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Review of

In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp

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In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy, and Education provides a timely portrait of the life and philosophical commitments of an often-underappreciated founder of the Philosophy for Children (P4C) movement. Ann Margaret Sharp wrote much of the curriculum in P4C, trained teachers worldwide in the practice, and theorized many of the movement's key ideas. Despite these many contributions, her collaborator Matthew Lipman has enjoyed much greater visibility in conversations about P4C. Sharp and Lipman were very much a team in their work together at Montclair State University. A critical anthology of Sharp's work in the *Philosophy for Children Founders Series* is, thus, an important corrective to an historical record that seems to skew arbitrarily towards favoring the contributions of her male counterpart. Editors Megan Laverty and Maughn Rollins Gregory are to be commended for curating a work that carefully blends biographical and critical essays, interviews, and poetry with Sharp's philosophical papers to draw out a picture of her that is richer than it would have been had it focused on her theoretical scholarship alone. In this picture, we receive yet another example through which to see philosophy as an increasingly diverse field, attending to an increasing diversity of topics and questions. In a world where academic philosophy as a discipline can sometimes seem lost in tedious pursuits and where political discourse has become strident and fragmented, there are good lessons to be gleaned in Sharp's example.

As Laverty and Gregory portray Sharp, she lived across borders of geography, culture, ability, race, class, social convention, and other forms of difference, oriented by an abiding faith in others. Though it is most explicit in Sharp and Laverty's essay "Looking at Others' Faces", which draws on the work of ethicist Emmanuel Levinas, Sharp's concern for her relationship to the mysteries that reside in others echoes throughout her scholarly and practical activity as a whole. For Sharp and Laverty, "human beings are essentially mysterious" (p. 123). On Sharp's picture, it is by caring for one's ethical relationship with others' mystery and alterity that one might be so cared for in one's own uniqueness and alterity in turn. Sharp saw this care as the basis of the creative activity of a community of inquiry and a unifying form of fallible "global ethical consciousness" (p. 231). Whether it was in her early career teaching at Virginia Union University, in helping develop the first PhD program with a concentration in Philosophy for Children at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City, or in her relentless efforts to share philosophy for children with others who were similarly curious, Sharp lived the principles she expresses in her essays. Her belief in the potential for education to liberate and to build community was one she not only articulated, but that she also lived with others whom she inspired and who inspired her in turn.

As Laverty and Gregory report, for Sharp, philosophy was not primarily a discipline concerned with the interrogation of theoretical propositions, but as "the art of living" (p. 10; p. 260): an art governed by epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic standards. According to Laverty and Gregory, Sharp "had no tolerance for the minutiae of theoretical speculation and point scoring that had become the *techne* of professional philosophy" (p.10). Sharp nevertheless wrote a number of theoretical essays advocating P4C on ethical and political grounds. On a charitable reading of Sharp's pragmatism, it is natural to see these essays not as evidence of a contradiction, but as practical proposals, that is, as ways we might see ourselves more fully as we strive to live more fruitfully together.

Laverty and Gregory help the reader to appreciate Sharp's care for this inquiring ethos as it is expressed in her anti-authoritarian streak, sense of humor, and generosity of spirit. Several episodes recounted in the volume reflect these traits: Sharp's nightly philosophical discussions with students who had been cast out by the traditional education systems due to their special needs, but whom she trusted to mark her university students' papers; her successful efforts to convince the racist family from whom she rented a home in her first teaching job to let her host racially inclusive events at their house; and her efforts to convince hostile and patriarchal philosophy departments that women could not only do philosophy but also that the philosophy of education, the philosophy of childhood, and philosophy with children are areas worthy of exploration, Throughout these episodes in Sharp's life her abiding and tenacious concern to create inclusive spaces where insight and understanding might flourish are on display. This spirit shines just as bright in Sharp's theoretical accounts of ethics, feminism, childhood, education, personhood, and political philosophy, all of which make explicit the reasons why she did what she did up until her death in 2010.

Laverty and Gregory's volume uses Sharp's essays to draw the reader into an agora of critical discussion and inquiry of precisely the sort Sharp labored to create throughout her life. The collection is divided into seven sections, each shedding light on a topic Sharp focused upon as an educator, curriculum developer, and theorist of philosophy for children. Each section title carries a common form: "Ann Margaret Sharp on *x* and the community of inquiry" where *x* denotes the variable topic of the section. The topics that are substituted for *x* are as follows: pragmatism (Part 1); philosophy of education, teacher education (Part 2); ethics, personhood (Part 3); feminism, children (Part 4); religion, spirituality, aesthetics (Part 5); caring thinking, education of the emotions (Part 6); and social-political education (Part 7). A critical introduction, often by a friend or collaborator of Sharp, starts each section. The introductory essays are illuminating, providing valuable context and even-handed assessments of the contributions of Sharp's philosophical essays in each section.

The P4C practitioner will find inspired support for the moral and intellectual worth of P4C in each of Sharp's essays, though there are no curricula or lesson plans in this collection. Like many in the Deweyan democratic tradition, Sharp sees the processes of reflective deliberation and problem solving to be the best basis upon which human beings might share space and orient their activity in the world. My own Deweyan sympathies to this intellectual and political project have me nodding along with many of Sharp's conclusions, even if I often feel, as I do with Dewey, that more should be said in support of them. In particular, Sharp's suggestion that fostering an ethical, politically just, and intellectually rich community of inquiry is as much an aesthetic and emotional project as it is one formed through the identification of principles and processes, is a welcome expansion on at least some discussions at the intersection of political philosophy and education.

In developing her substantive views about the nature and value of communities of philosophical inquiry Sharp draws on an eclectic mix of historical sources. Charles Pierce and John Dewey figure prominently in Sharp's theoretical writing alongside (to name but a few), Nietzsche, Simone Weil, Iris Murdoch, Hannah

Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Hilary Putnam, and bell hooks. What unifies these thinkers, as Sharp employs them, is a commitment to the concerns of active life as the basis upon which to orient reflection and communal action. As Jennifer Glasser notes in an excellent critical introduction to the section on the social and political educational significance of the community of inquiry, Sharp saw philosophy for children, as constituting "a *praxis*—reflective communal action—a way of acting in and on the world" (Sharp, 1991, p. 246).

For Sharp, following her reading of Pierce, the normative goal of responding to the world and others in it *correctly* is constitutive of what it means to be a person. "To be a person," on Sharp's account, "is to be a being that talks to itself, a process that cannot be separated from the on-going activity of self-construction" (p. 53) alongside others engaged in this same normative task. In this process, "Self-correction… becomes the significant criterion of self-knowledge, self-transformation and growth" (p. 53). "To perceive ourself as a self is to recognize where we have gone wrong" (p. 53). Without opportunities for normative inquiry in community with others, we thus might fail, by Sharp's lights, to fully realize our personhood, inasmuch as our capacities for self-interpretation and self-correction admit of degrees. Where such opportunities are afforded, we stand to gain the possibility of a transcendent form of "global ethical consciousness" (p. 230) that Sharp holds to be liberating. Sharp's brand of feminism and conception of human liberation emerges from this aspiration towards dialogic self-correction. In a co-authored essay on feminist philosophy of education with one of the volume's editors (Maughn Gregory), Sharp draws on work by Simone Weil to argue that through the process of reflective deliberation in community, the liberation of women will emerge "not from pre-determined truths but fashioned from a dialectic between the experiences of women and men past and present" (p.157). She states:

> the end of such an education is young women and men who are prepared to make an intelligent reckoning with the forces that beset them, to make sound judgments about what is possible and what is desirable, to engage in creative work that makes the desirable actual, and thereby bring the kinds of value and meaning to their lives and the lives of their communities that fulfill time's potential. (p. 157)

I applaud Sharp's insights but, with her commentators, sometimes find that the nature of her proposals is not always clear or well defended. As Peter Cam suggests in the introduction to the section on pragmatism, Sharp sometimes seemed to hold her commitment to the process of human liberation as procedural rather than substantive. Were it purely procedural, it would be good to know why one should commit to the procedure recommended—the process of rational inquiry—where one has other fundamental commitments. As Bernard Williams (1985/1993) has been so instructive in pointing out, one may be committed, for example, to one's faith come-what-may. Why should one with such a commitment put that at risk? These sorts of normative problems figure prominently in debates between procedural liberals like Rawls (1993), perfectionist liberals like Joseph Raz (1986), and communitarians like Michael Sandel (1982/1998) and Charles Taylor (1989) but are largely not considered in Sharp's treatments.

Sharp qualifies this proceduralism elsewhere, at least seeming to favour a more substantive view. Acknowledging Rortian views of pragmatism, which purport not to be interested in substantive truths, Sharp follows Hilary Putnam (1982) in holding that the very possibility of disagreement on standards of rationality itself entails a background commitment to a shared conception of truth and rationality (p. 44). The community of inquiry, Sharp asserts, "is a complex one. It presupposes some notion of truth, which in turn presupposes some notion of rationality and some notion of the good. The good is dependent upon assumptions that we hold about such things as human nature, society, persons, and even the universe," (p.

44). With R.G. Collingwood (1938), Sharp takes working out the right answers to these questions to require one to make sense of oneself in relation to others, precisely because the topics are normatively binding across lives. A student not educated with the tools of inquiry on these topics "would be denied the very means needed to make worthy judgments about the self" (p. 49).

For all Sharp says when she takes this more substantive line, it is not clear why the conception of rationality, presupposed in disagreement, must carry moral implications. Even if discovering misunderstanding depends upon a broader set of understandings between the disagreeing parties, there is no obvious moral upshot from this fact, unless one is to flatly infer a normative *ought* from a descriptive *is*. For all Sharp has shown, one may or may not care about the truth. Needless to say, these sorts of passages leave at least this reader wanting a bit more argument. Reading Sharp as a perfectionist or meliorist would put her within a camp that includes many philosophers of education, who recognize that procedural principles are always themselves substantive and ethical in nature when they are used to govern social life (see Levinson 1999; Callan 1997; Macedo 1990). It would in turn require some explanation of why her proposed form of perfection is normatively better than the alternatives not grounded in the spirit of inquiry.

I appreciate the depth of Sharp's work in blurring the distinctions between life and thought. Still, as Laurance J. Splitter remarks, it is easy to have "wished that Sharp was more critical—in the sense of more challenging of the viewpoints and understandings of those writers whose ideas she examined" (p.101). Peter Shea picks up this worry in his introduction to Sharp's essays on religion and spirituality. Shea rightly points out that Sharp (a) "has the generous habit of quoting briefly, in passing, from substantial works, without saying whether she agrees with the quotations or just finds the views provocative, and without locating the quotes within philosophic systems"; (b) almost always spends a large portion of an article outlining Philosophy for Children so that she might advocate for it but that this often "crowds out new arguments and insights, and limits space for a fuller development of the most central and potentially controversial claims"; and (c) "describes the ideal classroom in which everything goes right: students adopt philosophic practices quickly, acquire necessary skills, make space for each other's contributions… [and] treat each other carefully," (p. 163). With Shea, I concur that "Sharp's way of writing obscures the question of risk" (p. 163) in P4C, especially in cases where individual students' commitments and experiences may diverge significantly from others in the group.

As Shea shows, Sharp could have made a more modest claim in favour of philosophy for children. Rather than trying to justify it as a Deweyan "way of life" through which "global ethical consciousness" emerges transculturally and with a "sacred" status, Sharp might have defended the practice as a helpful way to cultivate students' autonomy while navigating fundamental ethical differences regarding the ultimate human good. Subjecting students to critical scrutiny on moral topics is not a trivial matter. As Shea highlights, where one disagrees deeply with one's peers and where the fundamental convictions forming the basis of disagreement were acquired through quite different experiences than those of one's fellow inquirers, it may not be possible to make visible to others one's reasons for seeing the moral world as one does. The background beliefs against which others make sense of one's claims may simply diverge too much from one's own, making one's view susceptible to a negative form of exposure that is not necessarily well-founded, nor psychologically beneficial. Shea highlights the way this might occur in discussions of morality that intersect with one's religious beliefs.

Similar problems may arise in response to other topics of normative concern, where participant experiences diverge. Students in a racialized minority group, for example, may have a difficult time articulating the normative features and weight of various acts of racial marginalization to members of a

dominant group who lack such experiences. If each student is to be heard in the discussion, a marginalized child may lack the airtime needed to make clear the differences between her own experiences and those of others. Though some space is given to cases where inquiry might bridge difference, the essays in the volume, taken as a whole, scarcely attend to issues of sexual identity, race, and class that might *challenge* the community of inquiry, particularly where one group of students is significantly outnumbered by another. In my view, the failure to make much mention or attend to these challenges, which animate many critical pedagogues and social justice educators, is a significant limitation of the volume as a substantive contribution to the literature on ethics and justice in and through a community of inquiry.

With that said, one gets the sense that Sharp would welcome these challenges to her work and to the community of inquiry she cherished. Above all else, it is clear that she lived a life animated by an openness to and active pursuit of self-correction, even as she worked to create the material conditions for inquiry with others. A starting point, here, would be to listen carefully to critical pedagogues who have been working to address these sorts of questions in the classroom, particularly as they impact students differentially along axes of race, class, gender, sexual identity, ability, and Indigeneity. Recent work in social epistemology might complement these efforts, as we think through the ways in which epistemic justice and injustice might be done in the community of inquiry (see Fricker 2007). Sharp has taken us some of the way toward addressing these issues by working to create the material conditions within which dissent might at least sometimes be heard. As a community of inquirers, we are left with more work to do in reconstructing our practice to facilitate deeper and more nuanced insight and action.

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