Philosophical Inquiry in Education

Scripting Feminist Ethics in Teacher Education by Michelle Forrest and Linda Wheeldon, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2019

Lana Parker

Volume 29, numéro 3, 2022

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1094138ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1094138ar

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce compte rendu

Parker, L. (2022). Compte rendu de [*Scripting Feminist Ethics in Teacher Education* by Michelle Forrest and Linda Wheeldon, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2019]. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, *29*(3), 214–217. https://doi.org/10.7202/1094138ar

***Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, Volume 29 (2022), No. 3, pp. 214-217**

Review of

Scripting Feminist Ethics in Teacher Education

by Michelle Forrest and Linda Wheeldon, Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2019

LANA PARKER
University of Windsor

In *Scripting Feminist Ethics in Teacher Education*, Michelle Forrest and Linda Wheeldon offer a rendering of feminist ethics for teacher education that grapples with how to do "good" in a material-realist world focussed on doing "right." The writers make a case for and employ irony and narrative as methodological tools for radical feminist consciousness raising. They seek to cultivate paradox as a framework for drawing apart the tensions created by the varied perspectives and singularities in any dynamic, difficult teaching scenario. In this project, Forrest and Wheeldon contribute to postmodern explorations of feminism as well as push back against the pressures to conform to the given ethos of logic and positivism as the governing tools for pursuing moral philosophy. The text is enriched with dramatized case studies in the form of "scripts," personal stories, and an easy-to-navigate structure from chapter to chapter.

Forrest and Wheeldon take up the mantra that the "personal is political" as a means of locating their thesis: that radical feminist consciousness raising is an ethical responsibility that must recognize contingency and singularity, rather than aiming for recognition and identity coherence. They make their case by describing feminist consciousness raising in tension with the conventional teaching of professional ethics for educators, which, they aver, often leads to "closed- or empty-mindedness" (Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019, p. 31). They concur with Van den Hoven and Kole's (2015) critique that John Rawls' reflective equilibrium lacks the interpersonal dimension that is needed for teaching professional ethics; they use this analysis of reflective equilibrium as a point of departure to further delineate feminist consciousness raising throughout the text. The authors advise that reflexivity is not enough, and that the contemplation and enaction of teaching through a feminist ethics must be enriched by vulnerability and witnessing.

As a result, the feminist ethics they delineate are inhabited with a restless spirit. Forrest and Wheeldon develop an approach to scripting feminist ethics which recognizes that although radical feminist consciousness raising may well be the ethos of the approach to teaching ethically, there are no normative recommendations for practice. Rather, through a series of engagements with a feminist philosopher who employs irony as a method, Adriana Cavarero, the authors add layers of nuance and complexity to both their rendering of feminism and their consideration of its usefulness as a frame for teacher professional ethics. Their key discussions of Cavarero's writings (2005, 2007, 2008) include the concept of beginning the work of feminism by starting from where one is, or "*partire da sé*," in chapter 2; the distinctions between singularity and identity and their implications for vulnerability, in chapter 3; and the desirability of paradox, irony, and teaching with "bad intentions," in chapters 2 and 5.

The book contains a prologue, an introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, and an epilogue. The five chapters are structured in the same way. Each begins with a philosophical discussion and contains a dramatized case study script that is then analysed according to the philosophical argument. The chapters conclude with two stand-alone sections, "A Teacher Prepares" and "Teaching Notes." The former extends the background information and concepts from the chapter, while the latter permits the authors to tell a personal story of radical feminist consciousness raising in conversation with the chapter's themes. Each section of the text concludes with its own list of references.

The outcome of their analysis is satisfying, if challenging. Their scripting of feminist ethics is not a *pre*-script-*ion* in the conventional sense, as it offers no solutions to the complex problems of relationality in teaching. Rather, with irony, the authors create dramatized case studies in the form of scripts, which are not foreclosed but instead multifaceted: hold them aloft in different lights and from different perspectives, and new challenges and possibilities emerge. As I read through the text and encountered the case studies and narratives, my own teaching stories and ethical conundrums rose to the surface vividly. The scripts evoked memories, parallels, and ghosts of mistakes made. When I read the authors' nascent discussions and provocations after each script, I found myself arguing with them, probing for other considerations, and feeling no small measure of frustration at the lack of forum to act as interlocutor. In other words, the authors, their case studies, and their analyses, provoked a strong desire for further engagement. I imagine that this very restiveness is what they had in mind.

Chapter 1 sets the stage for non-foreclosure with an exploration of the context and conflicts inherent to moral education in a pluralistic classroom. Here, the authors introduce Van den Hoven and Kole's concept of interpersonal reflective equilibrium as a point of departure for their depiction of feminist ethics. Through an initial script, "*In Media Res*," which drops the reader into a grade 9 English classroom, Forrest and Wheeldon illustrate how moral relativism can create tensions with a teacher's existing principles for ethical practice. They also explain the value and potential of case studies, or scripts, for examining complex reactions to possible scenarios that teachers face in the classroom. They establish for feminist ethics a premise of open-ended dialogic practice wherein reaching for the ethical "good" is less about arrival at "the good place" (eutopia) than it is about "striving for 'no place' [or utopia] … [to keep] the ethical task alive" (Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019, pp. 49–50).

Chapters 2 and 3 are strongly linked. Chapter 2 begins engaging more deeply with the idea that the "personal is political" by delineating the personal as a manifestation of singularity expressed through action in the world, with others. Employing Hannah Arendt and Cavarero, the authors critique the distinction between thought and action, leading as it does to the search for absolute truth and an overreliance on scientific empiricism. Forrest and Wheeldon (2019) write:

> As we have seen, there is a tension between the androcentric/patriarchal drive to find the one, universal answer to the problem of ethical action, and the equally strong desire to protect and preserve the unique singularities comprising *vita activa*, singularities that may inappropriately be reduced to medical pathologies, pseudo socio-economic analyses, or ungrounded concepts from learning theory applied wholesale for purposes of "streamlining" learning. This tension in schools is reflected through the history of feminist philosophy and is exacerbated by the false equation between meaning and truth, which drives education discourse toward a search for certainty when none is ever possible. (p. 77)

This, then, becomes the underlying thesis and context for the remaining chapters. The script in chapter 2, "No Place for the Faint of Heart," introduces a case study that Forrest and Wheeldon revisit in chapter 3. It serves to introduce the distinctions made between singularity and identity, and to introduce concepts of witnessing, vigilance, and recognition that are further taken up in chapter 3, drawing on both Judith Butler and Cavarero. Across both chapters, the authors briefly return to Van den Hoven and Kole's reflective equilibrium. They note that the reflective equilibrium relies on "dialogue and distance" and that both of these are needed to think about how to act ethically in one's work. However, they argue that for a feminist ethics, the distance required to acknowledge the other's singularity is not coldly impartial but should be characterised as witnessing their vulnerability, even as we make ourselves vulnerable.

Chapter 4, in my view, asserts the strongest and most clearly drawn argument for the type of radical feminist consciousness raising that Forrest and Wheeldon are developing here. It is also a chapter that can be read as a stand-alone critique of the distinctions between "good" and "right," particularly as they manifest in education. The chapter argues that G. E. Moore's shift away from metaphysical ethics created a "naturalistic-fallacy effect" (Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019, p. 141) that rendered analytic philosophy an aid to social science and that cultivated a more precarious route from empirical evidence to purportedly ethical action. Forrest and Wheeldon note here that "[their] point, and the overarching point of this book, is that to leap directly from empirical certainties to ethical injunctions and imperatives is far more

dangerous a practice than moral philosophy's traditional path via metaphysics" (p. 141). As such, the authors suggest that metaphysical speculation is a vital aspect of feminist ethics. The script in chapter 4, "Measure for Measure," presents an expert panel discussing the outcomes of bullying programs in schools. The researchers rely heavily on an "evidence-based" approach to evaluate these programs, basing their findings on data that will, ostensibly, inform decision-making for schools (e.g., the decision to purchase these pre-designed programs from companies). This script may feel a little on the nose in relation to the chapter theme, but I have to admit that it closely mirrors a good many arguments I have witnessed justifying instrumentalist solutions for curriculum and policy problems, in both K–12 and higher education.

Chapter 5 returns once again to Cavarero and the rationale for teaching with "bad intentions." There is less philosophical discussion here, but the script is lengthy, vivid, and engaging, depicting as it does yet another complex teacher–student interaction. This final chapter practices the restraint and silence that it notes is a component of teaching with bad intentions: it leaves gaps, raises questions, and opens avenues of consideration without seeking to provide solutions. Perhaps most relevantly to teacher education, the authors write, "we understand our responsibility in teaching ethics to teachers as a supportive and safe process of providing non-indoctrinatory openings … that require student teachers to stop and think twice, perhaps innumerable times, over something perplexing and seemingly inscrutable" (Forrest & Wheeldon, 2019, p. 191). I believe that the authors successfully make the case here, and across the book, for an open-mindedness that brings us, as teachers, relentlessly into utopias – the "no places" – of dialogue and witnessing.

Some of this book's strengths – its brevity, clear organization, and practical use of dramatized case studies – necessitate its limitations. For example, one possible critique is that the philosophical discussion in each chapter could benefit from engagement with other literature on the relevance of postmodern feminism to education (and teaching educators ethics). On the other hand, an extension of the philosophical analysis may have prevented some of the sense of textual balance between the philosophical argument and the case studies and pursuant discussion. Also, as I previously noted, some of the preliminary exploration of the case studies is just that. While this was likely a canny choice in the spirit of consciousness raising and open-mindedness, it may have been helpful to signpost some angles that the authors purposefully left unaddressed, so as to signal to readers the possibilities of the yet undiscovered. Finally, the rationale for the content of each of the case studies is never fully articulated: Why these scenarios? What do they uniquely open for discussion? This would have helped orient and anchor readers between chapters.

Overall, Forrest and Wheeldon have written a cogent argument for a radical feminist consciousness-raising approach to moral education and teacher ethics. This engaging text will be of interest to educators and scholars of education. Because of the case studies and the dexterity of the philosophical argument from chapter to chapter, as well as the invitation to open-mindedness, this book can serve as a useful addition to pre-service education foundations and ethics courses.

References

Cavarero, A. (2005). *For more than one voice* (P. A. Kottman, Trans.). Stanford University Press.

Cavarero, A. (2007). *Horrorism: Naming contemporary violence*. Columbia University Press.

Cavarero, A., with Bertolino, E. (2008). Beyond ontology and sexual difference: An interview with the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, *19*(1), 128–67.

Forrest, M., & Wheeldon, L. (2019). *Scripting feminist ethics in teacher education*. University of Ottawa Press.

Van den Hoven, M. & Kole, J. (2015). Distance, dialogue and reflection: Interpersonal reflective equilibrium as method for professional ethics education. *Journal of Moral Education*, *44*(2), 145–64.

About the Author

Lana Parker is an assistant professor at the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. Her research interests include relationality, educational ethics, meaning making, and the prospects for responsive pedagogy.