

*Ethical Dilemmas in Schools: Collaborative Inquiry, Decision-Making, and Action by Douglas J. Simpson and Donal M. Sacken*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020

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Review of

## *Ethical Dilemmas in Schools: Collaborative Inquiry, Decision-Making, and Action*

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*Ethical Dilemmas in Schools: Collaborative Inquiry, Decision-Making, and Action* presents a Deweyan approach to educational ethics that mixes analysis, pedagogy, and case study. Simpson and Sacken pair insightful analysis of Dewey's approach to ethical inquiry in schools with stories from the fictional Academy for Civic Responsibility, a Dewey-inspired magnet school, and its principal of many years, Maria De La Garza. While reading, I found myself switching often between the lenses of K–12 teacher, philosopher of education, Dewey scholar, and case study writer, and finding edification for each role. *Ethical Dilemmas in Schools* is a book that can speak to theorists and practitioners alike, with some caveats.

Simpson and Sacken achieve their goal of speaking to professors of education and their practitioner students through the book's unique structure. The bulk of each chapter is textual analysis that synthesizes Dewey's thoughts on the chapter's theme. In each chapter, the authors interweave vignettes about ethical dilemmas facing Maria, the Academy, and their district ("Harbor"). The vignettes tease out their analysis and often include Maria demonstrating Dewey's recommended mode of inquiry. Each chapter ends with a separate, stand-alone case study presented with discussion questions instead of analysis.

Where audience is concerned, philosophers of education and Dewey scholars will most appreciate the textual analysis component of each chapter. The authors go beyond their aim of providing an "introduction to democratic ethical inquiry and reflection" (p. xiii) by synthesizing Dewey's works and other authors' contributions on the chapters' themes. Teacher educators will appreciate the pedagogical tools Simpson and Sacken have crafted. The authors present strategic "stop and think" questions to the reader throughout each chapter ("since schools usually focus on daily teaching responsibilities, how can they reasonably be expected to engage in research regarding the outcomes of their ethical interventions?" p. 15). Each chapter closes with a set of discussion questions that range from the analytical ("How do Dewey's thoughts about the principle of regard for people help identify professional education responsibilities?" p. 87) to the personal and practical ("How would you describe the ethical forum of your own mind? Which cultural traditions and fields of creativity and inquiry most influence your thinking?" p. 60), and were some of my favourite moments while reading. Students will especially appreciate the annotated bibliographies the authors present at the end of each chapter under the heading "Related Readings." And practitioners – including pre-service teachers, administrators returning to graduate school for licensure, and educators looking for texts for professional development – will recognize themselves and benefit from discussing the case studies that end each chapter and the vignettes embedded in the chapter text. In the following section, I'll review how the elements come together in each chapter before discussing how this structure helps us understand Dewey's approach and its relevance for school decision-making. A summary of each

chapter should also help those interested in using the book for teaching make quick decisions about which sections and cases are most helpful.

Chapter 1 gives an overview of how ethical study can be of practical service to educators and introduces Dewey's vision for ethical inquiry. For our introductory vignette, we learn about Irene, a teacher accused of yelling at her third graders. As Maria carries out Dewey's inquiry process for this situation, she learns details of the situation that complicate an initial read. Readers are then asked to put the inquiry process to use in a case study about an Academy teacher who is providing food to students during a standardized test and the administrator attempting to sanction him for violating testing protocol.

Chapter 2 analyzes the role of sympathy and empathy in Dewey's approach to ethics. The vignettes explore Maria's reactions and relationships with characters who represent or inspire different aspects of sympathy in ethical inquiry. This chapter's case study is about a soccer coach who resigns just before the season starts, which sets off several ethical dilemmas, culminating in the question of whether Maria herself should resign.

Chapter 3 discusses the utility of ethical principles in the Deweyan framework and the importance of the "forum of one's mind" in ethical decision-making. Readers learn about the importance of personal knowledge in decision-making through a reconsideration of the vignette about the teacher who screamed at her students. The case study in this chapter describes the district's reaction to a teacher engaging in participatory action research with her elementary school students. This case study is notable in that, unlike the others, we see its positive resolution.

Chapter 4 focuses on the interdependence of society, group, and individual welfare in the Deweyan approach, and Dewey's focus on regard for social groups. Especially well-taken in this chapter is the point that "educators ... and students ... need to become experts at engaging in productive conversations about contentious issues" (p. 84). The vignette in this chapter, presented opaquely as "relevant contextual variables," is about how Maria deals with rumours of racism and nepotism in her hiring practices. New characters and complex administrative relationships abound in this especially intricate chapter, which ends with a case study about the conflicting demands that occur in matching teachers and students in annual class assignments. This case, a nuanced and authentic discussion of resource allocation in teacher-student relationships, is one of the best of the book.

Chapter 5 goes in-depth into how Dewey conceives of problematic ethical situations – as "[involving] a practical problem that is characterized by the presence of 'conflicts' and 'moral perplexities' and 'entails inquiry'" (p. 111) – and his analytical approach to solving them. We return to the problematic ethical situation of Maria's rumoured hiring practices and learn much more about the "whole situation" of the dilemma, including the personal relationships and contextual details behind the accusations, and are reminded to "be sensitive to situations without being overconfident about one's knowledge base and conclusions" (p. 122). However, the case study, "The Reverend," is one of the least effective in the book. It details a meeting Maria has with the reverend of a district church, and his revelation that he has been quietly working to influence multiple aspects of life at the Academy without Maria's knowledge. The case is presented primarily as a dialogue and lacks the multidimensionality of the others in the collection.

Chapter 6 reviews the traits and behaviours that Dewey thinks an ethical educator should possess. It focuses on the concept of ongoing ethical growth and habit, and includes some of the more shocking vignettes in the series. We are introduced rather unceremoniously to Maria's dilemma of how to treat a staff member with whom she is extremely close, Olivia, who develops a romantic relationship with a 12th-grade student. Olivia's ethical shortcomings are examined through the lens of her loss of "ethical alertness" (p. 134), which adds some new depth to the trope of the predatory teacher. The case study presents a confrontation between a veteran and new teacher in a faculty meeting, in which one accuses the other of trying to act as a "personal saviour" to students, and in response is accused of racial bias.

Chapter 7 details the characteristics of a good, democratic school, a synthesis that may be more familiar to Dewey readers and scholars than some of the previous topics. The vignette concerns school board policies around community engagement and political discussion in classrooms, and the final case study is about Academy students' decision to lead a school walkout for immigrant rights. This case study escalates until Maria herself is asked by students to lead the walkout, and in the appendix we learn that this is the situation that ultimately leads to Maria getting removed from her position as principal.

As this summary highlights, two things occur in parallel in this book: an insightful analysis of Dewey's ideas about ethical decision-making in schools, and rich world-building to illustrate and illuminate Dewey's concepts. Simpson and Sacken build the world of Harbor school district, the Academy, and Maria's character "by blending fragments of actual experiences with imaginary ones" (p. xvi). World-building in ethical case studies is a challenging task, and Simpson and Sacken's approach is remarkable. Rather than present neat and bounded narrative cases, the authors craft vignettes and case studies whose details flow between and build from chapter to chapter. The result approximates a school's complex and layered ethical ecosystem.

Simpson and Sacken's choice of structure sets their book apart in the growing landscape of ethical case studies in education. This style differs from, for example, Levinson and Fay's (2016, 2019) dilemmas of educational ethics, which build a rich world in a bounded case and welcome different philosophical approaches to their resolution. Instead, Simpson and Sacken focus on illustrating Dewey's thought in content and form. This approach may miss other potential ways to reason through Maria's dilemmas and make the project less widely applicable. However, it makes a couple distinct contributions. First, it illustrates Dewey's concept of a "whole situation," or the idea that "for Dewey, problematic ethical situations occur in particular yet dynamic contexts, cultures, and environments and are differentiated by unique people, conditions, continuities, interactions, transactions, and deliberations, [and] doubt, conflicting goods, and judgments about right and wrong" (p. 113). The "rich cultural and intellectual setting" encompasses all that is "ethically relevant" for the process of inquiry into the dilemma (p. 114). As a result, Simpson and Sacken's cases are authentic for the type of ethical inquiry they prompt their readers to engage in.

Second, this approach demonstrates how school-based dilemmas can feel to the educators experiencing them. Over seven chapters, Maria faces issues that span a period of time: they interweave, occur simultaneously, and are foreshadowed or referred back to as her career runs its course. Actions of multiple agents – students, parents, teachers, administrators, politicians, and community members – collide and react; abrupt actions intervene and change the course of the narrative; the private lives of characters hold purchase, as do rumours and "who knows what about whom"; and relationships transform and impact resolutions in profound and surprising ways.

However, this method can be jarring almost by necessity. The authors drop us into dilemmas *in media res* and layer on details, often without following a linear narrative. Characters may appear and disappear with little explanation or context, shocking particulars are revealed offhand, and readers, like the educators making decisions in this complex environment, often must play catch-up or wrap their heads around incongruous details. This is often what it feels like to engage in ethical inquiry in a complex school environment, and is worthwhile for that authenticity alone. But it also runs the risk of confusing readers, especially those who may want to use discrete cases or chapters in courses or professional development. A background overview early in the book of the district, the Academy, and Maria's trajectory would have provided helpful orientation.

Ultimately, this book walks the walk of a Deweyan approach. It both illustrates Dewey's philosophy through educational case studies and illuminates the ethical complexity of school leadership through philosophical analysis. As a result, it can help educators and scholars in a range of roles understand and use Dewey's approach to ethical decision-making in schools.

## References

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## About the Author

**Tatiana Geron** is a PhD student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She studies how classroom context shapes teachers' ethical decision-making and uses normative case studies to talk with teachers about dilemmas of educational ethics. Her work has appeared in the *Harvard Educational Review*, the *Journal of Global Ethics*, and Levinson and Fay's *Democratic Discord in Schools: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics*.