Fieldston Ethics Reader

Fieldston Ethics Reader
edited by Mark Weinstein and Beatrice Banu
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1988. 497 pp.

This review is biased. In more than a quarter century of teaching, I have tried many different instructional methods. While there are numerous techniques for teaching information, I have found only one effective way to assist others in *developing their own* beliefs: Inquiry.

Used by Socrates and later expanded by Francis Bacon and others into the scientific method, the inquiry approach to classroom learning seems again to be in vogue among educators. And why not? It is the *sine qua non* to which we owe the marvels — and evils — of modern life.

Fortunately, the inquiry method is as applicable to ethical problems as to scientific ones. In examining moral issues students can ask: What is bothering me about this situation; what ethical questions underly it; what alternative courses of action can be taken; which alternative promises to be the most ethical resolution? Then just as in explorations of the physical world, students can test and evaluate alternatives, or if that is impractical, they can examine the outcomes of parallel situations. By learning to inquire in this way, students become better able to resolve the moral dilemmas in which they occasionally find themselves.

Of course learning how to investigate matters of ethics takes practice. The school room can be a wonderful place for that practice, but only when ethical questions arise out of shared and deeply felt experiences. While discussions derived from real encounters remain the most potent base for inquiry, vicarious experiences are usually far easier to arrange. In general, the best vicarious experiences for moral inquiry continue to be drawn from literature.

To serve as an effective vicarious experience for ethical inquiry, a reading must meet five criteria. It must engage the reader's interest, be relevant to the topic of inquiry, raise related issues in a vivid way, forge empathy between reader and those being read about, and allow the

reader to examine the situation from several viewpoints. If in addition the reading presents a choice and describes outcomes of that choice, so much the better.

The *Fieldston Ethics Reader* is a compendium of 125 such readings drawn from the works of great writers, influential philosophers and contemporary news sources. It includes fictional works by the likes of Kurt Vonnegut, Tennessee Williams, and Willa Cather alongside scholarly writings by Ruth Benedict, David Hume, and Jean Paul Sartre as well as excerpts from *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines.

Mark Weinstein and Beatrice Banu have grouped these readings into a tri-part framework within the concept of self. The three units are search for self (what is the self, how does it integrate its internal conflicts); influences on self (the effects of family, society, school and work); future of self (experiences involving sexual love, marriage, autonomy, introspection, and death).

An introductory paragraph precedes each selection. This serves only to orient the reading to the article's place within the tri-part organization described earlier; the editors make no attempt to explain the special historical or cultural context in which the stories were written; nor do they explain concepts found in the story that may be unfamiliar to modern, younger readers. Unfortunately this occasionally leads to minor confusions. For example, my students were puzzled when in a contemporary sounding story a doctor made a "house call" for which he charged $1.50. Of course teachers can explain potential stumbling blocks as they introduce the reading; yet an occasional reference may be beyond even them: One story's mention of a "mother's helper," an apparently formalized position in America during the 1930s, continues to puzzle me.

Each reading is followed by one or more exercises or sets of discussion questions. These are a cut above those usually found in textbooks. Some are enjoyable to complete; all encourage higher level thinking.

On the whole the editors have chosen each of the readings carefully. While a few will be found in high school English anthologies, most are unusual, and nearly all are highly engaging. However, a few readings are too difficult for high school use. I find Lewis Thomas' "The Selves" from *Medusa and the Snail* neither engaging nor intelligible to the sixteen- and eighteen-year-olds I teach. However, the reading may skip the few such readings with little harm to the overall aim of the authors.

Another problem inherent in an anthology approach, especially one that contains much fiction, is that one selection often touches on issues dealt with elsewhere. For example, Charlie Russell's "Quietus" examines the ethics involved in a pursuit of success as do, to some extent, a dozen other readings (Checkov's "Vanka," Carson McCullers' "The Jockey," etc.). Unfortunately these readings are scattered throughout the book and there is no topic index by which to identify them.

However, such scatterings are inevitable in a series of edited readings no matter how carefully chosen, just as inevitable as in the tangled context of real life. Therein lies the value of *The Fieldston Ethics Reader*: It provides students with glimpses of alternative and engaging manifestations of enduring ethical issues while at the same time it raises questions about those issues that invite thoughtful responses. Thus the *Reader* both enlarges the student's experiences and encourages his or her ethical self-examination. Even Socrates or Francis Bacon wouldn't ask for more. Highly recommended.

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