

What Is Moral Competence and Why Promote It?

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Review of: Georg Lind (2016) *How to teach Morality. Promoting Deliberation and Discussion, Reducing Violence and Deceit*, pp. 200, Berlin: Logos Verlag.

Georg Lind's former books, *Ist Moral Lehrbar?* (Logos: Berlin 2000) and *Moral ist lehrbar* (Oldenbourg: Munich 2009), as well as a large number of research papers, leave no doubts that moral competence is an operational *cognitive* skill. Its growth and regress can be investigated and even measured with experimental measuring instruments (Lind 1978–2017), in particular, with the Moral Competence Test which has been being perfected and applied for 40 years by Georg Lind.

Ethicists, psychologists and educators can deliver countless descriptions of what morality might be: a personal trait, habitus, virtue; a set of beliefs, ideals, values and “internal principles” (Kohlberg 1964, p. 464); norm-conformist human conduct (Lind & Nowak 2015); a cognitive structure maturing as persons are stimulated by favorable social or educational environments; a set of moral emotions; a link between emotion and cognition, the development of which can be facilitated by social and cultural participation (De Waal 2016; Singer 2008; Haidt 2001); the “embodied” (tacit, intuitive, automatic, etc.) acts of a human cognitive apparatus (Greene & Haidt 2002; Greene 2015, 2016; Lind 2016), also called *software* in the transhumanist context. Today, the intuitionist and the cognitivist approach prevail over the classical theories of morality based on normativity, axiology and socialization. Nevertheless, such old-fashioned concepts as the Kantian *a priori* seem to be enjoying a naturalistic revival too (Sloan 2002).

Progressive concepts of morality might be one-sided simplifications which reduce morality to one of its core aspects, be it a set of emotions as 'prior' to everything, be it enactivism, direct understanding, shared intentions and mental states, or other pre-reflective phenomena already observed in pre-verbal infants. In fact, human minds are equipped with potentialities which need to be 'enacted' within interactions with others: visual, emotional, verbal, experiential, or conscious. Developing them, one learns how to be the subject of moral decisions and actions. One even learns why to be moral, and one creates a self-representation as a moral agent among other agents. One gets networked in practical and moral communities. That is the most progressive approach to socialization today. It squeezes out the old-fashioned approach based on the

conviction that a child's mind is a vacuum, a *tabula rasa*. But does the *person* we are becoming in our personal self-development (including sociomoral development) come from outside, i.e. from social, cultural and educational surroundings? Is everything that moral agents are just imparted into their empty minds? Are we, as moral individuals, copies of a single social and cultural pattern? If it is so, how can we explain such phenomena as *making a choice, taking autonomous decisions, having moral objections, following one's own conscience (an internal voice), behaving in a non-conformist way, being creative, finding enough civil courage to say "no" to social and political injustice, violence, or nonsense? Engaging in civil disobedience? Agreeing or disagreeing with someone else's viewpoint, and refraining from fights when we face other people who act extremely immorally – just restricting ourselves to a demonstration of legitimate moral anger?* Living in an immoral world as well as living in a world which is becoming immoral, dilemmatic, controversial and ambivalent is very challenging from the viewpoint of morality. In my opinion, living in the world is always challenging for morality, for we are constantly confronted with very new problems, conflicts and dilemmas. Yet no one is an experienced and trained expert in this domain here, provided with tacit knowledge and automatic moral competence. Moreover, living in a social world often requires collegial decision-making, the inclusion of others and consideration of the contrary views of other moral decision makers and moral agents.

Becoming a trained and retrained expert who embodies both tacit knowledge and tacit skills and abilities, including the ability to make justified and just judgments, has at least two analogies in the history of philosophy and sociology. The first analogy can be Aristotelian *virtue* and *phronesis* (practical wisdom). According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Aristotle "regards the ethical virtues (justice, courage, temperance) as complex rational, emotional and social skills." Neither skills nor practical wisdom can be imparted, or learned solely from general rules and theories. "We must also acquire, through practice, those deliberative, emotional, and social skills that enable us to put our general understanding of wellbeing into practice in ways that are suitable to each occasion" (ibidem), including those which are unexpected and overwhelm our command of solutions. Aristotle expounded a combination of particular virtues, but *proficiency, habituation, and strength* (in Latin *vis moralis*, in German *Stärke*) are common aspects of all the virtues incorporated by human beings.

The second analogy for tacit/automatic morality (called "embodied cognition" by Joshua Greene and Jonathan Haidt) can be found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1987). He emphasized that our skills can be strengthened most efficiently in shared social practice, almost "from body to body," but also through participation in structured, instructed and institutionalized practice. This offers an efficient way to develop "Habitus" and "virtuosity." "Habitus incorporates former experiences and unconsciously structures cognition"

(Gärtner 2013, p. 348). However, Bourdieu's conception does not match *virtue* as considered in terms of moral skills, in other words: as an ability to make moral choices and decisions case by case, conflict by conflict, dilemma by dilemma. Automatism and tacit knowledge may lead to *routinized*, standardized and unreflecting ways of behaving, or even to the regression of human potentialities for autonomy.

Moral behavior is very different in nature: diversified and specific problems (as well as pluralism and difference) challenge the ability to make choices and decisions. Repeating the same patterns could imply bad routines for moral decisionism, i.e., a thoughtless multiplication of the same solutions. In contrast, moral competence is demonstrated by showing proficiency and virtuosity in making demanding and new context-related decisions. Moral competence has to shuffle and reshuffle a myriad of normative criteria, the future consequences of actions, etc. for each morally engaging situation (not only for *types* and *categories* of situations). It does not always occur in a conscious and deliberative way. Trained and retrained moral competence deals with decision-making easily, 'automatically'. Does automatism leave enough space for personal autonomy, responsibility and self-consciousness?

It is exciting to observe how fast the paradigms of morality shift and change, and how they oscillate from one extreme to another, as, for example, from the conscious (manifest) level of morality to the unconscious, from the emotional level to the cognitive, rational and conscious "origins" of morality and moral judgment making. In this respect, Aristotle's claim was right. His concept of moral skill (ability, competence) mirrored his golden rule: no extremes, but, instead a moral ability that includes aspects that are cognitive and affective, silent and deliberative, as well as normative, judgmental, and situational. Despite the varied content of norms and ideals, moral ability can be identified across cultures, genders, political regimes, confessions, and maybe even across species – the moral behaviour of human and primates reveals some affinities.

But how to approach moral competence in a non-reductionist, holistic way that would be acceptable to both psychology and philosophy? Apparently, situating Georg Lind's most recent book entitled *How to teach morality?* (2016) in the field of moral-experimental psychology as well as classical moral philosophy shows that he contributes to the *holistic* concept of moral competence, being clearly in favour of the *cognitive turn* and in respect of emotionality, too.

Lind refers to the concept of cognitive interactionism, whose successor is the enactivism of today. According to Lind's early approach, shared with Kohlberg, Wakenhut, and others (Lind 1985), moral-judgmental structures in a human mind can be "constructed through the individual's interaction with his

or her social environment" (Lind 1985, p. 43). Judgmental structures can be strengthened if moral reasoning is repeatedly trained and retrained.

With respect to these discoveries, Georg Lind asks: "is there really such a thing as moral competence? Can it be shown as manifest disposition in human behavior? (...) Do people prefer high-type moral orientations and reject low-type orientations, the higher the moral competence is?" (2015, p. 74). "(...) morality in its core is a skill" (p. 75) and its development correlates with the quality of education in terms of cognitive–developmental psychology, and with the quality of interpersonal enactivism, as outlined by Shaun Gallagher. If their approaches are false, we have to stop considering moral agency, autonomy, social interactions, virtues, flourishing, perfectibility, responsibility, moral identity, and moral education as well. Rather, we should settle for experiencing a series of contingent moral 'episodes' (Strawson 2007) that happen automatically.

Georg Lind holds that an observable, manifest moral performance (deliberative, discursive, and unconscious/tacit judgmental acts) constitutes evidence of moral competence. According to Habermas and Lind, "competence by itself cannot be shown to exist except in its concrete manifestation, that is, through phenomena of performance" (Lind 1985, p. 25).

Today, neuroscientists are able to locate the neural correlates for moral competence in the human brain. "The neuroanatomy of moral judgment" has been described extensively by Greene and Haidt (2002), and others. As Greene asserts, "deontological judgments are associated with increasing activity in the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, a brain region associated with cognitive control" (Greene 2009, p. 582). Prehn et al. (2008) confirmed that selected neural areas are associated with moral reasoning and judgment making.

How does moral cognition work? It can work in both an unconscious or conscious way. "Unconscious" does not necessarily mean irrational; on the other hand, "conscious" does not necessarily means rational. For example, instincts, emotions, and intuitions might be an evolutionary inheritance in human minds, of an "unconscious" character. However, humans *learn* and *develop* some conscious tools to understand their natural impulses and to navigate them. Peter Singer and Georg Lind's statements show some affinities: humans are equipped with moral emotions (including empathy) through evolution, but they need more advanced instruments to deal with the demanding social contexts in which decisions are required. Following instincts and emotions is not enough in the social world.

It was complexity that inspired Jonathan Haidt (2001; Haidt & Greene 2002) to create the so-called *intuitionist* hypothesis. The intuitionist hypothesis was devised as a simple remedy for the complex world. It reduced moral judgment making to sudden "automatic affective reactions", as Greene and Haidt (2002, p. 517) put it. At the end of 20th century "the affective revolution was reinforced by a new focus on 'automaticity' – the mind's ability to solve

many problems, including high-level social ones, unconsciously and automatically," (Greene & Haidt 2002, p. 517) when judgment makers are confronted with moral challenges. We can easily find a counterargument: some people are less empathetic and less sensitive decision makers: they remain cold and show reflective moral reasoning, instead of automatic and emotional reasoning.

Subsequent experimental "findings in evolutionary psychology and primatology began to point to the origins of human morality in a set of emotions (linked to expanding cognitive abilities) that make individuals *care* about the welfare of others (e.g., altruism, including feelings of sympathy), and about cooperation, cheating, and norm-following" (Greene & Haidt 2002, p. 517). Haidt created the category of "intuition" as a link between emotion and cognition. "Intuitions" might be shaped in individual minds by evolution and sociocultural experience as well.

We observe the increasing role of cognition in the intuitionist hypothesis and theory of emotion as well (Bloom 2016), which is, however, ultimately only a moderate role. According to Haidt and Greene, "people certainly **do engage in moral reasoning, but** (...) these processes are typically **one-sided efforts** in support of **pre-ordained** [automatically, unconsciously made, E.N.] **conclusions. Moral reasoning matters, but it matters primarily in social contexts**". This is a very provocative moment for researchers who are familiar with ethics and social psychology: moral problems and, in consequence, moral reasoning, are usually superindividual, interpersonal and social in nature. Moral conflicts and problems often arise between persons, within social relationships – not in an isolated mind. Our internal and personal problems and conflicts often mirror interpersonal conflicts and tensions, or even originate from them. Thus, moral reasoning is rooted in moral cognition and cannot be underestimated or replaced by automatic personal decisionism, which cannot be articulated and shared with other human fellows.

Another controversial side-effect of the intuitionist approach is as follows: "people can **very easily construct post-hoc reasons to justify their actions and judgments**" (Greene & Haidt 2002, p. 517), in particular judgments which have been made in an automatic and unconscious way.

Approaching morality from the intuitionist perspective leads to a very sad conclusion: **firstly**, conscious moral reasoning, reflection, arguing, and justification etc. brings as much belated conjecture as post facto confabulation; **secondly**, such confabulation is ranked as a secondary justification of an automatic/unconscious judgment. **Thirdly**, the rational discourse of morality does not have any relevant impact on passing moral decisions and seeking solutions; and solutions are required. Moreover, justifications are required too. Following the intuitionist approach, a decision maker must be trained and experienced to be able to cope with moral problems without using reflective and principled judgment. The intuitionist hypothesis reduces moral

competence to the "wagging" of our internal emotional dog's tail, just to recall the title of Jonathan Haidt's paper of 2001, *The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail*. In his reaction to Haidt's emotional reductionism, Georg Lind does not respond with another reductionism, i.e., cognitive reductionism. Instead, he asks the following question:

Is our reason nothing more than a tail which our internal emotional dog is wagging? **This way of questioning is wrong.** It presupposes that our mind only works in a verbal way, and our emotions express themselves only in biological reactions as hunger and thirst. But **reason, it is not only conscious and verbal knowledge... It is also tacit knowledge** (...) Wasel (2007) showed, we can consciously change our stereotypes (for ex. about another gender, foreigners etc.). We may engage ourselves consciously in unconscious judgmental processes (Lind 2015, pp. 23–24).

The human mind is able to develop a link between conscious and unconscious processes. Emotions and affects, in particular the moral ones or morally relevant ones, can be understood by, involved in, and transformed or translated into, the cognitive or just more holistic processes in the human mind. Lind describes the role of emotionality without falling into reductionism: he just assumes that moral judgments do not originate from raw and blind emotions. The role of emotions for morality is significant and is not neglected by Lind. However,

It would be wrong to assume that we are at the mercy of our moral emotions. We can educate them (...). The fact that the feelings we have are often not conscious and that decision-making process runs at lightning speed does not contradict with the view that they are the product of highly complex cognitive systems in which our experiences and reasons are stored. This means that, although they are innate, the feelings change and develop as a result of our experiences. That is, we ourselves can use our judgment and reason to influence them purposefully through training (Lind 2016, p. 29).

The last decade brought another kind of reductionism, based on automatic (tacit), strictly cognitive decision making. Indeed, Greene and other radical cognitivists make moral decision makers' efforts significantly lighter. Neither emotions nor time-consuming reasoning are required when, in particular, the **utilitarian calculus** is employed. Moral economy matters in the domain of cognitive science. It is Joshua Greene who seems to deny the role of moral emotions in moral judgment making, at least in his recent writings. In contrast with Lind, **Greene belongs to the radical cognitivist party** which also denies the role of manifest, conscious reasoning preceding *moral* judgments or decisions. Greene describes the brain's "machinery" in the following way:

what we call 'moral cognition', is just the brain's general-purpose cognitive machinery – machinery designed to learn from experience, represent value and motivate its pursuit, represent mental states, imagine events, reason, and resist impulses – applied to problems that we, for high-level functional reasons, identify as 'moral'. If all this is correct, it explains why the field of moral cognition has been so varied and why that is unlikely to change. That what we call 'moral cognition', is just the brain's general-purpose cognitive machinery – machinery designed to learn from experience, represent value and motivate its pursuit, represent mental states, imagine events, reason, and resist impulses – applied to problems that we, for high-level functional reasons, identify as 'moral'. If all this is correct, it explains why the field of moral cognition has been so varied and why that is unlikely to change. We are explaining moral thinking in terms of its more basic cognitive components, which are not specific to morality" (Greene 2015, p. 40).

For Georg Lind, moral judgment competence is a distinct, *originally and specifically* moral sub-domain of the entire cognition we possess as natural, socialized, and educated beings. It is different to (1) a spontaneous, automatic, emotional, or intuitive impulse and different to (2) an act of an emotionally indifferent, "cognitive machinery". Rather, moral judgment competence is to be defined as "**an ability to apply a certain moral orientation** in a consistent [manner, as trained, developed, trustworthy moral subjects] and differentiated manner in varying social situations" (Prehn *et al.* 2007, p. 44).

At the same time, in the process of moral judgment making, given steps "may be **performed unconsciously**" and implicitly (Haidt 2001, p. 7) and some other steps – **consciously and explicitly** (Lind 2016, p. 56). Analogically, given steps may be provided with more "affective valence," as Haidt (2001, p. 7) stresses, and some other steps – with more rational evidence.

In his book, *How to Teach Morality*, Lind consequently advocates his dual-aspect concept of morality which contains **none of the emotional factors** but, instead, engages some affective aspects, such as the "affective valence" experienced by moral agents who personify moral orientations and apply them when they pass moral decisions.

Still, it is moral competence which enables persons to apply moral orientations as moral criteria for their articulated reasoning or tacit judgment. Reasoning and judging seem to be processual in nature. Processuality requires cognition, as it is comprehended by cognitive psychologists, in contrast with neuroscientists, who advocate the quick and automatic acts of "embodied cognition". An 'act' refers to the final step of the process, i.e., to its conclusion: it is like issuing a sentence after a dispute.

Most probably, articulated and manifest moral reasoning and judgment provides human action with more consistency, justification, trustfulness, and responsibility. Automatic "embodied cognition" and "direct social perception"

(Gallagher 2005; De Jaegher 2009) can be experienced, but humans are social beings and they need articulated reflection, self-reflection, and discourse-mediated communication. Moral cognition and, in particular, moral competence is more complex because a human being's feeling of being situated in the social world is much more complex than any other living being's life. My assertion implies neither an anthropocentric nor an "anthropodenial" conclusion (De Waal 2016).

Being a cognitive psychologist, Lind distinguishes between **two layers of cognitive moral competence**. The first layer would be an unconscious, inner disposition of moral competence; the second layer – a conscious, actual, manifest reasoning process the conclusion of which will be a concrete moral judgment, or decision. Human beings learn to **discursively express, improve (to make them just), and to justify** their judgments to significant extent, but some aspects of moral judgment making most probably remain unconscious.

Interviews with people who are inexperienced in employing moral reasoning and making judgments in a non-intuitionist but conscious way (Nowak *et al.*, survey "What is morality", 2017) reveal that their **ability to explain any reasons** for their judgments is poor. They are not aware of the meaning of the basic terms in which they try to describe morality. In contrast, those people who are trained in moral reflection and discourse are able to better understand their own intuitive judgments, to articulate them, and to explain their meaning. They are also able to observe how their opinion develops and evolves when new arguments broaden the world's representation in their mind, or convince them. That is tangible proof of the cognitive potential of articulated moral (ethical) reasoning. Articulated reasoning contributes to both a persons' moral awareness and self-awareness, as well as to the silent, tacit, unconscious moral cognition advocated by Greene and Haidt. In their dualistic approach to morality, they omit a link between conscious and unconscious. Such a link can be useful for bridging the gap (or even solving the "conflict") between "production of impersonal moral judgments" and the production of "personal moral judgments" (Greene & Haidt 2002, p. 522)

Exploring moral competence to find its most adequate description and to prove its dual (conscious and unconscious, cognitive and affective) nature remains the task of cross-disciplinary research. Georg Lind's research, much more than others', strongly contributes to a balanced, non-reductionist and empirical evidence-based approach to explaining a competent moral subject and interactive member of a society.

Lind also shows that moral competence can be strengthened, trained and retrained. This implies a **double effect**: personal and interpersonal. According to Habermas, it is a **self-governance** that "is achieved by a system of internal behavior controls which is **triggered by principled moral judgment**, that is, by motive-forming convictions, and which makes *self-governance* possible. **This system must function autonomously**" (Habermas

2010, p. 13); otherwise helplessness, or external control, domination, subversion, manipulation etc. follow. Living in a democratic society requires autonomous judgment, and its justification (How can I defend my judgment, argue in favor of my claim? How can I formulate critical arguments against unjust public institutions? How to become involved in the animal rights movement? etc.).

Furthermore, democratic life requires an ability to solve conflicts and deal with different, or even opposing interests, preferences, and opinions: it is typical for a democratic lifestyle. Today, people face other human fellows hailing from different cultural, religious, economic contexts. We are all challenged by new dilemmas and conflicts. Some of them are personal, while others are interpersonal, social, public, or even international.

Moral competence contributes to the ability to resolve problems more than emotion, intuition and tacit "embodied" skills. We need moral competence as well as "the ability to solve problems and conflicts on the basis of universal moral principles through thinking and discussion, instead of using violence, deceit, and force" (Lind 2016, p. 45). They can and should be fostered, just as all kinds of cognitive skills are.

The number of reasons why we should train moral competence constantly increases. My own experience with moral competence training using the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion brings additional evidence for Lind's claim that "based on this [morality-as-competence] definition we assume that the greater the problem, the better this ability must be developed" (Lind 2015, p. 45). Furthermore,

If the problems grow over our heads because social change is great, but our educational institutions (parents, schools, and universities) have not given sufficient opportunity for the development of moral competence, then we fall back on lower forms of conflict resolution such as violence, fraud, and force. If that also does not help then we call for a strong power that solves our problems and conflicts for us – which amounts to the abolition of democratic coexistence in favor of dictatorship (Lind 2016, p. 45).

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What Is Moral Competence and Why Promote It? (Review)

Abstract: This short review paper focuses on Georg Lind's approach to the moral competence as described in his recent book (2016) *How To Teach Morality? Promoting Deliberation and Discussion, Reducing Violence and Deceit*. Berlin: Logos Verlag. Lind's dual-aspect approach is discussed as one of the leading conceptions of personal moral competence and moral cognition today.

Intuitionist approach and "embodied cognition" are not enough, the author (E. Nowak) claims. As participants of social contexts and institutions, we need manifest, discursively articulated reflection, self-reflection, and conversation. However, Lind's hypothesis of two layers of morality, i.e., a conscious and unconscious finds evidence in cognitive sciences too. Lind's approach is not as reductionist as that of radical cognitivists. On the contrary, it combines all relevant aspects of moral cognition discussed right now, worldwide – when cognitive sciences flourish and the challenges for moral mind grow up dramatically.

Keywords: moral competence, moral cognition, moral development, embodied cognition, intuitionist approach, affection, emotion, Georg Lind, Joshua Greene, Frans de Waal, Jonathan Haidt

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