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An Interview with Georg Lind

Marta Soniewicka: Psychology became very influential in many dimensions, in social science and in the humanities especially moral philosophers tend to look into psychology nowadays. What can psychology contribute to philosophy in your opinion?

Georg Lind: Psychology was always important for philosophy. Almost all philosophers use some kind of psychological facts or knowledge to back up their philosophical theories. But this kind of psychology is more a kind of "an armchair psychology". Philosophers often have their own thoughts about the nature of morality but they do not submit them to experimental testing, and they do not take up much of the findings of experimental moral psychology.

MS: I know that you have a background in both psychology and philosophy. Could you tell me how philosophy has influenced your own psychological studies? What are the philosophical foundations of your method and approach?

GL: We need both for improving our conditions of life. Philosophy is a rich source for moral psychology but it is not its foundation. The actual foundation of my studies is experimental psychology and animal psychology. People' moral behavior is mostly influenced by their moral feelings. But those initial moral feelings are not enough for our life. We are not stuck with our inborn morality as some researchers believe. Mankind would not have survived if we could not develop and educate our moral feelings. In order to find more effective ways to stimulate their development we must carefully study and reflect about moral behavior and feelings. This is the ground for fruitful collaboration between psychology and philosophy must cooperate.

MS: You put a lot of attention to discussions. So were you inspired by Socrates for instance?

GL: Actually not really. I took the idea to use discussion for stimulating moral competence from Jürgen Habermas for whom free discourse about conflicts is of the highest moral principle. He poses discourse on one side of the conflict resolution continuum, and violence on the other side: The better people are able to solve conflicts by discussions, the less they need to resort to violence. Socrates' dialogues are not real dialogues, but pseudo-dialogues. He was not really treating his interlocutors as equal partners. And it was not him but Plato who put it in that form which is a literary way of presenting his philosophy.

MS: Recently you have published your book entitled "How to Teach Morality?" Is it really possible to teach morality? Many people believe that morality is something we are born with.

GL: I must admit my book is, in a way, neither about teaching nor about morality. I used this title because 'teaching' and 'morality' are traditional concepts. People understand them so I want to attract them to read my book, hoping that they will understand that both concepts have undergone big changes in our time. If morality means 'acting according to one's own moral principles' or conscience, we cannot teach it in the traditional sense of imposing them on people. Instead we must help people to develop their ability to live and act according to their moral principles. If we actually mean fostering when we speak about teaching, we can also continue to use this word.

Before we can answer the question of whether *morality* is inborn or not, we first need to clarify a conceptual confusion. We must remember that we can mean two totally *different aspects* when we talk about morality: one aspect is moral *orientation* (or ideal, principle, attitude etc), and the other is moral *competence*. Only moral orientations are inborn (at least the most basic ones). In contrast, moral competence is not inborn but needs to be developed and fostered.

In my book "How to teach morality" I argue that moral competence not only can be fostered but also *must* be fostered. We must foster it because most people have too little natural learning opportunities outside school for developing their moral competence. Schools need to provide supplementary learning opportunities for our children which they otherwise would not get.

This is essential for living together in a democracy. We can have democracy only if all people develop their ability to solve problems and conflicts on the basis of our moral principles through deliberation and discussion, instead of through violence and deceit. If citizens do not have this ability, they need others to take up the responsibility for their lives. They do not feel comfortable in a democracy because they feel overburdened by it. So they tend to elect some kind of autocracy in which other people solve problems and conflicts in behalf of them and police their behavior. Autocrats would not have any power if the people would not give it to them.

MS: You focus in your KMDD method on fostering moral competence. Do you think that moral orientation could be also fostered somehow?

GL: Moral orientations are very important. Without them no moral behavior would be possible. But, as Socrates had observed and as modern research confirms, they are inborn. Already very young, pre-verbal babies show moral orientations in their behavior, and animals like apes do, too. Therefore, in the school we can, and should, fully focus on fostering children's moral competence.

MS: Could you tell us briefly how do you suggest fostering moral competence with your method?

GL: In one sentence, I would say the KMDD works like immunization and physical training. We foster people's moral competence by confronting them with the kind of moral problems or tasks for which this competence is required. Using our abilities strengthen them. Like our muscles which become stronger when we use them. Or like immunization. By injecting a

weakened virus into our body, we stimulate the growth of our body's forces against an that virus.

Note that we do not use real virus for immunization, because this would not immunize us but kill us. The dose is important. Similarly in school we must not over-burden and frighten the learner! A too difficult task can hurt and hinder their learning. The KMDD keeps the dose within an optimal range by fictionalizing the main character or protagonist of the dilemma story. When the protagonist is fictitious, participants do not become too emotional as they easily would if we presented real people in our dilemma stories.

MS: It is not about solving the dilemmas, but rather about talking and listening, am I right?

GL: Yes. The actual moral task in a KMDD session indeed is to speak and to listen in a highly controversial situation, that is, to convince opponents about one's own point of view, and to let opponents convince you. The KMDD cannot, and should not, be used for convincing people of a certain course of action. In that case it would not stimulate their moral competence at all.

MS: Is this moral competence any different from other cognitive competencies, like linguistic or speaking competencies? Is there something special about moral competence?

GL: In one way it is similar: It takes much practice and long time to acquire it, and it can be lost if it is not developed high enough to become self-sustaining. But moral competence is more. Of course people have to put their moral feelings into words and understand others who speak in order to engage in a moral discussion. But moral competence does not require the use of a sophisticated language. Often moral behavior does not even require verbalization at all. People can express their moral feeling just by nodding their head, by raising their hands for voting, or by other kinds of non-verbal behavior.

Apparently moral competence is a very basic cognitive ability. A professor of mathematics who participated in one of my workshops told me that the KMDD was actually training mathematical competence. He said, the way we solve moral problems is very similar to the way we solve mathematical problems. When we try to solve a difficult mathematical problem we feel almost the same emotions as we have when we work on a moral problem. Moral competence seems also to be involved in other academic fields. Researchers have indeed found substantial correlations of moral competence with school grades in mathematics and other subjects.

MS: Do you agree with Kant that we have two distinct powers of reason: theoretical one and practical one and that we use our practical reason in dealing with moral issues?

GL: Yes, indeed I think this distinction between ethics and morals is very important. There can be a big gap between ethical reasoning and moral behavior. When the famous philosopher Max Scheler was accused that in his private life he did not live up to his own ethical teaching,

he excused himself saying: “Look, the signpost does not walk the direction it points out”.¹ So it means that as a philosopher you can teach ethics without being a moral person.

MS: If we can foster moral competence, is it also true that we can lose moral competence? Some studies show that it is possible to lose your moral competence. What are the reasons of losing moral competence?

GL: Unfortunately, like any other competence we can lose it – if we do not use it for some time. Like with muscles – if we do not use them for some weeks they shrink. Or like a foreign language – the longer we do not use it, the more difficult it is for us to speak in this language. If we lose our moral competence, we have to re-train it by using it again, like when we have lost muscles and language skills. How fast we lose a competence and how long it takes to redevelop it, depends largely on the level of competence we had developed before. If that level is high enough, the competence does not regress but becomes self-sustaining.

We have found that when life-conditions prevent the use of moral competence it will erode eventually. For example, as Kay Hemmerling showed, people who are imprisoned often lose their moral competence because there are too little opportunities for them to use it. The longer they have to stay in prison the more their moral competence diminishes – and the more they have nothing left than criminal behavior to survive. Similarly, medical students, who mostly have a relatively high level of moral competence in their first semester, lose some of it over the time of study, whereas the moral competence of students in other subject areas grows.

MS: When we should start teaching moral competence? At school or in kindergarten?

GL: At all age levels. It is never too early or too late. I have had participants in my course who were 60 or 70 years old, too. They had the same learning capacities as the younger participants. When you work with people who have low moral competence, the effects of the KMDD are more visible than if you work with people with a high competence. As Kay Hemmerling demonstrated, prisoners who participated in only a few KMDD-sessions, considerably increased their moral competence.

MS: You’ve been working for many years with the KMDD method and you applied it to many different groups. What was your best experience of teaching KMDD?

GL: I find it most impressive that during the many KMDD sessions which I convened over past 20 years with people of different ages, different cultural backgrounds, and different levels of education, nobody has ever violated KMDD-rule number one: discuss freely but don’t make judgments about people! Obviously, when you provide people with a certain kind of

¹ „So the isolated prophet, once said Max Scheler, stands on the mountain as a signpost; he points the way but cannot go, for if he did, no longer would there be a sign“ (in Daniel Bell, *The Decline of Intellectual Radicalism*, books google, p. 182). „Ein Wegweiser muss nicht dahin gehen, wohin er zeigt“ (Scheler). A similar quote is attributed to Schopenhauer: „Der Wegweiser muss nicht den Weg gehen, den er weist“.

environment, they behave very civilized, regardless whether they speak with their friends or when they exchange arguments with opponents. That's make me very optimistic about the possibility of improving the world by fostering moral competence.

The KMDD provides an environment which lets people engage in very controversial debates without getting into fighting. The KMDD teacher introduces the before-mentioned rule and announces that he or she will remind the participants if they should forget it. This seems to suffice to keep peace during the sometimes highly controversial exchange of arguments during a KMDD session. The participants do not need an authority who threatens them with sanctions. As moral competence of all participants develops beyond a certain level, even this mild authority of a reminder will not be necessary anymore. Morally competent people do not need to fight, but respect each other without any external control.

MS: Moral competence can be also defined as a power of attaining good. Everybody has his or her idea of the good but some of us are better than the others in attaining it. Why are people sometimes live up to their ideal or unable to follow their own moral views?

GL: To live up to one's moral ideals is not easy at all. Firstly, moral ideals or principles often leave much space for interpretations. We all love justice. But what does justice exactly mean? For instance, employers and employees both invoke justice, but they often disagree on what exactly a *just* income means. So there is a lot of thinking and negotiating involved in making this general principle concrete. The second problem is that our moral principles can come into conflict with each other and confront you with a moral dilemma: whatever you decide is wrong. One principle tells you to do one thing, and the other says no, don't do it. Like for instance the value of life. For example, if a woman is pregnant and very sick and she can only survive if she terminates the pregnancy, this is a situation of life against life. She has to take the decision against life, either the life of her fetus or her own life as a mother. This is why it is so hard to live a moral life, and why we have to develop moral competence.

MS: Does moral competence always manifest itself in behavior? One may think that something is wrong but choose or do otherwise in real life situation. I had the opportunity to participate in a KMDD session held within your workshop. In this session I had my own view on how to solve the protagonist's dilemma. But I am not 100% sure whether I would uphold my judgment if would I experienced such a difficult choice myself in a real life, under the pressure of many factors which were not present in the safe environment of a classroom.

GL: Every situation is unique and has to be considered from the scratch. The decisions made there cannot be generalized, because, as you said, the factors are different in each situation. If the factors change only slightly, a different decision might have to be made. That's why we cannot say that abortion is generally right, or generally wrong. That's why traditional moral education, which teaches moral recipes, is not helpful. Simple recipes do not prepare us for the complexity of life. In each situation we have to find out newly what is right and what is wrong. That's also why we need moral competence. A morally mature decision, Lawrence Kohlberg once wrote, is one which pays attention to basic moral principles *as well as* to all factors involved in a situation. This is not easy at all. This is a very high challenge for us. Often it is too hard a challenge, and then we fail.

MS: But I think that it is different to discuss the dilemma in a classroom and a different thing to face it in your life.

GL: The classroom is one among many factors which determine our moral decision-making. A very strong factor is the way a person perceives the dilemma. Remember: a dilemma does not exist 'out there,' but a dilemma is always in the eye of the beholder. People with high moral competence perceive a different dilemma than people with low moral competence. People who have only weak or no moral feelings (like psychopaths) never encounter a moral dilemma because without moral feelings you will not feel a dilemma either.

So our judgment of what is the right or wrong decision depends not only on the specific situation but also on our moral orientations and moral competence. As we have seen, usually all dilemmas are different from each other, and often they require different decisions. Even a little change of the situation might require different behavior. The dilemmas used in classroom are not less real but they are different.

MS: Speaking of Lawrence Kohlberg, how important was he for you and for your own research?

GL: For me, Kohlberg was a brilliant psychologist and researcher. Some people consider him even a founder of a new religion. They call others or themselves 'Kohlbergian' or a 'Post-Kohlbergian.' But that's not a category I would think of. In social science we are still too religious and worship the creator of a theory as if he was a religious leader and his theory was some kind of revelation.

I think that, although research has disproved some parts of his theory, Kohlberg made a huge contribution to psychology. I admire him most for his ability to listen. He taught me to listen to all, but especially to people who oppose our views. We ought to appreciate our opponents because they help us most to correct our errors.

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