TEACHING ETHICS IN THE HIGH SCHOOLS: A DEWEYAN CHALLENGE

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Everyone is ready to lead ethics classes and workshops—even undergraduates. One of mine recently asked me if I would agree to supervise an independent study in which she planned to design an ethics curriculum for middle-school and high-school students. “Maybe we could even take it down to elementary-school level,” she effused. This bright young woman earnestly believed that if people in low-income, high-crime areas would just take a couple of ethics courses, they would be less inclined to mug people and more inclined to act like the college students she knew.

–G. Marino¹

It would be, I am inclined to believe, comparatively easy to bring arguments in support of the conclusion that there has never been such a widespread interest on teaching ethics in the [high] schools as at present; or of the conclusion that there is a general consensus among experts against teaching it.

–J. Dewey²

Should ethics be taught in the high schools? Should high school faculty teach it themselves or invite college and university professors (or instructors) into their classrooms to share their expertise? In this paper, I argue that the challenge to teach ethics in the high schools has a distinctly Deweyan dimension to it, since (i) Dewey proposed that it be attempted and (ii) he provided many valuable resources with which to proceed. The paper is organized into four sections. In the first, I summarize Jim Garrison’s account of Dewey’s philosophy as education and argue that it offers an exceptional tool-kit to someone interested in advocating for high school ethics pedagogy. The second section presents Dewey’s model for ethics instruction in a high school setting, as articulated in his only essay devoted specifically to the subject.³ The third examines Peter Singer’s (1972) brief essay, “Moral Experts,” to see whether moral expertise is a sine qua non for teaching ethics in the high schools. In the fourth and concluding section, I propose that meeting the Deweyan challenge of teach-
ing ethics in the high schools requires, first, preparing oneself to overcome the objection that such a project is naïve, utopian or just plain foolish and, second, organizing enthusiastic participants to develop and test a prototype, experimenting with various implementation strategies on a small scale before attempting a bolder and larger scale version of the project. Apropos of this second requirement, I showcase the Center for Education in Law and Democracy’s (2009) “The High School Ethics Project” in the state of Colorado.

DEWEY’S PHILOSOPHY AS EDUCATION

According to Jim Garrison, Dewey offered a vision of philosophy as education, rather than a philosophy of education. The relevant difference is that, in the case of the latter (or philosophy of education), philosophical concepts frame an analysis of pedagogy, as philosophers already analyze other areas of study (e.g., science, math, language, sex and love), whereas in the former (philosophy as education), education pervades all philosophical inquiries, for philosophy broadly-construed is, in Dewey’s words, “the general theory of education.” Garrison’s cogent account of Dewey’s educational philosophy involves five elements: (i) habit, (ii) environment, (iii) growth, (iv) communication and (v) democracy—each of which I will briefly describe.

Habit

Education conceived as integral to philosophy is a “process of forming fundamental dispositions” so that they “take effect in conduct” (Garrison, 1998:63; Dewey 1996, MW 9:338). These dispositions are beliefs and, more generally, habits that together form and flexibly define a person’s character. While it is tempting to identify a habit or disposition to act with the act itself, Dewey (1996, LW 12:21) defines a habit as “a way or manner of action, not a particular act or deed.” In other words, a habit is a mode of conduct, not the conduct itself. According to Garrison (1998:64), “[p]hilosophy as education involves the critical acquisition of habits of conduct, controlled by the ideal values that nurture human growth.” Values direct choice and action when existing habits prove unhelpful or obstructive to good conduct. Indeed, both values and habits can be evaluated naturalistically, instrumentally or conventionally. The ultimate test of a habit’s value is whether it directs inquiry in fruitful ways—ways that fund experience with meaning, render new connections, create helpful tools for future inquiries and develop the inquirer’s native
Not surprisingly, the test of a habit’s value is identical to the test of education’s value. It involves the technique (or art) of imagining possible ways for improving one’s capacities and taking what one learns in one context and applying it in another context. Dewey (1996, LW 13-25-6) writes: “What he [the student] has learned in the way of knowledge and skill [or habit] in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow.” So, learning occurs through the accretion of intelligent habits that reflexively guide human action and inquiry. Both teaching and learning are artistic techniques that enrich experience.

Environment

For Dewey, the notion of interaction tells us that living organisms, whether sea anemones or human learners, are intimately connected with their environments. According to Tom Burke (1994:23), the “basic picture, generally speaking, is that of a given organism/environment system performing a wide range of operations as a normal matter of course—scanning, probing, ingesting, discharging, adapting to, approaching, avoiding, or otherwise moving about and altering things in routine ways, in order to maintain itself.” Whether within simple biological systems or complex social ones, environmental disruptions stimulate efforts by organisms to restore equilibrium, to adapt their (functionally-defined) internal and external environments (in a process biologists call ‘homeostasis’) and to subsequently develop in viable and meaningful ways. With respect to education, creating an environment that is conducive to learning is incumbent upon the educator. Indeed, Garrison (1998:69) draws attention to Dewey’s (1996, MW 9:23) statement that “[w]e [as educators] design environments.” When information is mechanically presented by the teacher and students are expected to passively receive and regurgitate it (what is often called the ‘banking concept’ in education), the environment undermines the aims of learning and growth. Moreover, mastery of the subject matter taught is not a sufficient condition for being an effective educator. Rather, good pedagogy integrates the subject-matter and innovative teaching methods within a learning environment that both appeals to and disciplines students’ natural impulses. For example, inquiry-based educational methods leverage the teacher’s ability to design projects that pique the students’ natural curiosity. These same projects should also channel students’ native energies by focusing attention on mastering techniques of inquiry and securing reliable outcomes.
Growth

For Dewey, education is a catalyst for growth. According to Garrison (1998:70), “[t]he aim of education is growth.” But what exactly does Dewey mean by growth? First, let’s examine what Dewey says, and then an interpretation by a recent commentator. Dewey (1996, MW 9:56) writes:

Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which ensure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age.

Educative growth occurs when a learner develops her potentialities under propitious circumstances, that is, in circumstances typically supplied by a thoughtful educator. Does this mean that growth can only occur within the school? Dewey’s (1996, MW 1:66) response might seem out of character for a university professor: “The everyday work of the school shows that children can live in school as out of it, and yet grow daily in wisdom, kindness, and the spirit of obedience—that learning may, even with little children, lay hold upon the substance of truth that nourishes the spirit, and yet the forms of knowledge be observed and cultivated; and that growth may be genuine and thorough, and yet a delight.” Educative growth for Dewey, then, does not depend exclusively on formal education. In his recent book, Inquiry and Education, James Scott Johnston (2006:106-7) proposes that the term ‘growth’ means three possible things for Dewey. First, it is a biological or “organismic” capacity that humans as well as other organisms have for developing and adapting to their environs. Second, growth indicates the emerging evaluative or “judgmental” skills that humans display in solving problems. Third, it is “experiential” in the sense that humans can learn from experiences and change their behaviors accordingly, thereby cultivating intelligent habits. Obviously, these three senses of growth are not mutually exclusive, but overlap considerably, especially when humans grow through learning. Therefore, the learning that takes place both in school and the greater society is a sine qua non for realizing Johnston’s three dimensions of growth: biological, judgmental and experiential.

Communication

Education also permits learners to become more effective and sympathetic communicators. Communication plays a crucial role in inquiry
or problem-solving, as does language, the quintessential means or, in Dewey’s (1996, LW 1:134) words, the “tool of tools.” Etymologically, to communicate is to make common (Dewey 1996, LW 10:248-9). Logic is the term of choice for Dewey in describing the pattern of inquiry common to scientific and ordinary discourse. Indeed, logic for Dewey (1996, LW 12:4) signifies the “need for the development of a general theory of language in which form and matter are not separated.” Form is nothing less than the techniques of inquiry and analysis; whereas matter is the subject-matter or content for inquiry and analysis. Through language use, form and matter, as well as techniques and subject-matter, can be viewed as reciprocally (or transactionally) related aspects of the same process: the process of meaningful communication. By converting objects in everyday experience into “things with a meaning,” communication “whether it be public discourse or that preliminary discourse termed thinking” reconstructs conventional terms into precise instruments for resolving common problems (Dewey 1996, LW 1:132). In Dewey’s (1996, LW 2:332) *The Public and Its Problems*, democratic methods encompass communication and collaborative inquiry undertaken by citizens against a rich background of supportive institutions. Developing the ability to communicate across disciplinary boundaries about the products of our separate inquiries is also an objective of the educational enterprise. It is the goal of making what is originally sequestered to separate and specialized (scientific) communities of inquiry into what is common, and thus part of a broader or more encompassing community.

**Democracy**

Democracy as a social ideal demands education for its (even partial) realization; education that generates growth requires (at least some degree of) democratic engagement. Rather than recommend specific institutional forms, or “political democracy,” Dewey (1996, LW 2:325) deployed a set of leading principles (or postulations) that together are termed the “social idea” of democracy. As postulations, they are intended to direct subsequent investigations; however, taken alone, they have no direct correspondence with any particular set of institutions. So, Dewey’s (1996, LW 14:230) democratic idea orients the democratic reformer towards a lofty, if somewhat vague, goal: namely, the “creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.” Likewise, with respect to democratic education, Dewey rarely recommended particular institutions, curricular designs or administrative reforms as panaceas for the problems confronting educators. With few
exceptions, he invited educators to experiment with multiple institutional forms, but did not advocate any himself.

One of the exceptional cases in which Dewey recommended concrete democratic-educational reforms can be found in third chapter of *The School and Society*. Here Dewey (1996, MW 1:51) proposed a novel design for a school based on the design of a home. The ideal home contains “a workshop” and “a miniature laboratory,” as well as an extension “out of doors to the garden, surrounding fields, and forest,” all of which are mimicked in the ideal school (Dewey 1996, MW 1:50). Dewey envisioned four rooms in the ideal school, each on the corner of a central museum/library and each devoted to an individual area of study (e.g., physical/chemical science, biology, music and art). Four recitation rooms sit half in the four rooms and half in the central museum/library, “where the children bring the experiences, the problems, the questions, the particular facts which they have found, and discuss them so that new light may be thrown upon them, particularly new light from the experience of others, the accumulated wisdom of the world—symbolized in the library” (Dewey 1996, MW 1:51). Dewey’s school design is based on the hypothesis that if we create shared public spaces for the purpose of pooling our ideas and sharing our experiences (i.e., social intelligence), then we can effectively increase opportunities for discussion and learning. While opportunities for communication are abundant in the ideal home, the objective of the parent-teacher should not be to talk aimlessly with the child-student:

The child is already intensely active, and the question of education is the question of taking hold of his activities, of giving them direction. Through directions, through organized use, they tend toward valuable results, instead of scattering or being left to merely impulsive expression (Dewey 1996, MW 1:25).

In other words, the aim of schooling is not to curry favor with the child or to permit the child’s natural curiosities to have full reign in determining the content of the curriculum—what is sometimes called ‘child-centered education.’ Instead, appealing to the child’s native interests and impulses becomes an initial phase of or entry-point into the educational process; however, it does not exhaust that process. Whether in the home or the classroom, the progressive educator should provide discipline and guidance, in Dewey’s (1996, MW 1:25-8) words, “direct[ing] the child’s activities, giving them exercise along certain lines . . . [that] thus lead up to the goal” of the child’s growth.
Dewey on Ethics Pedagogy in the High School

Dewey (1996, EW 4:54) opens the essay “Teaching Ethics in the High School” by revealing an apparent “antinomy” between the “widespread” popular support for teaching ethics in the schools, on the one hand, and “general” agreement among “experts against teaching it,” on the other. However, the opposition to ethics pedagogy depends not only on expertise, but on a particular conception of ethics, namely, that of “moralizing in the classroom,” the “drumming in of ethical precepts,” and “set moral instruction other than [that which] grows directly out of occurrences in the school itself” (Dewey 1996, EW 4:54-5). In other words, ethics understood as socialization or indoctrination from a particular moral-religious perspective (even in a more diluted sense, such as spiritual guidance) is inappropriate for the modern secular classroom. Of course, the corollary to this objection is that ethics “conceived in this [moralizing] spirit” is better taught in a different context, viz. the church or the home. Dewey (1996, EW 4:55) argues that if we start with a different “conception of ethical theory,” viz. where agents inquire into morally problematic situations and imagine possible ways of acting and resolving these problems, then ethical theory is “teachable in the schoolroom” and, indeed, is “necessary to any well-adjusted curriculum.”

Dewey’s rationale for making ethics a subject for study in high school is that it has a series of cascading benefits, such as the development of an open-minded disposition, moral imagination and the ability to address problematic “practical situations” generally. Open-mindedness is a secondary disposition (or second-order habit) that empowers students to learn how to learn, that is, to forge and to modify the initial tools (or first-order habits) they acquire by solving problems in specific situations and then to generalize these lessons for use in future (unforeseen) situations (Dewey 1996, LW 8:136). Studying ethics prepares students for adult life by offering them “the record and the instruments” of “human life itself,” a curriculum that is not just relevant, but integral, to practical living (Dewey 1996, EW 4:61). In this way, Dewey’s argument for teaching ethics in the high schools directly implicates the initial three elements of Garrison’s account of Dewey’s philosophy as education. First, with regard to habit, ethics education in the high schools cultivates inquiry-specific habits, such as open-mindedness and moral imagination, in the character of students. Second, in the area of environment, high school teachers design ethical learning environments, posing moral dilemmas and problems that involve value trade-offs, thereby testing and reinforcing intelligent habits of moral choice. Third and lastly, the objective of
teaching ethics in the high school is to generate growth, or what Dewey calls “the ordered enrichment of experience,” by helping students acquire the instrumentalities to negotiate morally and practically problematic situations.

Less directly, but just as significantly, teaching ethics in a high school setting implicates the last two elements in Garrison’s Deweyan model of philosophy as education. Ethics education in the high schools improves communication skills. Working through morally problematic situations with other students tends to refine the learner’s ability to sympathetically communicate with others. Ethics education in the high schools also facilitates democratic engagement and a sense of political efficacy. Though Dewey never expressly connected his school design to the activity of teaching ethics in the high school, one could imagine a fifth room devoted to the study of moral problems, which would then be related to the other four subject areas (physical/chemical science, biology, music and art) in the central “recitation” or deliberation area. In addition, situational problem-solving permits students to empathetically imagine the interests of all those affected by their decisions (including those not present), an important skill for acting in the dual capacities of a citizen representative (i.e., representing both one’s own and other citizens’ interests). Indeed, once a student becomes habituated to the activity of engaged problem-solving, she is more likely to feel as if her engagements in public affairs (whether voting, serving on a jury, participating in a poll or volunteering on a city commission) will meaningfully contribute to the political process.

SINGER ON MORAL EXPERTISE

In this penultimate section, the question of whether high school faculty devoted to teaching ethics in the curriculum should invite those with appropriate expertise, such as college and university ethics professors, into the classroom is addressed. A brief essay by the ethicist Peter Singer (1972:115), “Moral Experts,” provides insight into how one might answer the parallel question of whether there is “such [a] thing as moral expertise.” If there is no such thing, then the matter is settled, there is no need to proceed further. If moral expertise is possible, then we must contemplate whether a college or university ethics curriculum is suitable for high school students.

Singer rejects three meta-ethical positions that would defeat the possibility of moral expertise ab initio. The first is similar to one Dewey
eschews in “Teaching Ethics in the High School”—namely, that the function of ethical experts is not to moralize or proselytize: “The role of the moral philosopher is not the role of the preacher” (Singer 1972:115). Second, moral relativism is incompatible with moral expertise, since if every person’s moral view were as good as everyone else’s, no one could claim to have an epistemically or normatively privileged position in making choices about how to resolve morally problematic situations. Third, Singer (1972:115-6) evaluates Gilbert Ryle’s claim that moral choice only requires that the agent show genuine care for others, not that she have some special expertise or knowledge of moral subject-matter. Although caring factors into the process of ethical decision making, it is by no means exhaustive of those resources that a moral agent must bring to bear in making difficult choices about matters of right and wrong. Indeed, when two values direct us to two different courses of action (e.g., “honesty clashes with charity”), Singer (1972:116) notes, the “need for thought and argument” arises. Thus, the need for moral experts qua experts in rational argumentation reenters the picture with a vengeance.

If moral expertise is possible, then Singer must say what being a moral expert entails. In a process that he calls “thinking out,” moral agents are challenged to engage in a four-step exercise that does not imply the dominance of any single ethical principle. First, the agent gathers information. Second, she determines the relevance of that information to the moral issue at hand. Third, she evaluates the information in light of one or more ethical principles or frameworks, whether utilitarian, deontological, virtue-based or another. Fourth and finally, the agent tries to isolate and remove any trace of prejudice or extreme partiality in this deliberative process (Singer 1972:116). The upshot of Singer’s (1972:117) argument is that moral expertise is not only possible, but also superior: “[T]he moral philosopher does have some important advantages over the ordinary man.” The three “advantages” that she has over the average person are that (i) she is formally trained in argumentation; (ii) she has greater familiarity with the conceptual tools of ethics; and (iii) she has more time to contemplate moral issues. Since thinking out is not confined to normative evaluation, “to be moral experts,” Singer (1972:117) concludes, “it would be necessary for moral philosophers to do some fact-finding on whatever issue they were considering.”

Given that moral expertise is both possible and superior, the way forward involves asking whether a college or university ethics curriculum can accommodate a high school audience. Surely some high school students are capable of the same level of instruction as their higher educa-
tion counterparts. On the other hand, many are not. So, the choice of curriculum to suit an audience is a matter of degree, not of kind. Curricula suited to college and university students can be adapted for a high school audience, not only tailoring for their degree of interest, but also their ability to think critically. Another way to introduce ethical concepts such as character and virtue to students unfamiliar with them is through analysis of more familiar sources, such as texts in classic literature. Inviting moral experts or philosophers into the classroom is one way to increase the rigor of instruction, but not the only way. In the state of Colorado, the Center for Education in Law and Democracy (2009) working in partnership with the Xcel Energy Foundation has been facilitating ethics education seminars for high school teachers—thereby teaching the teachers. The result of this collaboration is “The High School Ethics Project,” whose organizers and associates strive “[t]o support Colorado secondary teachers,” “[t]o find appropriate opportunities for integrating ethics into” the high school curriculum, and “[t]o increase student understanding of ethics and enhance their ability to engage in reasoned discussion of ethical issues.” Their website features two examples of lesson plans developed by Colorado teachers working in consultation with moral experts: (i) Jason Barnes’ (2009) “Ethics and Decisions” exercise, whereby students reason about the course of action a character in a morally problematic hypothetical scenario should choose and (ii) Richard Rosivach’s (2009) “Will you tell?” lesson which tasks students to imagine a situation in which they observe morally questionable behavior and asks them whether they would report it to an adult. These two lesson plans demonstrate that ethics instruction can be tailored to a high school audience, both piquing students’ native interests in the subject-matter and disciplining the ways in which they inquire about and render judgments in the face of pressing moral problems.

CONCLUSION

One possible response to Dewey’s recommendation that ethics be taught in the high schools is to treat it as a clarion call to school reformers. However, I would like to suggest another avenue. It is perhaps not the recommendation itself, but the bevy of conceptual tools that emerge in his educational philosophy (or Garrison’s presentation of them in his account of Dewey’s philosophy as education) that will aid the reformer dedicated to introducing an ethics curriculum into the secondary school classroom. In other words, it is not Dewey’s challenge to teach ethics in
the high schools that we should be exclusively concerned with here, but rather a Dewey-inspired (or Deweyan) challenge to introduce ethics pedagogy into secondary schools by drawing on a wide array of resources (even those that Dewey omitted to mention). No matter what the content of a high school administrator’s ideological or pedagogical commitments, Deweyan reasons—such as those hinging on the cultivation of intelligent habits, the design of superior educational environments, the provision of conditions for personal growth, the development of better communication skills and the promotion of democracy in the classroom—are those that typically garner support, not opposition. It is in this way that Dewey’s educational philosophy offers a tool-kit for those who advocate teaching ethics in the high schools. As one school reformer notes, “We can’t tell kids what’s right and wrong—not in schools. They won’t believe us anyway. What we can do is ask them to think about what it means to be civilized and get them to talk openly with us and each other. Ethics isn’t much more than that.”

NOTES


2 EW 4:54. J. Dewey, “The School and the Life of the Child” in The School and Society (1899). Citations are to The Collected Works of John Dewey: Electronic Edition, edited by L.A. Hickman (Charlottesville, VA: Intelex Corp., 1996), following the conventional method, LW (Later Works) or MW (Middle Works) or Early Works (EW), volume: page number. The chapter was originally delivered as the second of three lectures to parents and others with an interest in the University Elementary School affiliated with the University of Chicago in April 1899.


4 Value judgments can be assessed naturalistically, that is, in terms of whether they permit humans to adapt to their natural and social environment. Dewey (1996, LW 7:285-309) (with James Hayden Tufts), “The Moral Self,” in Ethics (1932 revision). They can also be assessed instrumentally, that is, in terms of their efficacy or success in achieving favored ends. Finally, they can be evaluated conventionally, that is, by recourse to widely approved or potentially approvable community standards. Dewey’s theory of value requires that we locate the conditions of justification for our value judgments in both the individual’s community (i.e., in terms of standards of general approval) and human conduct itself (i.e., in terms of instrumental efficacy), not in a priori criteria, such as divine commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or a fixed Aristotelian telos.


5 James Scott Johnston makes this point: “Education is the formal means for the development of the habits and attitudes of inquiry such that growth can occur.” Inquiry and Education: John Dewey and the Quest for Democracy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 110.

6 In a popular address, Dewey claims that teaching is both an art and a technique: “Now, there is a technique of teaching, a technique of the management of the schoolroom . . . [yet] no matter how complete and adequate the teacher’s command is of the technique of teaching, that is, of the various forms of outward skill which are necessary to make the successful teacher. The teacher as an artist needs to be one who is engaged in getting the pupils as much as possible into the attitude of the artist in their relations in life, that is, to solve what is after all the great problem, the moral, the intellectual problem of everyone, to get habits of efficient action, so that the person won’t be a mere day-dreamer or theorist, or a wasteful or incompetent person, but to get that unity with certain affections and desires and sympathies and with power to carry out intellectual plans. That can be got only when we give as much attention to the thinking side of the life of the pupils from the first day as we give to their forming these good outward habits. For this reason it seems to me that so far as the teaching is concerned the great problem of the teacher is the problem of keeping a balance between these two factors of efficiency in action and insight and foresight, ability to have the purpose to perform plans in thought.” “The Educational Balance, Efficiency and Thinking,” LW 17:81-2.

7 According to Mark E. Warren, “citizen representatives” fulfill the two “representative capacities” as “citizens [who] represent themselves” and “lay citizens [who] represent other citizens.” Many new experiments in citizen engagement that allow citizens to exercise these dual representative roles, such as “citizen juries and panels, advisory councils, stakeholder meetings, lay members of professional review boards, representatives at public hearings, public submissions, citizen surveys, deliberative polling, deliberative forums, focus groups, and advocacy group representations.” “Citizen Representatives,” in Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly, edited by M. E. Warren and Hilary Pearse (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 50-69, 50-1.


10 High school faculty worked in concert with faculty associated with the Center for Education in Law and Democracy as well as the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics.

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