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BOOK REVIEW

Identity and personhood: Confusions and clarifications across disciplines, by Laurance J. Splitter, Singapore, Springer, 2015, 220 pp., € 99.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-981-287-480-1

In what appears to be the twilight of analytic philosophy's contribution to educational studies, Laurance Splitter has mounted a valiant attempt to apply its methods to the study of identity and personhood. His conclusion is that, conceptually, there is no relationship between identity and personhood. Identity, in what he calls 'its proper place and home', belongs to 'mathematics and logic, with some conceptual extensions' (p. 1). By contrast, he argues, the notion of persons or personhood is social and communal, wherein each individual becomes aware of her/himself as 'one among others', not any others, but specific others with whom our lives are 'in some sense interwoven' (p. x).

I have to confess that I rather like this communal idea, even though I doubt that the proper place and home of the word 'identity' is mathematics and logic, and so question the wedge this book drives between identity and personhood. According to my copy of The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (Onions, 1983, p. 1016), it appears the word identity entered the English language from Latin in late sixteenth Century, probably related to the notion of *idem* 'same' but also possibly associated with *identidem* meaning 'over and over again, repeatedly'. Either way, though identity may be defined as the 'quality or condition of being the same', by 1638 it was being used to denote individuality and personality (personhood). It seems the etymology of the word identity does not entirely support Splitter's analytical wedge. But, I hesitate to engage in this kind of quibble. I live in hope that 'philosophy has finally recovered from the time when a Viennese mystic … attempted to pervert the discipline into a commentary on the Oxford English Dictionary' (Marshall & Gurd, 1996, p. 189). Arguably, the really important philosophical issue, at least for educators, is whether we are founding educational policies and practices on mistaken ideas, conceptual and/or empirical, and this book has much to say that is sensible about that.

In additional to the important notion of our self as *one among others*, the author also advocates what he calls the *Principle of Personal Worth* (PPW). This provides him with a tool to attack, for example, what he calls *supra-persons* and the power they can exercise over persons, particularly a person's sense of who or what they are and what they ought to do. It also allows him to draw important distinctions between citizenship or civic education and moral education that are frequently muddied. Whether the notion of supra-persons is helpful or not must be left to the reader, the core idea, however, has considerable merit.

A supra-person is defined as 'a group, association or collective of, or abstraction from, persons which has characteristic features that do not reduce to the properties of its members' (p. 7). What he is refer- ring to is collectives such as families, religions, nations, ethnicities and cultures that, he argues, are less valuable than persons (p. 105) and are potential or actual 'threats to the principle of personal worth' (p. 120). One sees this threat, we are told, in the case of Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann's defence was that he was not personally responsible for any crimes because he had no control over the decisions and judgements made regarding the murder of six million Jews. Splitter says Eichmann, 'surrendered his own autonomy, his *personhood*, to a larger more powerful entity—a *supra-person* in my terms—be it the Third Reich, or even the will of the Fuhrer' (p. 124). Splitter also argues that moral relativism, at least in its strong form, 'is inconsistent with that part of PPW which asserts that all persons (i.e. irrespective of time, place, or other contextual factors) are of equal value'. In other words, the 'PPW places all persons in the same basket, morally speaking'

and that 'means that there is some set of moral rules, values or norms … against which *all* may be judged and held to account' (p. 125).

I suspect that many readers of this book will find themselves agreeing with what it says on these and related issues, though some may detect a degree of slippage between the notion of personal worth and the examples chosen to illustrate it. I am not sure, for example, that the notion of personal worth is necessarily in conflict with strong moral relativism, for the reasons given by the author. The issue revolves around the author's assertion that all persons are of equal value *irrespective of time, place or context*, and the (seemingly opposite) claim of strong moral relativism that 'moral judgements cannot be coherently made beyond the *particular circumstances (including time and place*) in which they are made' (p. 125, italics added). The argument seems to be that the value of persons is *not relative* to time place or context and moral judgements (contra relativism) are *not relative* to time and place. But, aren't we dealing with different issues here; I presume a person committed to moral relativism (which I am not) could nevertheless be committed to a universal notion that all persons are of equal value, irrespective of time, place or context? I'm not sure these are mutually exclusive.

The same criticism cannot be made, I believe, regarding the notion of personal worth and the line this book draws between citizenship and morality and, by extension, between citizenship education or civics education and moral education. Here I find myself in total agreement with the author, first in pointing out: 'Philosophers are trained to ask awkward questions', though that is not restricted to questions about 'concepts and their meanings', (p. 131) as the author states—in keeping with his commitment to analytic philosophy, no doubt. Philosophers should be wedded to the Socratic principle of asking awkward questions about all manner of things, including concepts and their meanings, but also claims to knowledge, beliefs, theories and practices and so forth.

Second, I entirely agree that many awkward questions need to be asked about the notion of citizen- ship, particularly in education where it is often conflated with morality and moral values education. Here, I suggest, the notion of personal worth as a moral claim comes into its own. Splitter says in 'line with my commitment to PPW, I maintain that *citizenship* has little, if anything, to contribute to conceptions of morality and moral education that is not already covered by reference to persons who are the key players in moral transactions' (p. 131). His concern is particularly exemplified in East Asia, where political leaders and (regrettably) educationists 'equate citizenship education with moral education on the one hand, and nationalistic or patriotic education on the other'(p. 131). Those of us who have spent a large part of our life in the East Asian context will readily recognise this scenario and may share the author's disdain for the complicity of western scholars who naively 'imagine that a more critical, deliberative and cosmopolitan conception of citizenship—such as may (or may not) fit their own political environments—will be universally accepted'(p. 131). Of course, such complicity oils the wheels of conferences and international exchanges of all sorts, but at the cost of diminishing the moral imperative, which may well be, and often is, in conflict with nationalism and patriotism.

This book certainly asks some awkward questions that are relevant to education, and the reader will find there are some awkward questions that need to be asked about this book. Personally, I find it extraordinary that one can write a book about persons and personhood that does not discuss the neurobiology of the human self in some detail. Instead, we are offered Donald Davidson's philosophical notion of *Anonymous Monism*, which has its merits in being a non-reductive monist position, though without systematic empirical support or application. Arguably, a more promising and recent approach is provided by complexity theory that intermingles the philosophical and empirical in advocating an emergentist notion of the self (Sankey & Kim, 2016). Though claiming commitment to monism, Splitter says that what he finds puzzling 'is the relationship between me and my own body' (p. 69), but this smacks of dualism. His puzzlement would begin to resolve if he adopted the notion of the embodied brain, which is a standard view in neuroscience. He also wonders about the issue of physical continuity, given 'the collection of cells that constitute me at any given moment, its persistence conditions—hence its very existence—are relatively transitory,

because the individual cells have such a short life-span …'(p. 69). But, crucially, this is not true of the cells (neurons) that comprise the embodied brain, which are seldom replaced during the lifespan of a person, though they may of course die.

Nevertheless, for those who enjoy quibbling over the meanings of words, this book provides plenty of opportunity, especially in Chapters 1–4. Whether these readers will agree with Splitter is, of course, another thing. On the other hand, those (including analytical philosophers) who care about the quality of education will find much in Chapters 5–8 that they can agree with, even applaud. In the process, however, I sense they will realise that one does not need the apparatus of analytic philosophy to debate these important issues. Throughout the book, one learns quite a lot about the author's notion of himself, his identity and personhood, but also his educational commitments. These are brought to the fore in the final chapter when he claims to offer 'a novel defence of the idea that classrooms (indeed, all teaching and learning environments) should be transformed into *communities of inquiry*' (p. 179). This, of course, is a central claim of *Philosophy for Children* with which the author of this book is closely identified, but in this chapter he prioritises the notion of classrooms as communities of inquiry, believing it is this notion 'which has the power to reshape—even transform—schooling to match the needs and interests of young people everywhere' (p. 179).

Well, it's a grand idea and how I wish it could become a reality, but for someone who spent 15 years as a teacher in classrooms, much of it in a difficult and challenging school, I can only say it does not resonate with my actual experience of schooling. For much of the time, it seemed sufficient that I try to inspire my students to undertake any worthwhile learning and help them achieve examination success. If these classrooms were communities, it wasn't inquiry that provided the bond, but an underlying rejection of having to be in school and abide by the rules and practices of the school. Of course, I am not denying that there are schools, elitist schools perhaps that might indeed constitute communities of inquiry. But these are not the norm, and I very much doubt they could become the norm. I understand why the author of this book wanted to take his readers to this end, as the climax of his study. For me, however, it seemed an anti-climax. But, maybe that's just me. Other readers might have other perspectives to bring to their reading and, indeed, this is true of all the issues raised in this book. I recommend this book, not because I always agree with the author, including the approach he has adopted, but precisely because it frequently provides the joy of disagreement, while also saying some wise things along the way.

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Derek Sankey

Education & Social Work, The University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

derek.sankey@sydney.edu.au

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