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Should We Legislate Morality?

To make its research easily available to a broad audience, the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes a quarterly newsletter: *QQ—Report from the Center for Philosophy and Public Policy*. Named after the abbreviation for "questions," *QQ* summarizes and supplements Center books and working papers and features other selected work on public policy questions. Articles in *QQ* are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Center or its sponsors.

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Conservatives lobby for federal action to protect religious and family values; liberals lobby for federal action to protect artistic and environmental values. But can the government legitimately address questions of how its citizens should live their lives and what kind of society they should create together? p. 1

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Throughout the first two years of the Reagan administration, conservative supporters of the president have lobbied to cut taxes, lighten the regulatory burden, wind up loose reels of federal red tape, eliminate or streamline executive departments and agencies—all with the stated aim of reducing the role of the federal government in citizen and corporate affairs. Yet critics have pointed out that this same administration has voiced support for legislation limiting access to contraception, for constitutional amendments banning abortion or permitting school prayer, and for a variety of measures designed to strengthen traditional family life. In the view of some critics, this comes down to getting the government off people's backs and into their bedrooms. At the least, it seems to many inconsistent that the sphere of governmental influence should be simultaneously expanded and contracted, so that funding to encourage teenage chastity is proposed at the same time that funding for sex education is curtailed—and the latter on the grounds that the government should not intrude itself into matters that are properly the responsibility of the family.

Yet liberal critics of the administration must themselves answer to charges of a perhaps analogous inconsistency. For the same critics who are appalled at proposed "family support" bills requiring textbooks to portray a certain percentage of women in traditional female roles were the proponents of earlier legislation requiring portrayal in textbooks of a certain percentage of women in non-traditional roles (where an illustration didn't count toward the quota if the female character was wearing pink). And ardent defenders of the right to define one's own alternative life-style and private vision