

Identity, Reasonableness and Being One Among Others: Dialogue, Community, Education, by Laurance Joseph Splitter (2022), Springer, Singapore, 2022. ISBN 978-981-6683-5

As the person who brought Philosophy for Children (P4C) to Australia in the 1980s, and who has been a leading figure in the movement internationally ever since, Laurance Splitter probably needs no introduction. He has long been fascinated by Big Questions—both in trying to answer them himself, and in exploring the means by which we can encourage youngsters to do so too. He brings all of his experience to bear on this, his latest book.

The central concerns of this book are well signposted in the title, though the major concern that prompts much of it is not: the increasing polarisation of opinion (and action) amongst the citizens of the world. Splitter is far from alone in being concerned—see, for example, Cathy Legg’s paper in this volume—but his approach is less about immediate suggestions for countering such polarisation (though he does eventually advance them) and more about analysing underlying philosophical positions: both those from which the problems arise, and those on which remedial suggestions can be based.

The approach Splitter takes unashamedly follows ‘the rigorous procedures and conceptual analysis of analytic philosophy’ (p. ix). Consequently, we are presented with a very clear and careful elucidation of the concepts involved and their interrelations, drawing on important work from many of the major figures of that tradition. Given Splitter’s rich and detailed treatment, consisting of nearly 300 pages of tight philosophical argumentation, it is only possible in this review to outline some of his major moves.

Even before he came across P4C, ‘What is identity?’ was possibly Splitter’s first Big Question in both ‘analytic philosophy and pure mathematics’ (p. 7). He outlines two different broad understandings of identity—quantitative (or strict, numerical) and qualitative (or predicative)—and asserts, with copious quotes in illustration, that the latter is now preponderant in accounts of personal identity in the social sciences and certain branches of philosophy. This development he ascribes largely to the rise of identity politics, where people in certain (usually disadvantaged) groups have banded together to seek changes. Qualitative identity typically holds that my personal identity consists in the overlapping of all those groups to which I belong, and hence is ‘constructed, fragmented, shifting, impermanent, non-unified and conflicted, because the qualities with which I am associated are ... shifting and impermanent’ (p. 11).

Splitter, rightly to my mind, points out that, 'logically speaking ... qualitative identity presupposes numerical identity. In order to conceive of an object having specific qualities ... we must already possess the concept of an object as something which has various qualities' (p. 18). Following David Wiggins, he asserts that the 'thing' in question must be capable of being referred to, or picked out.

So far, the focus has been identity in general. In Chapter 3, Splitter turns his attention to persons. The account he develops is relational. Here, he draws on PF Strawson's transcendental arguments (themselves based in Kant) as to the primacy of persons over minds and bodies, as well as Donald Davidson's triangulation: to be a specific person is not to be a pure subject, but to be 'self-aware ... as one among others who are also self-aware and who are jointly aware of the world' (p. 35). So central is this conception of persons that the phrase *one among others* is italicised at every mention throughout the book. Again following Davidson, Splitter argues that 'in order to make sense of self-awareness ..., I must also possess the concepts of truth and falsehood' (p. 43) and, further, this entails communication with others, through language. 'Hence, the importance of dialogue as both communicating and "thinking out loud"' (p. 45) and the centrality of 'communities of persons' (p. 54) to our own personhood. The maintenance of such communities, in turn, requires 'a degree of shared understanding of, and commitment to ... what is actually true' (p. 54). In emphasising the interaction between self and others, Splitter claims such an account can walk the line between the radical individualism so beloved by neo-liberals, and the confining collectivism of identity politics.

The next two chapters tease out the moral implications of this view of persons. Reflecting in Chapter 4 on Jonathan Haidt's psychological 'Theory of Moral Foundations', which posits that people's moral reactions are 'driven, first and foremost by intuition, emotion, sentiment and passion, with reason ... and rationality ... playing a subsidiary or retrospective role' (p. 70), Splitter argues that our task is to build reasonableness, 'one of whose components is the cooperative partnership between affect and rationality ...' (p. 73). Here, given our propensity to rationalise our affective reactions via confirmation bias, dialogue with others is vital, as they are much more likely to identify our inconsistencies than we are. And this requires dialogue across difference, rather than merely within our own 'bubble'. Flowing on from his argument that a person is one among others, Splitter's account of reasonableness cannot be 'either reduced to the domain of the individual, or understood entirely intellectually or impersonally' (p. 81), but must involve being 'open to being reasoned with' (p. 82) in a (broadly understood) community of inquiry

based on care and respect for each other, with an orientation towards the truth and truthfulness (drawing on Bernard Williams). This orientation has three parts: an intention to tell the truth, making judgements about the truth of what we are told, and being prepared to change our mind when given good reasons to do so. Splitter argues that his concept of reasonableness is open to those on both the left and the right of politics, if they have an open disposition, treating everyone as one among others (p. 100).

In Chapter 5, we are introduced to Splitter's 'Principle of Personal Worth': 'persons are, morally speaking, more valuable and worthwhile than non-persons ... My primary target ... is those constructs ... constituted by, but "larger than" persons ... nations, religions, ethnicities and races ...' (p. 109)—he goes on to list many other groups and institutions. That is, the effects of such groups are moral only insofar as they 'support the well-being of actual persons' (p. 115). Such groups are constituted by persons, each one among others, and so form communities. While such communities certainly influence us, as we are relational beings, they do not constitute our identity. They don't account for qualitative personhood: the thisness of persons.

Chapter 6 is an interesting—and lengthy—critique of an overreliance on narrative in accounting for personal identity. Interesting because Splitter does not deny the power of narrative: rather, he argues that narrative alone cannot explain identity, personhood and morality, as narrative—unlike inquiry—does not have an inherent commitment to the truth.

Finally, Splitter turns his attention to the implications of the preceding chapters for education and, indeed, wider political action. After expanding on the concept of reasonableness and its links to democracy, he focuses on teaching persons to be reasonable through the community of inquiry, initially concentrating on classrooms. An interesting distinction is made between learning (what the teacher or syllabus has decided on) and inquiry (into open questions that the students have). He then analyses the requirements for a community of inquiry in three dimensions:

D1: creating a safe place of care and respect where students are happy to take risks;

D2: 'content which students, themselves, find genuinely puzzling or intriguing' (p. 235); and

D3: the use of inquiry procedures including identifying the puzzles, formulating questions, attempting to resolve them.

Splitter provides a detailed and extraordinarily helpful discussion of each these dimensions.

Given my paper in this volume, it is interesting to explore what Splitter means, in classroom terms, by the phrase community of inquiry (CoI). At times, it is clearly my narrow-sense CoI (e.g. pp. 239-240, and by the equating of inquiry with dialogue, pp. 247-250), while more often it is a wide-sense CoI (e.g. 'If [subjects] are taught as modes of inquiry in classrooms that function as communities of inquiry ...' (p. 236)). I note that Splitter does at times use the phrase I have suggested—inquiring community (p. 238)—for this. In this latter case, the role, if any, of non-inquiry methods (lectures, demonstration, mastering skills, etc.) is not clear to me. Finally, we hear that 'the community of inquiry and the standards which constitute reasonableness are normative ideals to which we aspire, even if, in practice, we inevitably fall short' (p. 277)—what I have labelled the transcendental CoI.

Beyond the classroom, Splitter ends by investigating how the ideals of community of inquiry could be utilised in the broader community to help alleviate the social and political divisiveness that he has explored throughout the book. He proposes a model for 'social deliberation' (pp. 279-284) based on Deliberative Polling (but without the polling part). This is a fascinating proposal, and it would be very interesting to see an attempt to implement it.

Laurance Splitter has written a detailed and carefully argued book encapsulating the fruits of his decades working in the field of Philosophy for Children and its many offshoots. He has read widely and engages with many and varied views from disparate sources, always in the careful spirit of inquiry and dialogue with others that he so ably champions. As he says in his introduction, 'the book's success will ... depend ... on its potential to inspire [readers] to formulate their own "Big Questions" and stimulate further inquiry and dialogue' (p. viii). By this standard, it succeeds admirably. All who are interested in community of inquiry, in education—indeed, in ways to bring about a more reasonable and cohesive society—ought to read it.

Tim Sprod