

CHAPTER I

What Can Educators Expect from Ethics?

In reflective experience as such, in investigation called forth by problematic situations, there is a rhythm of seeking and finding, of reaching out for a tenable conclusion and coming to what is at least a tentative one.

—John Dewey,¹ *Art as Experience* (LW 10, 183)

Introduction

Many future and current educators – teachers, leaders, counselors, and allied professionals – probably have more than a single expectation of the contributions of ethics to their educational theory and practice.² Unsurprisingly, they have insights and cautions to offer about the field, especially in diverse schools and societies (Hansen 1988). The cautions are offered, in part, because opinions and expectations are so numerous and diverse that they frequently collide. Moreover, ethical claims and concerns can sometimes be off-putting because they are confusing now and again as certain ethical ideas are encountered (e.g., subjectivism, relativism, emotivism, pluralism, particularism). These strands of thought, however, are readily distinguishable (Pappas 2008; Ruitenberg 2007). Beyond wanting clarity and offering caution, then, many educators think that a study of ethics should offer ways of determining the differences between right and wrong and wise and unwise choices and actions as they interact with students, colleagues, and others. In short, they think ethics ought to offer clear paths to a fair, responsible, and caring way to teach and lead. Equally, they may think of

¹ John Dewey and James Hayden Tufts coauthored *Ethics*, but each focused on a select set of chapters although they jointly wrote the 1908 and 1932 edition prefaces and 1932 Introduction. Dewey is the primary author of chapters 10–17. When referencing *Ethics*, we refer only to Dewey's primary chapters. Hence, our citations from the volume list Dewey only.

² Readers will note that we blend expectations for both ethics and ethical theory. While these topics can be distinguished, this work is based on the premise that ethics encompasses ethical theory.

ethics as a set of intellectual tools that enable them to address and contribute to the resolution of school moral quandaries so that they can quickly refocus on their teaching and leading, not realizing, perhaps, that addressing ethical concerns is an intrinsic, not intrusive, part of being a teacher and leader (Fenstermacher 2013; Goodlad, Soder, and Sirotnik 1990). Relatedly, some people wish to learn more about ethics so that their ethical reasoning and choices become more consistent and integrated with their religious ideals and professional codes of ethics. Others, both religious and nonreligious educators, may expect ethics to affirm and help them refine a swath of ethical givens, if not absolutes, that run through their transcendental thinking. Obviously, the above-mentioned expectations may commingle in complex and even contradictory ways.

Expectations and Dewey

Still, other aspiring and practicing educators may indicate that they expect little, if anything, worthwhile from a study of ethics. Their expectations may be shaped by historical, social, economic, political, and personal experiences and events that cause them to doubt the usefulness of ethics as a field of inquiry. Among these educators are those who think ethical claims are either an entirely personal matter or that they stem exclusively from one's cultural or religious beliefs. The choice, as they see it, is one of deciding which, if any, ethical values they prefer to observe or practice: their cultural ethic, religious ethic, or, perhaps, their personally designed eclectic ethic. Others (e.g., Gorecki 2017; Harris 2010; Stengel and Tom 1995), however, want to go beyond an inherited ethic to add an epistemic or knowledge concern: What are the intellectual grounds or warrant of ethical claims? That is, many proponents of diverse positions add to the what-to-expect-from-ethics discussion that ethical claims – whether cultural, religious, rational, scientific, or otherwise – need more than personal affinities to justify an acceptance and practice of them. They may argue too that a form of political or democratic legitimacy or social tolerance needs to be examined (LW 15, 170–83; Fine 1993; Heft 1999).

But those who want to examine the epistemic warrant or credibility for ethical assertions often differ on whether and to what degree there is a knowledge base for making ethical decisions. Some argue there are logical, scientific, religious, historical, practical, and experiential grounds for making many ethical decisions. Yet, others argue that there is little, if any, epistemic warrant or authority for ethical decision-making. Plus, they may add that a number of ethical claims have become tools for familial,

Expectations and Dewey

3

cultural, religious, political, and economic coercion and oppression (MW 14, 208). They think people with much to gain or lose – an autocratic family, a wealthy social stratum, a political elite, a religious oligarchy, a privileged profession – use ethical frameworks as tools to justify their manipulation, coercion, miseducation, and domination of others; they rely on undemocratic power rather than open deliberations, public data, and noncoercive persuasion to foster beliefs and practices. Moreover, whatever the practical or philosophical roots of ethical positions, those who are influential and powerful often reinterpret beliefs to their advantage, whether that entails defending the status quo or changing practices to advance their interests. Hence, many educators, like noneducators, think that ethics is often an instrument that is employed by the influential and powerful to retain and extend their cultural, educational, economic, religious, and professional advantages over others. In short, ethics has been corrupted, frequently, perhaps incorrigibly, in the interest of the powerful (Apple 1982, 2002; Freire 1973; Taylor 1996). Inside this evaluation of ethics may be an unarticulated assumption that there are both defensible and indefensible forms and uses of ethics.

Are there other reasons for studying ethics? Perhaps there are others who wish to understand how advantaged groups and individuals use ethics as a tool for control and dominance. These inquirers, rather than rejecting a study of ethics because of its frequent association with exploitative power, prefer to understand how people in power positions may employ ethical theories and arguments to give their personal or group agendas an advantage. Studying ethics from this angle, therefore, may provide opportunities for those interested in the economically and politically underprivileged to develop counterarguments to the claims of the overprivileged. On this point, Dewey (MW 14, 208) implies that multiple theories need to be studied because there is no one ethical position of those who seek “a monopoly of moral ideals, to carry on [their] struggle for class-power.”

Beyond the aforementioned diverse expectations for studying ethics are many others, including Dewey’s approach and expectations.³ He, like

³ While Dewey is known for being interested in moral struggles that result from “sincere doubts” and “moral perplexities” that are “between values each of which is an undoubted good in its place” (LW 7, 164–5), our interests as educators lead us to approach ethical inquiry more inclusively. That is, we employ Dewey’s method to address both ethical dilemmas that involve undoubted goods as well as ethical conflicts that seem, at least to some, to be between questionable goods and possible evils for at least two reasons. First, many, using multiple ethical lenses, begin analyses of reported ethically problematic situations without knowing whether anyone has acted ethically or unethically. They simply see problems and seek to address them. As they enter the inquiry process, it seems

ethicists with multiple backgrounds, is familiar with the contributions, limitations, and distortions of ethical theories, not just the strengths and limitations of his own orientation. Thus, he references, directly or obliquely, other theories (e.g., deontological, virtue, consequentialist, utilitarian, Marxian, Islamic, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Confucian, and Taoist). He anticipates elements of other theories too, e.g., critical, feminist, and care approaches. Incorporated into his philosophizing are references to many of the aforementioned expectations people have for studying – or not – ethics. Regularly he enhances his own ethical theory by recasting the strengths of others' theories, but he appraises these theories, seeking to select and employ warranted ideas.

Fortunately, there are critics (Gouinlock 1993; Horrigan 2015; Margo-lis 1986; Miller, Fins, and Bacchetta 1996) who respond to Dewey by evaluating his strengths and limitations. Collaborative evaluation of one another's ethical theories and arguments, therefore, is an intrinsic part of thinking ethically. As Peters (1966, 8) somewhat humorously states, "Philosophy [and ethics] is essentially a co-operative enterprise. Advances are made when two or three are gathered together who speak more or less the same language and can frequently for the purpose of hitting each other politely on the head." Dewey (LW 1, 298) clarifies that collaborative ethical evaluation or "criticism of criticism" is rooted in ordinary experience and has "its distinctive position among various modes of criticism in its generality" (298). Hence, ethics as "criticism of criticism" constitutes "discriminating judgment, careful appraisal" of any matter that involves goods, virtues, and obligations (298).

Dewey (1859–1952), of course, is a pragmatist or experimentalist, who profits, at least in part, from understanding many of the aforementioned ethical ideas and theories that arose before, during, and near the end of his life. He had the opportunity to construct, evaluate, and reconstruct his own thinking from almost the time of the US Civil War (1861–5) into immense cultural, political, demographic, epistemic, technological, and scientific change through both World War II (1939–45) and the Chinese Revolution (1949). He was noticeably influenced by numerous intellectuals, including thinkers like Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Darwin, and James. His first wife, Alice Chipman, friend Jane Addams, and numerous

worthwhile for them to learn to employ Dewey's method of inquiry, even when they disagree with aspects of his thought. Second, as people enter the inquiry process, they often learn that, at least on many occasions, an ethical conflict is indeed between two undoubted goods, e.g., providing more resources to better serve students on the autism spectrum or providing more resources to better serve students with English as a second language needs.

colleagues and students at the universities of Michigan, Minnesota, Chicago, and Columbia likewise deeply influenced his ideas (Martin 2002; Menand 2002; Ryan 1995). As an international figure, he was influenced by audiences and acquaintances who heard his lectures, raised questions, and answered his queries in China, Japan, Mexico, Canada, South Africa, Turkey, and Europe (Martin 2002). His ideas, however, do not constitute a nomadic ethical eclecticism but a pragmatic experimentalism that emphasizes a deliberation of viable choices and actions, a scientific approach to ethical inquiry and development, and an evaluation of the likely and actual consequences of moral decisions and actions (LW 7; Martin 2002). But his views are also greatly informed by the ordinary people who live in multiple forms of community as they communicate with one another and develop commonalities and differences (MW 9, 11, 17).

Dewey, along with William James (1842–1910) and Charles Peirce (1839–1914), produced a largely original philosophy and ethics that continue to inform philosophical and ethical deliberations, research, and evaluation worldwide (Martin 2002). His final articulation of ethics, while only a facet of his immense body of writings, is worth examining for several reasons. For K–12 educators, it is particularly relevant because he maintained a career-long interest in ideas, which continue to influence schools and students, e.g., (a) educational philosophy and practice; (b) democratic principles and values; (c) children, pedagogy, and learning; (d) curricular development and educational outcomes; (e) scientific inquiry and school assessment; and (f) social and school change and continuity. While many of his detractors and proponents have made claims about his ideas that range from the fanatical to the fantastical, there are also many carefully reasoned evaluations of his thought.

We explicate and employ Dewey's ideas in order to provide a way of addressing educators' ethical quandaries and dilemmas suitably for contemporary times (Pring [2007] 2017). His voice can help provide insights into a public ethic that welcomes the full public, including the Other (Abowitz and Stitzlein 2018; Stengel 2009), to share ideas and arguments. Of course, attention needs to be directed toward public problems and challenges using inquiry, laws, data, and deliberation rather than privileging certain opinions. But listening to others to understand their interests and to expand one's own is considered an essential ethical duty and virtue (Rice and Burbules 2010). Moreover, policies and expectations regarding ethical development and practice by public school educators and students in liberal democracies are regularly based on publicly accessible reasons and

grounds. Everyone, including those of different faiths (Kunzman 2006), should be welcome to participate in the development of policy proposals, explain why a proposal is or is not deemed acceptable, and argue why their identities, if they are not, should be respected. What is more, any critic of public school policy or practice, in whole or in part, should be free to express their criticism with the aim of reconstructing or replacing it, whenever merited, with a more clearly stated, valuable public ethical practice that attracts the support of diverse citizens.

We start our discussion of the above epigraph and this chapter to clarify the emphasis Dewey places on (a) reflective experience, (b) investigation, (c) problematic situations, (d) the rhythm of seeking and finding pertinent data and relevant arguments, and (e) tenable and tentative conclusions. These ideas represent a partial answer to the question, What can educators expect from Dewey's ethical theory? and provide a skeletal overview of certain aspects of his broad ethical theory. This glance at Dewey's ethics focuses on Problematic Situations and Reflective Experience and, later, on Aesthetic Experience and Investigative Conclusions.

Problematic Situations and Reflective Experience

What can educators learn by examining Dewey's ethical views? While his answer to this question is partially, if obliquely, implied earlier and in the epigraph, further clarification is merited. For explanatory purposes, the epigraphic order of concepts is modified below. Of course, the discussed strategic concepts remain ultimately connected; they overlap and, sometimes, fuse but can also be distinguished. The epigraph opens by giving attention to problematic situations and reflective experiences.

Problematic Situations

For Dewey, ethical issues and dilemmas arise in everyday school experiences and situations that are characterized by specific practical, local problems yet not isolated from broader life settings. He labels these typical encounters and circumstances, variously, as contexts, environments, and situations. Importantly, he argues that no problematic situation is ever an exact replication of another but that ethical precedents and historical continuities are frequently informative when one encounters moral challenges in new surroundings (LW 7, 329–30; Garrison, Neubert, and Reich 2012, 58–64). Each situation, then, is unique but not an isolated or disconnected experience. Every situation is embedded in a context that

includes more than the obvious concerns of interacting participants. Participants – students, educators, and parents – are unique and remain unique, because they are in a never-ending process of development, whether positive, negative, or both. Contexts include elements of social, material, and emotional cultures; they contain rudiments of prior and continuing emotions, beliefs, values, and conduct; they promote diverse desires, intentions, goods, evils, and obligations; they retain considerable historical and ethical continuity that informs new situations; and they involve both ethical uncertainty and conflict regarding equally feasible proposals of good. They too are distinctive as they change. The potential solutions that ideally lead to tenable and tentative solutions in situations, therefore, emerge through participants' everyday experience and thinking, interactive and reflective inquiry, not by a simple reflexive recall of opinions, beliefs, and truth claims.

Take, for example, the situation of Irene Sebastian, a third-grade teacher at the Academy for Civic Responsibility,⁴ who is reported for suddenly screaming at her students. The appropriate response to Irene's problem, according to Dewey, is not a reflexive reaction and quick reprimand based on a code of ethics, relevant laws, desirable virtues, or ethical principles. Instead, a cycle of "seeking and finding" facts and answers to pertinent questions is merited, a "reaching out for" Irene's and others' explanations and for tenable solutions to the problem, and, then, a narrowing of options to tentative explanations is necessary. But the consequences of the tentative resolutions should be determined (a) hypothetically by focused deliberations or dramatic rehearsals and (b) actually after a specific tentative solution has been carefully examined and tested. Plus, thoughtful attention, if Dewey's analytic strategy is acceptable, needs to be given to Irene's present problem, her formative growth and future responsibilities, not on her discipline for unprofessional behavior. This is not to say that her troublesome conduct is ignored; it is not. Instead, her actions should be investigated and, if appropriate, addressed with the intent of better serving students and enabling Irene to grow personally and professionally.

But important questions for the Academy, Maria, and others, are: How should problematic situations be investigated? Should the inquiry process always be the same or, alternatively, be situation specific? That is to say,

⁴ We strongly encourage the reader to read the Foreword and Preface if they have not already done so. Each is central to understanding the volume. The Preface not only introduces the book as a whole but importantly it also clarifies how the Academy helps contextualize Dewey's theorizing, related vignettes, and case studies. Likewise, the Foreword by Barbara S. Stengel helps situate the work in the context of contemporary ethical deliberation.

should each inquiry process be overseen by a senior teacher, a house coordinator, an assistant principal, the principal, or a school or district committee? Or by a variety of processes? How will solutions be constructed to ensure the well-being of individuals, classes, social groups, and the Academy? How will fairness in processes and outcomes be created, safeguarded, and expanded? To be more specific, who should do the “seeking and finding” and “reaching out for” and “coming to” the relevant details of Irene’s situation (LW 10, 183)?

However, there is much more to be said about what ethics may offer educators. Thinking back through Dewey’s concept of a problematic situation offers insight. First, ethics offers both broad and deep perspectives on how to address problematic situations. This is fortunate since problematic situations are inescapable and ubiquitous. They may also multiply if they are not addressed thoughtfully and expediently. Thus, Dewey claims, decisions and actions should be examined in a contextualized and holistic fashion, not in an isolated and atomistic way. Inquiring into ethical situations, moreover, is a crucial endeavor and not to be pursued haphazardly if a broad and deep perspective is to be gained. Any information – data, facts, outcomes, intentions, desires, and emotions – that offers insight into a practical problem and helps resolve the problem needs to be uncovered and considered. Indeed, Dewey conceives of educators’ involvement in ethical problems as another way they help one another and students to dissolve, resolve, or solve practical problems and problems of practice (EW 4, 54–61; Garrison 1999; Hansen 1998). But he goes further to suggest that ethical imagination, inquiry, and living should lead to an enjoyable and meaningful life (LW 7). He is not recommending a narrow ethic that just helps educators identify, analyze, disentangle, and adjudicate ethical infractions. To the contrary, he tries “to discriminate the fundamental instrumentalities requisite to our achieving and sharing the most intrinsically satisfying life” (Gouinlock 1972, vii). Thus, studying Dewey opens a window on multiple ways educators may wish to live broadly and fruitfully.

In Irene’s situation, she and her students appear to be the concerned participants. But does the obvious serve to mislead the inquirer? Are the obvious participants the only participants? Are there unidentified onlookers or participants? If yes, who are they? Seeking to address a complete problematic situation, therefore, means that ethical inquiry raises questions that may lead to more fertile interpretations of a problematic incident. For example, if the question, Who were the participants in Irene’s situation? is not raised, only a limited picture may be obtained

Problematic Situations and Reflective Experience

9

and, thereby, result in a skewed understanding of Irene's actions. Overlooking participants – or their importance – and other elements of a situation can be catastrophic, undermining what could have been a fair, responsible, and future-oriented outcome. In such cases, a problem becomes compounded by inadequate inquiry and may evolve into a series of related problematic situations. Dewey, therefore, concludes that one of an educator's basic ethical responsibilities is to examine thoroughly problematic situations. Fact-finding is an initial and ongoing responsibility of educators, parents, and students. Rushing to judgment is unethical and frequently leads to misdiagnosed situations and unwarranted conclusions and outcomes.

Studying ethics, then, helps educators understand the nature of ethics and ethical inquiry. In particular, studying ethics usually clarifies a set of concepts and questions, such as: What is ethics? What is an ethical problem? What does it mean to be ethical? When is a teacher or student ethical? How are ethical issues examined and resolved? What counts as warranted conclusions or cogent arguments in ethics? Why should I be ethical? Who am I becoming when I make a decision or set of decisions? Dewey approaches these questions from several angles. To begin, he observes that ethics involves “should questions” and wrestles with what an individual, group, society, or a teacher, parent, or principal should or should not do in a particular problematic situation (LW 7, 214, 229, 246). Dewey's emphasis, of course, is on specific situational problems, not on issues that are irrelevant to a board, student, teacher, school, or district. To work on the problematic details of a school-related situation, Dewey thinks ethical imagination and creative deliberation are likely as necessary as inquisitiveness. Or, better, he argues that imagination and deliberation are embedded in insightful inquiry. For instance, Maria needs imagination when she first hears of Irene's outbursts. As fair-minded and caring professionals, Irene's colleagues need imagination when they consider how they should respond to accounts of her behavior. How should they determine what is well-advised? Who needs to be involved? Why?

Moreover, Dewey claims that ethics is concerned with the emotions, actions, conduct, and habits that have a bearing on the well-being of one's self, others, groups, and, ultimately, the common good (LW 13, 18). How, from a personal-groups-common-good perspective, will Irene's situation and its resolution affect her, students, staff, administrators, and, maybe, the district as a whole? What do the likely outcomes of the situation imply about the development of desires, attitudes, and dispositions that will have an effect on the welfare of students and teachers?

To ignore the emotional aspect of ethical inquirers and participants, for Dewey, is to disregard a vital part of the human personality and ethical inquiry. In the end, such neglect is similar to disregarding acts or outcomes: unthinkable. The whole person is and should be involved in thinking about and learning to feel and act as an ethical person, including deciding what needs to be learned about a problematic ethical situation.

Most ethical decisions that are made in schools may seem to affect only the relationships of administrators, teachers, students, or a mixture of these participants. Yet, nearly every decision or behavior that affects anyone in a school has the potential to affect other district personnel, school volunteers, and parents because all are together part of the time (LW 13, 65–79). Thus, all principal-teacher-student-guardian interactions and collaborations can easily roll over into other situations. This rollover potentiality, for us, means the outcomes of situations are rarely self-contained, for many initial outcomes link to later ones. Situations, therefore, are not only unique; they are interconnected, dynamic, and can mutate into expanded or new situations. As a result, personal and group deliberations or dramatic, imaginative rehearsals need to consider the current whole situation as it exists and how that situation may be transformed in the future by reflective decisions (MW 14, 132–8). Indicators of potential undesirable changes in the lifecycle of a situation, therefore, are invaluable markers for school communities, e.g., unanswered questions, stubborn doubts, and pervasive uneasiness.

Dewey notes too that those who examine problematic situations explore and interrogate claims of good and bad, right and wrong, virtue and vice, and prudence and imprudence (LW 5, 279–88). He emphasizes that the meanings of these concepts and other ideas are unusually important and, frequently, controversial. Thus, they should be clarified as often as needed, e.g., situationally, culturally, and generationally. In many multilingual and multicultural situations, the need for conceptual clarity is heightened: seemingly simple words like the Spanish “*respeto*” and the English “respect” can have both similar and dissimilar meanings. The concept of equal respect of persons, therefore, can easily lead to different shades of expectations and misunderstandings. Similarly, Dewey recognizes that one of our earlier imaginary objectors to studying ethics is correct: many – perhaps most – people use ethical claims to impose, at least occasionally, their personal preferences and purposes on others, children, and adults (LW 13, 5–10). Imposing values on others, he observes, is itself an ethical issue that merits ongoing investigation. The grounds for opposing – but occasionally approving – imposition require examination and evaluation (LW 11, 345–7).