

Maughn Rollins Gregory and Megan Jane Laverty (editors)  
*In Community of Inquiry with Ann Margaret Sharp: Childhood, Philosophy and Education*  
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*Reviewed by Marie-France Daniel, 2018*

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**Quote:** "To Sharp, the liberation of children, women, and other marginalized groups relies on responsible education."

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This book is an anthology of Ann Margaret Sharp's selected papers. It comprises thirteen articles by Sharp and seven essays by contemporary scholars who have analyzed her work. Sharp was a philosopher of education. With Matthew Lipman, she was one of the pioneers of the Philosophy for Children approach now used in sixty countries. Although Sharp is not usually considered a feminist philosopher, her work was profoundly inspired by feminist values, and her articles put forward several ideas that are fundamental to the pursuit of women's emancipation through education. Sharp's work constitutes a significant and original contribution to philosophy of education and to feminist philosophy, as she meaningfully adapted and enriched central classical concepts such as community of inquiry, teacher education, ethics, feminism, silence, caring thinking, and transcultural consciousness. I describe her analysis of these concepts in the following pages.

The anthology's introduction, which includes a presentation by editors Maughn Gregory and Megan Laverty and an interview of Sharp by Peter Shea, is enlightening in that it contextualizes Sharp's work by presenting some of her life experiences as a woman, a professor, and a scholar, as well as some of the authors that influenced her thoughts, including Arendt, Augustine, Dewey, Nietzsche, Noddings, Nussbaum, Sister de la Cruz, and Weil.

Part I of the anthology sheds light on the originality and relevance of Sharp's work on the advancement of knowledge in philosophy of education. Her experiences as a woman and as a teacher, and her extensive reading of the works of pragmatist philosophers (among others, Dewey, Mead, and Peirce) have led her to "translate" their theses, in an innovative

and empathetic manner, into classroom practice. To Sharp, pedagogical act and theory are intimately interrelated. Therefore, the anthology is valuable not only to scholars but also to teachers, since Sharp illustrates her translation of pragmatist concepts with concrete means for the rigorous application of these concepts to a philosophical community of inquiry with children. For instance, with reference to the concept of dialogue, Sharp explains:

As children in elementary classrooms begin to master the art of speaking dialogically to one another (rather than always to the teacher) the discourse should go through various stages. Children, at the beginning, have a tendency to want to speak all at the same time about things that concern them. . . . It is at this point that the teacher can guide constructively. The students can learn to take turns, to listen to one another carefully and to reconstruct what is being said in such a way that one can respond. As the process continues, the pattern should move from a teacher-student, teacher-student discourse pattern to a student-student-student-teacher-student-student discourse pattern. A question-answer-question process should also begin to form. . . . Questions prod students to inquire, to look for solutions. Answers prod them to argue their point of view consistently and comprehensively to their peers. This presentation of one's views inevitably gives rise to further questions. Thus construction and reconstruction of ideas among all the students can be seen as distinguishable for purposes of analysis. But in reality they are inseparable when a group of children is discussing a particular issue in community. (43-44)

The philosophical community of inquiry, as Sharp describes it, is revolutionary in that it implies a transformation of current education (which she reproves for its neoliberal values) into a dialogical and intersubjective education, that is, an education that has the courage to listen to children and encourage them to engage critically in the co-construction of meanings that constitute personal and social experience. This co-construction implies openness to others, freedom of expression, compassion, and deliberation. Sharp considers children to be full-fledged citizens, as autonomous and committed citizens, able to transform their society into an open, inclusive, and solidarity-based democracy. Education then becomes a work of liberation and emancipation, which Sharp never ceased to promote.

As discussed in part II of the anthology, the key to such education resides in the competencies and attitudes of teachers, who, apart from knowing how to transmit culture and knowledge accumulated over centuries, are careful to stimulate in pupils an intersubjective dialogue that nurtures their critical comprehension of the legacy of the past (data, concepts, traditions, and stereotypes). In this respect, Sharp's chapter titled "A Letter to a Novice Teacher" is revealing, showing how teachers who are engaged in the community of inquiry can transform their teaching to become liberators of children, and how children, in turn, can become liberators of their teachers.

Part III focuses on the ethical component of Sharp's works by shedding light on the concepts of interaction and responsibility. Her vision of the world, of education, of

people, was fundamentally and authentically relational. The selected articles show that, to Sharp, ethical inquiry transcends moral theory to find its foundation in responsible actions. These actions manifest themselves and develop through interactions with peers, engaging in a critical dialogue that is guided by caring, respect, sensitivity to context, integrity, sympathy, imagination, and self-correction. The main objective of the philosophical community of inquiry is to give a voice to children (and to women and other marginalized groups); to provide them with the time and space needed, within the school curriculum, to examine their values, beliefs, and everyday situations. Sharp offers examples of ethical tools or procedures that help teachers and pupils become responsible individuals; that is, to help them refine their perceptions so they can formulate moral judgments in order to contribute to the common good:

Considering alternative consequences, . . .  
Investigating underlying ethical assumptions,  
Universalizing (e.g. asking yourself what it would be like if everyone were to do this), . . .  
Seeking comprehensiveness . . . ,  
Demanding coherence and consistency, . . .  
Developing an understanding of the relevance of ideals (e.g. asking yourself what kind of a world you want to live in and what kind of a person you want to be)  
(114).

In summary, since the community of inquiry has its roots in caring actions, Sharp argues that the community of inquiry, which is at the heart of Philosophy for Children, is an "ethics of care."

Parts IV to VII explicitly illustrate the feminist character of Sharp's philosophy of education. Indeed, profoundly sensitive to injustice, oppression, and marginalization, Sharp worked incessantly to enable children, as well as teachers--particularly from elementary schools (the majority of them women)--to reflect philosophically and make their voices heard.

In the chapters in part IV, Sharp insists on the philosophical community of inquiry as a place for valuational praxis that can foster self-awareness, which in turn can lead to the growth of critical habits of mind. Such growth encourages the individual to engage in constructive social criticism (based on caring and imagination) in order to change the dominant culture's unfair and oppressive practices (sexism, racism, and so on). To Sharp, the liberation of children, women, and other marginalized groups relies on responsible education: on education that values the improvement of humanity, and that helps girls and boys to notice social injustices, to care *about* others, about their society, and about all people who suffer violence and injustice because of the beliefs and policies of their society.

Part V presents a logical continuation of Sharp's reflection, as she attempts to understand the reasons for some children's silence within communities of inquiry. The first reason is found in a kind of oppression: children are generally unaware that their ideas can make a

difference, so they remain silent and let adults decide everything. This silence is similar to the oppression experienced by workers, people of color, women, immigrants, and the poor--categories of people who are not part of the dominant culture. Religion can also explain some children's silence: on one hand, when their beliefs are firm and their culture does not allow them to question or criticize inherent values, and on the other hand, when the need for religious introspection is stronger than the need for verbal expression. Another explanation suggested by Sharp for children's silence is to be found in the necessary reflection that precedes speaking up, and in the active listening that is essential to the construction of any philosophical dialogue. In any event, Sharp maintains that silence risks preventing the development of self, and as such, silence must be challenged by implementing philosophical communities of inquiry where children care for one another, respect one another's differences, and allow these differences to be expressed. Only within this environment of trust can children feel free to think, to express themselves, to reinvent themselves, to anticipate the consequences of their actions, and to self-correct.

Part VI emphasizes caring thinking. Along with Lipman, Sharp considers that caring thinking is partly cognitive (appreciative judgment) and partly affective (emotions). Caring thinking is manifested through action; it is a transactional and interactive praxis that mobilizes a person's normative and ethical values. Indeed, to think caringly leads to discerning and promoting what is important and valuable for the self and for society, and thus to acting accordingly. To Sharp, this dimension of thinking is an integral part of our humanity because care, which nurtures friendship, love, compassion, and commitment, enables the self to develop through "*being-in-the-world*" with others. The community of inquiry--in which children raise questions cooperatively with peers about problems important to them--is a privileged place for children to mobilize and develop caring thinking. Within the community of inquiry, caring thinking is manifested through active listening, comprehension, and the willingness to build on the meanings and representations of peers while seeking an evaluative and rigorous reflection. In summary, to think caringly with others gives meaning to experience, and it motivates the imagination and judgment toward an active participation aimed at a common good.

Part VIII highlights Sharp's aspirations regarding education and democracy; it focuses on the sociopolitical dimension of the community of inquiry. Sharp argues that in today's age of globalization, the essence of an authentic education resides in the fostering of a deliberative and public sphere where philosophical dialogue among peers stimulates a global ethical or transcultural consciousness that is likely to lead youngsters, as early as elementary school, to be responsible and take well-thought-out actions aimed at engendering a good life and a common good. Indeed, to inquire within a community is a political commitment, a liberation process that aims to transform the quest for personal autonomy into a quest for democracy, justice, and world peace. Decentering from self, intersubjectivity, compassion, interaction (understood as transaction), empathetic imagination, and intelligent sympathy all become integral parts of the human experience. These predispositions or virtues are not innate; that is why Sharp maintains that they must be reinforced by implementing a deliberative and practical pedagogy.

Over all, the anthology reveals that Sharp's work, although less well-known than Lipman's, is invaluable to scholars, teachers, and all those concerned with the improvement of people and societies. The concepts of philosophy of education and feminist philosophy, which Sharp revisited with great acuity and insight, become fundamental sources of reflection for readers.

However, Sharp might be faulted for being unconditionally committed to Philosophy for Children and the community of inquiry. She did not question or criticize either one. Rather, she defended them. Since she invented, then theorized about and experimented with, the community of inquiry as no other scholar has, her enlightened questioning or criticism would have been beneficial to improving the Philosophy for Children approach.

Yet it is possible to understand and even applaud Sharp's unswerving commitment to Philosophy for Children, since from its beginnings it has been seriously criticized by philosophers and educators. To survive and be disseminated, the approach needed a well-known author to defend it against the callous indifference of some and the negative criticism of others, the latter probably based on fear of the changes that philosophical reflection and critical dialogue within a children's community of inquiry might engender.

Another point concerns some of the ideas Sharp proposed in her writings that could have been developed further. Because these ideas are characterized by originality and novelty, readers will likely feel the need to know more about them. Sharp accompanied each of her articles with rich and diversified footnotes and reference lists likely to satisfy anyone interested in exploring her ideas in more depth.

A last comment concerns the analyses of contemporary scholars included in this book. These scholars seem to enter into a dialogue with Sharp's ideas, contextualizing, explaining, completing, and furthering them--constituting an outstanding body of work that is particularly valuable to readers. Still, given each scholar's level of expertise in the specific area each one analyzed, it would have been interesting for them to enter into a *critical* dialogue with Sharp, by questioning her proposals, challenging her perspectives, and even opposing some of her conclusions (see chapter 12, by Peter Shea), to provide readers with avenues for further theoretical and empirical research. In my view, constructive criticism is a way to pay homage to the work of any researcher, particularly that of a pioneer like Sharp, and to contribute to the advancement of knowledge.

In sum, the commented anthology of Ann Margaret Sharp's writings is a major reference work that was certainly worth publishing (thanks to Gregory and Laverty) and will become canonical for anyone interested in Philosophy for Children, in philosophy of education or in feminist philosophy. It will no doubt serve as food for thought for generations of scholars, decision-makers, and practitioners.