THE VIRTUOUS, WISE, AND KNOWLEDGEABLE TEACHER: LIVING THE GOOD LIFE AS A PROFESSIONAL PRACTITIONER

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Abstract. In this essay, Elizabeth Campbell reviews three recent books that address the ethical nature of professional practice: Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions, by Hugh Sockett; The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice, by Chris Higgins; and Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions, edited by Liz Bondi, David Carr, Chris Clark, and Cecelia Clegg. While the first two books are situated within the context of teaching and education, the third book, as an edited volume, contains chapters that represent a multidisciplinary perspective on the work of professionals within nursing, social work, counseling, and the ministry, as well as in teaching. Each of the books engages in the careful inquiry into philosophy broadly and educational philosophy specifically from conceptual frameworks widely associated with Aristotelian virtue ethics. Writing from an applied perspective on the field of scholarship relating to the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching, Campbell applauds the books for their timely reminder of the central role or persona of the individual professional as a moral agent and ethical practitioner. She argues that within the contemporary context of teacher education, which tends either to neglect or narrowly define the ethics of the profession, such an emphasis on the cultivation of personal character and responsibility within a framework of clear ethical dispositions or virtues is a welcome contribution to the field. It enables teachers, teacher educators, and student teachers to concentrate on both the ethics of practice and the practice of ethics in the ongoing quest to further their own development of virtue, practical wisdom, and personal and professional knowledge.

The Centrality of the Ethical Individual

In the approximately twenty-five years since John Goodlad and his colleagues stimulated interest in the moral dimensions of teaching, others have engaged in the exploration of the moral and ethical nature of teachers’ roles, responsibilities, interpersonal professional relations, curricular and pedagogical intentions, and other aspects of their daily practice. From varying perspectives, scholars have addressed these and other related areas philosophically, theoretically, practically, and empirically, and their contributions to the education literature have been summarized in at least four focused reviews. More recently, Robert Bullough Jr. summarized the number of articles published over two decades in the journal Teaching and Teacher Education that have collectively helped to illuminate the field of teacher ethics. He concluded from his summary that “ethics are at the heart of the teacher’s disciplinary knowledge … [and] to teach is to be embedded


in a world of uncertainty and of hard choices, where what a teacher does and how he or she thinks is morally laden. While such a claim is not well recognized, explicitly explored, or even considered as relevant in educational literature more broadly, the limited number of scholars whose theory and research do attend to the moral and ethical aspects of education appreciate the values-infused nuances and complexities of schools and classrooms that both enrich and complicate the professional work of teaching. Central to much of this body of scholarship is the individual teacher as a moral agent and an ethical practitioner, who is ideally reflective about and attentive to how his or her intentions, decisions, conduct, and personal and professional qualities express fairly uncontestable goods such as fairness, honesty, patience, empathy, trustworthiness, constancy, and integrity in the often routine yet morally complex contexts of schools and classrooms.

Some of the field’s most notable qualitative studies, such as Philip Jackson, Robert Boostrom, and David Hansen’s Moral Life of Schools Project, and Virginia Richardson and Gary Fenstermacher’s Manner in Teaching Project, introduce us to individual teachers, many of whom are held up as exemplars of moral character, manner, virtue, and wisdom.

Notwithstanding this body of scholarship, many of those writing about the moral and ethical aspects of teaching also lament its noticeable lack of representation in teacher education curricula. Among others, Kenneth Strike, Hugh Sackett and Pamela LePage, and Gunnel Colnerud have separately criticized an absence of a rich moral or ethical language in the discourse on teaching and teacher education. Professional ethics, if addressed at all, is often discussed at a superficial and narrow level concerned with codes of teacher conduct and other


4. Throughout this review, the terms “moral” and “ethical” are used interchangeably, as they are not often consistent in the literature. Support for this approach can be found elsewhere. See, for example, Gunnel Colnerud, “Teacher Ethics as a Research Problem: Syntheses Achieved and New Issues,” Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice 12, no. 3 (2006): 367. See also Michael G. Gunzenhauser, The Active/Ethical Professional: A Framework for Responsible Educators (New York: Continuum Books, 2012), 51.


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formalized and legal requirements. The vacuum prevails in contemporary teacher education programs, in which a sound exploration and appreciation of the moral agency and ethical identity of the teacher, as these are reflected in the nuances of practice, should be fostered and honed.

In the absence of such exploration and appreciation, a different language has emerged in many teacher education programs that, while dominantly framed by social, cultural, and political terminology, increasingly positions its perspectives as being of moral and ethical significance to education more broadly. It is often manifested in orientations to social justice (notably, critical social justice) education, whose advocates defend its theories of pedagogy not in terms of moral virtue, but rather in the political language of equity, power, privilege, oppression, and resistance. Their focus is not on the ethics of individuals as much as on macro-level social issues portrayed as ethically relevant from the conceptual frameworks of more collectivist and egalitarian principles. In terms of teachers’ value, what is in the foreground is not the moral nature of their individual characters as they develop and define who they are professionally as well as what they do and what they are held accountable for ethically; rather, teachers’ value is measured in terms of their capacity to critique systemic problems, engage in alternative pedagogies, and thereby promote and agitate for social change, if not radical social transformation. The concept of the teacher as an activist conduit for promoting sociopolitical objectives based on his or her fidelity to specific ideological orientations, often of a more or less singular nature, is prioritized over the cultivation of oneself morally and ethically in relation to others. Striving to be fair and just becomes primarily a means to a larger goal rather than, above all, the lived expression of moral responsibility felt by the ethical teacher for his or her students in the immediacy and intricacy of classroom interactions.

Critics of my position might argue that I am unnecessarily polarizing the moral work of teachers and social justice education, and that an either-or choice between the two ignores their potential — some would say inevitable — compatibility. Perhaps at the practical or micro level, this could be the case. Ethical teachers of a range of political affiliations should be dedicated to respecting all students, recognizing inequalities that impede the well-being of some more than others, and striving to counter the harm caused by them through enabling students to flourish intellectually and emotionally. Indeed, these intentions underpin the core principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence so embedded in conceptions of professional ethics. However, it is erroneous to imply that in order to engage in ethical teaching, one need subscribe to the critical (as in critical pedagogy), and in some cases revolutionary, precepts underlying social justice education as it is increasingly promoted in teacher education programs. It is within such contexts

that a subtle repositioning of ethical priorities shifts attention to the wider agenda of social, cultural, historical, political, and ideological issues and away from more traditional perspectives on individual normative ethics. Consequently, it is conceivable that the person of the teacher and the moral and ethical world of his or her own practices and relationships can become overshadowed, if not entirely lost.

This is of considerable concern for some of us who are invested in the scholarship and practice of teacher ethics, and who conceptualize the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching around the central person of the teacher as a virtuous practitioner responsible for how his or her moral character is infused into the daily complexities and decisions inherent in the academic, affective, and interpersonal work of teaching. I have criticized elsewhere what I have described as the distracting influence of social justice education on this more traditional perspective on ethics in teaching and teacher education. The purpose of this essay is not to revisit that critique, but rather to emphasize the centrality of the person of the individual ethical teacher in sustaining a vision of defensible professional practice. By this, I mean that we should regard the person of the virtuous teacher him- or herself as the most important or essential part of ethical teaching. This is quite different from defining the ethical component of teaching as consisting of those broader political issues or beliefs held by some to be moral imperatives, and then by extension framing the value of teachers around their proficiency in upholding and promoting such issues and beliefs in the course of their professional work.

It is against this contemporary backdrop that the three books I address in this review essay have emerged; collectively, they offer a welcome, timely, and exceptionally fine contribution to the field of ethical philosophy in general, and specifically as related to the practical work of teachers and other professionals. Each focuses attention on the character and person of the individual professional; and, to this end, each adopts in its own way a virtue ethics orientation rooted in Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian thought, not as a throwback to what some may disparage as an outdated morality, but as a reinvigoration of the central importance of an individual’s virtuous self in any conceptualization of human ethics, and certainly within a vision of the professional practitioner.

In Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions, Hugh Sockett articulates a powerful, accessible, and refreshing theory of education that has at its center the developing person within a moral space in which personal dispositions or virtues are inextricably connected with

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knowledge to create a context that combines the moral life and the intellectual life.9 While his theory relates to the education and development of both students and teachers as individual seekers of knowledge and truth, my concentration in this review is on the persona, a word Sockett prefers to role, of the teacher.

As one of the leading educational philosophers whose scholarship has contributed so much over a sustained period to our collective appreciation of the moral core of professionalism in teaching, Sockett brings to this book not only well-grounded assumptions about understanding education as primarily moral, reminiscent of his previous work, but also a unique lens on the need for teachers to develop and foster what he defines as “epistemological presence” in all classrooms.10 To cultivate such a presence is “to assert that matters of knowledge, truth, belief, commitment, experience, and identity are always in play in a classroom” (KVT, 18). And, consequently, a moral classroom is one where major epistemological questions relating to such matters are similarly embraced (KVT, 33).

Sockett’s arguments are developed through a rigorously coherent structure. The book’s twelve chapters are allocated equally to its four separate parts. Conceptually, each part builds on the previous ones in an orderly and unfolding way, and the three chapters in each part either establish the context for or parallel a thematic element central to the book’s schema of distinct moral and intellectual virtues. Sockett explains that the first part is written for a practitioner audience, teachers and teacher educators, who may have limited background in moral and epistemological theory. Its first chapter introduces the idea of epistemological presence in classrooms, while the second addresses the individual’s quest to acquire both public and personal knowledge, two fundamental concepts that underpin the entire book. The third and last chapter of this first part contemplates both the complexity and essential nature of the teacher’s moral and epistemological authority; it introduces us to several examples of real teachers who exercise such authority in different ways. Authority, it is clear, is revealed by the individual teacher’s dispositions that are inherent in his or her character — with dispositions defined as virtues such as truthfulness, accuracy, fairness, consistency, clarity, sincerity, care, courage, impartiality, thoughtfulness, and open-mindedness (KVT, 51–52).

The introduction to the language of dispositions as virtues leads directly to the next two parts, which are more philosophically complex. Part 2 picks up on the theme of public knowledge, essential in a classroom having epistemological presence, which Sockett argues has three elements (truth, belief, and evidence or justification) and three specific virtues that relate to these elements (respectively, truthfulness, open-mindedness, and impartiality). Each of the three chapters in this part focuses on one of the key element-virtue relationships. Part 3 repeats

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9. Hugh Sackett, Knowledge and Virtue in Teaching and Learning: The Primacy of Dispositions (New York: Routledge, 2012). This work will be cited in the text as KVT for all subsequent references.

this pattern in its exploration of personal knowledge, the other broad category of knowledge essential for the establishment of epistemological presence. Again, three key elements are described (experience, commitment, and identity) and associated with distinct virtues (integrity, courage, and autonomy), and the chapter structure parallels each respective combination.

The fourth part draws together the initial introduction to epistemological presence with the subsequent detailed description of the inherent moral and intellectual virtues grouped, at this point, under three categories of virtues: character, intellect, and care. It articulates features of Sockett’s vision of epistemological presence that honors and cultivates the dispositions, and further proposes ideas for a teacher education assessment program built around those dispositions as virtues elaborated on in the previous parts of the book.

In sum, the overall structure of the argument flows effectively and persuasively from a theoretical base of practice to a depth of philosophical analysis to an application of moral and epistemological principles to the professional work of the teacher practitioner. Throughout the entire book, there is a clear dedication to the primacy of the development of the moral individual. Sockett emphasizes that “self-knowledge is the process of constituting ourselves through understanding who we are, and it is that understanding that will require intellectual and moral virtues” (KVT, 109, emphasis in original). And, as he reminds us, in the Aristotelian tradition, moral virtues are “dispositions of character” (KVT, 123).

Chris Higgins’s The Good Life of Teaching: An Ethics of Professional Practice is clear in its depth of commitment to the claim that “restoring to its central place the question of the flourishing of the practitioner is the first step in constructing a virtue ethics of teaching.”11 As in Sockett’s book, virtue ethics in an Aristotelian tradition provides an overarching conceptual framework, although not in the sense of examining specific and individual moral and intellectual virtues as dispositions, such as fairness, truthfulness, and so on. Instead, one of the book’s stated aims is to reveal the full implications of “the contemporary retrieval” of the broader ancient concepts of arete, as excellence or virtue, and eudaimonia, as flourishing, well-being, or happiness (GLT, 10). Higgins’s focus on the purpose of education being its capacity to help individuals answer the question, “What sort of person are you going to become?” (GLT, 4), however, is one that would resonate with Sockett. Both his and Sockett’s portrayals of the teacher as a developing ethical person capture the nuances, the layered complexities, and the epistemological challenges that influence such development. Organizational forces and constraints that shape the person, as well as institutional realities, interpersonal norms, and social dynamics, cause teachers to respond and react to, as much as initiate and create, the circumstances of their ethical growth. It is not a matter of the individual identifying virtues in isolation and trying to apply them

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to practice. The development of the ethical person as teacher is more complex and involves processes of reflection, interaction, and inquiry. Throughout the book, Higgins forcefully and eloquently reinforces the important premise that ethical reflection begins and ends with first-personal questioning, in thick evaluative terms, about the shape of one’s life as a whole. Ethics is rooted in the perpetual practical question “what should I do next?” and flowers, in our more contemplative moments, into questions like “what do I want to become?”, “what does it mean to be fully human?”, and “what would make my life meaningful, excellent, or rich?” (GLT, 9)

The virtue ethics explored in this book seeks, as a primary aim, to disarm and finally put to rest what Higgins describes as the “dichotomisation” of duty and self-interest that has traditionally “plagued” teaching in discussions of teacher motivation, identity, and development (GLT, 10). In a lively line of argument in support of this critical point, Higgins challenges the idea of teaching as a “helping profession” given that the normative understanding of this designation leads to an almost caricatural image of the ethical teacher as an altruistic “selfless saint” willing to sacrifice personal well-being in the service of others, notably his or her students. If teachers fail to live up to this perceived ideal based on what seems to be a perverted interpretation of ethical duty and dedication, they are criticized as “self-interested scoundrels” (GLT, 1). In his insistence that the ethics of teaching must compel teachers to attend to their own self-cultivation and ongoing growth, Higgins offers a powerful distinction between “self-ful” teaching and the problematic aspects of “selfless” and “selfish” teaching (GLT, 8). In addition, he connects the good life generally with the teaching life, in which cultivating one’s own flourishing should also nourish the growth of others. The ethics of teaching speaks directly to virtue and the self; it leads teachers to contemplate not only the practice of teaching but also what led them to it and what sustains their engagement with it and in it.

Higgins articulates a well-developed and coherent structure for the presentation of his arguments. Given that his chapters are for the most part reworked versions of previously published journal articles, there might have been a tendency toward a certain disjointed quality to the book as a whole. However, despite some repetition of text, the parallel structure he employs to group eight chapters equally within two main parts is very effective. In part 1, Higgins develops the conceptual framework “for an aretaic professional ethics” (GLT, 10) by examining in philosophical detail scholars’ work that explores “general issues about the relation of work and human flourishing” (GLT, 13). The first four chapters address, respectively, self-cultivation as the main concern of ethics, as developed in the work of both Bernard Williams and Charles Taylor; Alasdair MacIntyre’s significant ideas about practices as “ethical sources rather than as targets of application” (GLT, 11); the contribution of Hannah Arendt’s “hierarchical phenomenology of practical life” (GLT, 11) to professional ethics; and, lastly, the combined work of John Dewey and Hans-Georg Gadamer as it informs thought about learning through one’s work and the concept of phronesis, or practical wisdom, that has such relevance for any theory of professional ethics.
As this part unfolds, the thread that draws these separate discussions into a comprehensive and holistic conceptualization of professional ethics strengthens around the self and the place of the practical.

Part 2 aligns each of its chapters with those from the first part by mapping the more general philosophical theory “on to the terrain of teaching” [GLT, 13]. So, for example, chapter 5 picks up on the earlier discussion in chapter 1 of Williams’s and Taylor’s work to address self-interest in teaching; then chapter 6 explores how MacIntyre’s ideas from chapter 2 inform questions about teaching as a practice. Chapter 7 parallels chapter 3 in considering within the context of teaching Arendt’s three categories of labor, work, and action in order to explore an ethics of practical life conceptualized as “self-ful” teaching. Ultimately, chapter 8 extends chapter 4 to engage with questions around the notion of pedagogical practical wisdom, among others. This part is consistently rooted in general ethical theory as well as educational philosophy more than in other forms of theoretical and empirical literature on teaching and teacher education; consequently, there is more to grapple with regarding the theory of practice than there are exemplars of actual or real teaching practice, such as those offered in Sockett’s book, that could illuminate the reality of theoretical concepts in action, so to speak. Higgins does, however, animate his text with illustrations from literature, popular culture, and other entertainment media to provide some vivid snippets of or analogies to teaching. His approach is entirely appropriate for the nature and spirit of this book, and Higgins is clearly attentive to theories of teaching and the central person of the teacher practitioner.

The disciplines that Higgins critiques for being stigmatized as “helping professions” — teaching, nursing, and social work — are among those fields that the third book under review here identifies as the “people professions.” Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions is a cross-professional collection of essays, edited by Liz Bondi, David Carr, Chris Clark, and Cecelia Clegg.12 This book has its origins in a multidisciplinary conference hosted at the University of Edinburgh that invited scholars in the fields of social work, education, nursing, counseling, and the ministry — all considered at their core to be avowedly moral or ethical occupations — to engage with questions about professional virtue, practical reason, procedural knowledge, and reflection in action [TPW, 2]. The aim of the conference, and subsequently of the book, was “to focus mainly on issues and problems concerning the character of deliberation and judgement in such ‘people professions’, specifically with a view to exploring the possibility that such occupations require the development of a special kind of reflection or deliberation [perhaps along the lines of Aristotle’s phronesis, or practical wisdom]” [TPW, 4]. As with Sockett’s and Higgins’s books, issues related to the ethics of professional practice, reflective deliberation and judgment, wisdom,

12. Liz Bondi, David Carr, Chris Clark, and Cecelia Clegg, eds., Towards Professional Wisdom: Practical Deliberation in the People Professions [Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2011]. This work will be cited in the text as TPW for all subsequent references.
knowledge, and human flourishing, contextualized by heightened awareness of the person of the individual professional, provide the conceptual foundation of Towards Professional Wisdom.

While the fifteen chapters, authored by seventeen different contributors (including the coeditors), adopt varying theoretical perspectives and emerge from distinct disciplinary contexts, they coalesce effectively in this collection to support an overall philosophical orientation rooted in versions of ancient and modern virtue ethics. The introductory editorial statement and many of the chapters clearly anchor their positions in Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian thought and confirm, in a way that is reminiscent of Sockett’s perspective, that “for past and present virtue ethicists, virtues are dispositions to moral conduct that are no less affective than cognitive” (TPW, 3, emphasis added). Thus, virtue ethics as the preferred moral theory for examining questions of personal and professional value, as well as general “human welfare and flourishing” (TPW, 2), though certainly not exempt from debate, provides a steadying and uniting force in this collection of disparate essays.

While only five of the chapters directly address the discipline of education, the book as a whole contributes much to a wider conceptualization of the cultivation of professional judgment that is easily transferable among the fields. Specifically, it emphasizes the need for a “core ethical component” (TPW, 3) in all professional education programs, not just teaching, and by extension raises complex issues relating to the form and substance that professional ethics should take.

Structurally, Bondi et al.’s book is divided into three parts, each including five chapters. The chapters in the first two parts, with one exception that reports qualitative empirical data, are conceptual essays based on philosophical argumentation and other theoretical propositions. Part 1 explores concepts of practical wisdom and professional deliberation as they connect with theories of knowledge, wisdom, practice, initiation, and intuition. Questions about what constitutes wise judgment and expertise are raised against a wider critique of “technical-rational” and “scientistic views of professional practice” (TPW, 2). Part 2 “explores ways in which wise personal and affective engagement might be thought about and developed in professional practice” (TPW, 6). In considering how moral and affective qualities of individual professionals — such as the inclination to be sympathetic, caring, warm, and supportive — might be developed and fostered (TPW, 4), chapters in this part provoke thought about the emotional dimensions of their work and how they can best manage them.

Part 3 focuses on the concrete demands of state and professional governing bodies, in the form of regulations, legislation, accountability measures, reform initiatives, and professional standards, as well as their positive and negative.

13. One of the book’s coeditors, David Carr, is a notable philosopher of education, a virtue ethicist who has contributed extensively to the education literature on ethics in teaching and professional virtues.
influence on how professionals deliberate and exercise their individual judgment. The chapters in this part intersect with the book’s overall orientation in relating the particular local and professional contexts to broader considerations of professionalism, the concept of expert knowledge, and wisdom. Ultimately, in its attention to the wisdom, emotion, knowledge, and virtue of professional practice, this book, like the previous two, establishes (either by implication or by direct reference) the importance of the individual professional’s judgment, character, and capacity to reason, think, feel, and deliberate about significant moral and ethical questions embedded in the human quest for a “flourishing” life.

The three books introduced here are based on an examination of conceptual arguments grounded in the detailed and sophisticated analysis of moral and ethical philosophy in general and, for the most part, educational philosophy in particular. The remaining discussion extends their focus on what Sockett refers to as “the centrality of the person working out who he or she is [and] what he or she is becoming” (KVT, 198) in order to consider the relationship between the private and public self as expressive of personal and professional virtue. It also addresses the interconnectedness of ethics and practice as well as the primacy of practical wisdom for the cultivation of the ethical teacher.

**The Private Individual and Public Professional: Each Person Has One Self**

I have argued previously that “the ethical teacher is, by necessity, an ethical person.”\(^{14}\) For the public professional to practice with integrity, honesty, compassion, diligence, and fairness, the private self must have a keen sense of these and other virtues or dispositions as an integral part of his or her fundamental character. As Kristján Kristjánsson explains in his description of an Aristotelian paradigm of professional identity, “each person has one self. . . . It is futile to study teacher selves or teacher identities in isolation. What matters is how they fit into a person’s moral character and resonate with one’s overall life plan” (TPW, 116). This is consistent with Sockett’s description of the primacy of the “moral agent–professional model,” in which the teacher’s moral and epistemological authority is a creation of his or her individual character; as he explains,

> across the range of the exercise of a teacher’s moral authority will be revealed the individual’s character as embedded in a teaching persona [not a role], sincere, caring, generous, courageous, trustworthy, friendly, even-tempered, and careful. Out of the individual character is built a teaching persona and a content-filled conscience. (KVT, 51)

The moral agent, as both a private person and public professional, is “an individual who acts consciously and intentionally but often out of habit in consideration of the interests of other people” (KVT, 159, emphasis in original). Many of the empirical accounts of moral agency in teaching provide illustrative portraits of teachers doing exactly that.\(^{15}\) And they support arguments, such as Richard

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\(^{15}\) See, for example, Catherine Fallona, “Manner in Teaching: A Study in Observing and Interpreting Teachers’ Moral Virtues,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 16, no. 7 (2000): 681–695; Gary D.
Osguthorpe’s, that we need “teachers of good disposition and moral character” if for no other reason than the belief that “good dispositions are immanent in good teaching.” As David Carr further remarks, “the development of character [is what] lies at the heart of professional development” (TPW, 108).

Such other-regarding dispositions need not lead to the kind of selflessness, personal sacrifice, and self-disregard described by Higgins, any more than respect for and virtuous treatment of others in one’s daily nonprofessional life should result in any personal diminishing of the self. Quite the contrary, as the virtue one cultivates as part of one’s ever-evolving character strengthens and develops further in the context of one’s practical experience. There need be no jarring disconnect or division within the self, no tension between one’s moral sense in life generally and one’s ethical orientation to teaching. The dispositions of character that teachers honor in their professional capacity are reflections of more general virtues; in this respect, professional ethics, while recognizable as sharing qualities of more general ethics, “is the extension of everyday ethics into the nuances of the professional’s practices.”

Nonetheless, despite this seamless permeability between the virtuous private individual and the public professional of good character and disposition, there are quite obviously distinctive characteristics peculiar to the professional context that demand expertise and a special kind of virtue, wisdom, and knowledge. For Sockett, this knowledge is both “public” or “propositional knowledge” — the type of knowledge that, according to Michael Luntley, “makes practice wise” (TPW, 28) — and the more experiential “personal knowledge” similar to what Chris Clark describes as “background knowledge” (TPW, 55). John Swinton also asserts that “professional wisdom is both personal and public” (TPW, 155). Both types of knowledge are virtue-infused, as Sockett clarifies in substantial depth. “Moral” and “intellectual” virtues overlap to inform both the professional’s self-identity and orientation to teaching. Dispositions as virtues of character, such as trustworthiness, sincerity, and courage, combine with virtues of intellect, such as truthfulness, open-mindedness, fairness, and impartiality, as well as with virtues of care, such as patience, civility, and compassion, to characterize the persona of the virtuous teacher (KVT, 179–180).


17. Campbell, The Ethical Teacher, 12.
Is this the knowledge that should enable teachers to make conceptual and experiential connections between the practical elements of their professional work and their ethical self — their beliefs, emotions, intuition, convictions, inclinations, and sensitivities — as framed by broad moral rules and ideals?18 Likely so. However, there is a qualifier to the quotation that opened this section: while the ethical teacher is by necessity an ethical person, “the reverse is not necessarily the case. Even those of good character, will, and intention may fail to grasp how the moral principles they strive to uphold apply to the contextual realities and details of their daily professional practices.”19 This is not to contradict the claim that each person has one self. Rather, it is to propose that being of a kind and fair-minded disposition, for example, does not automatically mean that a teacher will consistently act in a kind and fair-minded way; for a variety of reasons, teachers (who not surprisingly differ in their interpretation of virtues) may not always know what the kind and fair thing to do is when faced with multiple demands, competing student needs that cannot always be concurrently met, and the pressures of institutional life. Nor does a virtuous disposition necessarily ensure that a teacher will uniformly recognize particular curricular, pedagogical, and evaluative situations as requiring a kind or fair approach. Of course, this is not to say that the teacher would be intentionally unkind or unfair; it is simply to recognize that he or she may be unable, as Higgins states in his discussion of moral conduct, “to perceive such situations and their morally salient aspects amidst the ceaseless flow of everyday life” (GLT, 130). It is reminiscent of Strike’s observation that teacher education students rarely recognize moral considerations in teaching until they are pointed out as being such, even though the abstract moral concepts (for example, virtues of fairness, truth, integrity) are themselves familiar.20 I have found the same to be true of many experienced teachers engaged in the study of teaching in graduate education courses. So what is it that can cultivate the knowledge needed to facilitate a more astute appreciation on the part of teachers to guide their moral judgment and further development as ethical practitioners?

What is not needed, according to Higgins, is “moral professionalism” that, as he defines it, is quite distinct from professional ethics and “deals with codes of professional conduct and our role-specific obligation to others” (GLT, 9–10). This is a curious observation given that, in my view, the reverse is true: the term “professional ethics” is usually the one that conjures up images of codes and statements of duties, and the literature on what Higgins sees as moral

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18. This reference to “broad moral rules” is intended to reinforce the nonrelativist perspective of the three books as well as of this essay. In an Aristotelian tradition, both the universalistic notion of general moral truth and the particularistic acknowledgment of situation-specific truth coexist. Various accounts of “ethical particularism” throughout the books support that while Aristotle did “hold that the virtuous moral response should be a matter of particular context-sensitive judgement . . . [he also] explicitly subscribed to general moral rules and principles, and saw particular moral judgements as nevertheless dependent upon some framework of such principles” (TPW, 3).


professionalism, such as the work of Carr and Sockett (GLT, 17–18), suggests exactly the kind of personal attention to self-flourishing that Higgins advocates as professional ethics throughout his book. Rather than using “moral” and “ethical” as interchangeable terms, as is sometimes the case in the moral and ethical dimensions of education literature, Higgins consistently distinguishes between them and criticizes “a growing literature linking the revival of virtue ethics to professional ethics” (GLT, 17) because of what he sees as an excessively narrow “moral” interpretation of virtue fixated on principles of professional conduct. He makes this distinction central to his conceptualization of a virtue ethics of teaching that transcends one’s moral duties, dilemmas, and relationships to others in order to cut to the core of the teacher’s own sense of “what is most worthwhile to experience, excellent to achieve, and admirable to become” (GLT, 149). For Higgins, the questions that “guide life’s pursuit” (GLT, 159) are what should inform an ethics of professional practice.

While this is philosophically coherent, given Higgins’ aretaic and eudaimonistic conceptual framework, I find it difficult from the perspective of the practice of teaching and teacher education to heed his caution about the narrowness of moral professionalism (GLT, 37). Much of the rich scholarship on the moral work of teaching — some of which has been referenced in this essay, including the other two books reviewed — goes well beyond the limitations of codes, standards, rules, and duties to depict the ethically nuanced complexities of teaching; it compels teachers and teacher educators to grapple with what Katherine Simon referred to in her classroom-based research as “moral and existential questions” in life and, by extension, within teaching.21

What Higgins rebukes as moral professionalism I tend to collapse into a perhaps philosophically loose, but practice-grounded vision of the good life of teaching — of the ethics of teaching. From my interpretation of what he refers to as moral professionalism, this vision need not be incompatible with the aspiration for “self-ful” teaching. Indeed, it should not be. Rather, it should provide the context for the cultivation of knowledge needed to guide moral judgment and both personal and professional growth. However, as Higgins would perhaps point out, I am still prioritizing the teacher’s moral beliefs, intentions, and actions underpinning practice as an extension of character and self rather than prioritizing the very cultivation of the self. Notwithstanding respective differences in interpretation, we both, as do the other two books reviewed here, celebrate the concept of the indivisible individual whose character unifies the personal and the professional; and in acknowledging the pedagogical distinctiveness of teaching, we look to its practice as a source of professional wisdom.

ETHICS NEEDS PRACTICE AS MUCH AS PRACTICE NEEDS ETHICS

The title of this section takes some conceptual liberties in paraphrasing Higgins’s wonderfully evocative statement that “virtue ethics therefore needs

21. Simon, Moral Questions in the Classroom.
teaching as much as teaching needs virtue ethics” (GLT, 10). Following from MacIntyre’s philosophy, Higgins states that practice informs ethics and, further, that “practices are in fact our ethical sources: they are the sites where aspects of the good are disclosed to us as well as the primary scenes of our ethical education” (GLT, 10). Within the context of virtues and personal knowledge, Sockett’s claim that teachers develop “their own personal identity through and within teaching … [since] schools are places where teachers, as professionals and as persons, learn” (KVT, 151) has relevance for Higgins’s emphasis on the educative power of practice. Both Sockett and Higgins imply a kind of dual-directional relationship between virtue and the practice of teaching, as each informs the other and, in the process, develops and enhances not only the practitioner’s ethical well-being, but also the very meaning of ethical well-being. One could argue that practice expands our understanding of virtue as much as virtue regulates our practice.

It is for this reason that Higgins eschews “applied ethics,” or the idea that the forced application of abstract ethical precepts onto the practice of teaching can foster an authentic professional ethics. He rejects such an “application model that plagues professional ethics” (GLT, 48), instead opting for the concept of “practical ethics” that “turns to practices themselves to learn about goods and virtues, in their variety, as they are disclosed through the particular terms and problematics of each practice” (GLT, 10).

I find this idea of practical ethics compelling, as it speaks to the development of robust conceptualizations of what ethics, virtues, or moral dispositions (however differently these terms are used in the literature) actually look like in the professional practices of teaching. What shape does fairness take in the ways that teachers balance the academic and emotional needs of individual students and those of the class as a whole? How is our appreciation of truthfulness and open-mindedness, two of Sockett’s key virtues, enhanced by the teacher’s thoughtful treatment of divergent curricular perspectives on topics of a complex or controversial nature? How does the way the teacher enacts such school policies as those pertaining to grading, testing, discipline, lateness, and dress codes enlarge the way we conceive of honesty, impartiality, compassion, and diligence? The contextualized practices of the teacher’s daily and often routine professional life provide the substance and scope for understanding virtue.

However, having said this, I confess to using the language of applied ethics as well as practical ethics: “There are times when professional teachers need to ‘apply’ principles of ethics to the conceptualization of their work consciously, visibly, and with commitment and determination. And, at the very least, they need to recognize how such principles do actually ‘apply’ to their work.”22 In terms of this section’s title, such an argument captures its second part: practice needs ethics. Teachers cannot leave ethics up to chance and assume that their own good character will permeate their intentions and actions. Ensuring that they strive to be fair, honest, caring, and so on is essential for both their own

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22. Campbell, The Ethical Teacher, 10.
sake and for the sake of their students. Their practice needs to be ethical practice.

The initial part of the title — ethics need practice — contains a double meaning. In the first sense, it corresponds to the previous account of practical ethics and the conclusion that the practice of teaching informs ethics by providing a richer and more contextualized portrayal of ethics. Practice helps fill in the picture of what ethics is and what it can be. The second meaning alludes to the need for teachers themselves to practice at being ethical practitioners. Here, the stress is on the verb form of practicing ethics rather than on the practice of teaching. It requires patience, diligence, reflection, and self-forgiveness on the part of teachers who engage in repeated efforts to approach their professional work in the most ethically defensible ways. It relies on the teachers’ capacity to confront moral mistakes they may make and to work on perfecting the ways they conceive of and enact their approaches to teaching, and ultimately experience ethics. In this respect, it is a measure of their practical wisdom.

All three of the books reviewed here address at some length various interpretations of “practical wisdom” or, in Aristotelian terms, phronesis. Indeed, Bondi et al. position the development of professional, and by association practical, wisdom at the core of their book’s purpose. In it, Carr describes practical wisdom as the “guiding intellectual virtue of human moral life” (TPW, 107). Kristjánsson similarly defines it as an intellectual virtue that is “guided by general moral truths as well as situation-specific observations” (TPW, 121). Practical wisdom, which, according to Daniel Vokey and Jeannie Kerr, enables us to make “sound practical judgements” (TPW, 64), is an intellectual virtue that directly influences conduct and indeed practice. As Joseph Dunne explains, “practical wisdom is more than the possession of general knowledge just because it is the ability to actuate this knowledge with relevance, appropriateness, or sensitivity to context” (TPW, 18). Higgins would concur; in naming practical wisdom “the central virtue,” he regards it as “that variety of understanding conducive to right conduct” (GLT, 129).

For Sockett, who similarly regards practical wisdom as an intellectual virtue, the individual teacher’s capacity to cultivate it, as well as other virtues as dispositions, “at his or her own initiative” is what provides “the ethical framework of the classroom” (KVT, 175). The cultivation of practical wisdom, then, would require teachers both to practice ethics and to examine the ethics of practice. Sockett provides an extensive discussion of how teachers should cultivate their moral dispositions, specifically in relation to the task of teacher education, which he sees as not being the imposition of “a template of dispositions,” but rather the enabling of student teachers to explore in a “profoundly self-conscious” way both themselves as developing individuals and their professional work (KVT, 180). He emphasizes the essential place of reflection and reflective practice as they compel self-assessment or self-examination in the cultivation of knowledge, virtue, and wisdom. Sockett concludes his book by reminding us that its primary theme is about the connection of knowledge and virtue; he stresses that this connection
must stand at the center of the educational experience of the student teacher. Profound self-examination throughout that educational experience must be measured not against goals, but against the principles and virtues within which one’s life is developing, being understood, and conducted. (KVT, 198)

Higgins would likely agree with this vision for teacher education. He argues forcefully that the “cultivation of practical wisdom” should provide the “guiding principles” for any teacher education curriculum so that teachers could “learn through their practice” (GLT, 274). He too promotes the need for profound and imaginative reflective practice. And in one biting, but astute and certainly amusing, sentence, he distinguishes between the kind of reflection he (and, I would add, the other two books) advocate and the “talk-show constructivism in which each student shares a personal, experiential truth before heading his or her own way” (GLT, 277) that seems prevalent today in teacher education. While reflective practice and self-examination within an ethical context are implicitly inward looking, they should not simply devolve into versions of subjectivist pondering. As the books reviewed here make entirely clear, the personal pursuit of the good life of teaching is situated within the serious contemplation of virtue, in all its practical complexity, as the conceptual foundation of professional ethics.

Perhaps the neglect of ethics in teacher education is explained partly by a prevailing, but not empirically verifiable, assumption that those who choose teaching as a vocation and career are inherently moral people who both know and will do the right things without needing explicit instruction. Consequently, any attempt to introduce such instruction would be interpreted as unwanted moralizing. Or, perhaps, in the exhausting whirl of the curricular and pedagogical training that occupies much of the technical focus of teacher education, ethics is regarded as a philosophical frill, an unnecessary extra in an otherwise packed program that offers only the potential for speculative and unresolvable discussions of values. By extension, perhaps ubiquitous questions that raise relativistic doubts about “whose values” should determine the substance of professional ethics defeat any worthwhile consideration of ethics before it can even get started. Or perhaps both teacher educators and their students tend to believe that any valuable lessons about ethical practice happen only by experiencing them firsthand once student teachers graduate to become more seasoned practitioners.

In my own qualitative study of ethics education in preservice teacher education programs, students consistently referred to such reasons as these for their own lack of exposure to the moral and ethical dimensions of teaching.23 While many expressed a wish that there could have been more ethical content in their professional education, they were not sure what form it could take to be of use and relevance to them. They uniformly reported that instead of any

23. I gratefully acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its support of this research project, entitled “The Cultivation of Ethical Knowledge in Teaching.” See Campbell, “Preparing Ethical Professionals as a Challenge for Teacher Education.” See also Elizabeth Campbell, “Teacher Education as a Missed Opportunity in the Professional Preparation of Ethical Practitioners,” in Towards Professional Wisdom, ed. Bondi et al.
rigorous introduction to their own ethical development as teachers, they gleaned knowledge from three general sources that substituted for what the books identify as the cultivation of practical wisdom: (1) superficial summaries of the legal duties of teachers and vague codes of professional conduct; (2) emphasis on the critical importance of committing to a belief in the principles of social justice education; and (3) examples of role modeling practices, both good and bad, that they witnessed during practice teaching experiences in schools. In each of these areas, students did not believe that their programs enabled them to understand how such knowledge informs their own ongoing development as ethical people and ethical teachers. Instead, they were left to ponder the precepts, abstract principles, political orientations, and unexamined qualities, characteristics, and practices of others, rather than of their own.

In this essay I initiated the review of Sockett’s, Higgins’s, and Bondi et al.’s books by situating the discussion within an argument in support of the ethical individual. Within the contemporary context of teaching, discussions about ethics, if they occur at all, tend to de-emphasize the character and persona of the individual teacher practitioner and his or her personal responsibility in a virtuous sense. This is regrettable since, as Sockett notes, “being a human being demands taking responsibility for oneself and what kind of human being one is and who one becomes” (KVT, 164). The same is no less true for the ethical teacher. One may be reminded of David Hansen’s claim that “the human being who fills the role of teacher is the most important factor in teaching.”24 The professional ethics of teaching should privilege the character of the teacher as a virtuous, wise, and knowledgeable practitioner. These three books contribute significantly toward this aim.
