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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Teaching Philosophy*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Samuelsson, L., Lindström, N. (2020)

On the Practical Goal of Ethics Education: Ethical Competence as the Ability to Master Methods for Moral Reasoning

Teaching Philosophy, : 1-22

<https://doi.org/10.5840/teachphil2020420120>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-170116>

On the Practical Goal of Ethics Education: Ethical Competence as the Ability to Master Methods for Moral Reasoning

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Abstract: In this paper we consider the ability to master a set of methods for moral reasoning as a form of ethical competence. These methods can be roughly assembled under the headings *information*, *vividness* and *coherence*. We distinguish between the theoretical characterization of ethical competence and what we take to be its practical role and argue that the ability to master these methods fits the theoretical characterization of such competence as well as fulfils its practical role. An important upshot of this result is that these methods are suitable as a basis for ethics education at various levels, at least when the goal of such education is partly practical: to provide tools for reaching justified moral decisions. Consequently, we encourage ethics educators who teach ethics with this goal to design their educational approaches in such a way that these methods are taught and practiced.

Introduction

Sometimes when ethics is taught the goal is largely theoretical. When philosophy students in universities and colleges take ethics courses, for instance, they are expected to have a theoretical interest in the subject, to be interested in ethical theory as such (the theoretical underpinnings of moral theories and arguments for and against them). Often, however, ethics is taught with a

different, practical goal. This is the case when ethics is taught to student groups studying for various professions where ethical considerations may be crucial.¹ The main objective of such ethics education can generally be described as that of providing tools for the students to build a certain kind of competence – in some sense an ethical competence – which can be useful in their future working lives. Building ethical competence is plausibly also an important goal when ethics is introduced to younger pupils. It is, however, a controversial question what such competence consists in more precisely. It is also highly contestable whether the most common ways of teaching ethics to such student groups are efficient means for helping the students to build anything that is to count as ethical competence in this practical sense.²

Against this background, the aim of the present paper is *to detail and defend a concept of ethical competence such that it fulfils the practical role that one plausibly seeks for it in an educational setting where the goal of ethics education is partly practical.*

While it is a controversial question how the details of ethical competence should be spelled out, we take it to be neither difficult nor controversial to give a theoretical characterization at the most general level of the practical notion of ethical competence that we are interested in. It simply refers to the ability to make, and act on, decisions that can be morally justified to others.³ Setting aside the motivational component, i.e., that one's moral decisions should lead to action, this is the familiar ability to reason morally or make well-grounded moral judgements. The difficulties begin when we start to consider what, more precisely, this ability amounts to.

Ethical competence is often characterized by way of providing a list of several ethical traits, of which the ability to reason morally or make well-grounded moral judgements is one. Kulju et al. (2016), for instance, provide a conceptual analysis of *ethical competence* according to which “ethical competence can be defined in terms of *character strength, ethical awareness, moral judgement skills* and *willingness to do good*” (see also Osbeck et al. 2018).

Without downplaying the importance of the other traits, the aspect or form of ethical competence that we focus on in this paper is the one these authors refer to as “moral judgement skills”, i.e., the ability to reason morally or make well-grounded moral judgements. Our reason for focusing on this aspect of ethical competence in the present paper is – as will be developed subsequently – that it is the one most suitable as a direct target for ethics education.

Although this kind of trait is typically listed among the ones that together are supposed to make up ethical competence, it is rarely elaborated on in any detail. Compared to how it is usually treated in accounts of ethical competence, the characterization provided by Kulju et al. must actually be considered rather detailed. Describing this aspect of ethical competence, they write: “An ethically competent person is able to think and act openly, without moral fixations or automatic ways of action; having the ability to consider critically and logically all values, principles, needs and beliefs; and making moral judgements consistently, from the alternatives involved in an ethically demanding situation” (Kulju et al. 2016). Comparatively elaborate as this description is, it still leaves many details open.

Given the practical understanding of ethical competence that we suggest, an investigation into the details of the “moral reasoning”-aspect of ethical competence might give important insights as to how ethics education at various levels may be fruitfully carried out, at least when the goal of such education is practical, i.e., to provide tools for reaching moral decisions that can be justified to others.

As should be clear from the account above – but important to emphasize in order to avoid misunderstanding – the concept of ethical competence that we provide in this paper is not meant to be exhaustive of what one may plausibly refer to when using the phrase “ethical competence”, even in a practical sense. Rather, it is one very important form or aspect of such competence – one that fulfils what we will argue is its practical role. A comprehensive account of ethical competence will plausibly include other components as well (e.g., those listed in

Kulju et al. 2016), and what is to be included may well be to some extent context dependent.⁴ However, the concept of ethical competence that we detail in this paper should, we contend, be considered an important aspect of any comprehensive account of such competence, and one that is particularly suitable as a basis for ethics education when the goal of such education is partly practical. Yet, it has not been clearly spelled out *as ethical competence* in an educational context.

In the following, we develop this aspect of ethical competence by presenting it as the ability to master certain methods for moral reasoning structured under the headings *information*, *vividness* and *coherence*. Along the way we provide a defense both of why these methods should be considered valid methods for moral reasoning, and of why they are suitable in an account of ethical competence relevant to ethics education.

In the next section we begin by distinguishing between the theoretical characterization of ethical competence and what we take to be its practical role. We then present, as a contrast to our own suggestion, a candidate for ethical competence that naturally emerges when one considers the history of moral philosophy as well as how ethics is commonly taught today. We argue that although this candidate might fit the theoretical characterization of ethical competence, it cannot presently fulfil its practical role. Hence, in the subsequent section, we turn to the methods for moral reasoning that we claim could provide the foundation for an ethical competence which could both fit its theoretical characterization and fulfil its practical role. In the final sections we provide arguments for this claim and explain its relevance to ethics education.

The Practical Role of Ethical Competence

What gives the question of ethical competence particular interest (besides any interest one may have in ethical issues generally), we submit, is its practical potential. Of course, any notion of

ethical competence is bound to have a theoretical dimension, but in order to generate the special interest that we seek in it, it must also play a certain practical role. Hence, we want to draw a distinction between the theoretical characterization of ethical competence and its practical role.

As for the theoretical characterization, we take ethical competence to be, roughly, any competence the possession of which aids its possessor to reach justified moral decisions and act accordingly.⁵ While this characterization can certainly be developed, this very rough version suffices for our purposes since it is the practical role of ethical competence we want to focus on.

The practical role of ethical competence is not all that easy to capture, but what we have in mind is something like the following. First, ethical competence should indeed aid its possessor in reaching justified moral decisions – that is the main point of possessing such competence. However, the ethically competent person does not merely reach justified moral decisions but can also justify these decisions in a way that is accessible to others. A normally competent agent is supposed to be able to follow and understand such a justification even if he or she may not ultimately agree with it. That is to say, the ethically competent person can explain and defend her decisions in a way that resonates with other people. One way of putting it may be that, in the sense that we are after, the practicality of ethical competence should not be merely personal or individual, but also in a way social or communal: It should be suitable to teach this competence, to learn and practice it, and people should generally find it plausible to agree on as an appropriate common basis for moral decision-making.⁶

This last point is important. Suppose we have a person who somehow knows what is right and wrong in any situation (assuming that this is a kind of knowledge that one can have), but who cannot explain to others why this or that action is right or wrong. Although in a sense obviously ethically competent, this person still lacks in ethical competence; her ethical decision-making is not transparent. The process by which she reaches her ethical judgements is

not accessible to others, and she will not be able to justify her moral judgements to those affected by them. Hence, even though she reaches correct moral judgements, her ethical competence fails to fulfil the practical role identified above.

An ethical competence that could fulfil this practical role would indeed deserve our attention, not the least because it could provide insights as to how ethics education at various levels could be fruitfully carried out, given the practical goal of reaching justified moral decisions. What it takes to fulfil the practical role of ethical competence will hopefully become clearer after the next section, where we consider a candidate for ethical competence that might fit the theoretical characterization of such competence but fails to fulfil its practical role.

The Theory-Candidate for Ethical Competence

In view of the history of moral philosophy (see, e.g., Norman 1983), one main candidate for ethical competence suggests itself. According to this suggestion, ethical competence consists in (i) the knowledge about which moral theory is correct, (ii) the understanding of this theory, and (iii) the ability to apply it to particular cases.⁷ Much of what moral philosophers have done through the last centuries is to develop moral theories with a two-fold ambition: to provide a criterion of rightness (i.e., explain what, at the most fundamental level, makes actions right or wrong) and to provide a decision-procedure (i.e., a procedure to guide action with the ultimate point of departure taken in the theory's suggested criterion of rightness) (see, e.g., Timmons 2013, pp. 3-4). Hence, if a person knows which moral theory is correct, has an adequate understanding of this theory and possesses the ability to apply it to particular cases, then she has all she needs in order to make the right moral decisions in various situations. Such a person would clearly be ethically competent in the sense of possessing a competence the possession of which aids its possessor to reach correct moral decisions. Let us call this candidate for ethical

competence “the theory-candidate”, and our contrasting candidate – to be developed in the next section – “the methods-candidate”.

If we now turn our attention to how ethics is commonly taught today, both as professional ethics for various student groups studying for different professions, and as introduction to younger pupils, the theory-candidate for ethical competence actually seems to gain support. Even when ethics teaching is supposed to be practical, it is commonly introduced by presenting the students with a set of moral theories and applying them to different scenarios, leaving it to the students to decide which theory, if any, to consider correct.⁸ We have previously referred to this approach to teaching ethics as “the smorgasbord approach”, reflecting how it presents the practice of moral reasoning as the activity of simply choosing from a list of moral theories when making moral decisions.⁹ But of course, if the student chooses “the right” theory, understands it, and gains the ability to apply it to particular cases, then she clearly has become ethically competent in the sense of possessing a competence the possession of which aids its possessor to reach justified (or at least correct) moral decisions.

Hence, it seems possible that the theory-candidate for ethical competence could fit the theoretical characterization of such competence, at least on the assumption that there is a right theory to choose. However, it cannot, for the time being at least, fulfil the practical role that we have identified for such competence. To explain why, let us consider two kinds of controversy or disagreement in ethics. The first we can call *normative disagreement*, and the second *metaethical disagreement*.

Normative Disagreement

Philosophers disagree widely about which theory in normative ethics, if any, that is the correct one. Consequently, even if there is one correct moral theory, the knowledge of this – and the further abilities necessary to successfully act on that knowledge – would by many be disputed

as constituting ethical competence. Those who do not believe that this theory is correct will probably object to this kind of knowledge constituting ethical competence.

Let us consider an example. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there is in fact one correct moral theory, and that that theory is classical hedonistic act utilitarianism (see, e.g., Timmons 2013, Ch. 5). Suppose, further, that some people know this, understand this theory and possess the ability to correctly apply it to solve concrete ethical problems. Still, those of us who do not believe that classical hedonistic act utilitarianism is the correct moral theory will probably deny that these people possess ethical competence through this purported knowledge, understanding and ability. Thus, even if this knowledge, understanding and ability, theoretically speaking, *is* ethical competence, it does not fulfil the practical role that we seek for such competence. Given the current state of moral philosophy, it is not true of classical hedonistic act utilitarianism (nor of any other theory in normative ethics) that it is suitable to teach as ethical competence or that people generally find it plausible as an appropriate common basis for moral decision-making.¹⁰

Michael Hand (2018, p. 76) makes a related point in terms of indoctrination. If moral education “aims to bring it about that children subscribe to moral standards and believe them to be justified” and if “there is reasonable disagreement about the content and justification of morality”, then teaching such standards as true or justified is indoctrinatory. This point holds irrespective of whether the standards taught are true or not, since, regardless, the disagreement is reasonable (at least for the time being). Hand’s way out of this problem bears resemblance to ours. He notes that: “While it is certainly true that there is reasonable disagreement about the content and justification of morality, it is not true that no moral standards are robustly justified. Reasonable disagreement about morality does not go all the way down” (Hand 2018, p. 76). What we wish to add to this picture are the valid methods for moral reasoning that one can use for defending or criticizing moral standards or particular moral judgements.

An objection might be raised here. Is it not the case that what is important is to do what is actually right and avoid doing what is actually wrong, rather than to do what can be justified to others and avoid doing what cannot be justified to others? Suppose the convinced utilitarianist is correct. Should not this agent then act in accordance with the theory she knows to be correct, even if she lacks the means of justifying her actions to others (in the sense of explaining or defending them in a way that resonates with other people)? These are delicate matters that we do not have the space to develop here in detail, but there are some brief remarks that can be made in response. First, if this person is correct and knows it, then she should arguably act in accordance with her favored theory. Our claim is merely that this theory is not suitable as a basis for ethics education aimed at improving students' ethical competence (teaching it for this purpose would indeed be indoctrinatory, even if the theory is true).

Second, if a moral theory is correct it is plausible to assume that at least in principle the actions that it recommends can be justified to other people, in the sense that we have tried to convey. On our account (to be developed in the next section), what this means is that these actions can be defended by means of valid methods for moral reasoning. To be a little more precise, they can be defended at least in the sense that one rationale for performing these actions is compatible with completely fulfilling the demands expressed through these methods: If a moral theory *T* is correct, then the methods for moral reasoning cannot be correctly applied to show that an action recommended by *T* is wrong. If they could, we would have to admit that these methods are not valid. In the next section we will present a set of methods for moral reasoning and argue that they are indeed valid. Hence, assuming that we are correct, if the verdicts of a moral theory are incompatible with the correct application of these methods, this shows that this theory must be incorrect, not *vice versa*. The important point here is that there is no conflict between applying the valid methods for moral reasoning and referring to a moral theory for the purpose of justifying an action (or a decision, more generally), as long as the

verdicts of that theory are compatible with a correct application of these methods. However, it is the correct application of the valid methods for moral reasoning, not the reference to the moral theory, that for most people will constitute the justification.¹¹

In sum, the fact that there is widespread reasonable disagreement about which moral theory that is correct is sufficient to establish that the theory-candidate for ethical competence cannot fulfil the practical role that we seek for such competence in an educational setting where the goal of ethics education is partly practical. There is, however, an additional problem with this candidate to which we now turn our attention. Aside from its failure to accommodate reasonable normative disagreement, it is difficult to reconcile with reasonable metaethical disagreement.

Metaethical Disagreement

Metaethical disagreement takes various forms and is actually several different kinds of disagreement.¹² However, for our purposes it suffices to hint at the problems that such disagreement poses for the theory-candidate for ethical competence. To start with, there is widespread disagreement and skepticism about the kind of moral knowledge discussed above. Of those who believe that we can have such knowledge the views on how we can reach it diverge. While some think that we get it via some sort of intuition others defend opposing views, and many people are skeptical to the very possibility of such moral knowledge. At least the people in the last group would probably reject any notion of ethical competence built on knowledge about the correctness of a moral theory.

There is also disagreement about the nature of morality. While some believe that there exists some sort of moral reality that we usually intend to speak about when making moral utterances, others reject the existence of such a reality and take our moral utterances to either be in error or have some other function. Many people in the second group would probably be

skeptical to a notion of ethical competence built on knowledge about the correctness of a moral theory – since such knowledge would seem to be knowledge about some sort of moral reality.

Simply put, for various reasons many people are skeptical to the idea that there exists one correct moral theory of which one can have knowledge or which correctly represents a moral reality. Just as with normative disagreement, this metaethical disagreement is sufficient to establish that the theory-candidate for ethical competence cannot fulfil the practical role that we seek for such competence in an educational setting where the goal of ethics education is partly practical. Referring to one particular moral theory in defending one's moral judgements will not resonate with those who for various reasons reject the idea that any one such moral theory can be true or correct in the relevant sense.

The Methods-Candidate for Ethical Competence

The question we want to ask at this point is whether there is some other candidate for ethical competence which can *fit its theoretical characterization* as well as *fulfil its practical role*. Is there some candidate that survives the challenges posed by the two kinds of disagreement we have just described?

We suggest that there actually is such a candidate, namely the ability to master a set of valid methods for moral reasoning. As we will argue, possessing the ability to master these methods does aid the possessor to reach justified moral decisions, so it fits the theoretical characterization of ethical competence. Furthermore, these methods should be seen as uncontroversial. They are extracted from our actual moral practice and should be considered valid irrespective of one's normative ethical views, and in most cases irrespective of one's metaethical views. Thus, they survive the challenges posed by normative and metaethical disagreement, and people should generally find it plausible to agree on them as an appropriate common basis for moral decision-making. Hence, the ability to master these methods for moral

reasoning also fulfils the practical role of ethical competence.¹³ We will now turn our attention to these methods, which we structure under the headings *information*, *vividness* and *coherence*.¹⁴

Information

The focus of the first method is information. When making moral decisions it is essential that one bases them on as much correct information as possible, and no incorrect beliefs. For instance, if I have to make a decision affecting some person, *P*, I should know as much as possible about *P*'s situation, e.g., *P*'s relations to others, *P*'s emotional dispositions, how *P* is likely to react to various outcomes, how other people are likely to react to various outcomes affecting *P*, and so on. But I also need to know a lot of other things, such as which outcomes are likely to follow from the various actions I might undertake, and how these outcomes will affect me and others.

The most obvious role that information plays in moral decision-making is probably the instrumental role of providing input necessary to apply moral principles or act on moral reasons. Suppose that I take myself to have a moral reason to make you happy. Then I need information about what makes you happy in order to take the appropriate means to act on this reason. But it might also be that information sometimes can play a more profound role in moral reasoning. My beliefs about certain aspects of human nature, for instance, might affect my moral views. E.g., people's views about the appropriateness of blame in certain situations might differ depending on their views about to what extent and in what sense agents are free when they make crucial choices. Moral views based on false beliefs about such matters should not, of course, be considered justified, at least not on the basis of those beliefs.

The first method, then, can be stated as follows: (1) Try to find out what non-moral information that is relevant to the moral decision you are about to make;¹⁵ (2) try to gain

as much of this information as possible (and get rid of false beliefs). The ideal, when making a moral decision, is that one possesses all correct information that is relevant to the decision, and no false beliefs. It is important to emphasize that this is an ideal. There may be relevant information that one cannot gain, and knowledge that one cannot have, but that does not undermine the point that it would preferable to have it. Accordingly, in order to make a justified moral decision in a certain situation one should investigate the relevant factual matters as thoroughly as possible. To the extent that one's moral decisions are based on incorrect or incomplete information, they are open to legitimate criticism.

This method may seem so obvious that it need not be spelled out. But we think there is a point in explicitly stating this method, not the least because it is easy to miss relevant information and draw hasty conclusions about which information that is relevant to a certain decision that one has to make (see further Samuelsson & Rist 2016).

Vividness

However, for moral decision-making pure information is often not enough. To be able to justify one's decisions to those affected by them, one may also have to be able to mentally represent the relevant information in a "vivid" way.¹⁶ If one fails to vividly entertain the situations of those affected by one's decisions, for instance, this failure seems to provide a legitimate ground for objecting to those decisions. As Shelly Kagan (1989, p. 284) notes, the details of vividness may be discussed:

It seems possible that vividness simply is a matter of having a wealth of details. Or it might be more directly a matter of how adequately the belief is displayed in the representational system of the mind – where the influx of information simply acts as a stimulus for more adequate representation of the belief itself. These are tricky issues ...

But I believe that we can leave them to one side without ill effect.

Like Kagan, we take it that these tricky issues can be left aside. Irrespective of how, exactly, vividness should be understood, we believe that the notion of vividness points towards an important feature of our moral reasoning. Suppose, again, that I have to make a decision that will affect *P*. I may possess all the relevant information about *P* and *P*'s situation (in the sense that I can express all the relevant true claims about *P* and *P*'s situation) without actually grasping what it is like (or feels like) to be *P* in that situation.¹⁷ However, such understanding seems crucial for making moral decisions.

As a method for moral reasoning, *vividness* amounts to trying to represent the relevant information that one possesses as vividly as possible. To a large extent, whether this succeeds may be a question of experience and imagination. As Jonathan Glover (1990, p. 26) points out:

It is a truism that we are able to accept the rightness of actions or policies often only because of a failure of imagination, and experience of their consequences often greatly changes our responses. Sometimes experience may not be needed. It can be enough to use some imagination, and often films or novels can help us to respond in a more sensitive or imaginative way. Someone who thinks that Stalin's labour camps were an acceptable consequence of a morally legitimate policy may not himself be able to experience such a camp, but the novels of Solzhenitsyn may modify his views about what is acceptable.

Transferred to an educational setting, it is not uncommon that if the subject of teaching is, e.g., bullying, or drug-abuse, one invites a person who has been bullied, or a former drug addict, in order to convey a more direct experience than what the teacher herself can manage to do, or that can be gained by simply reading a textbook. Or perhaps one uses a realistic portrayal such as a film or a novel. The purpose of such ingredients in an educational context is arguably to

capture some aspects of the phenomena in question that go beyond the kind of pure information that can be gained by reading a purely informative textbook. It is partly this kind of experience-related insights that we intend for the notion of vividness to capture.¹⁸

Coherence

When we explain or defend our moral decisions we provide reasons for these decisions, i.e., we cite some facts that we take to count in favor of these decisions. Someone may for instance cite as a reason for a certain action that it causes less harm than other available actions, or that it is the action that best respects people's integrity. Given what has been said so far, it is crucial that one's purported reason is based on vividly represented correct information. However, for one's decision to be justified one also has to reason coherently from this vividly represented information, i.e., the reasons that one cites have to be coherent with the reasons that one cites in other relevantly similar situations as well as with one's overall set of opinions and beliefs.

There are of course several ways in which one's reasoning may fail. Glover (1990, pp. 25-26) accounts for three of these:

- (i) One's reasoning may be grounded in "concepts that are blurred or incoherent".

As an example of such a "blurred" concept Glover mentions *unnatural*: "Someone who believes that homosexual acts are wicked because they are unnatural may be open to this kind of argument. If pressed to define 'unnatural' he may find it hard to provide a definition that includes homosexual acts without also including singing at the opera" (Glover 1990, p. 25).

- (ii) One's reasoning may be logically flawed – either by involving or implying some logical inconsistency,¹⁹ or because one cites as a reason for a moral judgement some fact that is not relevant to that judgement. Again, we can use *unnatural* as an example (although Glover himself uses a different example for illustrating this form of logical flaw). Suppose that the person in the above example does manage to define 'unnatural' in a way that includes

homosexual acts but not singing at the opera. If so, the challenge remains for this person to show that the concept on naturalness that he has defined is relevant to whether an action is wicked or not. This, we are convinced, is something he will not be able to do.

(iii) One's rationale for a moral decision may have previously unnoticed implications that one is not willing to accept.²⁰ One of the most common ways of defending and criticizing moral theories or principles is to test them on examples or thought experiments to see whether their implications in these examples or thought experiments are ones that one finds acceptable.²¹ Suppose, for instance, that the ethical principle that I test on a certain example has the implication that it is right to sentence an innocent person to prison, or that we are not obligated to help a person in need even if the cost of doing so is negligible. Are these implications that I am ready to accept? If not, then I have to abandon or revise the principle in question.

Let us assemble these ways in which moral reasoning can fail under the heading *incoherence*. Now, there are at least two items that we ought to add to the list of ways in which our moral reasoning may fail:

(iv) One's reasoning may involve unfounded assertions – that is, assertions that are introduced only to save a theory that one is inclined to accept, with no independent motivation of these assertions (i.e., *ad hoc* assertions), or assertions that just do not fit well in the whole that is constituted by one's total set of beliefs and judgements (see also Kagan 1989, pp. 12-14).

(v) One's ethical judgement may fail to respect the requirement of universalizability:

The requirement that moral judgments be universalizable is, roughly, the requirement that such judgments be independent of any particular point of view. Thus, an agent who judges that *A* ought morally to do *X* in situation *S* ought to be willing to endorse the same

judgment whether she herself happens to be A, or some other individual involved in the situation (someone who, perhaps, will be directly affected by A's actions)... (Jollimore 2014)

Such a weak requirement of universalizability seems to be inherent in the very notion of moral reasoning. To hold, for instance, that other people are subject to other standards of moral justification than oneself is just immoral. It is important to notice here that universalizability differs from impartiality. For example, as ethical egoism is usually formulated it respects universalizability, but it is the typical case of a partial theory. Somewhat simplified, a partial theory may respect universalizability if it allows the same partiality for everyone. While it is very plausible to consider universalizability a basic requirement on moral reasoning, the same is not true of impartiality. An impartiality-requirement would prematurely exclude too many moral theories as reasonable candidates, not only ethical egoism, but also, e.g., ethics of care and various versions of what is often referred to as "common sense morality" (which arguably allows a fair amount of partiality).

As a method for moral reasoning, *coherence* amounts to trying to be coherent in one's moral reasoning by avoiding the flaws identified in (i) through (v). To the extent that one's moral decisions are based on reasoning that is incoherent, one is open to legitimate criticism. That is, moral judgements based on incoherent reasoning should not be considered justified, at least not on the basis of that reasoning.

To sum up, we have presented and developed the following methods (or kinds of method) for moral reasoning:

1. *Information*: Collect all relevant (correct) information (and get rid of false information)
2. *Vividness*: Represent (mentally) the relevant (correct) information as vividly as possible

3. *Coherence*: Reason coherently

(Samuelsson & Rist 2016, p. 80)

Let us now turn to the validity of these methods and their suggested role as providing the basis for ethical competence.

Defending the Methods-Candidate

If we are correct that the ability to master these methods for moral reasoning is a form of ethical competence (in the practical sense that we are after), this ability must (1) fit the theoretical characterization of ethical competence, and (2) fulfil its practical role. We shall now consider these two requirements in order.

Fitting the Theoretical Characterization of Ethical Competence

For the methods-candidate to fit the theoretical characterization of ethical competence, the methods for moral reasoning that we have presented must be valid: It must be true that possessing the ability to master these methods aids the possessor to reach justified moral decisions. So, the question we need to ask at this point is why we should take these methods to be valid methods for moral reasoning.

The answer has already been hinted at above, when presenting the methods, but it might be helpful to spell it out explicitly. To begin with, we take these methods to be almost self-evident. It can hardly be disputed that it is desirable, for the purpose of moral reasoning, to collect relevant information (and get rid of false beliefs), to represent this information as vividly as possible, and to reason coherently on the basis of that information. Moreover, these methods are extracted from our actual moral practice (e.g., Firth 1952; Strömberg 2001). To the extent that we take an agent to fail in her application of any of these methods when she tries to justify

some moral decision, we do in fact consider her decision open to legitimate criticism. Hence, any account of morality that is not compatible with the way in which these methods shape our moral reasoning can rightfully be challenged with not being an account of morality at all.²²

The upshot here is that if our actual moral practice is a guide to how morality should be understood (and what other guides do we have?), it seems safe to consider these methods as valid methods for moral reasoning. And if they are valid, it is also true that the ability to master them aids an agent to reach justified moral decisions. Consequently, we take the ability to master these methods for moral reasoning to fit the theoretical characterization of ethical competence.

The crucial advantage of the methods-candidate for ethical competence, however, is not that it fits the theoretical characterization of such competence. As we have seen, even a theory-candidate *might* fit that characterization. What makes it such a plausible candidate for ethical competence is that it fulfils the practical role that we seek for such competence (at least in an educational setting where the goal of ethics education is partly practical).

Fulfilling the Practical Role of Ethical Competence

For the methods-candidate to fulfil the practical role of ethical competence, it should be reasonable to agree on the methods for moral reasoning as a basis for such competence. If we are right that these methods are close to self-evident, this requirement is certainly met. Hence, these methods, we take it, are not subject to the normative disagreement that we accounted for above. Rather, these methods constitute some of the very tools by which one can evaluate the plausibility of moral theories (i.e., theories in normative ethics).²³ That is to say, if a candidate for a moral theory is in some sense incoherent, or based on false beliefs about the world, or if some of its verdicts are incompatible with vividly represented true beliefs, that is a firm ground for rejecting that candidate. This point itself shows one of the practical advantages of focusing

on methods for moral reasoning in ethics education. Even when such education involves moral theories, if the students are supposed to have any chance to even start to evaluate the reasonableness of these theories, they need to be able to apply some methods for moral reasoning to be used to evaluate such theories.

However, usually we do not justify moral decisions by way of referring to a moral theory. Most people (even most philosophers, we guess) do not adhere to one particular moral theory, at least not with any certainty. But even when they do, there is – as we stressed above – extensive reasonable normative disagreement, such that others may not find one’s decision justified when one has tried to justify it by referring to a moral theory. Rather, one’s decision is to be considered justified to the extent that one has managed to successfully apply the methods for moral reasoning. For each of these methods there is a corresponding requirement on moral justification, or ideal moral reasoning. Ideally, an agent’s moral reasoning should be based on all relevant, vividly represented information (and no false beliefs) and be completely coherent.

As one should expect, given the role these requirements play in our moral thinking, they are at the core of several prominent meta-ethical accounts.²⁴ Indeed, the very idea of moral reasoning seems to involve these requirements (see also Strömberg 2001, p. 346). Accordingly, variants of them appear with slightly different but similar roles in most metaethical positions, even if they are not always at the center of them: Normative naturalists tend to understand the meaning of moral claims partly in terms of these requirements (e.g., Firth 1952; Brandt 1998; Smith 1994); non-naturalist cognitivists typically regard failure to meet them as a factor that may blur an agent’s moral intuition or responsiveness to moral reasons (e.g., McNaughton 1988; Parfit 2011, pp. 546-563); and some non-cognitivists take them to be requirements on valid non-cognitive “judgements” (such as imperatives, prescriptions or the expression of emotions) (e.g., Hare 1981).²⁵ Even meta-ethically motivated moral relativists,

such as Gilbert Harman, may accept such requirements, although Harman takes them to yield different sets of locally valid systems of morality (Harman 1977, in particular parts II to IV).

What this shows is that these requirements on moral reasoning, and the corresponding methods, are largely unaffected by meta-ethical disagreement. Irrespective of whether one believes that we can have moral knowledge or that there exists a moral reality, one can (and should) accept the validity of these methods. Indeed, we take it to be a condition of adequacy on a meta-ethical theory that it can explain (or at least is compatible with) the actual moral practice where these methods play the role of yielding justified moral judgements to the extent that they are successfully applied. It is hard to see why an account of ethics which cannot make sense of this salient feature of our moral practice should be considered an account of ethics at all.

We conclude that the ability to master the methods for moral reasoning that we have presented in this paper fulfils the practical role of ethical competence. Explaining or defending one's moral judgements by way of referring to these methods does resonate with other people – people should (and generally do) agree on these methods as an appropriate common basis for moral decision-making. Accordingly, this competence is – as far as this practical role is concerned – suitable for teaching and practice. In this sense it is not merely personal or individual, but also in a way social or communal.

It is, of course, an open question how far these methods can take us with regard to reaching moral progress or moral agreement, but insofar as we can tell, there really is no alternative to them as far as the “moral reasoning”-aspect of ethical competence is concerned. And we are quite optimistic in this respect (partly from experiences from our own teaching) – taking such requirements as vividness and universalizability seriously can take one far in one's moral reasoning. It is clear that there are innumerable ethical judgements that should be dismissed in light of these methods – because they are grounded on false beliefs or incomplete

information, because they would not survive vivid representations of relevant facts, or because they are based on incoherent reasoning. On at least many moral questions it may be that the views of all ideal moral reasoners would converge.²⁶

Concluding Remarks

We have argued that the ability to master certain methods for moral reasoning is an important form of ethical competence that fulfils the practical role that we seek for such competence in an educational setting where the goal of ethics education is partly practical. Consequently, we encourage ethics educators who teach ethics with such a goal to design their educational approaches so that these methods are taught and practiced, i.e., so that the students get the best prerequisites for developing this competence.²⁷ Further research is needed regarding how this is most efficiently achieved, but we see no reason to believe that these methods cannot be fruitfully taught and trained in an educational setting, for instance by way of cleverly designed group discussions.²⁸ We have made some suggestions in that direction in previous work (Samuelsson & Lindström 2017), but there are many details to be filled in.

We want to end this article by briefly listing some of the additional potential gains – besides aiding the students to reach justified moral decisions – we see with focusing ethics education on the methods for moral reasoning: (1) Such a focus respects the fact that ethical questions are often controversial and complicated and that even a person with very well-grounded ethical views might be mistaken (no ethical theory or principle can, for the time being, be considered the key to correct moral judgements, and most ethical theories are difficult to apply in many cases); (2) a methods-based approach to ethics teaching furthers autonomy in the sense that each person has to critically think for themselves in order to reach justified moral opinions; (3) arguably, it also tends to further moral motivation: it is plausibly more likely that one is motivated to act in accordance with such moral judgements that one has reached through

one's own reasoning; (4) similarly, it may further the durability of one's most deliberate moral views; (5) it can be adapted for different target groups (e.g., for pupils of different ages) by focusing on different methods or aspects of methods;²⁹ and (6) the methods can be applied to all kinds of ethical problems, for instance to problems that the pupils or students encounter in their everyday lives or in their working lives.

As should be apparent from this list, practicing these methods may arguably have positive effects on other aspects of moral competence as well, besides the "moral reasoning"-aspect. Autonomy, motivation, and plausibly also the ability to detect moral problems, are likely to be furthered in an educational setting focusing on the methods for moral reasoning.³⁰ Accordingly, a person with a highly developed ability to practice the methods for moral reasoning is likely to score high on other aspects of moral competence as well. While these aspects are typically difficult to target directly in ethics education, teaching the methods for moral reasoning may be an efficient way to target them more indirectly.

Notes

¹ There are many examples of such student groups: teacher students, engineering students, police students, medicine students, research students etc. (see further Samuelsson & Lindström 2017).

² It is often assumed that a theoretical ethics education is an efficient means to build such competence. Peter Murphy, for instance, has noted that "the majority of people who teach applied ethics... do aim to have their students lead a more examined life. And they do think the examined life impacts both what one believes and how one acts." (Murphy 2014; see also Musschenga 2008). However, as such ethics education is typically designed, it is questionable to what extent this aim is fulfilled for those who study ethics as a part of their professional training (see Davis 2011; 2014; see also Warnick & Silverman 2011 and Lampe 1996). A more general worry would be that ethics education – irrespective of design – cannot contribute (or cannot contribute effectively) to raising ethical competence (see for instance the account in Assudani et al. 2011). However, in the debate about how to best design ethics education for the purpose of contributing to raising the students' ethical competence it is a shared assumption that ethics education can have some important impact in this respect. Since the goal of

ethics education that we suggest in this paper plausibly calls for new educational settings not properly tested before, it also seems quite premature to assume that such settings cannot contribute (or cannot contribute effectively) to raising ethical competence.

³ The expression ‘ethical competence’ can, of course, be used in different ways, for instance to refer to stages in moral development according to some theory on moral psychology (see, e.g., Teke 2019 for an overview; see also Lind 2016, Ch. 4, for an account of a test of moral competence along these lines). Having reached some such stage may be a prerequisite for being able to develop moral competence to a high degree, but it is not a guarantee for it. Autonomy often plays a crucial role in such accounts, as well as in various characterizations of ethical competence understood as an ability (see, e.g., Thomasma & Weisstub 2004). For our purposes, it may be good to notice that the autonomy of a decision is no guarantee of its justifiability.

⁴ It may for instance depend on which profession ethics is taught for, or the ages of the pupils to which it is taught.

⁵ Arguably, the decision, or the reasoning behind it, should be in some sense the agent’s own (i.e., it should be in some sense autonomous; see also footnote 3). Although we will not explicitly defend the following claim (as we take it to be outside the scope of this paper), we believe that this autonomy-requirement is covered by our theoretical characterization of ethical competence, in virtue of how we will unfold the relevant notion of justification.

⁶ This idea may for instance be recognized from the writings of Jürgen Habermas (see, e.g., Habermas 1990, pp. 79-82).

⁷ One might want to add “(iv) the motivation to act in accordance with it”, but remember here that we are interested in the aspect of ethical competence that can be referred to as “moral judgement skills”, or the ability to reason morally or make well-grounded moral judgements. The motivational component is a different aspect of ethical competence, found, for instance, in what Kulju et al. (2016) refer to as *character strength* and *willingness to do good*.

⁸ Michael Davies (2011; 2014) develops this picture in the case of professional ethics education and argues forcefully against such a theory-based approach. For examples of textbooks at least partly taking this approach, see, e.g., Haynes 1998; Murphy et al. 2005; Loewy & Springer Loewy 2005.

⁹ For our critique of the impracticality of this approach as a basis for teaching ethics, see Samuelsson & Lindström 2017.

¹⁰ On our understanding of the practical role of ethical competence, what should count as such competence might change over time. As moral philosophy evolves, agreement may emerge where there is none today. As Derek Parfit (1987, p. 454) famously claimed about non-religious ethics, such ethics “... is at a very early stage. We cannot yet predict whether, as in Mathematics, we will all reach agreement.” If in the future there is sufficient agreement on a certain (correct and sufficiently applicable) moral theory, *T*, then knowing that *T* is correct, understanding *T*, and being able to apply *T* to particular cases, may indeed fulfil the practical role of ethical competence.

¹¹ Similar problems as those brought up here for the theory-candidate can also be raised against other possible candidates for ethical competence. For instance, it may be suggested that to be ethically competent in relation to a certain profession *p* is to master the professional ethics of *p* or the code of conduct relating to *p* (assuming that there is one). While a person who masters the professional ethics or code of conduct of *p* may well reach the right decisions, she will not be able to justify those decisions to others simply by referring to the professional ethics or code of conduct of *p*. She will also need means to defend or justify this professional ethics or code of conduct. Michael Davis (2014) has suggested, as an alternative to a theory-based approach to teaching professional ethics, that one provides students with a check-list – a list of questions to test the moral plausibility of the choices one has in some situation where a decision has to be made: “Harm test – does this option do less harm than any alternative? Rights test – would this option violate anyone’s right, especially a human right? [...]”, and so on. While applying these tests might generate the right answer in some cases, there is still a need to justify these tests (and conflicts may arise between different tests, calling for methods to solve these conflicts).

¹² For an introduction to metaethics and these kinds of disagreement or controversy, see Miller 2003.

¹³ We are aware that there are other models that might be considered methods-based alternatives. Some of these identify methods to treat practical problems in a systematic manner in combination with an ethical theory of one’s own choice (Henriksen & Vetlesen 1998). Others are constructed as a synthesis of elements from several ethical theories (Velasquez et al. 2015; Davis’s check-list alternative described in footnote 11 may also be a case in point). However, none of these alternatives is restricted to methods that can be considered valid irrespective of which ethical theory (if any) that is correct.

¹⁴ The exposition of the methods that follows draws to some extent on that provided in Samuelsson & Rist 2016. See that paper for further comments about these methods and how one might succeed in one’s application of them.

¹⁵ It is of course a difficult and controversial question which information that is relevant to a certain decision, and by which criteria one should decide what is relevant, but we leave these difficulties aside here. Regardless of how one wants to answer these questions, it remains a valid point that one should try to find the information that is relevant to the decision one is about to make.

¹⁶ See Kagan 1989, pp. 283-291. See also Brandt 1998, pp. 58-64, for illustrations of the importance philosophers have assigned to vividness historically.

¹⁷ This is something I may never be able to fully grasp, but my understanding of it can be better or worse.

¹⁸ It is, however, important that the exercise of one's vividness is unbiased. See e.g. Glover 1990, p. 29.

¹⁹ Such inconsistencies in one's ethical views are often revealed when one starts to compare one's moral judgements in different areas.

²⁰ Consider the interaction between applied ethics and general normative ethics: an important way to measure the plausibility of a moral theory is to test its implications in particular cases. It may also be helpful to draw to mind John Rawls's reflective equilibrium (Rawls 1971, pp. 20-21; 48-51).

²¹ See also Timmons 2013, p. 14; the criterion he calls "internal support".

²² There might exist other practices that could also be correctly labelled "moral practices", such as one where what is to be considered right and wrong is entirely determined by consulting religious sources. However, here we are interested in the kind of moral practice in which one tries to justify one's actions, opinions and decisions to one another in a rational manner, providing arguments for one's views and trying to identify and defend moral reasons. This is the kind of practice we see in political and societal debates, as well as in discussions in applied ethics, both among philosophers and laymen. Even if participants in such debates commonly fail to successfully apply these methods, they at least outwardly aim to apply them.

²³ See, e.g., Timmons 2013, pp. 12-16. However, when evaluating whole moral theories, some additional criteria may be relevant (ibid).

²⁴ Consider for instance R. M. Hare's archangel (Hare 1981, pp. 44-46), Roderick Firth's ideal observer (Firth 1952) and Richard Brandt's cognitive psychotherapy (Brandt 1998, pp. 11-12).

²⁵ There are different uses of the terms 'naturalism' and 'cognitivism'. For the use employed here, see Parfit 2011, pp. 265-266.

²⁶ That should plausibly be the view of at least those who believe that there is one correct moral theory (which most of the times yields definite unique verdicts). Plausibly, if there is one correct moral theory, an ideal reasoner should be able to figure out which theory that is.

²⁷ That is to say, rather than focusing on moral theories and their application, we suggest that practical ethics education should focus on the methods for moral reasoning (see Samuelsson & Lindström 2017 for further details). Sometimes specialized ethics is taught with a theoretical goal besides the practical one. E.g., business ethics or engineering ethics may be taught with such a dual goal. In such cases it is of course suitable to address relevant theories within these fields, but to the extent that the goal is partly practical, we suggest that such a theory-based approach should be accompanied by a methods-based approach of the kind developed in this paper.

²⁸ See also Samuelsson & Rist 2016 for some possible gains of working with ethical problems in groups.

²⁹ While *information* and its importance may be easy to grasp, some aspects of *coherence* are considerably more complicated. Already small children can arguably start to work with information and vividness when beginning to develop their ethical competence, whereas high school pupils can begin to grasp the role and importance of universalizability. Students in universities and colleges – e.g. teacher students and engineering students – should be able to work thoroughly with all the aspects of the methods for moral reasoning.

³⁰ For instance, it seems reasonable that a person who scores high on vividness is generally more likely to detect moral aspects of situations than a person who scores low on this ability.

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