COMMENTARY ON “ETHICS EDUCATION AND THE PRACTICE OF WISDOM”

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In a beautifully researched paper with elegant and persuasive arguments, Maughn Gregory rightly identifies the apprehensions of many of us who think about teaching ethics. The incoherence and disparity of modern approaches to ethics education seem to miss the classic aims of living well and wisely. Examining objectives from pre-college values and character education to professional codes to college courses, Gregory offers an acute and telling critique of clumsy and short-sighted efforts to introduce “ethics” into both pre-college and college curricula. The article concludes with a discussion of the “community of inquiry” method developed by Matthew Lipman and Ann Margaret Sharp as a pragmatically and theoretically effective, self-corrective instrument to introduce students of any age to a culture of ethical discourse.

Turning first to the traditional offering in college ethics courses, Gregory observes the trend to address topical or historical issues that fail to address the immediate concerns of many students and teachers about what it means to them to live good lives; “...the study of ethics becomes removed from being ethical.” While the study of theoretical ethics may not necessarily make us good, it is indispensable to understanding the logic and arguments of ethical concepts, such as the moral notions of obligation and desert.

Even with a somewhat recent shift in college ethics course fare to focus on applying classical ethical theories to compelling issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, stem-cell research, or corporate profit-making, there is a systemic failure to figure in every-day dilemmas that most of us, and most poignantly, our young students, face at one time or another. For example, how honest should we be in our everyday dealings with one another? How should we react to a roommate’s dishonesty? or What should our personal moral response be to corrupt (and corrupting) practices in the workplace? Gregory points out that professional schools and
programs generally include instruction in ethical codes and issues relevant to the professions, but stop short of broad discussions of the duties of moral personhood. He reasons that we might, for example, turn out professionally competent and ethical judges, but there is a divide between professional ethical competence and a judge’s capacity to be prudent or wise in his or her lived moral life. How can such theoretical, even professional, examinations contribute to pressing moral demands faced by individuals?

Examining a few of the Ethics texts on my own shelves, it is clear that some authors do recognize the relevance of discussion about what constitutes a good life, or living well in the Aristotelean sense, but none offers the scope Gregory calls for. Most advanced texts are mere academic exercises in ethical theory or meta-theory.

A linguistic distinction identifies the partition between “values education” (education about moral feelings and behavior), which is directed at young children, and “ethics education,” which purports to focus on moral reasoning, and is directed almost exclusively to adults and adolescents. Gregory expresses serious misgivings about the intent and purpose of the big business of character education in the pre-college classroom. Standard fare in more and more elementary and secondary schools, character education purports to help children develop exemplary moral behavior, but expends little effort toward helping young people understand the theoretical basis or justification for their moral judgments. Moreover, this approach certainly fails to respect the young person’s intellectual, or moral, autonomy and, worse, makes no move to serve young people who face vexing moral ambiguities in their lives. Gregory aptly acknowledges a gnawing concern many of us have when we examine the trendy contours of character education in the schools and notice that this pedagogy amounts to imposing moral lore on passive minds. He examines the turn to propagandized values and value traditions designed to inculcate “appropriate” attitudes without encouraging students to critically, and perhaps, dangerously, examine the basis of those judgments.

The emphasis of character education rests on impressing students with the need for right action, but does not also require deliberation or thought about why something is right. Gregory rightly notes that such an approach presupposes an ethical tradition, generally Christian morality, but might just as well be used to inculcate notions of aristocratic virtue, Communist solidarity, or the evils of unabashed optimism. Character education is often marked by a “lack of personal meaningful response” and seems to be a less than honest approach to ethics education because
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it fails to respect a young person’s capacity for thoughtful moral deliberation.

Gregory uses a delightful turn of phrase to distinguish between “values transmission,” which does not encourage questioning or critique, but functions like a “super highway” in comparison to the “little footpath” of values inquiry. He proposes the use of the “community of inquiry” (COI) model that encourages children and adults to participate in a discursive, open, collaborative model of philosophical thinking cultivated through the Philosophy for Children program.

Such an approach avoids the overly simplistic, behavioristic, and exclusively theoretical approaches, as well as heavily behavioristic methods Gregory has outlined earlier in the paper. He implies that COI allows for nuanced discussion about ethical issues from varying perspectives. The method is designed to help participants avoid the excessive narrowness or dogmatism that plagues many of these failed approaches, while taking notice of the child’s capacity for individual conscience and intellectual and moral contributions in a shared dialogue of learning.

Gregory offers COI as an effective tool for bridging the divide between abstract theorizing, on the one hand, and outright manipulation of children’s ethical reasoning, on the other. Using COI allows participants to develop shared ethical visions that ground judgments about how to be exemplary ethical agents, knowing what to do, but also critically justifying one course of action, rather than another, as right. COI offers some promise as a holistic alternative to hopelessly lopsided approaches to ethical education; a real ethical community underwritten by multiple and diverse perspectives within a community of peers. Thus, COI may be a useful antidote to narrow and rigid ethical pedagogies by serving as a forum for self-directed, selfcorrective moral inquiry.

My concern, and it is not one directed at Gregory’s argument, is that we are investing a good deal of confidence and hope in COI as a pedagogical methodology. Oh, dear, another pedagogical method to add to the burgeoning collection? We have good reasons to believe that COI is effective in helping children (and grown-up students) to clarify and share positions, but it, too, is a theory and I can envision clumsy, and even gross, misuse of it. COI could prove to be a two-edged instrument, used for good or ill in the hands of inexperienced, conceptually clumsy, or short-sighted practitioners. While many of us believe the method may solve the problems Gregory identifies in this paper, how can we be certain that it will help most, or even some, students become more confident and articulate in their moral understanding? Will it help participants
to transcend their prejudices and evil propensities? Or make them more apt to act in morally laudable ways? While COI seems to make theoretical and pedagogical sense, I think we should be cautious about jumping aboard, and promoting, the COI bandwagon with abandon.

Lastly, it becomes increasingly clear that we live in a time of deep irony, a point Gregory eloquently identifies. Despite humanity’s focused pursuit of knowledge, of truth, and goodness, in the wake of centuries of effort and countless pioneers and martyrs to this cause, and along with increasingly sophisticated educational theories, epistemologies, psychologies, and pedagogies, we may have lost sight of the original goal of our shared human project—to live well and become wise—a state that the ancients, and Gregory, identify as an important existential aim. As I read this paper, it occurred to me to share it with every educator I know and am very pleased it is included in *Teaching Ethics*. I greatly appreciate the opportunity to read it myself and look forward to more provocative thoughts about these issues from Maughn Gregory.

**NOTE**