

Engaging up to a point

Engaging with Ethics: ethical inquiry for teachers

Mark Freakley and Gilbert Burgh

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reviewed by Trevor Curnow

This is an ambitious book that sets its sights in a number of different directions. However, its primary target audience is the world of teacher training, and its primary aim is to prompt and support ethical inquiry in that world.

Although formally divided into two parts, for practical purposes the book falls into three. The first of these is concerned with communities of inquiry. It is the view of the authors (p. 47) that 'the community of inquiry is a unique educational practice that cultivates democratic character in students and a special sense of community - the community of ideas for a common purpose.' Having thus nailed their colours to the mast, they go on to show how such a community may be established. In so doing they helpfully identify the different skills which a successful community of inquiry needs, and suggest ways in which they may be developed. This part of the book contains a valuable distillation of evident experience in this area, including useful warnings about potential problems and how to overcome them.

The second part of the book comprises a brief introduction to moral theory. Because no formal philosophical background is assumed on the part of readers, the authors provide one. They first discuss the general nature of ethics, and then go on to give outline accounts of some particular ethical perspectives. The four they select for this treatment are non-consequentialism, consequentialism, virtue ethics and the ethic of care. These are then contrasted with each other through developing and considering the different responses they generate to a short case study. The third, and largest, part contains materials for classroom use. A variety of topics are introduced, such as equity, democracy, pluralism and punishment. Each section contains an 'episode' backed up with brief analyses of 'key ideas' and suggestions of 'cues for inquiry'. The narrative episodes are all related in some way to issues arising in the world of education, and to a single imaginary community. While these materials are specifically designed to be used in the programme for establishing a community of inquiry set out earlier in the book, they also lend themselves to employment in other contexts. Some of the cues for inquiry, in particular, could work well as free-standing exercises, essay titles or exam questions!

In addition to all of the above, the book also contains helpfully annotated suggestions for further reading, information on further resources, and guidance on training in philosophy for children. No one could accuse the authors of trying to do too little, although some may feel they have tried to do too much. This problem seems to me to be particularly evident in the second part of the book. To fit all the authors wish to convey into fewer than fifty pages is a very tall order, and sometimes the price of compression is serious distortion. To suggest, for example (p. 112), that, 'Non-consequentialism does not adhere to the principle of equal respect for persons,' is at best misleading. Some forms of non-consequentialism certainly embrace this principle, but it is entirely possible to be a non-consequentialist without doing so. One solution to this problem would be to assign more space to this part of the book. A more radical approach would be to omit it altogether, and leave (or force!) the community of inquiry to operate without the benefit of its contents. It would be interesting to see how much of them it could generate by itself, and how much of them it could happily do without.

The authors presumably did not take this radical approach because of the importance they attach to moral theory. However, their attitude to moral theory turns out to be rather puzzling. Early in the book (p. 15) they justly bemoan the tendency of students to 'hold naive versions of either moral relativism or moral absolutism,' and one of their aims is to confront and challenge this tendency. But towards the end of it (p. 215 and again on p. 224) they say that: 'Ethics is not a matter of trying to work out which is the better ethical or moral theory or which theory results in the better solution. Sometimes it may be necessary to take all or only some theories into account.' If I understand these words correctly, and their meaning seems to be plain, the authors seem to be endorsing a form of moral eclecticism. This is dangerous because it threatens to undermine moral theory itself. Part of what it means for moral theories to be different from each other is the fact that it is necessary to choose between them. To entertain more than one at the same time is generally to embrace inconsistency, and inconsistency is generally fatal to theory. Once it becomes possible to hold all theories at once, what is left of theory? If this is the price to be paid for shifting students away from moral absolutism or moral relativism, it seems to me to be an inordinately high one.

These concerns lead me to take an ambivalent attitude towards the book as a whole. There is indubitably much of practical value here, but I find myself in serious disagreement with some of its philosophical content. I would certainly be willing to use it as a manual for setting up a community of inquiry, but I would equally certainly be wary of exposing students to some of the observations on ethics it contains. It engages me, but only up to a point.

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