which there are plausible alternatives, disputable predictions, estimations, or value judgments are acknowledged as such.** Reasons for them are given and, where appropriate, the impact on the analysis of making another such judgment is recognized.

5. **The speakers or writers do not insidiously introduce their own special point of view as being the one the audience would naturally adopt.** (Example: If a feminist is speaking in favor of equal pay for work of equal value, the speaker does not refer to the audience as “we in the feminist movement.”)

6. **Sources are indicated and, where practically feasible, quoted so that they may be checked in contexts where this is sufficiently important.**

7. **Arguments are careful and well reasoned, not fallacious.**

8. **Where time and space permit, alternative positions are stated, explained, and considered.** Reasons are given as to why these positions are seen to be less satisfactory than the one advocated. Alternative positions are fairly and accurately represented and described in nonprejudicial language. People holding them are described accurately, politely, and respectfully.

9. **The point is acknowledged where evidence and reasons offered are less than rationally compelling.** An explanation is given as to why the position taken nevertheless seems the most nearly correct or appropriate in the context.

Advocacy accounts can be biased and misleading. They can also be objective and fair. Presentations of two sides can be biased and misleading. They can also
be objective and fair.

No, there are not two sides to every question. In some ultimate sense, there are far more than two—an indefinitely large number when all the different alternative descriptions, explanations, predictions, hypotheses, and recommendations are taken into account. Considering two sides does not guarantee fairness, genuine understanding, lack of bias, tolerance, or accuracy in conclusions. It sometimes facilitates these, but not if opposed accounts are propagandistic or when little scope for cross-dialogue and genuine critical analysis is allowed. We must remember that there is nothing necessarily objective either about our own favorite account or about the two sides of an issue that may constitute society’s agenda in a particular immediate situation. We must think carefully and flexibly when working out and expressing our own beliefs. Showing these capacities and eliciting them in others is more important, I submit, than seeking balance as a virtually automatic by-product of the presentation of the two sides of an issue.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why does Govier think that endorsement of a two-sides model by television networks and other social institutions will tend to perpetuate status quo thinking? In what sorts of circumstances might her claim about this be wrong?

2. Are there more than two sides for issues such as capital punishment, the draft, prayer in public schools, and bilingualism? Pick any one of these, or another public issue of your own choice, and see how many reasonable positions you can identify and distinguish.

3. How could a press discussion of a controversial subject such as Kurt Waldheim’s Nazi connections be made more intellectually significant to readers, according to Govier? Do you tend to agree? Why or why not?

4. What do you think Govier means by the “setting of agenda” in public debate? Does this agenda setting just happen, or do people or institutions consciously plan it?