Coherentism as a Foundation for Ethical Dialog and Evaluation in School
– value communication, assessment and mediation

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Abstract

In this paper, we are mainly concerned with coherentism as an approach to ethical dialog in school. We have two different but connected aims with the paper. The first aim is to say something about general philosophical questions relating to coherentism as a theory in metaethics, and especially in relation to value education; the second aim is to explore some possible implications of coherentism as a method in studying the enterprise of discussing ethical issues and questions with children as well as the study of the actual ethical discussion in school. Furthermore, we evaluate the connection between a coherentistic approach to justification and the methodological parts of a Philosophy with Children, or Community of Inquiry, approach to ethics in school. Related to this, we scrutinize what implications this has for evaluating ethical learning within Philosophy with Children, or Community of Inquiry, as well as implications for evaluation of the Philosophy with Children, or Community of Inquiry, approaches as methods for dealing with ethical matters in school.

Introduction

Ethics is of central interest to educational systems around the world. In this paper we are concerned with a theory of justification, called coherentism, as an approach to ethical dialog in school. First, we discuss some general philosophical questions relating to coherentism as a theory in metaethics, and especially in relation to value education. Thereafter, we explore some possible implications of coherentism as a method in studying the enterprise of discussing ethical issues and questions with children as well as the study of the actual ethical discussion in school. Furthermore, we evaluate the connection between a coherentistic approach to justification and the methodological parts
COHERENTISM AS A FOUNDATION FOR ETHICAL DIALOG AND EVALUATION

of a Philosophy with Children (PWC) or Community of Inquiry (COI) approach to ethics in school, and hence what implications this has for evaluating ethical learning within PWC or COI as well as implications for evaluation of PWC or COI as a method of dealing with ethical matters in school.

Justification

Coherentism is a theory in the philosophical field of inquiry concerning justification of beliefs and statements, a subdomain of epistemology (Goodman, 1965; Tersman, 1993). The main rivalizing theory is called foundationalism (Greco, 2002), and it has been the historically dominant position (BonJour, 1978), while coherentism is a rather new invention (Goodman, 1965; Sosa, 1980). What, then, is justification? And what is its relevance for school as well as other contexts? Justification of some specific belief is one (or many) reason(s) to uphold the belief. For example, we might believe, similarly to a professor of economics, that the wages being above market clearing rate can cause unemployment. There are some differences in the two cases, though, being that the professor of economics is more justified in her belief than we are. She can probably give a lot of arguments for believing what she does. These arguments, then, justify her belief (to a greater degree than we are justified by the few arguments we can present, if any). But why is justification interesting for school? One part of the answer will have to be postponed to the very end of this paper, since the role of justification in regard to ethical dialog in school is at the very core of the paper. But initially, one can at least say this; justification is, on most accounts, central to knowledge, in the very strong sense

1 See Robert Nozick (1981) for a discussion of an account of knowledge not incorporating justification. Nozick instead takes the property of tracking the truth as filling the place that justification normally does in the analysis of knowledge.
that justification is part of the definition of knowledge (Dancy, 1985; Gettier, 1963; Grayling, 1995; Nozick, 1981; Sturgeon, Martin, & Grayling, 1995). Knowledge, of course, is vital to school, and hence, justification is.

Foundationalism holds that beliefs differ in kinds, and can be distinguished in two classes: foundational beliefs and non-foundational beliefs (Levin, 2005; Moser, 2002). Non-foundational beliefs, if justified at all, are justified by relation to foundational beliefs (or by relation to other non-foundational beliefs, which are in turn justified by foundational beliefs, i.e. transitively justified). Foundationalists differ from each other in how they consider foundational beliefs in relation to if, and in that case how, they are (or need to be) justified. This leads to different version of foundationalism (Fumerton, 2002). One position is that foundational beliefs do not need justification at all, or at least that there is one foundational belief that needs no other justification than that it is not inconsistent (Goldman & Pust, 1998). Another is that foundational beliefs are self-justifying in some sense (L. Pust, 2000). A third position on the subject matter is to claim that foundational beliefs are directly justified by reason or intuition (Bealer, 1996, 1999; Goldman & Pust, 1998; Kornblith, 1998; J. Pust, 2000; L. Pust, 2000). All of these theories have theoretical problems that need to be solved. Common to them all, which is the feature that interests us here, is the basic idea that some beliefs (namely the foundational beliefs) necessarily stand in a justification-relation to a certain class of other beliefs (namely the non-foundational ones) in only one direction. That is, the foundational justifies the non-foundational, but not vice versa. We can imagine the belief system as a tower or pyramid, where the base supports the top, but not the opposite (Sosa, 1980; Sosa, Kim, Fantl, & McGrath, 2008).
Coherentists, in contrast to what has been discussed above, deny the distinction between non-foundational and foundational beliefs or judgments (Klein, 2003; Lemos, 2002; Tersman, 1993). A coherentist instead claims that every belief in a belief system needs, and indeed can acquire, justification from other beliefs within that system. Hence, one might speak of such a coherentistic system of beliefs as a web of belief, where there might be more or less central beliefs, but where the justification relation (possibly) holds both ways between any two statements (Audi, 2002). In contrast with the metaphor of comparing foundationalism with a pyramid, one could analogously compare coherentism with a raft (Sosa, 1980).

At least some variants of coherentism include the idea that a system of beliefs can cohere in different degrees; likewise, a specific belief can possibly cohere in different degrees to a specific set of other beliefs. Moreover, a certain belief is more justified (for a certain person) the more it coheres with his or hers system of beliefs. Some has also suggested that we (ought to) strive towards getting to a more coherent system, a system were every belief coheres (perfectly) with the rest of the system, a balanced state called reflective equilibrium (Daniels, 1979; Rawls, 1999). The possibility of defining or at least specifying this relation of coherence, is therefore of great importance. Many have attempted to accomplish this, but there are controversies regarding which account is correct (Davidson, 1989).

**Justification in Ethics**

While coherentism generally is taken to be a theory about the justification of

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2 Maybe given that the system has reached some certain level or standard, or such that it is more justified given the same amount of coherence, the higher status the system has, due to it e. g. being bigger and more coherent
beliefs, metaethical coherentism is a theory regarding justification of moral judgements (Bergström, 2004). Hence, the theory is not strictly epistemological, but rather within the field of metaethical epistemology, or value epistemology. Metaethics is the study of second-order ethical questions; questions about the (first-order) ethical questions belonging to normative ethics – questions such as “Is it always forbidden to murder?”, “Can one own intellectual material?”, “Is copyright a moral right, and, if so, can it ever be violated?”, “Is abortion wrong?”, “Ought I care about others health and well-being?” and so on (Singer, 1993, 1994; Tännsjö, 1998, 2000). The metaethical questions are such questions as “Does it exists moral facts?”, “What does ‘wrong’ mean in ethics?”, “What is value?”, “What is the semantic function of moral judgements?” and “Can we have moral knowledge, and if so, what is justification in ethics?”. These are questions about the field of normative ethics (Miller, 2003). Metaethical coherentism is concerned with the second half of the last of these questions. Metaethical coherentism holds, analogously to coherentism as a general epistemological theory, that moral judgements are justified if they cohere with the agent’s web of judgements, or, similarly, that one is justified in believing in a moral proposition just in case it coheres with ones other beliefs (Lemos, 2002), depending on how one views what moral statements actually is, or what semantic function moral statements have.

**Ethics in School**

In Sweden, one of the main purposes of the educational system is to mediate a value foundation (called the Fundamental values of the school, and in Swedish ‘värdegrunden’) based on Christian tradition and western humanism to the pupils.
centre Lpo 94, 1994). Let us suppose now that you have a foundationalist approach to ethics in school, as many educators and others seem to have had historically.³ Let us perform a thought experiment, consisting in a fictional story about a possible situation occurring in a typical school, given that this school belongs to an educational system which shares the features of having a curriculum including a value foundation with the Swedish one. Let us suppose that some pupil, called the first pupil, in our imagined class expresses the judgement that some of his classmates, called the second pupil, have a lower value than him, due to e.g. the second pupil having been born in another country than the first pupil. In this case, it seems, the first pupil does not believe in equality in value between different people, independent of origin. This seemingly anti-egalitarian judgement deeply conflicts with the basic democratic judgement that cultural origin or nationality is unimportant to the value one has, which is included in the value foundation of the educational system in question. What is the role of the teacher in this situation? Or, rather, what ought the teacher do? According to the imagined curriculum, the teacher ought to mediate to the first pupil the values supported by the educational system. But how shall this goal be reached?

According to a foundationalist, we are in the above example facing a conflict between foundational values, or so we can suppose (i.e. by supposing that the anti-egalitarian judgements expressed by the first pupil is a foundational value judgement). In the case we then have at hand, there is nothing obvious to do to resolve this conflict, because the foundational values cannot be justified in some obvious way in this position. It seems the intuitions of the boy is in conflict with those of the teacher. Therefore, there

³ And this idea seems to correspond well with the idea of a value foundation or fundament
is a conflict between what the teacher ought to do and what the teacher in fact can do.\textsuperscript{4}

A coherentist, in contrast to the foundationalist, could point out that the two different judgements in our hypothetic example gain different amount of justification from other judgements possibly upheld by both sides, and thereby (ideally) find consensus, and thereby end the conflict. Hopefully, by dialog, the first pupil can come to realise that the belief in the different values of the two classmates does not cohere as well with the value system he or she actually upheld as does the idea of equality and the irrelevance of nationality regarding questions of value, or, if this is not the case, that the value system upheld by the teacher is more coherent than his or hers own. This would then be reasons for the first pupil to change position, and dispense with the original judgement.

The ability to (at least theoretically and given appropriate time) resolve ethical disputes and conflicts speak in favour of coherentism, it seems. As we noted above, coherentism has its theoretical problems as well. One of these is how to understand the justification-relation. What does it mean for a coherentist that two beliefs justify each other? In other words: what is coherence? In an ongoing project, we investigate the possibility to define coherence in a way that makes it easy to empirically measure the level of justification (for a certain statement given at a specific time by some individual).

**Coherentism and Philosophy with Children**

We now, finally, intend to investigate what implications our reasoning might have for the PWC and COI community. First of all, therefore, we will briefly state some main

\textsuperscript{4} And according to the Kantian principle that ought implies can, it seems as if this shows that if you are a foundationalist, you must conclude that it cannot be the goal for the teacher to mediate these values, hence the foundationalist seems forced to believe that the idea behind the value foundation is misguided. This speaks in disfavour of foundationalism.
aspects of the PWC and COI approach. First of all, the dialog is of central value (Börresen & Malmhester, 2004). A dialog is necessarily goes at least two ways, a dialog stands in opposition to a monolog, where the communication goes only one way. In our above discussion about how a teacher could handle an ethical conflict based on a coherentistic view on justification, the dialog with the pupil was central. Also, the dialog has a form which resembles the form of the reflective equilibrium, with the difference that the dialog is eternal (in relation to persons, it takes place outside of people) while the process of reaching coherence and equilibrium within ones system of belief is an internal process (which can of course be driven by factors external from a person). The process of reaching coherence can be seen as an inner dialog, a process where one deliberates back and forth, modifying ones beliefs and then checking them against each other again, much like how the process of a dialog can take form in a PWC or COI community could take form. Second, the PWC and COI approaches are based on reasons, and the idea that everything can be questioned and studied, that everything can be evaluated and put to the test of checking whether we actually have reasons for accepting it. This also corresponds well with the basic assumptions made by coherentists.

Regarding methods for ethical discussion in relation to a coherentistic approach, it seems the “philosophy with children” (PWC) or “Community of Inquiry” (COI) approaches will seem reasonable and fitting, since there seems to be harmony between the methods of PWC and COI on the one hand (Lipman, 2003), and the coherentist view of justification. Since a coherentist approach has advantages, the PWC and COI approaches have these advantages as well.

Finally, it seems that coherentism understood this way has positive implications
on evaluation and assessment, first of all within the PWC, but also as for evaluation of PWC. It has positive implications for evaluation within PWC since if we can easily measure level of justification, then we have at least one part of the assessment of knowledge at hands. Moreover, it can be argued that justification is even more important than truth in PWC, since (whether there actually is truth to be found in all philosophical investigations or not) focus is being put on the abilities to give arguments and critically evaluate, which seems tightly connected to justification, rather than on the students’ abilities of expressing correct statements (bearing a certain relation to true propositions) in the sense of remembering memorized information. If this is correct, justification is amongst the most important qualities to measure, in order to evaluate within the PWC, and if this is rather easily accomplished with some form of coherentism, then it is a benefit for evaluation within the PWC. Moreover, this in turn leads to benefits for evaluating PWC, i.e. evaluation and assessment of PWC. At least in as much as justification is valued.
References


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