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Assessing and Educating Moral-Democratic Competence

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ASSESSING AND EDUCATING MORAL- DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE¹

*Georg Lind*²

*Socrates: But if this be affirmed, then the desire of good is common
to all, and one man is no better than another in that respect?*

Menon: True

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

Introduction

Every journey, even the longest, starts with a first step. Every democracy, even the most advanced one, begins with speaking up about things that really matter for us, and with listening to those who disagree

¹ Uma versão traduzida deste capítulo encontra-se na sessão “Adicionais”, ao fim do livro.

² “Prof. Dr. Georg Lind died unexpectedly on 30th of november 2021. This text at hand was his last one. In 2020 Georg founded the “Institute for Moral-Democratic Competence (IMDC)”. The IMDC will continue Georg’s work. In particular, this is the maintenance and further development of inclusive, effective and efficient methods such as the Konstanz Method of Dilemma Discussion (KMDD[®]) or the Discussion Theater (DT). The IMDC verifies its effectiveness in fostering moral-democratic competence by means of the Moral Competence Test (MCT) and other objective and valid instruments with which moral-democratic competence can be made visible. The IMDC conducts its own workshop seminars to train and certify KMDD teachers and KMDD trainers for KMDD, as well as for analogous programs such as the Discussion Theater.” (Kay Hemmerling)
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or have their own reason for speaking up. The very essence of democracy relies on speaking up and listen to others, and on resolving inevitable conflicts through thinking and discussions based on shared moral principles such as freedom, justice, cooperation and truth rather than by using brute force and deceit, or by letting others decide for us.

Ideally, all institutions in a democracy, ideally, operate on the same premise, namely mediating conflicts in a peaceful way, that is, by coming to an agreement that is fair and respects the worth of each individual regardless of wealth and social power. This is, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785) stated, the highest ‘standard’ of democratic life: Act as if the principle on which your action is based were to become by your will a universal law of nature, and treat humans in every case as an end, never as a means only. An updated and communicative extension of this democratic standard has been presented by philosophers like Jürgen Habermas (1990), who states that we should always seek a ‘moral’ solution to a conflict, that is, one which excludes any use of power or violence, but rest only on reason and dialogue.

Democratic ideals, values, or beliefs are essential for developing and maintaining a democratic society. If people would not value the ideals of democracy, and if they would not believe that this is the best form of government, it certainly would not prevail. Most, if not all, people in the world value that high moral ideal of democracy. The *World Values Surveys* indicates that most people all over the world hold democratic values. Citizens of Islamic or Buddhist or Communist countries do not differ in regard to their democratic ideals from citizens from the US or from other Western countries (INGLEHARD; NORRIS, 2003; SEN, 1999).

The authors of the American declaration of independence “hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they

are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” As many surveys show, the democratic *ideal* is not confined to North America or Europe but can be found around the globe, regardless of cultural and religious background. The agreement on these ideals is documented in many international declarations—for example, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*--, and most national constitutions refer to unalienable democratic ideals as the ultimate standard for policymaking, law-enforcement, and education.

Yet, these ideals contrast sharply with reality. There are daily media-reports about violent conflicts, corruption, deceit, and other criminal offenses, and about governments which feel it to be necessary to restrict democratic rights. They show that we are far from being able to live in harmony with our democratic ideals. In fact, more often than we like, we do not live up to these ideals. All too often, we resort to power, violence or wars to resolve differences of opinion, or use deceit to settle conflicts, or bow down to other people who offer to solve all our problems and think for us. This gap between the moral ideal of democracy, on the one side, and everyday life, on the other is, as research shows, best explained by the lack of moral-democratic competence in most citizens. If people have had no opportunity to develop a minimal ability to solve conflicts through thinking and discussion, they can solve them only by the use of violence, deceit and submission to others.

This insight raises two important questions: First, how can we make moral-democratic competence visible so that we can research hypotheses about its nature and relevance for every-day decision-making? Second, what learning opportunities can and should we provide young

and old people so that their moral-democratic competence can grow and flourish?

In the past five decades I have spent most of my time searching for an answer. Here I will give you an oversight of the best answers that I have found.

1. The meaning of moral orientations and moral competence

Human behavior can be described in two ways: first, which aim or direction it is pursuing, and second, how well or capable it is in doing do. In psychology, the first aspect of behavior is called in different ways: content, attitudes, orientations, or values. The second aspect is also called differently, e.g. structure, cognition, judgment, ability or competence. For example, if I wish to travel to Seoul, this city can be called my orientation (orientation is my preferred term for the first, affective aspect). In contrast, the way I plan and realize my aim, shows my ability to reach this aim. In this case it shows my travelling competence. Similarly, private and public values describe the affective aspect or orientation of our behavior. The way in which we put them to practice is described as value competence or moral competence.

Both aspects of behavior, orientation and competence, are important. However, they must not be confused because they have different origins, are measured in different ways, and must be treated differently in education. Our moral orientations or moral ideals are inborn. Even preverbal babies and animals show moral sensitivity. They do not need to be taught. Our moral competence is also given us at birth only very minimally. In order to be effective it must develop, and it

develops best when we used it, like muscles grow only when we use them. While moral orientations can be simulated in any directions, moral competence cannot be simulated upward. For example, moral orientations or attitudes as assessed with the Defining-Issues-Test (DIT) by Rest (1979) can be simulated upward (EMLER, *et al.*, 1983). In two replication experiments with the Moral Competence Test, no upward movement of scores could be simulated (LIND, 2002).

Moral principles are a special kind of values, namely those which can be agreed by all people. As criterion for distinguishing moral principles from other values, the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1785) has suggested his *categorical imperative*. Only a few values meet this criterion, namely values like freedom, justice, truth, and cooperation. All other values, which are specific for certain cultures, religions, communities, or individuals, are called relative values or relative orientations. They cannot be expected from everyone. Only if we respect this distinction, Kant taught us, we can keep peace. If we try to “convince” other people of our *relative* values through force, they will eventually defend themselves through force. But if we insist on universal moral principles as basis for settling conflicts and solving problems, we have a good chance to live together peacefully and maintain democracy.

But *moral orientations* are only one of two basic requirements. As Socrates and Confucius taught, all people want to be good but differ in regard to their ability to be good. Good action requires *moral competence*. Moral competence is the *ability to solve problems and conflicts on the basis of (universal) moral principles or values only through thinking and discussion, instead of through the use of force and deceit, or through submission to other people* (LIND, 2019).

This definition builds upon, and extends, the definitions by the psychologist and educator Lawrence Kohlberg and by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Kohlberg (1964) defined moral judgment competence as the ability to base one's judgments on internal moral principles and to act accordingly. Internal moral principles are distinct from external social principles. Of course, there is a great overlap with public values because internal moral principles common to all people. But they are not identical. Private and public values can sometimes differ considerably when they are spelled out in concrete.

Habermas (1990[1983]) speaks of communicative competence. He defines it as the ability to solve conflicts by free discourse instead of using force and violence. In everyday life we all experience how difficult it can be to meet this criterion. Oft people find it too difficult to think for themselves, and rather let other people decide what to do. Often they find it also very difficult to talk with opponents about disagreeing opinions, but stop the conversation prematurely or become aggressive.

Hence, if we want to maintain and develop democracy as a way to live together peacefully, we need to assess people's level of moral competence. If it turns out to be too low, we need to foster it with adequate education.

2. How to make moral competence visible

If a human trait is real, that is, if it guides and directs human behavior, then it is also visible and we can see and scale it. This truth seems simple. But in the past, it has been mostly overshadowed by the (false) belief that psychological traits are hidden and cannot be observed objectively. Two different conclusion have been drawn from this believe.

Most, if not all, “objectively” oriented psychologists have completely discarded psychological traits from their agenda (WATSON, 1913), or they have misconceived them as social norms. So for example, Hartshorne and May (1928) have operationally defined “moral behavior” as such behavior which complies with external standards of society (or its agents, the researchers). Thus, the core element of morality, namely complying with *internal* standards, has been given up and replaced by social or legal standards. At the end of their study the authors admitted that this was a mistake. Their experiments had failed to demonstrate any consistency of norm-following behavior.

Moreover, because objectively oriented psychologists do not recognize internal, organizing principles of human personality, they see no sense in looking out for the structure of *individual*’s behavior but look only for consistency across random samples of subjects. In addition, without a sense for individual structure, objectively working psychologists focus merely on isolated responses of an individual (“items”), and regard variations of response structure merely as sources of measurement error or unreliability instead of an expression of cognitive structure (LIND, 2010).

In contrast, “subjectively” oriented psychologists like Piaget and Kohlberg insist that we cannot do research without a psychological object to be studied and without looking at individual personality structures. Because they also thought that psychological traits like morality are somehow hidden, they can be studied only with subjective or qualitative methods. Piaget (1965) developed what he called a “clinical interview method.” He used a mixture of behavioral observation (e.g., of children’s plays) and of interviewing them (by telling little moral stories and asking the participants to judge the wrongness of deeds and the reason for their

judgment). Later, Kohlberg refined this method in order to assess participants' developmental stage of moral development.

Although there subjective research method was worked out well and has made possible many valuable insights into the moral judgment of humans, it was not satisfactory for two reasons. First, objectively minded psychologist questioned their findings in principle. They argue that subjective scoring is susceptible to self-serving biases. In fact, in my review of Kohlberg's *Moral Judgment Interview*, I found a scoring instruction which was favoring results that were in line with his theory of an invariant developmental sequence (LIND, 1989). Second, both theorists were confused regarding the role of behavior in their theory. Piaget (1965) thought that he dealt only with judgment, but not with behavior. Similarly, Kohlberg (1984) and his followers believed that moral judgment is something apart from behavior and, therefore, tried to study the judgment-behavior relationship.

Both have overlooked that their data on judgment were *behavioral*, not just imagined. But their understanding of behavior was different from behaviorists' understanding of behavior. Namely, they tried to describe behavior from their participants' *own* point of view instead of from the researchers': They were interested to answer questions like this: is taking away the toy from another child seen by the actor as stealing, as borrowing, or just as sharing? Without taking the point of view of the actor in account, we cannot adequately describe and study his or her behavior in terms of its moral quality.

They also overlooked that structure means the relationship between the behaviors of a person in different situations, that is, the consistency of their behavior in regard to their moral orientations. Without looking at behavior in context, we cannot interpret someone's

behavior adequately. For example, if a person accepts a moral principle only when it supports his opinion, but not when it disagrees with it, we cannot say that this person acts according to moral principles. Rather we would say that he or she uses moral principles only to rationalize his or her decision. Actually, in the initial form of his interview method, Kohlberg probed the participants with counter-arguments. Unfortunately, he dropped them later.

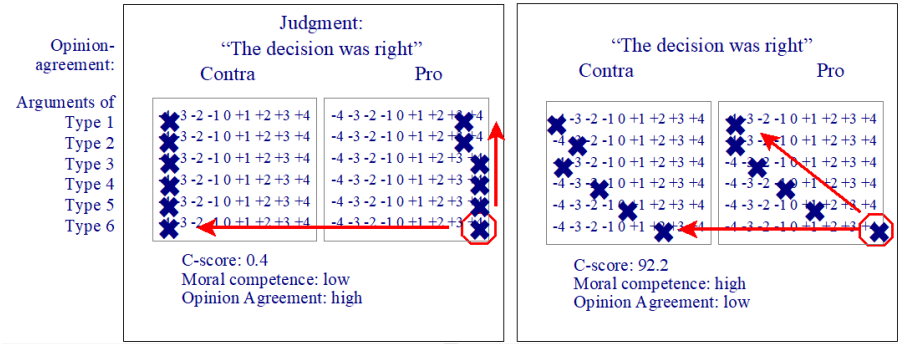
Our Moral Competence Test (MCT) has been constructed in order to resolve the dilemma between an objective research without an object, and subjective research without objective data. The MCT make people's moral competence visible without subjective interpretations and without relying on questionable statistical models. Through the MCT's multivariate experimental design we can, assess the structure of an individual's *pattern* of responses to systematically varied questions (LIND, 2019[1978]). We call this new method underlying the MCT, Experimental Questionnaire, EQ (LIND, 1982). An EQ is not a psychometric test that requires statistical assumptions (*Classical Test Theory*, or *Item Response Theory*, to name the most common ones). Rather it rests solely on a psychological concept of human traits like moral competence. Statistical methods are invoked only afterwards, when we translate the optical diagnosis into a number (C-score) so that we can do numerical analyses.

Concretely, the MCT presents two stories to the participants. Each story contains the difficult decision of a fictitious protagonist. One is about a doctor, the other about two workers. Each story is followed by six arguments in favor and six arguments against the protagonist's decision, which the participants are invited to rate on a scale from -4 to +4 as to their acceptability. The arguments differ not only in regard to their

opinion agreement but also in regard to their moral quality. The arguments have been carefully grafted to represent each of Kohlberg’s six types of moral orientation. The arguments were reviewed by several experts.

The MCT allows us to see whether the participants rate arguments in regard to their opinion-agreement, or in regard to their moral quality. Obviously, only when people are able to see the moral quality of others arguments, a discussion can lead to an agreement. In the following figure, two extreme pattern of responses are depicted, one showing no moral competence at all, and the other one showing an almost perfect pattern of a morally competent individual.

FIGURE 1 Two Response Patterns Manifesting Different Degrees of Moral Competence (one story only)



Fonte: Lind (2019)

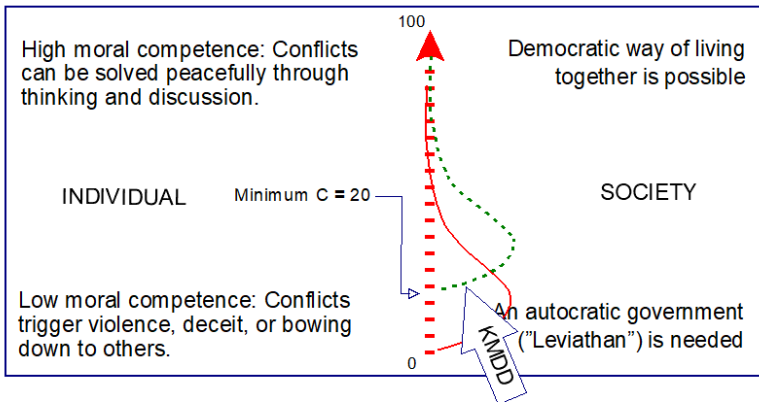
When you look at the rating of the encircled supportive argument of type 6 of both participants, you see no difference. They both rated it “+4”, that is maximally agreeing. However, when you look at these two

person's complete pattern of ratings, you see that both identical ratings mean something quite different. The person on the left side rated all arguments very positively. That means that she rates the supportive type-6 argument only high because it supports her stance on the decision. She even strongly rejected type-6 reasoning when she is to rate counter-arguments. So her judgments are clearly not determined by her moral orientation, but by her wish to defend her stance. In contrast, the pattern of judgments of the person on the right side shows clearly that she has judged all arguments, supportive as well as counter-arguments, by their moral quality. She rejects "bad" arguments even if they support her stance. And she accepts counter-arguments even if they question her stance on an issue.

So, in order to make an individuals' moral competence visible, we need only to look at their responses (after ordering them according to the type of the arguments' moral orientation) without invoking statistics and questionable statistical assumptions. The MCT works, so to say, like a X-ray device.

For technical experts: The optical information contained in these response patterns are translated into a numerical score for moral competence (C-score) through a multivariate analysis of variances. The C-score is the proportion of an individual's responses determined by moral considerations in relation to his or her total response variation (LIND, 1978). It can range from 0 to 100. The scores typically range in the lower half of this scale as the following Figure indicates (solid line).

FIGURE 2 Low and High C- Score and type of society



Fonte: Lind (2019)

The above figure indicates the fact that most people's moral competence is below 20. Various experimental and correlation studies show that at least a moral competence of 20 is needed to make a difference in various fields of behavior (LIND, 2019). In other words, if people have a C-score below this, they cannot solve problems and conflicts through thinking and discussion but only through the use of force and deceit, or through submitting to the commands of other people. For obvious reasons, the form of government is closely related to citizens' level of moral competence. If they use force and deceit, or let others think for them, they need to be controlled by a strong authority. Living in a free, democratic society requires that all citizens have had the opportunity to develop a minimum level of moral competence (dotted line; see also SEN 2009; NOWAK *et al.*, 2013).

3. The *konstanz method of dilemma-discussion* (kmdd)[®]

As the world grows ever more complex, we encounter more and more new problems and conflicts, which our ancestors never could imagine. If we feel overwhelmed by the problems that we are confronted with, we either react aggressively and criminally, or we seek shelter under some strong personality or power. So if the moral competence of the citizens could not develop to a certain minimum, democracy is endangered.

Some citizens can grow up in a favorable environment in which they have ample time and opportunity to practice their moral competence and develop it to the level needed in the context in which they live and work. But most people do not grow up under such a lucky condition. Many people, even university students, report that their learning environment offers little or no opportunity of responsibility-taken and guided reflection (SCHILLINGER, 2006). Consequently, their level of moral competence is rather low. An extreme example are prisoners who got into trouble because they had a rather low ability to solve problems without resorting to violence and deceit, and then even lose their little moral competence in prison because they are deprived from any opportunity to practice it. No wonder that they get back into prison the sooner the longer they had to stay in prison.

Hemmerling (2014) has demonstrated convincingly that this lack of opportunity can be compensated effectively by offering them “KMDD-sessions.” KMDD stand for the *Konstanz Method of Dilemma-Discussion* which I have developed on the basis of the dilemma-method created by Moshe Blatt and Lawrence Kohlberg (1975). The Blatt-Kohlberg method is hardly used anymore because Kohlberg declared it as unsuccessful even

though it showed to be very effective (LIND, 2002). It was unsuccessful in his eyes because teachers did not want to use it. For them it required too much training and too much time for preparation. Some also felt that Kohlberg asked for too much instruction by the teacher which left not much room for students' own thinking.

I decided to safe this method by making it easier to apply and by offering the teachers a more thorough training. I have described the KMDD in my book "How to teach moral competence" (LIND, 2019). For really understanding and applying the method effectively, a practical training and certification is needed. The KMDD is even more effective than the Blatt-Kohlberg method (however only when applied by a well-trained teacher) and is very efficient. One 90-minute session can produce more increase of moral competence than a whole school year.

In a carefully designed, randomized intervention experiment with Thai college students, Lerkiatbundit *et al.* (2006) found high and sustainable effects of the KMDD on moral competence. The experimental group gained 12 C score points on the MCT, and this gain could still be observed six months after the end of the intervention. The high average gain is remarkable as the MCT showed a high stability in a separate 'reliability' study ($r = 0.90$) (LERKIATBUNDIT *et al.*, 2004), and the C score remained almost unchanged in the control group. Other studies found similar gains. For comparison, the gains with the Blatt Kohlberg method were, on average, about 6 percentage points per year (LIND, 2002). The effect sizes of both intervention methods compare favorably to average effect sizes of "effective" psychological, educational and medical treatments.

Conclusion: Democracy and moral competence

Democracy can only work when most citizens have learned how to solve the conflicts and problems which inevitably result from the application of public values. When we want to be good we often find ourselves in a dilemma-situation, that is, in a situation in which all possible courses of action would violate a basic moral principle. In order to solve such dilemma situations we need moral-democratic competence. In other words, democracy is a very demanding form of living together. Its citizens are required to govern themselves, that is, to solve problems and conflicts which they encounter on their own instead of letting other people decide what to do.

Thus moral competence is the basic pillar of democracy. If people have not been able to develop this competence, order must be enforced through trained police, judicial personnel, prison guards and large institutions etc. This costs a vast amount of money. Such enforcement has also its limits because it breaks down if too many citizens and even law-enforcement personnel lack moral competence. Moral competence is not only needed in the public sphere but also in private life, schools, and business (LIND, 2021).

After more than forty years of research and development in this area, I am sure that we could improve the quality of all our lives and also save us many costs, if our schools would foster moral competence in all people. It would stabilize and develop our democracy. This is possible. We have developed a very effective method for fostering moral competence. It would require little time and no changes of schools' and universities' curriculum. The only challenge is the training of teachers to use this method, because the method works only if the teachers understand it and

apply it competently. Therefore, all institutions of higher education should offer such training. This is their most essential duty in a democracy.

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Notes

* Can be downloaded from: <http://moralcompetence.net/b-liste.htm>

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