

## Review of

### ***In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy, and Education.***

Edited by Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Lavery.

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Philosophy for children (P4C) is a pedagogical initiative that is practiced in 63 countries and in 24 languages (<http://my.icpic.org/>). This vast array of P4C flagbearers is an extraordinary testament to the energy and enthusiasm of a movement that, only 50 years ago, was of maverick status. To her credit Ann Margaret Sharp, along with Matthew Lipman, founded this philosophically-informed educational adventure, despite the up-turned noses of those in the parent discipline who thought that philosophy was far too obtuse and abstract for the likes of mere children.

It was her genuine passion for children, and for what she believed was their right to have the sort of education that nurtured self-growth, that fueled Sharp's commitment, from the founding days of P4C until her death in 2010. And it is for that reason that this volume is a "must read" not only for all P4C practitioners, but, as well, for anyone who worries about the state of contemporary education. If those worries include the pervasive assumption that the main aim of education is to facilitate the making of money which is the ultimate source of happiness (76), then you will treasure what is written here. Sharp writes boldly of a vision of a different world, populated by individuals who are not mere cogs in the machine of production and consumption (76), but, rather, who are deeply self-reflective, open to vastly different perspectives, and who embrace a process of self growth that is directed toward a fuller, happier, qualitatively richer life (45).

This book offers a comprehensive view of Sharp's rich and varied thoughts. It is divided into seven parts, which include articles written by Sharp, as well, commentaries by recognized scholars. The topics include pragmatism, the community of inquiry, ethics, feminism, aesthetics, caring thinking, and social-political education. Threaded through all of these sections is a deep and varied analysis of the "community of philosophical inquiry" (CPI)—the pedagogical cornerstone of the P4C movement. It is this thread that many readers will find most riveting.

The exploration begins with the rather shocking admission by Sharp that she experienced a pang of "revulsion" (38) upon being told by a teacher, new to the method, that she thought that the group had achieved their goal: "they were now truly a community of inquiry" (38). Those of us who have spent years in the P4C trenches will sympathize with this honest revelation.

On the surface, creating a community of philosophical inquiry, whereby “people with diverse experiences, ideas and concerns join in dialogue around a shared question—challenging and building on one another’s ideas, offering stories, attending to emotions and imagining new possibilities—in the attempt to form a judgment about the matter that is as reasonable, meaningful and practicable as they can imagine” (1), looks easy. To the untrained eye, this may look like a typical classroom discussion during which students are asked to voice their opinions on any given topic. However, a CPI is anything but this sort of opinion-gathering. This is so because, for genuine inquiry to take place, the facilitator needs the philosophical sensitivity and intellectual dexterity to insure that all positions are accompanied by justification, that all assumptions are laid bare, that silent voices are coaxed into daylight, and that few leave the process without having their own cherished hypothesis put at risk (50-51). Most important of all is that the facilitator must also ensure that the inquiry “makes progress.” As Sharp points out, “mere discussion is not enough. Children want to feel that they achieved something, if only a new understanding of the complexity of the issue under discussion” (111).

Given the enormous demands placed on the facilitator, it is not surprising that this creative intellectual orchestrating cannot be taught by a rule book, or top-down instruction. On the one hand, the facilitator must askew what Freire has called the “banking model” of education whereby the teacher tries to transmit to her students what she knows. On the other hand, as Sharp notes “equally essential is the educator who has the ability to love, respect and demand a great deal from the student, while at the same time manipulating the environment so that the student constantly experiences challenges that he can and does overcome. The educator takes it upon himself to shake the student out of self-complacency and urge the creation of a higher self. The educator, of necessity, is engaging in the process of constantly ‘restor[ing] energy to the slack fibres and toughness to the will to live’” (Nietzsche, 1901/1968: 476) (85).

Ultimately, Sharp’s foundational message is that there is a pervasive and systematic misunderstanding about what human selves are all about; that we have fundamentally failed to comprehend that we are *processes* who need to *grow in relationship* (99) toward a personal understanding of the world (76). We are not, as some may think, objects to which fancy accoutrements can be attached, such as critical thinking and logic skills. And though Lipman and Sharp used increased scores on the *New Jersey Test for Critical Thinking* as evidence in their efforts to convince “the powers that be” that philosophy should be included in school curricula, Sharp was adamant that enhancing logical skills as a goal, in and of itself, (which is common on many university agendas) often blinds us to the real motive, namely that this is done “out of a fear that the new ideas [of ever-evolving selves in dialogue] will not lend themselves to domination” (46).

Sharp, however, was equally adamant that logic and other thinking skills, though not sufficient for philosophical reasoning, are absolutely necessary (46/67), and, in this sense, she swam against the strains of the postmodern choir that calls into question the enterprise of reasoned dialogue itself, on the grounds that it is (or can be) used to stabilize illegitimate power structures. Sharp forcefully rejects this message. She says, in opposition, that “It’s just not so that we would be better off without logic, open-mindedness, willingness to accept criticism, or consider alternative positions, willingness to subject our hypothesis to analysis, willingness to consider reasons, even though we may only approximate these traits to dialogue with one another. We would not be better off without impartiality, consistency and reasonableness, even though we may all live them imperfectly” (40).

“One of Sharp’s most significant contributions to Philosophy for Children, and community of inquiry studies,” the editors suggest (15), is “her theory of the central role of care and caring thinking in

philosophical inquiry.” Much scholarship has been, and continues to be invested in attempting to determine what precisely is entailed in these notions. In her article “The Other Dimension of Caring Thinking,” Sharp describes caring thinking as caring deeply for what one values. She writes that the *good life* “comes from what we care about, what we value, what we truly think important, as distinguished from what we think merely trivial. What we care about is the source of the criteria we use to evaluate ideas, ideals, persons, events, things and their importance in our lives” (209). This claim, in and of itself, is profound, as it alerts us to the fact that we need to pay serious attention to what young people care about, and, as well, figure out how to mobilize their passions so that they are not utterly dissipated in the complex superficialities of contemporary life. Taking a slightly different tack, Sharp also writes that part of caring is to care deeply about the tools of inquiry, the problems deemed worthy to be inquired into, and the form of dialogue (213).

Elsewhere, however, Sharp sneaks in more substantive claims by suggesting that caring thinking involves caring about actively participating in society with a concern for the common good (209), that those in a CPI really do care about one another as persons (213), that the “going visiting” (221) (aka empathy) that is inherently involved in a CPI ensures that this process is based on love, compassion, and solidarity (214), and that participants are committed to one another’s flourishing (237). These are big “asks” of academic encounters—that participants of CPI’s care about the flourishing of other participants over and above their care within the CPI itself. And it is these latter views that have led some scholars to worry that this notion of caring thinking may squander the intellectual rigor of the CPI, particularly by novice facilitators, who may interpret disagreement in dialogue as a lack of concern for the flourishing of others; that this attention to emotions may devolve into “pampering” (203).

With regard to caring thinking, then, it appears that Sharp was ambivalent about what role it plays, or should play, in philosophical inquiry. On the one hand, it is clear that she wanted us to like each other, while on the other, she recognized that subjecting another’s ideas to critical inquiry is part of what it means to take another seriously (239). She seemed not to have entertained the possibility that taking another’s ideas seriously could result in disgust, and that that would undermine one’s concern for the other’s flourishing. Clearly, this issue needs significantly more research. Nonetheless, Sharp is to be credited for insisting that, if we are ever to understand what is involved in good thinking, we absolutely need a clearer picture of what role “care” plays in that vision.

All in all, this book is a tribute to an extraordinary woman. Ann Margaret Sharp was a formidable, enthusiastic, utterly ethical, inspiringly optimistic, intensely engaged (167), and sometimes forbidding force—much like the program she helped to found. Her writing, however, is delightfully inviting. Anyone interested in trying to make this world a better place, and in transforming education so that young people are shaken out of their complacency (85) and become empowered to enthusiastically grab their own lives by the throat so that they are able to march toward the future with confidence and competence, will treasure this book.

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