Review of Liz Jackson (2021). *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions*

Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 250 pp. ISBN 9781108482134 (Hardcover)

Winne Wong¹

Accepted: 16 February 2022 / Published online: 2 March 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022

Keywords Emotion education · Emotional virtues · Politics · Relation · Social justice · Precarity · Hong Kong

What Is in The Book?

In *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions* Liz Jackson (2021) remarks that her book may come across as ‘pessimistic’. I understand that statement as a euphemistic reference to the discomfort and frustration we face when we confront our complacency. As teachers, educators, researchers, philosophers, or even parents, we have let ourselves be lulled into a false sense of security. We think we understand the way emotions and emotional virtues are known and ‘taught’ and how curricula and education at large are configured around these understandings. Throughout the book, Jackson problematises the commonly-held but seldom-questioned views about emotions and emotional virtues. She also critiques various pedagogical models and approaches, such as social and emotional intelligence, positive psychology, and growth mindset, that have been adopted at different times and places to educate young people about emotions. Each chapter is underscored by this refrain: no matter how we perceive and frame emotions and emotional virtues in education, the perceptions and framings are probably more problematic than we realise.

The book consists of eleven chapters. The three introductory chapters offer an overview of some underlying assumptions about emotions and the prevalent philosophical and empirical approaches and perspectives. These are followed by seven chapters in which Jackson examines a selection of emotions and virtues commonly associated with education. In the conclusion, Jackson discusses the education of

✉ Winne Wong
winne.wong@unifr.ch

¹ Faculty of Philosophy, Department of Educational Sciences, University of Fribourg, Fribourg, Switzerland

emotions from a global perspective and offers some thoughts on how researchers and educators should approach the education of emotions.

Towards a Critical Consciousness of Emotions

Jackson (2021) offers a wide range of reasons why the prevalent perceptions and framings of emotions and virtues can be problematic. She points out that the assumptions about the nature of emotions and the realm in which emotions belong are often left unquestioned. The ways in which we apportion values to different emotions and the manners in which emotions and virtues are inculcated or manipulated are also seldom challenged. Most importantly, Jackson argues that the prevalent perceptions and models fail to factor in individual differences, diversities, and power hierarchies. To break away from these widely held views, Jackson brings to the forefront the boundaries and the power structures that are hidden from plain sight. Jackson pushes her readers to confront the complexity of emotions and any attempts to educate young people about them.

Boundaries and power, closely related to social categories as we know them, are perhaps more widely understood as concepts of social sciences rather than philosophy. This is, for me, why this book stands out. Authored by a philosopher of education, *Beyond Virtue* (Jackson 2021) reaches beyond philosophy. Jackson makes clear from the outset that ‘some particular kinds of Aristotelian accounts that grant educators moral authority and superior understanding of something like “moral truth” as a matter of course’ do not sit well with her, and that her focus is ‘on the diversity of emotional experience in real-world contexts’ (Jackson 2021: 21).

Jackson brings together the philosophical, psychological, and sociological strands of education. This makes the book a multidisciplinary undertaking. There are also conscientious efforts at breaking out from the Western and Anglophone discourses to include Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist approaches. Examples and context-specific discussions about places such as Hong Kong, where Jackson is currently based, can also be found in some chapters.

It is an ambitious and extensive scope to fit into a highly readable space of 250 pages. Nevertheless, Jackson (2021) manages to offer a rich multidisciplinary overview of the education of emotions. Historical accounts, perspectives, and epistemic models of different disciplines are thematically juxtaposed, delineated, and synthesised. Each chapter is concluded with some general pointers grounded in interdisciplinary insights. Jackson does not shy away from pointing out blind spots of various perspectives and models. She makes straightforward recommendations on what and how certain emotions or models *should* or *should not* be perceived or implemented.

Instead of developing a single theory and delineating a new, ‘correct way’ of approaching the education of virtues and emotions, the primary aim of the book is to ‘advocate for more caution in educating emotional virtues, to apply what is known critically and reflectively’ (Jackson 2021: 22). Critical reflections of one’s ingrained beliefs and practice cannot happen out of thin air ‘without an

undergirding moral epistemology’ (Jackson 2021: 20). *Beyond Virtue* provides researchers and practitioners with the input and tools to reflect critically on their own beliefs and practice. Jackson has achieved this without encroaching into the space of reflection with recommendations conceived in generalised or universalised (West-centric) settings or situations.

Beyond Virtue is anchored in the ‘real-word contexts’ through Jackson’s unwavering effort in linking her work to power and social justice. Jackson challenges educators to question their own motives in endorsing or dismissing certain emotions. For example, she questions whether making happiness an educational goal has enabled educators and authorities to dismiss the necessity of addressing the more complex, graver structural issues that underscore the sub-optimal emotional well-being of students. When addressing the negative emotions and dispositions such as anger, sadness, fear, and anxiety, Jackson asks whether dismissing these emotions as time-wasting and unproductive is about ease of control inside the classroom and in larger societal contexts. Concerning the promotion, or even celebration, of grit and resilience, Jackson exemplifies how discourses of these virtues have been manipulated by state authorities to justify misallocation of resources and continued neglect of the marginalised and underprivileged. These are discomfiting but critical questions that are not often given the attention they deserve.

The complexity of emotions lies in their non-static and changeable nature. Impacts of emotions cannot be generalised and categorised easily. Jackson demonstrates again and again how young people can be conditioned by the expectations of positive emotions and can learn to perform them in front of teachers. It prevents them from dealing with negative or even destructive emotions in a healthy, constructive manner. Another recurrent point is the way negative emotions may in fact be useful and help young people to attain longer-term fulfilment and contentment. Repeatedly, Jackson urges readers to examine whether their intention is to control or to empower the younger generation, and whether their ways of managing emotions, both in general and pedagogical settings, align with their intentions.

Examples from Hong Kong

Jackson’s reference to Hong Kong (Jackson 2021: Chap. 4) demonstrates her sensitivity to high expectations on pupils’ work ethics and their performances in the high-stakes, assessment-driven schooling system. In that context, happiness is predicated on academic success and latent economic security in the future, justified only by pseudo-meritocracy and very little else. Students are often asked to put their happiness on hold, with the promise that it will arrive in larger measure once they finish school. Frontline teachers in the local system often brand themselves as the model of motivation, hard work, and success, and attribute success and failure to individuals’ work ethics and dispositions. Though aware of the potential detriment of competition and stress, few would question the morality of participating in the perpetuation of the system.

As Jackson points out, discourse focusing on individual happiness sets too much store on virtues such as grit and resilience but does not pay enough attention to structural issues such as inequitable distribution of resources. This kind of discourse made it possible for teachers and society at large to look away from the root causes of systemic problems and continue to ‘sort young people *en masse* in the world into either positions of political and material hardship and continuous suffering, or less tragic and hopeless forms of precariousness’ (Jackson 2021: 216). To a large extent, taking emotions and virtues such as happiness and grit at their face values has enabled frontline practitioners and policymakers to shirk their moral responsibility.

Jackson does not directly address the social movement in Hong Kong. However, the condition in which many young people in Hong Kong found themselves in the two years prior to the pandemic, and the way emotions and virtues were deployed in political discourse, epitomise Jackson’s concerns regarding the framing, understanding, and education of emotions. Since 2014 Hong Kong has seen a series of confrontations between young people and the authorities. These events, triggered by the proposal of the extradition bill in 2019 (see Victors and Yuhas 2019), eventually culminated in a series of large-scale protests in which protestors expressed their profound dissatisfaction about the shrinking autonomy of Hong Kong since the handover in 1997 (see CNN 2022; deLisle 2019). The protests lasted for almost two years, until the pandemic brought everything to a halt in 2020.

The highly divisive debates revolving around the protests and disruptions were charged with heightened emotions. Emotions such as anger and the ensuing reactions were condemned as destructive and equated with violence. Meanwhile, virtues such as gratitude and respect were evoked, and the term political ethics was deployed by the pro-establishment narrative with the sole purpose of delegitimising the discontentment and displacing the concerns of the protestors.

Jackson (2021: 216) pointedly argues that young people are not duty-bound ‘to smile and persevere in dysfunctional and unjust societies’. Instead, she puts the onus on those who educate, control, and gatekeep, and urges them to relate to the young people and prioritise personal and social flourishing. Considering the time and geopolitical context in which the book was published, the compassionate and balanced stance and voice Jackson maintains throughout *Beyond Virtue* are critical.

Surviving Precariousness Through Attention to Relations

Towards the end of *Beyond Virtue*, Jackson touches on the question of precariousness. This connects *Beyond Virtue* (Jackson 2021) to a range of other scholarly works which address the cultural and sociological concept of precarity as a norm of life in our time (see Berlant 2012; Butler 2006; Tsing 2021). These works dwell upon different realms yet they converge around a common theme: to survive in a precarious world, we need each other. We need to move away from individuals being self-sufficient, independent units, refocus our attention on relations, and attune ourselves to one another in all of our differences, diversities, and complexities.

Schools are often the first or most significant social institutions with which young people affiliate. Despite the emphasis on knowledge transmission, assessments, and achievements, they remain institutions of care. If becoming attentive to relations and attuned to differences are indeed our only chance, we should look upon schools as venues in which the shifting of paradigm and transformation of perspectives and attitudes could take place. With its approachable language and structure, *Beyond Virtue* (Jackson 2021) serves as a valuable, versatile resource for those who are ready to reconsider how we ought to prepare young people to live a good life.

Covid-19, Education, and Postdigital Relations

During the pandemic, schools and teachers have had to improvise and quickly adapt to a new way to relate to their students. Education news since the beginning of the pandemic has been teeming with reports of the mental health crises amongst young people due to prolonged isolation and deprivation of in-person human contact (see Nurunnabi et al. 2021). Meanwhile, teachers, journalists, and researchers have highlighted the ways the pandemic and home learning have exacerbated class and social divides and the chasm between the haves and have-nots (see Goudeau et al. 2021). The chief chorus amongst educators seems to be that technology is a poor substitute for in-person teaching and interactions, and we must find a way to return to the ‘old normal’ for the sake of the young people.

However, Jandrić and Hayes (2020) argue otherwise. They point out that ‘human existence has always been dialectally intertwined with technical innovation’, and that it is entirely possible for us to grow ‘alongside the machines in our lives’. What it takes, they argue, is a ‘postdigital praxis’ that ‘frees us from the existing social order’ and disrupts ‘neoliberal learning logic’, which focuses on the individualistic rather than the relational. Though departing from a different area, Jandrić and Hayes (2020) share Jackson’s (2021) concerns on social justice: they seek a new way to democratise education so as not to ‘reinforce existing power relationships’ and ‘produce subjects who can slot into a pre-existing order of society’. It requires educators to unlearn neoliberal notions and rethink how we can produce human agents who can ‘radically reimagine their roles in a global collective society’. Like Jackson (2021), Jandrić and Hayes (2020) believe the key lies in relations.

Covid-19 has accelerated the need for educators to confront the dysfunctional ‘old normal’ and look upon the space where technology, relations, emotions, and education intersect as a site of new opportunities (Jandrić et al. 2020). Jackson’s discussion of emotions and education is largely human-centred. She does not address technology directly when she urges educators to relate to young people in a new way. However, it seems apparent that, given the context in which *Beyond Virtue* is published, the relational approach Jackson (2021) calls for also requires educators to consider technological, non-human agents and the way young people relate to them.

Three Provocations

To close, I would like to make three observations that occupied my mind as I pored through the text. I present them in forms of provocation in the hope that this review, apart from showcasing the insights, relevance, timeliness, and the compassion of the text, will also lead to further discussion.

Can Emotions be Taught?

At the beginning of this review, I put ‘taught’ in quotation marks to indicate my reservations with this choice of wording. While I mostly agree with Jackson’s (2021) perspectives on how emotions and virtues should be framed and understood, I am much less certain about the feasibility of ‘teaching’ emotions. To many, the verb ‘teach’ implies a process directed by intention and fulfilled by actions. In some schools, the topics of emotions are addressed through subjects such as personal well-being and personal growth or homeroom time that is dedicated for pastoral care. In many schools, however, emotions remain a topic addressed at the periphery of the curriculum. Even when contact time is carved out to discuss emotions, the discussions usually subsume under well-being.

It is clearly possible to make room for the education of emotions at school. However, it is also clear that emotions are dissimilar to the contents of conventional academic subjects in many ways. In *Beyond Virtue* (Jackson 2021) teachers and adults remain the knowers who have knowledge to impart to students. Can we ‘teach’ emotions? Is ‘teach’ the best action verb to encapsulate the attempts of supporting young people in their pursuits of a good, meaningful life?

How To Avoid Othering and Other Pitfalls?

Jackson makes laudable efforts to diversify the discussion of emotion education. She writes:

By exploring Eastern and especially Chinese philosophical and cultural views of emotions in education in part, I thus aim to signal profound diversity when it comes to understanding emotions in society and educating emotional virtues. The aim of this book is not to review views of emotions held around the world. But bringing Eastern views into the discussion demonstrates how Western views of educating emotional virtues are culturally particular, not universal. (Jackson 2021:16)

There is no question that Jackson has an excellent grasp of the Eastern epistemological and philosophical perspectives. Her finesse in illuminating both Eastern and Western perspectives through one another is also evident; she has done so without oversimplifying them as diametrical opposites. However, Western views are also highly diverse in themselves. For example, there are considerable differences between Anglophone and continental European perspectives. By skipping over the

diversity within the Western traditions and reaching directly to the Eastern ideas to demonstrate the particularity of Western views, Jackson may have inadvertently othered ‘Eastern’ epistemology and perspectives.

This is further complicated by the question of what constitutes ‘the East’ or ‘Asian’—their meanings vary according to geopolitical contexts. For instance, while ‘Asians’ in North America often refers to people who are of the Far East heritages, in the UK, ‘Asians’ commonly refers to people of heritages from India, Pakistan and the neighbouring regions. In view of these considerations, how should we bring cultural diversity into academic dialogues?

What About Politics?

In the concluding chapter, Jackson offers the following suggestion:

Educators can explore with students what it means to be a good and just person within interpersonal relationships, in communities, and within societies, and various means of effectively organising and sustainably identifying with collective others. Students can also learn to appreciate that the right thing for people as individual or collective actors to do is not usually given by school curricula, or any other ‘rules for life’, in this context; practical judgement is also needed, to consider what virtues and principles are relevant, and what unique situations demand.

None of this requires educators to push students to the front lines of particular political battles. On the other hand, it does require that students and teachers grapple with political and moral complexity in classrooms, where lessons do not have clear right and wrong answers, when it comes to what people as individuals and communities should do. (Jackson 2021: 214–215)

Beyond Virtue (Jackson 2021) demonstrates a clear political awareness and a serious commitment to social justice. In this concluding remark, however, I feel Jackson has overlooked two important, interrelated points. First, her suggestion is predicated on the assumption that discharging daily teaching duties will not lead to life-altering political consequences. Second, ‘grappling with political and moral complexity in classrooms’ can be a precarious undertaking.

In Hong Kong, for example, there have been incidences in which teachers were dismissed (Wong 2020) or had their professional license revoked (BBC 2020) because they had included erroneous or politically controversial contents during lessons. The largest professional teachers’ union in Hong Kong, which had provided legal support to teachers in these cases, was disbanded due to political pressure (Roantree et al. 2021). This highlights the growing precariousness inherent in the teaching profession (Cheng and Zaharia 2021). The emotional strain and mental health impact these incidences have caused amongst teachers cannot be overstated.

Discussions on being a good and just person must inevitably touch on civic duties, community relationships, morality, and politics. When teachers are gripped by the fear of unwittingly putting themselves in the political firing line, how should researchers and educators reconsider and/or reframe Jackson’s suggestion?

References

- BBC. (2020). Teacher disqualified for 'promoting Hong Kong independence'. BBC News, 6 October. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54431729>. Accessed 15 February 2022.
- Berlant, L. G. (2012). *Cruel optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Butler, J. (2006). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. New York: Verso.
- Cheng, S., & Zaharia, M. (2021). Hong Kong teachers exit under shadow of security law, schools scramble to fill gaps. Reuters, 16 September. <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/hong-kong-teachers-exit-under-shadow-security-law-schools-scramble-fill-gaps-2021-09-16/>. Accessed 15 February 2022.
- CNN. (2022). Hong Kong protests. <https://edition.cnn.com/specials/asia/hong-kong-protests-intl-hnk>. Accessed 16 February 2022.
- DeLisle, J. (2019). Hong Kong's summer of discontent. Foreign policy research institute, 3 September. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/09/hong-kongs-summer-of-discontent/>. Accessed 16 February 2022.
- Goudeau, S., Sanrey, C., Stanczak, A., Manstead, A., & Darnon, C. (2021). Why lockdown and distance learning during the covid-19 pandemic are likely to increase the social class achievement gap. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5(10), 1273–1281. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01212-7>.
- Jackson, L. (2021). *Beyond Virtue: The Politics of Educating Emotions*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jandrić, P., & Hayes, S. (2020). Postdigital we-learn. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 39(3), 285–297. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-020-09711-2>.
- Jandrić, P., Hayes, D., Truelove, I., Levinson, P., Mayo, P., Ryberg, T., Monzó, L.D., Allen, Q., Stewart, P.A., Carr, P.R., Jackson, L., Bridges, S., Escañó, C., Grauslund, D., Mañero, J., Lukoko, H.O., Bryant, P., Fuentes Martinez, A., Gibbons, A., Sturm, S., Rose, J., Chuma, M.M., Biličić, E., Pfohl, S., Gustafsson, U., Arantes, J.A., Ford, D.R., Kihwele, J.E., Mozelius, P., Suoranta, J., Jurjević, L., Jurčević, M., Steketee, A., Irwin, J., White, E.J., Davidsen, J., Jaldemark, J., Abegglen, S., Burns, T., Sinfield, S., Kirylo, J.D., Batarelo Kokić, I., Stewart, G.T., Rikowski, G., Lisberg Christensen, L., Arndt, S., Pyyhtinen, O., Reitz, C., Lodahl, M., Humble, N., Buchanan, R., Forster, D.J., Kishore, P., Ozoliņš, J., Sharma, N., Urvashi, S., Nejad, H.G., Hood, N., Tesar, M., Wang, Y., Wright, J., Brown, J.B., Prinsloo, P., Kaur, K., Mukherjee, M., Novak, R., Shukla, R., Hollings, S., Konnerup, U., Mallya, M., Olorundare, A., Achieng-Evensen, C., Philip, A.P., Hazzan, M.K., Stockbridge, K., Komolafe, B.F., Bolanle, O.F., Hogan, M., Redder, B., Sattarzadeh, S.D., Jopling, M., SooHoo, S., Devine, N., & Hayes, S. (2020). Teaching in The Age of Covid-19. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2(3), 1069–1230. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42438-020-00169-6>.
- Nurunnabi, M., Almusharraf, N., & Aldeghaither, D. (2021). Mental health and well-being during the covid-19 pandemic in higher education: Evidence from g20 countries. *Journal of Public Health Research*, 9(s1). <https://doi.org/10.4081/jphr.2020.2010>.
- Roantree, A. M., Cheng, S., Waters, A., & Pang, J. (2021). Hong Kong teachers' union to disband due to 'drastic' political situation. Reuters, 10 August. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kong-teachers-union-disband-due-drastic-political-situation-2021-08-10/>. Accessed 15 February 2022.
- Tsing, A. L. (2021). *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the possibility of life in capitalist ruins*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Victors, D., & Yuhas, A. (2019). What's happening in Hong Kong? The New York Times, 8 August. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/08/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-explained.html?>. Accessed 15 February 2022.
- Wong, R. (2020). Second Hong Kong teacher sacked, this time for Opium War blunder as lawmaker says punishment too harsh. Hong Kong Free Press, 13 November. <https://hongkongfp.com/2020/11/13/second-hong-kong-teacher-sacked-this-time-for-opium-war-blunder-as-lawmaker-says-punishment-too-harsh/>. Accessed 15 February 2022.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.