

Towards Mastery

■ Jean-Paul Munsch

Abstract

Ethical competence is the ability to ethically act masterfully in a given situation. This capability is determined by a (never-ending) learning process that leads towards mastery. This article outlines the learning process as a step-by-step approach that includes breakthroughs as well as so-called plateaus where we feel like not progressing at all.

The applied theories are part of the process itself and the occurring hypotheses are always linked to a reality. In this regard the ethical learning process leads into an ability of disillusionment and includes frequent loops of accepting and letting go. This ideally will lead to compassionate action characterized by authentic affection.

Ethical competence means practicing theory

The practice of ethics is a process of human development that leads across different levels and never ends. This article provides an overview of this revealing and rewarding learning process that could occasionally include frustration, boredom or setbacks.

Ethics as a philosophical discipline fascinated me during my studies, although the academic debate ultimately felt too abstract to me and I was missing the relevance to everyday life. However, my interest in ethics continued beyond my time at the university, because I more and more realized that ethics is a human development process. It is a vivid process that manifests itself in ever new questions and new answers that can be decided in a new, humane way in dialogue and in awareness of the uniqueness of each situation. With this article I therefore plead for compassionate ethics that cultivate humanity. I am not primarily concerned with the acquisition of know-

ledge, but rather with gaining orientation in order to be able to cope with any specific situation immediately. Ethical competence is the ability to ethically act masterfully in a given situation. This capability is determined by a (never-ending) learning process that leads towards mastery. The learning process is a step-by-step approach that includes breakthroughs as well as so-called plateaus where we feel like not progressing at all. It is based on models and inspired by theories while the process itself and the occurring hypotheses should always be subject to a reality check (e.g. through reflection). The ethical learning process thus fosters a disillusioning ability including frequent loops of accepting and letting go. This ideally will lead to compassionate action characterized by authentic affection.

Understanding an ethical situation theoretically

It is quite clear that this is a learning process that first of all requires an understanding of human action in an (ethical) situation. The Chilean cognitive scientist Francisco Varela assumes that understanding a situation is always accompanied by "tiny breakdowns" (Varela, p. 16). These breakdowns create, so to speak, the interspace in which learning is possible. Once I have come to understand this, I can begin to observe myself in a situation.

In the course of our lives we are constantly exposed to new situations. The human cognitive apparatus would be overwhelmed by the reassessment of each individual situation, and orientation would be lost (cf. Monty Python's Flying Circus). Therefore, interconnected elements are formed which act as models and, once they have proven their usefulness, are transformed into theories. The English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion writes: "Models are ephemeral and differ from theories in this respect; [and a] model has a valuable function provided always that it is recognized for what it is" (Bion, p. 80).



Our models and theories generate hypotheses. This is also the case in ethical situations when we say: "Don't do that!" or "That's okay!" or "This is more important to me than that!" Bion points out that hypotheses are statements in which certain elements are constantly connected (cf. Bion, p. 73). The hypotheses derived from models and theories in a given situation therefore coagulate into identities (cf. Varela, pp. 16f.). This increases the risk of confusing them with the reality of a situation. Thus, it is important to note that "I am not my hypothesis". (This may sound absurd in this phrasing, but identification, as we know, does not stop at our name to which we listen).

The path to mastery leads across stages

In his studies, the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg has shown that ethical skills evolve across stages. At each level the assessment of a situation obeys different values. The stages of development integrate the previous ones and move from the adoption of perspectives and rules to a more abstract universal ethics, and from there to universal compassion. Kohlberg's co-worker and student of Erik Erikson, Carol Gilligan, rightly pointed out the gender bias in Kohlberg's work and found out from her studies of developmental psychology that the path to ethical mastery is a maturing process that perceives opposing positions as complementary. Eventually the conflict between "integrity and care" (Gilligan, p. 120) can be integrated and thus is resolved.

Models that provide preliminary guidance

Moral development and the handling of ethical situations is neither a path of endless climaxes nor an ambitious goal achievement undertaking. To experience the above-mentioned immediacy of a situation requires devotion. The associated learning process also follows rather unpleasant learning steps, which can be accompanied by emotional rollercoaster and frustration (cf. Dreyfus &

Dreyfus). Devotion does not exhaust itself in a single act, but brings with it the fact that in the model of gradual development plateaus are reached and explored on which apparently "nothing happens". Some may find this boring. But: "Actually, the roots of boredom are to be found in the obsessive search for novelty" (Leonard, p. 69). Much rather, the point is to cultivate the beginner's spirit of Zen and the joy of regular practice in the imperfect everyday life. - Also the joy of the newly "climbed" plateau is put into perspective, because we realize that the new plateau is actually (just) a threshold: We temporarily fall below the previously acquired level of achievement and the corresponding consciousness. If this happens, it is important and helpful not to scourge ourselves based on the consciousness of previous plateaus for "having made a mistake" again, but compassionately take new attempts until we succeed.

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Creating favorable development structures

Being able to cope with a situation immediately should not be confused with "behavior which is spontaneously demonstrated out of personal interest" (Deci & Ryan, p. 225 [translated by the author]), because the motivation is very different. This follows the stages of development outlined above. Following rules is motivated at a particular stage of development by external rewards and threats

of punishment. This brings along emotional reassurance. Nevertheless, situations will arise which are accompanied by disappointment, because "each rule works on some occasions and fails on others" (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, p. 234). And this is a frustrating process, which, if we continue the learning process, is overcome by no longer identifying with the conscious planning of a situation, but by rather understanding oneself as connected to the situation and continuously refining one's intuition (cf. Dreyfus & Dreyfus, p. 247).

Thus, in positions of responsibility it is a matter of creating favorable development conditions through structures and processes, and combining forms of "extrinsic motivation with the highest degree of self-determination" (Deci & Ryan, p. 228) so that the individual integration process can succeed. And this is where attention comes back into play, which "supports the learner's autonomy efforts" (Deci & Ryan, p. 236).

It is a reciprocal process of social involvement in obstructive or supportive structures as well as the creation of structures that promote increasing degrees of freedom and support ethical competence as a result of reflective practice. The Swiss ethicist Christof Arn provides concrete suggestions on how ethics can influence organizational structures (cf. Arn).

Ethical action is authentic action

As we have mentioned, the path to mastery of ethical skills leads through breakthroughs and frustrations across plateaus in a never-ending learning process. This process is always based on models and theories that can be deepened and then let go. The constant accepting and letting go leads to increasing disillusionment and merges into compassionate action while inner freedom is the guiding principle for any ethical decision and action. For the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, following ethical principles was a form of inauthenticity. Therefore,

for him, ethical situations are about “creation out of freedom”, directly, authentically. He writes: “There are [...] no mechanical means to judgement.” The content of a situation that requires an ethical decision “is always concrete and therefore unpredictable; there is always invention involved. What counts is to know whether the invention that is applied is applied in the name of freedom” (Sartre, p. 60 — translated by the author). And if this does not succeed, it is a matter of continuous practice, even if it seems to be impossible. ■

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