University philosophy courses in ethics typically aim for certain narrow goals. These standardly include familiarity with core texts and ideas in (mostly) Western meta- and normative ethics and the ability to think about them philosophically and relative to pressing social issues. In general such courses aim to improve student’s capacities for ethical reasoning about moral problems. They do not aim to enhance student’s ethical behaviour, nor even really their day-to-day practical reasoning.

In *Ethics, Emotion, Education, and Empowerment*, Lisa Kretz (now Leaf) asks what beyond the standard curriculum and pedagogy must educators do ‘if student empowerment through ethical action is a goal’ (p. 2)? What changes must we make if we want our students to leave ethics classes with not just the knowledge, but also the confidence and drive they need to ethically enact their convictions? This book develops answers ‘in favour of attending to the role of emotion in our moral lives’ rooted in ‘insights derived from the nexus of action, philosophical ethics, pedagogy, feminist theory and oppression theory more generally, and moral psychology’ (p. 3). The current approach fails to support empowered ethical action because emotions such as sympathy, empathy and the like are crucial to action, and the standard curriculum fails both to elicit and train these.

As I understand Kretz’s text, the failure has two aspects and correcting it involves a two-pronged approach. The first failure is that any approach so focused on enhancing ethical reasoning – like the standard curriculum – fails to engage and support development of the emotions needed for ethical motivation and action. Reason and emotion must work together to produce action, and guidance that trains only reasoning is incomplete. The first prong of correcting this is to (do more to) directly teach emotion concepts and provide support for developing the moral emotions.

However, even teaching in ways that do engage the emotions is insufficient. How we experience emotions like empathy is partly determined by our social world, and they can be misdirected through various forms of bias, despair, inattention and the like. The second prong requires seeking to (re)train the emotions and correct for corrupting influences such as oppressive ways of thinking. Thinking about ethics and the sad moral state of the world can also lead to emotional overloading and hopelessness. Environmental issues like climate change, for example, are especially liable to trigger such feelings. Thus it is also necessary to attend to the emotional impact of our teaching.

In developing this view, Kretz’s book covers lots of ground. The following highlights are selective. Chapter 1 addresses some reasons instructors might...
hesitate to make a goal of enhancing students’ ethical behaviours. There is significant disagreement, of course, about which behaviours are ethical. This is not a problem, Kretz claims, if the goal is to empower students to enact their beliefs. Some might fear manipulating rather than educating their students, but there is nothing manipulative if it is made explicit that behaviour change is a goal (this inference is not plainly valid). Finally, instructors might hesitate given that, unlike moral reasoning, behaviour change cannot be tested and measured. This is generally true, though Kretz rightly notes that not all things worth doing educationally are testable. We are also not totally at a loss for ways to study how to teach in ways that support empowering behaviour, such as inviting students to reflect on past behaviours or exploring correlations between different teaching methods and student reports on their own behaviour.

Chapter 3 critiques historically common conceptions of reason and emotion as wholly separate, at odds and of unequal value, reason being epistemically and agentially superior. Like our beliefs, emotions can lead us astray when supported, e.g., by oppressive social structures. Still, emotions are epistemically important, giving us information about the world and tuning us in to what’s salient for us. Supporting students’ acquiring the right emotions will involve affective pedagogy, i.e. attending carefully to the ‘emotional hues’ of classrooms since ‘affective valences can limit or encourage various forms of learning’ (p. 74). Students who are angry, anxious or depressed may learn less than those who are helped to feel more positive emotions.

As an extended example, Chapter 4 discusses the emotional dimensions of teaching about climate change, a topic that can inspire despair or even various mental health concerns. Kretz maintains that teaching hope can help students to feel empowered to act, but only given an appropriate understanding. Kretz’s conception of hope is not just a cheery attitude, one compatible with complacently expecting that things will get better. While Kretz does not use this language, hope, as the text describes it, seems to be more akin to a character virtue, involving complex patterns of judgment and will, than an emotion per se. Hope must have as its object an outcome that is realistically possible, but not inevitable. Hopeful people then ‘(1) clearly conceptualize goals, (2) develop the specific strategies to reach those goals (pathways thinking) and (3) initiate and sustain the motivation for using those strategies (agency thinking)’ (p.89).

The final chapter and appendix describe various concrete tactics for emotionally engaging students toward the end of supporting ethical action. Many (like service learning) may be familiar to readers who are already thoughtful teachers. But some are novel and the discussion is helpfully detailed. This chapter, for example, describes teaching the subculture of the emotional outlaw and feminist killjoy, developing what I am calling the second prong of Kretz’s approach.
Kretz’s book makes a strong case on the whole in support of making ethical action one aim of university ethics instruction while usefully assembling relevant evidence and ideas on how this might be done. Like all books, it leaves certain important questions open and invites several critical questions. One question concerns whether any teaching at the college level can do much at all to influence the future behaviour of already adult(ish) people. Aristotelians about moral development may be sceptical, though we should all hope they are wrong and that people aged 18+ can still learn to be and behave better.

In a related vein, political behaviours, such as voting habits or habits of engagement in public dialogue, are arguably some of the most important behaviours that college educators are best positioned to enhance. Ethical conduct in those domains certainly involves appropriate moral emotions. But individual behaviour change is not clearly the most important solution to many such problems, such as climate change, which emerge from collective action. And it may be that the standard philosophical ethics curriculum, well-implemented, makes absolutely essential contributions to supporting something – clearheaded ethical reasoning – that students are unlikely to acquire outside of philosophy classrooms. Many courses outside philosophy, on the other hand, are excellent and appropriate forums for providing students with valuable ‘service learning plus moral reflection’ opportunities. Philosophy instructors might think twice before greatly compromising their teaching of ethical reasoning.

Finally, making a goal of enhancing such civic behaviours, under this description, has a rather different connotation (than empowering students to act on their own ethical beliefs), one that heightens the legitimacy concerns Kretz brushes to one side in Chapter 1. There is potentially a very big difference between aiming to support student empowerment to enact their own ethical convictions and aiming to support students’ being better citizens and acting ethically. Neither is neutral. But each will need quite a bit more defence and elaboration than is given in this book.

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