

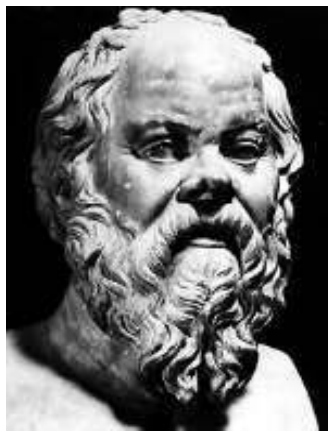
# Is Morality a Competence? Can It be Taught?<sup>1</sup>

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*And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be  
better in the power of attaining it?*

*Then if virtue is knowledge, virtue will be taught?*

SOCRATES (469 - 399 B.A.E.)



## Abstract

About 2500 years ago, the Greek philosopher Socrates asked whether morality is a virtue and can be taught? Today the answers are still highly controversial, if not even seen as irrelevant. Moreover, there is little agreement on the meaning of competence and teaching in regard to morality. This author believes that the key to the nature of morality can be found in Socrates' hidden theory. Today, moral competencies can be validly measured and they can be very effectively taught. Modern experimental studies have shown that while moral intentions (orientations) are inborn, moral virtues (i.e., competencies) can, and must, be taught.

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Two and a half thousand years ago, in his dialogue with Meno, Socrates asked important questions, which still puzzle us today. After more than thirty years of psychological research and pedagogical practice I believe that we can now answer them.

For the sake of brevity, my presentation must be sketchy. Fortunately, I can refer to recent publications in which I have painted a more detailed picture (Lind, 2008 a; 2008 b; 2009; in press) and to numerous presentations here at this conference, which deepen and extend my findings.

When I first read Socrates, I thought, probably like you, that he confronted Meno (and us) only with questions. However, after re-reading his dialogue with Meno on the basis of what we know today, I believe, that his answers are hidden in his questions. By posing his theory of moral behavior and development as questions, it seems, Socrates wanted to make his – in those times highly heretical – ideas more acceptable for his audience. Unfortunately, he had made them not acceptable enough but got accused of misleading the youth and was sentenced to death by the Athenian citizens. Socrates' theory, I believe, has several important implications. Some of these implications concern the clarification of core concepts and their conceptual relationship. Others concern the nature of moral behavior and its development and education.

1. First, when talking about moral behavior. Socrates taught us, we must distinguish *two* important *aspects*, namely “the desire to be moral,” that is, *moral orientation* or motivation, and the ability to attain this ideal, that is, *moral competence*, as we would say today. In other words, we must distinguish between *affective* and *cognitive* aspects of moral behavior (and of any human behavior). But we must not talk about these aspects as if they were *things* or *components*, which can be physically separated.

For example, the size and the weight of a ball are aspects or properties of the ball. We cannot take size and weight away from the ball like its rubber or the air in it. Neither can we find out about the correlation between size and weight of balls but measuring the size of one sample of balls and the weight of another sample of balls.

Analogously, aspects of moral behavior can be distinguished but they cannot be *separated* like *components*. In Piaget's words, “the two aspects, affective and cognitive, are at the same time inseparable and irreducible.” (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969, p. 158) We readily understand this distinction when dealing with physical objects like a ball but often find it difficult to distinguish between aspects and components when dealing with psychological

dispositions. Let me illustrate this with a situation in which a participant is to discuss the following moral case (re-worded from Kohlberg's *Moral Judgment Interview*; Colby et al., 1987):

*A woman had cancer and she had no hope of being saved. She was in terrible pain and so weakened that a large dose of a painkiller such as morphine would have caused her death. During a temporary period of improvement, she begged the doctor to give her enough morphine to kill her. She said she could no longer endure the pain and would be dead in a few weeks anyway. The doctor gave her the overdose.*

Let us assume, a respondent, Shawn, says the doctor did *wrong*. What can be inferred from Shawn's response? Obviously, we can ask two types of questions here: First, questions about Shawn's underlying moral orientations: Was the doctor's decision against Shawn's moral conviction that life must be preserved? Was he thinking that the doctor might get punished? etc.

Second, we can try to find out about his cognitive structure: Did he weight the life of the woman against her pains? Does he actually value life or does he merely submit to the norms of his "folks"? With no more information at hand than knowing Shawn's opinion on the doctor's decision, we cannot say which moral orientations were determining his behavior and how they were doing this. Rather we must engage Shawn in a moral discourse in order to find out. Kohlberg and his colleagues did this in a very sophisticated way with their *Moral Judgment Interview* (MJI).

Yet MJI -interview is very time-consuming to administer and to score, and does not allow us to clearly distinguish between the participants' moral orientations and their moral judgment competence. It provides only one index for both aspects. Therefore, we developed a new experimental assessment instrument, the *Moral Judgment Test* (MJT). I have described the MJT in the workshop and in many publications (Lind, 2008a; see also Weiss & Zierer, 2009). The basic idea behind the MJT is that participants (like Shawn) are confronted with a carefully selected series of argument in favor and against the doctor's decision. Each set of arguments represents also different moral orientations (incidentally those described by Kohlberg in his Stage model). The pattern of responses by a participant (see Figure 5) lets us see whether, and to which degree, his (or her) judgment behavior was

guided by moral orientations rather than by his inclination to defend his (or her) stance on a specific issues like mercy killing.

2. We see from this that, as Socrates said, both aspects are *indispensable*: “Virtue is the desire of things honorable *and* the power of attaining them.” (Meno) So, on the one side, behavior which is not determined by moral concerns cannot be called *moral*. To quote Kant: “Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good, without qualification, except a good will.”<sup>3</sup>
3. Neither can, on the other side, behavior be called morally good if it does not show moral *competence*. A person who only desires to be good but does not strive to attain this ideal, is not morally good in the fully sense of the meaning. Moral competence or moral *judgment* competence, is the link between moral ideals and everyday decision-making. Namely, moral (judgment) competence is, as Lawrence Kohlberg (1964) defined, “the capacity to make decisions and judgments which are moral (i.e., based on internal principles) and to act in accordance with such judgments.” (p. 425)
4. Although affective and cognitive aspects are both indispensable, Socrates argued, they show some clear differences in regard their prevalence among human beings: “*And if one man is not better than another in desiring good, he must be better in the power of attaining it?*” That is, although moral orientations are essential and indispensable for moral action, they are not very interesting for moral research and moral education. If all people have high moral ideals ( “If one man is not better than another in desiring good” ), it means first that there will be hardly any variation between them. As many studies have shown this empirical hypothesis is universally valid. For example, inmates of prisons hold the same high moral ideals like their non-criminal counterparts (Levy-Suhl, 1912; Wischka, 1982; Scheurer, 1993). Even primates (de Waal, 2009 and pre-verbal infants already show clear signs of a moral sense (Hamlin at al., 2007; see also Schwarz & Sagie, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> Kant continues: “Intelligence, wit, judgement, and the other talents of the mind, however they may be named, or courage, resolution, perseverance, as qualities of temperament, are undoubtedly good and desirable in many respects; but these gifts of nature may also become extremely bad and mischievous if the will which is to make use of them, and which, therefore, constitutes what is called character, is not good.” (Kant, I. (1785).

5. But things are different with moral competencies. Because we must expect substantial differences in people's moral competencies (“... *he must be better in the power of attaining it*”) we must be concerned about fostering them through education. “*Then if virtue is knowledge, virtue will be taught.*” (Meno) Again, Socrates seems to mean that this is not question but a statement of fact. If the variation in moral behavior is *essentially* due to differences in regard to people's moral competence, we would say today, we can *teach* morality. Teaching is appropriate because competencies cannot be indoctrinated like moral values but must be learned through exercises. This shows what vast consequences our theory of moral behavior and development has for a society and its for educational policy-making. If particular citizens were really as bad-minded as some people believe teaching would not work. Rather we would either have to detain them in prisons or change their moral motivation by means of coercion.
  
6. Going beyond Socrates, Kant believed that we not only *can* teach morality but that we also *must* teach morality if we want to create morally mature citizens and achieve universal peace: “Education is the process by which man becomes man. Mankind begins its history submerged in nature. ... Nature offers simply the germs which education is to develop and perfect.” Without education, Kant insists, moral competencies cannot develop. Education thus would be not only a sufficient condition of moral development but also a necessary one. He got support from no one less than Charles Darwin: “The more efficient causes of progress seem to consist of a good education during youth whilst the brain is impressible, and of a high standard of excellence, inculcated by the ablest and best men, embodied in the laws, customs and traditions of the nation, and enforced by public opinion.”<sup>4</sup>

### Empirical Evidence

Does empirical evidence agree with our two basic claims by our theories, especially by the *dual-aspect theory of moral behavior* and the *education theory of moral development*? Of course, there is not enough time here to give full account of the empirical evidence. More can be found

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<sup>4</sup> Charles Darwin (1871). The descent of man, ch. 4. Source: [http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles\\_darwin/descent\\_of\\_man/chapter\\_05.html](http://www.infidels.org/library/historical/charles_darwin/descent_of_man/chapter_05.html)

in recent publications (Lind, 2002; 2008 a; 2008 b; 2009) and in many presentations at this conference. Let me highlight just two findings which clearly support these claims.

By virtue of its experimental design, the MJT shows that affective and cognitive aspects can be distinguished and measured independently without conceiving them as separate components. The MJT allows us to measure moral orientations and moral competence simultaneously without confounding them like in other measures.

Empirically we can thus submit Piaget's theory of affective-cognitive parallelism to empirical test without creating two different tests, which would imply that they were separate components rather than aspects of one and the same behavior. In fact, in all studies with the MJT, we find a very high correlation between the two aspects. The higher participants' moral judgment competence, the more they prefer universal moral principles and the more they reject "low stage" moral reasoning (Lind, 2002).

The different nature of the two aspects can be also demonstrated experimentally. While moral orientations can be simulated in any directions (Emler et al., 1983), moral competencies cannot be simulated upward. We should be able to simulate almost any moral attitude but we should not be able to show high moral judgment competence 'on demand.' It should not be possible for participants to get a higher C-score on the Moral Judgment Test just because they want to do better. They should only get higher scores if they practice moral judgment and discourse regularly and participate in an educative process. Furthermore, participants should profit the more from learning experiences the better the method of teaching and the training of the teacher is (see Schillinger, 2006).

The first hypothesis can be tested by comparing the findings of two experiments, one by Emler and his associates (2003) and one done by me in collaboration with members of a psychology course (Lind, 2002). The two experiments were identical with one exception. In both experiments participants were divided into three groups according to their self-described political orientation on a left-right continuum: left, neutral, and right wing. Then the leftist and the rightist groups were instructed to take the test twice, first regularly and a second time with the instruction to simulate the moral judgment behavior of their political counterparts.

In the experiment by Emler et al. (1983), the participants were given the *Defining-Issues-Test* (DIT) by Jim Rest (1984). Its P-score measures the degree to which participants prefer principles moral reasoning, that is the highest moral orientations. In our experiment, the participants were given the Moral Judgment Test (MJT). Its C-score is an index of their moral judgment

competence.

Figure 1 depicts the findings of both experiments. It shows clearly that moral orientations can be simulated in any direction, low and high. The crucial finding is the change of C-score of the self-described rightist (conservative) students. Their moral orientation score is considerably lower than that of the leftist (liberal) students. But they can easily simulate a higher P-score than their own, namely the P-score of the leftist students (see left side of Figure 2). Thus the P-score of the DIT is indeed a measure of moral orientation not of competence.

In contrast, in the rightist students cannot simulate the higher competence-score of the leftist students on the MJT (see right side of Figure 2). Thus the C-score of the MJT is indeed an index of moral judgment competence.

Can moral competence be taught? Our findings from two decades of research show here the answer is also yes. Although moral competencies cannot, as we have seen, merely simulated upward, they can grow if students can learn in a favorable learning environment (Lind, 2000; in press; Schillinger, 2006; Lupu, in press) or if it is stimulated with specific methods like dilemma discussion (Lind, 2009; Hemmerling et al., 2009). In a meta-analysis of interventions using Kohlberg's (confounded) measure of moral judgment competence, we found a mean relative effect size of  $r = 0.40$  (Lind, 2002), which is already very high, much higher than the effect of dilemma discussion on moral orientations. In adolescent samples the effect size for moral preferences was only  $r = 0.11$  (cf. Schlaefli et al., 1985).

When the MMS scale, which ranges from 100 to 500, is transformed to a standard scale of 100 points, the absolute effect size is about six points, which is almost double as much as schools with a good learning climate achieve over the period of a fully school year (see Figure 3). The average effect of secondary schools has been estimated on the basis several cross-sectional studies (Lind, 2002). Note that some schools (vocational schools and schools in other countries as well as medical schools have no or even a negative effect on moral judgment competence, indicating that their teaching is not effective or counter-productive.

In a meta-analysis of the impact of 43 courses which I gave over the past eight years we found that seminars can very effectively foster moral judgment competence, even if we do not run dilemma discussions and if their content does not explicitly deal with moral issues (Figure 3). Even a chemistry course by a colleague who seems to be a good teacher, has fostered moral judgment competence effectively. Its students' C-score improved by 5 points in one semester. It seems that the more a course provides opportunities for responsibility-taking, mutual respect,

co-construction and affect regulation, the more it fosters moral judgment competence regardless of whether we teachers teach moral theory or not. In contrast to my seminars, I was not able to improve the effectivity of my lectures though I achieved a much better attendance rate over the years, going up from about 10 percent to 80 percent of a cohort, and very good evaluations by the students. Figure 3 shows also that a single moral dilemma discussion adds value to a course. Its boosts moral judgment competence by another 3 points (which is the effect size of a whole year of good schooling). Even the lectures profited from a single dilemma discussion.

You may object, that all these courses were run by a single well trained expert of dilemma discussions with two decades of teaching experience. You are right, one cannot expect such strong effects from novice teachers or teachers who got no adequate training. Adequate teacher training is paramount for teaching moral competencies effectively.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude my presentation with an answer to the two initial questions, and a new question:

- Is morality a competence? My answer is: Yes, it is a competence, and this competence can be measured.
- Can moral competence be taught? Considering all findings from three decades of research, my answer is: Yes, it not only can be taught but it must be taught in order to grow and mature. And in a democracy, it must be fostered in everyone.

I believe that most, if not all studies in which moral competencies are adequately measured and taught, will come to the same conclusion as I do.

The big question remains: Can we afford to train enough teachers to promote the moral competencies of all citizens? Can we afford *not* to train our teachers to be able to foster them?



## Epilogue:<sup>5</sup>

### Rejoinder to critiques of the Dual-Aspect Theory of moral behavior

Even scholars who use the words *competence* and *cognition* frequently and even consider themselves to hold a cognitive theory (like *cognitive* neuro-scientists), argue vehemently against the theories of Socrates, Piaget and Kohlberg (see, e.g., Zajonc, 1980; Emler et al., 1983; Hoffman, 2000; Green, 2005; Haidt, 2001; Hauser, 2006). If they admit some *cognitive* processes to be involved in moral behavior, they believe that these are *separate* components of human functioning which are located in separate brain areas. “A dual-process theory of moral judgment, according to which characteristically deontological judgments are driven by automatic emotional responses, while characteristically utilitarian judgments are driven by controlled cognitive processes.” (Greene, 2009, p. 581) Most, if not all, of these *emotion* theorists regard cognitive processes as *epiphenomena*, that is, as processes which have only small, if any, impact on behavior but typically come *after* behavior as rational reflection and post-hoc justification of behavior. Moreover, many of these theorists believe that moral emotions or affects are genetically determined and thus cannot not be fostered through teaching.

Probably no scholar can be said to have ever presented a totally coherent and fully consistent theory from the start of his intellectual career. Probably, no scholar has even achieved such an ideal theory at the end of his or her life. Most, if not all, theories are patchwork to some extent, meaning that we will be able to find blatant contradictions within even the most developed theories.

Therefore it is not astonishing that even in Piaget’s and Kohlberg’s work we can find “non-Piagetian” and “non-Kohlbergian” statements. Piaget has managed to pack such contradiction into one and the same sentence: “Affective life, similar to intellectual life, is continuous adaptation, and both of these adaptations are not only parallel but interdependent, since sentiments express the interests and values of actions of intelligence constitutes the structure.” (Piaget, 1951, p. 220) While the last part of this statement (“sentiments express the interests and values of actions of intelligence constitutes the structure”) agrees well with the *dual-aspect* theory of moral behavior, the first part rather suggests that both, affect and intellect can be separated into two *components* of moral behavior.

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<sup>5</sup> This epilogue will not be presented at the conference.

Component models of moral behavior have got a boost through Jim Rest's *four component model* (Rest, 1984). Ann Higgins aptly criticizes this model: "However, one should note that there are cognitive aspects to all of Rest's components, and Kohlberg's idea of a stage as a structured whole or a world view cuts across Rest's componential model." (Higgins, 1995, p. 53)

Component models of the mind used to be very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the name of "faculties." James Baldwin critically examined their function in psychology: "To say that an individual mind possesses a certain faculty is merely to say that it is capable of certain states or processes. But we find in many of the earlier psychologists a tendency to treat faculties as if they were causes, or real conditions, of the states or processes in which they are manifested, 'peak them as positive agencies interacting with each other. Thus persistence in voluntary decision is said to be due to extraordinary strength of will, or to will-power or to the faculty of will. Certain mental processes in man are said to have their source in the faculty of reason, and certain other processes in lower animals are explained by the existence of a faculty of instinct. This mode of pretended explanation has received the name of Faculty Psychology. Locke, in criticizing the phrase 'freedom of the will', has brought out very clearly the nature of the fallacy they involved. 'We may as properly say that the singing faculty sings, and the dancing faculty dances, as that the will chooses, or that the understanding conceives.'" (Baldwin, 1911; quoted in J. A. Fodor, 1983, pp. 23-24)

The key to understanding contemporary *anti-cognitive* theories seem to be the meaning of the words *cognitive* or *cognition* in the writing of Piaget and others. Piaget was originally interested in studying children's moral behavior and its affective and cognitive aspects. Yet, in his *Moral Judgment of the Child* he actually investigated something different, namely children's *conscious verbal* evaluation of moral behavior and called this *moral judgment*. These verbals judgments were about their own behavior and behavior of other people. "It is the moral judgment that we propose to investigate, not moral behavior or sentiment," Piaget (1965, p. 7) stated. He was fully aware of the fact that it was not easy to draw valid inferences from such *verbal judgment* to a person's moral behavior. "Great danger, especially in matters of morality, is that of making the child say whatever one wants him to say" (Piaget, 1965, p. 8). "Verbal evaluations made by our children are not of actions of which they have been authors or witnesses, but of stories which have been told to them." (p. 119).

Piaget became aware of the difficulties of his shift of research interest. Unfortunately, he did not become aware of this before the end of his book on moral judgment. Only there he argues that

we ought to distinguish two forms of moral thinking (i.e., cognitive functioning), namely between

- a) the *real moral thinking*, which enable the actor to make an informed decision in a specific situation and to evaluate the actions of other, and
- b) the *theoretical* or *verbal* moral thinking, which is, Piaget writes, as distant from real moral thinking as, in general, thinking is distant from action.<sup>6</sup>

It is clear that he uses the word *thinking* (or judgment or reasoning or cognition) here in two completely different ways. In the first part of his statement thinking means an aspect of behavior which defines the nature of this behavior. In the latter part of his statement, Piaget seems to mean by “thinking” a verbal judgment about behavior. Although Piaget and his collaborators show some interest in observing morally relevant behavior and their cognitive and affective aspects, most of their investigations are directed only at verbal judgments. Until today, this conceptual confusion of the terms *cognitive* and *cognition* hampers progress of research in the moral domain.

To avoid confusion, I have proposed to use the word *cognitive* to describe an individual’s organization of behavior which we infer from observing manifest pattern of reactions to particular pattern of environmental stimuli (Lind, 2008 a). The word *affective* should be used to describe the direction or orientation of behavior which we can infer from the very same pattern. When we use these words as nouns (cognition and affect) we should always keep in mind that this is grammatically correct but psychologically meaningless. Affect and cognition do not denote “things” or organs. We must also keep in mind, that the relationship between an *aspect of behavior* and *behavior* itself implies, in Ryles’ terms, a “category error.” (Ryle, 1949)

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<sup>6</sup> See pp. 196-199 in the German edition (Piaget, 1973).

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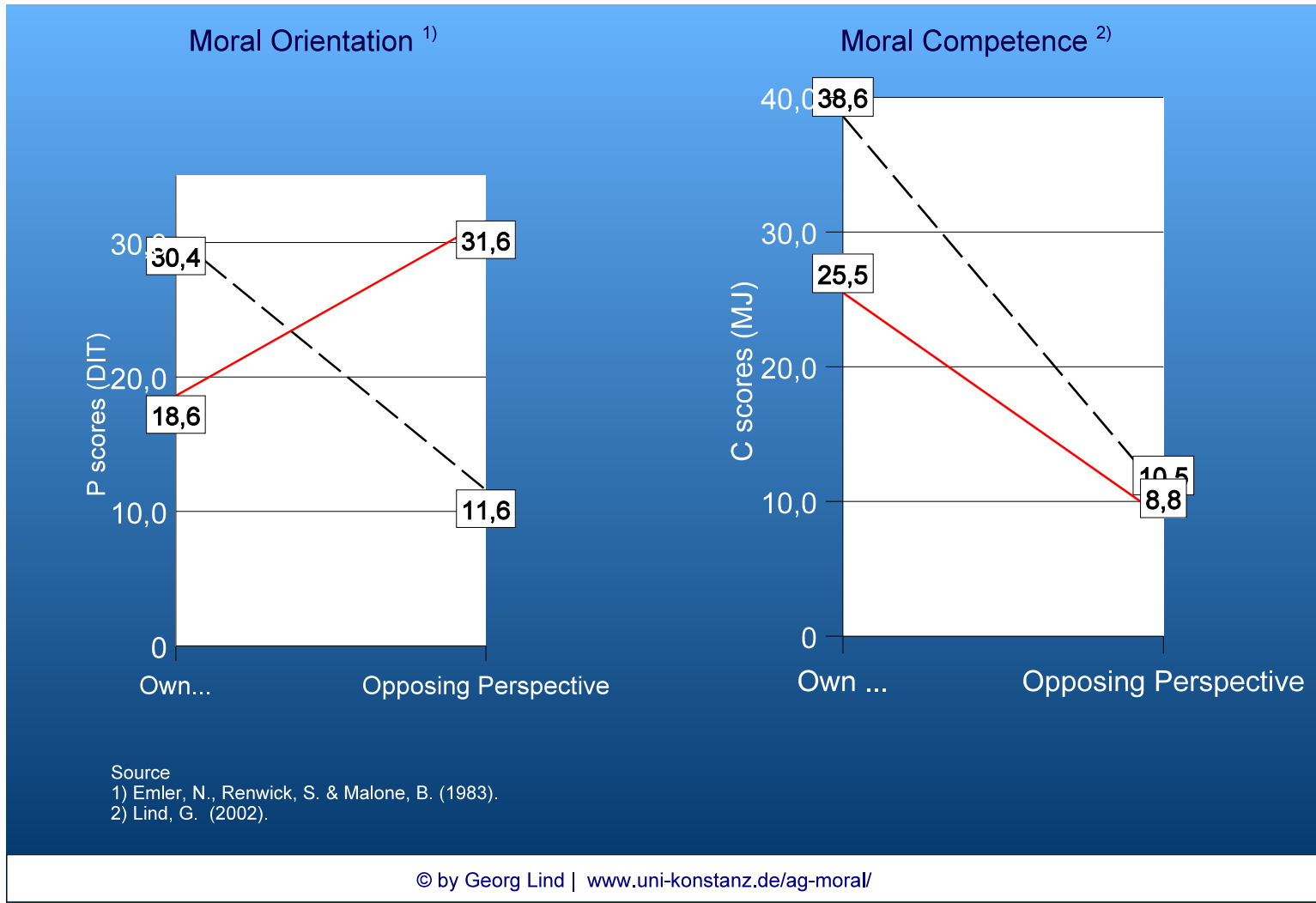
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Further reading:

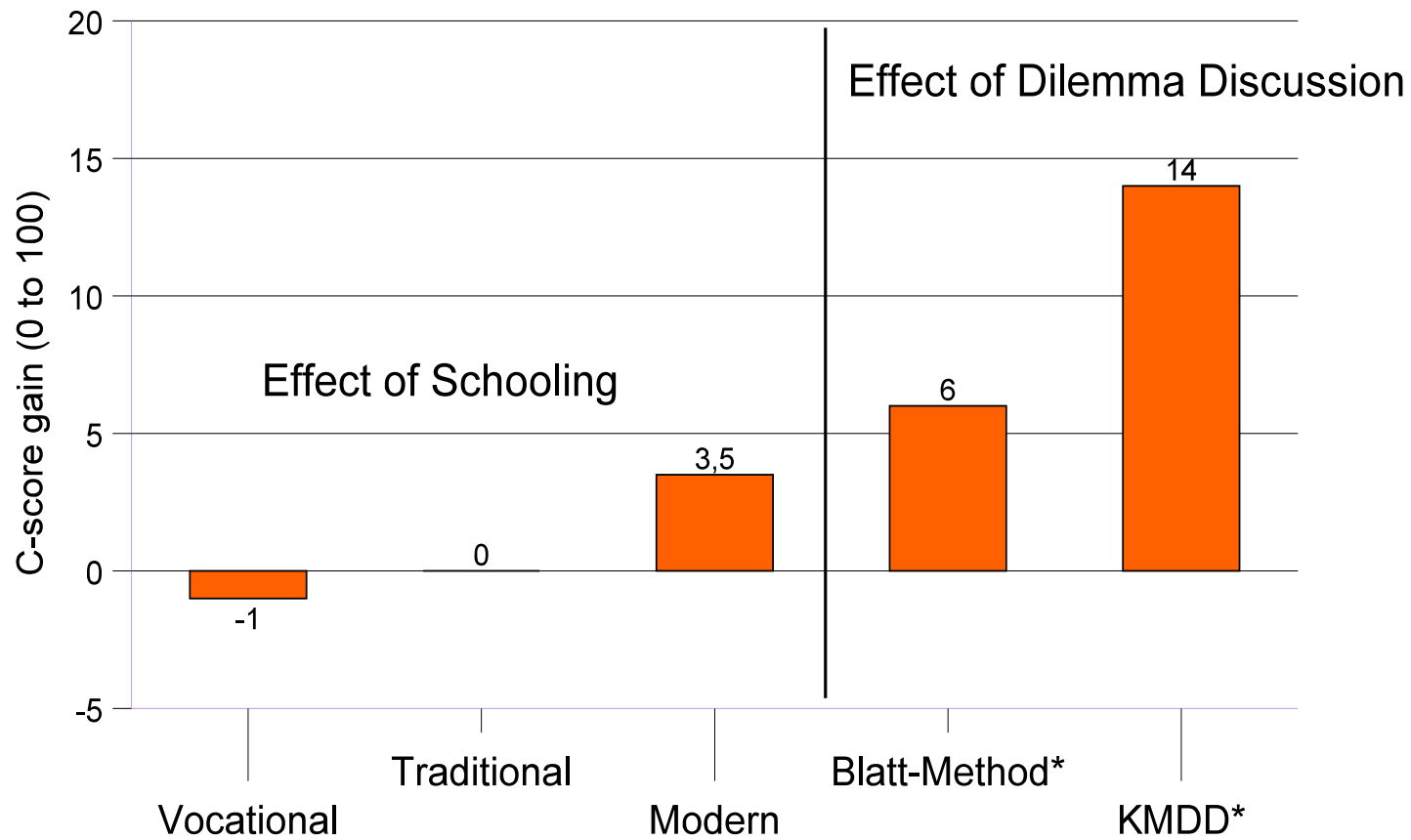
<http://www.uni-konstanz.de/ag-moral/b-publik.htm>



**Figure 2** Two simulation experiments

# Estimated Absolute Effect Size of the KMDD

(Sources: Lind, 2002; 2009)



\*Absolute effect sizes per semester or less

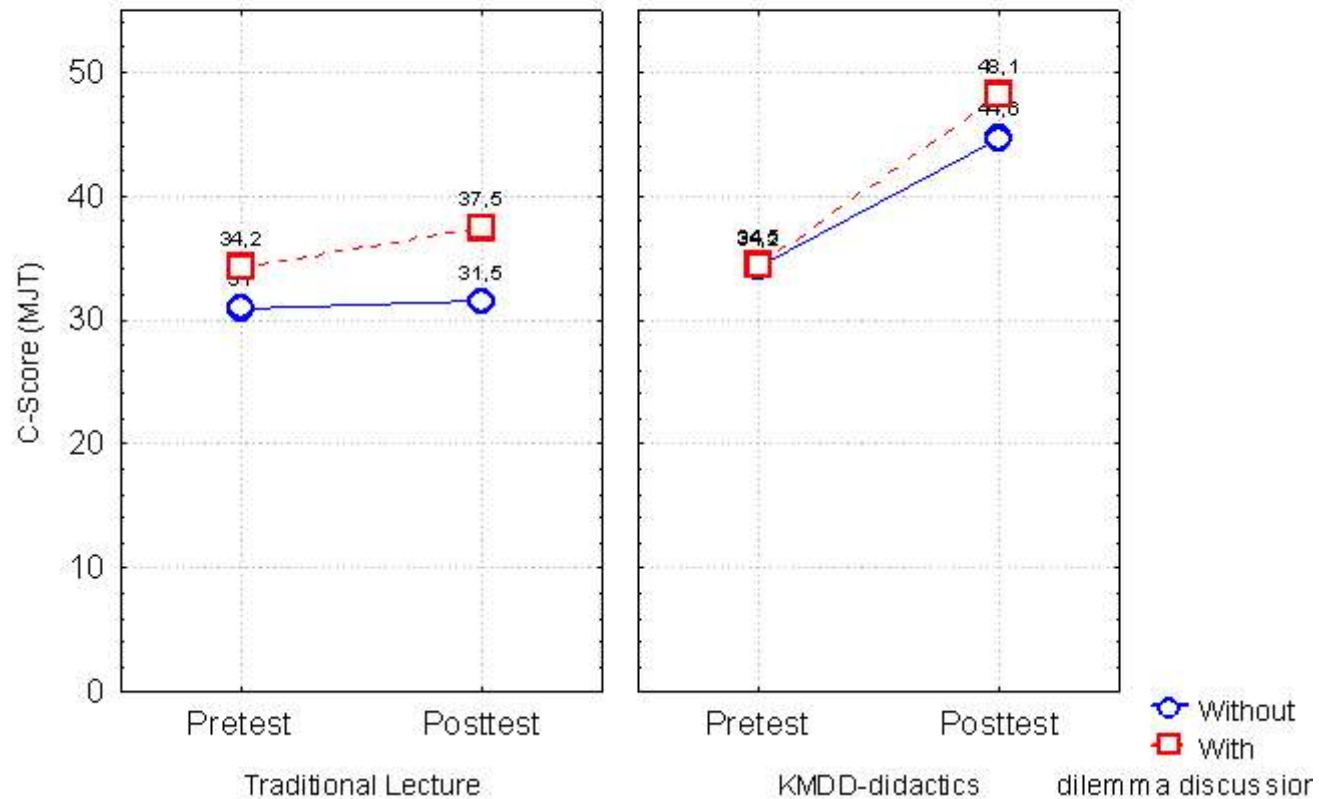
(C) Georg Lind

Figure 3



## The Impact of Dilemma Discussion and KMDD-didactics

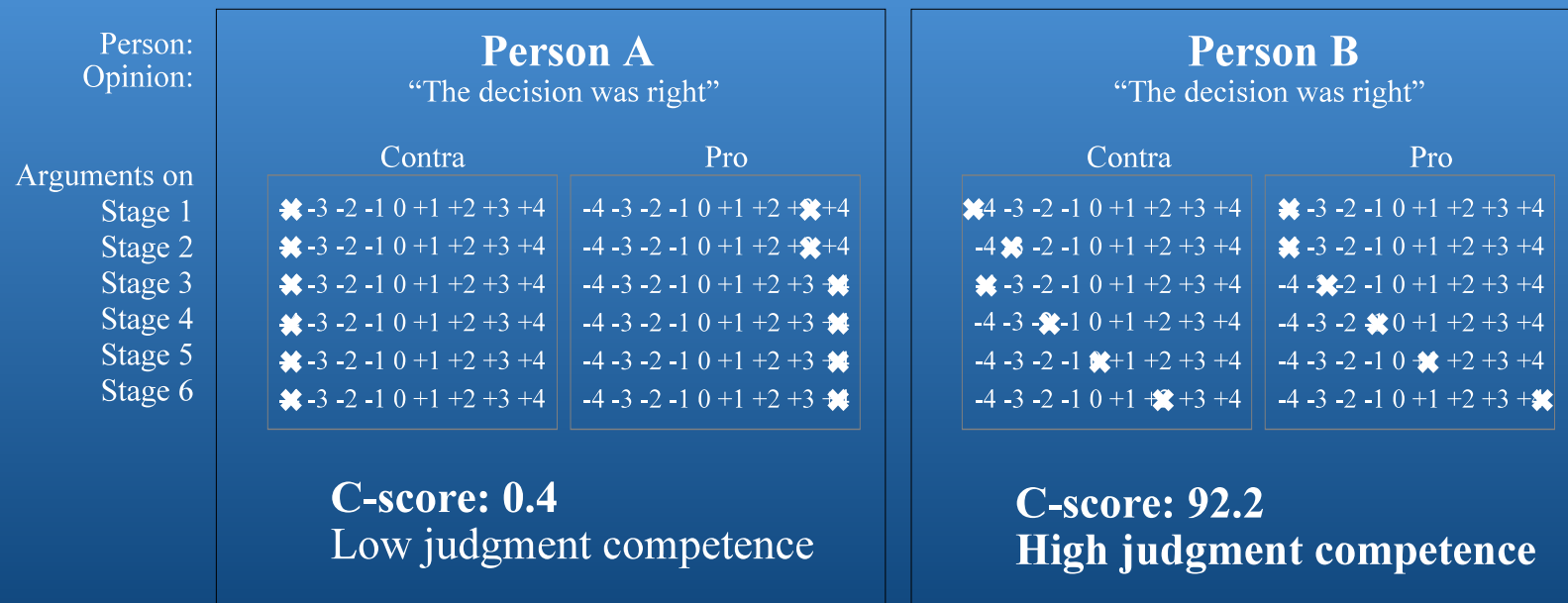
$F(1,1053)=,01$ ;  $p<,9323$ ;  $N = 3102$ ;  $aES$  (DilDisc) = 2.8 and 3.2 (added value)



Source: Lind, G. (2009). Favorable learning environments for moral development – A multiple intervention study with nearly 3.000 students in a higher education context. Paper to be presented at the annual meeting of AERA in San Diego, April 13 - 17, 2009

**Figure 4**

## The Response Pattern of Two Participants With Different **C**ompetence-scores



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Figure 5