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Distance, dialogue and reflection: Interpersonal reflective equilibrium as method for professional ethics education

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The method of reflective equilibrium (RE) is well known within the domain of moral philosophy, but hardly discussed as a method in professional ethics education. We argue that an interpersonal version of RE is very promising for professional ethics education. We offer several arguments to support this claim. The first group of arguments focus on a changed practice that is more team-oriented, inter-professional and aims at shared decision-making with patients and clients. The second group of arguments relate to the core aim of professional ethics education, namely to stimulate critical moral reflection. This central aim is a core professional moral competence that entails both a dialogical approach to practice and one's own moral beliefs as well as a more detached viewpoint on practice, reflection on types of cases and one's attitude as a professional in practice.

Keywords: professional ethics, education, critical reflection

1. Introduction

A Dutch family guardian supports a single mother of Turkish origin and her three children. The oldest child has already been put in foster care because of her bad relationship with her mother. Now, the mother no longer wants to cooperate with the guardian, because she fears that her other two children will also be 'taken from her'. The youngest two often miss school and have an untidy appearance.

Recently the mother has found a new partner, the neighbour, and she gets pregnant from him. She wants to make a fresh start and stop all interferences of youth care. The

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*guardian notices that the children are stoical about the new situation; they react indifferently and don't communicate with their mother. The guardian faces a request to renew the foster care programme for the oldest child and is worried about the two other children: would they also be better off in foster care? Mother is not willing to cooperate.*¹

This case is typical for the issues youth care professionals are confronted with (in the Netherlands); they deal with a family and continuously face new types of questions. Often, such issues have a moral dimension. Variants of the basic ethical question 'What should I do in this situation to do good to others?' arise. The situation may be experienced as a dilemma as there are competing views on what would be the best thing to do. There are no handbooks available which tell professionals what to do in such situations. Nevertheless, they are fully responsible. What is in the best interest of these children and the mother cannot be objectively determined, it requires an interpretation of (moral) values and the norms involved and moral judgement.

In many client-oriented professions, such as health care, law or coaching, professionals will face similar situations where deciding what 'the best option' will be requires critical and methodical reflection and wise judgement. When new professionals enter the domain for which they were trained, they are expected to be ready for moral issues like these. They ought to have the moral competence to deal with them responsibly.

The case above illustrates that society has high expectations of its professionals. Good professionals are not only technically skilled; they also have moral sensitivity, a competence for moral reasoning, moral motivation and moral character (Rest & Narvaez, 1995). They endorse profession inherent ideals like health, safety and justice; accept moral responsibilities and develop virtuous attitudes that involve, for example, empathy or courage (Freidson, 2001; Kole, 2011; Martin, 2000).² Professional ethics education is the appointed discipline to help students become *such good professionals*.³ Yet, such education is confronted with several problems, which make it a highly ambitious project.

Firstly, in the literature there is no consensus about the aim of professional ethics education (Camenisch, 1986; Callahan & Bok, 1980; Muskavitch, 2005). The aims mentioned are also difficult to achieve within the context of a formal curriculum and its time constraints (Camenisch, 1986; Hafferty & Franks, 1994; Mattick & Bligh, 2006).

Secondly, students entering the classrooms of professional ethics teaching already have acquired a sense of what is right and wrong in their upbringing. Teaching these students ethical theory and moral principles runs the risk of cutting them off from their own moral background (Cowley, 2005; Molewijk, 2008). Besides, students tend to consider ethical theories as mere 'tools' or 'philosophical jargon' to solve issues. The first alienates students from their moral education, which may function as a valuable source for moral reflection while the second implies mis-evaluation of the role of ethical-theoretical insights. Some authors therefore propose to ban ethical theory and/or abstract principles from professional ethics education (Lawlor, 2007; Benatar, 2007; Lawlor, 2008). After all, the idea

of such education is at least to empower students in their moral reasoning and judgement, not to undermine or block it.

Thirdly, professional practice is full of tacit moral knowledge, which is a valuable source of moral wisdom (van der Zande, Baart, & Vosman, 2013). Yet, this moral knowledge is seldom made fruitful to more formal ethical teaching in the classroom.

Fourthly, many students think that ethics is subjective, that moral judgements are only relatively true or justified ('That's just what you think', 'That depends on the culture you are living in') (Momeyer, 1995; Satris, 1986; Talbot, 2012). From the fact that it is hard to arrive at consensus about difficult moral issues, students easily conclude that it is impossible to justify moral opinions at all. Thus, in our case, it would, according to many students, depend on the individual subjective moral preferences of the family guard as to what is the right thing to do. At the same time, it belongs to the essentials of morally responsible professionalism that professionals are able to justify their acts and attitudes towards others with relevant and convincing reasons.

The claim we argue for in this article is that use of the method of reflective equilibrium (RE) as a professional ethics education tool may help to meet these problems, especially if we use an *interpersonal* variant of this method. This claim is inspired, at least partially, by a remark that Van der Burg & Van Willigenburg (1998b) made in their comprehensive volume on RE. In their introduction, they state:

Reflective equilibrium thus, need not only be a method for philosophers—it may even be more attractive and effective for the general public. *It may also be a method for moral education and, in connection with this, a model for moral development.* The student can be confronted with concrete moral problems and be asked to solve them, starting with her moral intuitions, reflection on them, trying to find principles that do justice to them, and so on. In our experience, this basic structure proves to be very useful in teaching ethics to student in the various biomedical departments. (Van der Burg & Van Willigenburg 1998a, p. 16; emphasis added)

The remark of Van der Burg & Van Willigenburg deserves further elaboration. Although we do not assume that the method of RE offers a panacea for all problems in professional ethics education, we think that it has several promising characteristics which make it a very useful tool to cope, at least to some extent, with the problems mentioned here. We will argue that this method is able to support future professionals in acquiring the moral competence necessary to become good professionals, especially if the method is considered as a method for interpersonal moral reflection and deliberation.

In the next section, we will first present the method of RE as a model of *interpersonal* moral reasoning and moral justification and then discuss how this model combines several important aspects of professional ethical competence, namely the ability to take reflective distance without becoming completely detached from the moral experiences of one's own and one's collective professional practice. These

are, we will argue, necessary conditions for professional ethical competence that fit with the main goal of ethics education, which is, as we propose, to stimulate the competence of critical moral reflection. Then, we address some objections to the method of RE in order to arrive at the conclusion that the method in its interpersonal variant, remains attractive for professional ethics education. We illustrate our argument in reference to the case of the family guard and our own experiences in using the method in professional ethics education.

2. Interpersonal reflective equilibrium

Let us start with a description of what the method of RE amounts to. In their volume on the theory and method of RE, Van der Burg and Van Willigenburg state that '(t)he basic idea behind reflective equilibrium is that, in developing and justifying moral theories and in seeking answers to practical moral problems, we bring to bear—in some ordered way—all kinds of moral and non-moral beliefs and theories' (1998a, p. 1). John Rawls has been known for (re)introducing the method in the philosophical arena, sketching it as a reflective tool to help people develop moral theory, or to arrive at justified moral judgements in particular situations. Norman Daniels (1996) and Michael DePaul (1993) have developed the method further. Finally, Spiecker and Steutel were the first to introduce the method in the field of philosophy of education. They focused on the use of the method for the development of an ethical conception of children's sexual rights (Spiecker & Steutel, 2001).⁴

We propose to consider RE as a reflective deliberation method to justify moral judgements with respect to specific practical cases,⁵ like the case of our family guardian. This approach is in line with the current use of RE in applied ethics education. Less in line with current practical use is our emphasis on the interpersonal use of the method but we will come to that after the introduction of the method in its common use.

The method as a reflective deliberation tool has at least three important characteristics. Firstly, it allows for a diversity of both moral and non-moral 'ingredients' in the process of moral reasoning and justification. Secondly, it assumes that these 'ingredients' are all revisable during the process. Thirdly, it assumes that a moral judgement concerning a case will be justified if it is part of the strongest possible coherence of a given set of diverse ingredients. We discuss these characteristics one by one.

Firstly, the method assumes that a broad range of considerations can be taken into account in moral deliberation. Against crude deductive ('top down') views of moral reasoning in which general moral ethical principles are directly 'applied' to cases (cf. Nichols, 2012, p. 327), RE allows for a variety of ingredients in the process of moral deliberation: They may be both moral and non-moral and their justificatory status (the degree to which they are justified) may differ. In this respect, Rawls implicitly made a distinction between a narrow and a wide version of the

method (Daniels, 2013; Rawls, 1971). In the narrow version, the deliberation process (according to the method) involves just moral principles and considered judgements concerning the matter at hand. Thus, in case of the family guardian we may have a considered judgement that it is in the oldest child's interest to renew her foster care program. Relevant general principles that may be introduced are for example the principle of non-maleficence and the respect for autonomy (of both the oldest child and her mother).

The more components that are involved in the deliberation process, however, the *wider* the method or RE will be (Daniels, 1979; Nichols, 2012). Diverse considerations may enter the reflection process. Rawls himself mentions 'background theories' (social, psychological, philosophical theories). In our case, these amount to, for example, pedagogical theories about sufficient and optimal parenthood. Other relevant considerations that may be introduced are morally relevant *facts* and data about the case that may be important to evaluate what is in the oldest child's interest, for example reports about her development and well-being during her stay with her foster parents (cf. Arras, 2007, p. 51). 'Empirically gathered moral views of relevant stakeholders' (see Van der Burg & Van Willigenburg, 1998a, pp. 13–15) may be introduced as well. A *conceptual analysis* of the meaning of 'the best interest of a child'—a value-laden term often simply taken for granted in youth care—may be relevant in the reasoning process. Not only principles but also *ideals* of optimal youth care may be brought to the fore. The options for introducing other 'ingredients' into the deliberation process are, according to the method of (wide) RE, not endless but they are definitely wider than crude moral reasoning views usually assume.

Secondly, the method assumes that no element introduced in the process of moral deliberation is sacrosanct and non-revisable. Thus, one's initial considered judgements (also regularly considered as 'intuitions') may not survive further scrutiny in the light of other factors that are introduced, such as general principles, morally relevant facts and background theories. Yet, it may also be the case that a principle has to be adjusted in the light of one's considered judgements. Moral deliberation thus becomes a dynamic dialectical interplay of diverse factors.

Thirdly, the method of RE is a coherentist approach towards moral reasoning and justification. Endorsing the method, one seeks the strongest possible coherence between the diverse ingredients in one's reflection process. To arrive at such coherence could require revision of one's initial judgements. Or, a general principle that seemed *prima facie* relevant appears to need further refining in order to arrive at the strongest possible coherence in one's set of considerations. This coherence is portrayed as a (provisional) balance or equilibrium. 'We thus zip back and forth, nipping an intuitive judgement here, tucking a principle there, building up or reformulating a theory in the background, until all the disparate elements of our moral assessments are brought into a more or less steady state of harmonious equilibrium' (Arras, 2007, p. 47). The best moral judgement concerning the case at hand will be the one that coheres optimally with other considerations put forward after a process of revising, refining and balancing.

Interestingly, philosophers who wrote about RE have mainly presented the method as a reflective tool that is supposed to be used by individual moral inquirers (cf. Strong, 2010, p. 127). Van der Burg and Van Willigenburg, however, point out:

Usually, reflective equilibrium is merely a method for *intrapersonal* argument. It may, nevertheless, be used as a model for *interpersonal* argumentation, as a real-life framework for structuring discussions. For example, we could structure discussion in ethics committees along the lines of a reflective equilibrium process. (1998a, p. 15–6; emphasis added)

Despite this open suggestion, professional ethics education has, as far as we know, not embraced the method of RE explicitly, nor has anybody explained the relevance of the *interpersonal* use of RE methods in professional ethics education contexts.⁶ This article is an attempt to fill this omission.

For that purpose we will specify the method to make it more suitable for professional-ethics education. Firstly, we stress the importance of an additional ‘ingredient’ to the process of wide RE: the (empirically gathered) moral views of professionals embedded in professional practice. Secondly, we stress the interpersonal use of RE, which makes the method especially useful in professional ethical contexts.

2.1 Professionals and reflective equilibrium

So far, only a few authors have explicitly engaged professionals or professional practice in RE methods. Van Thiel and Van Delden state that ‘according to the current understanding of RE, it offers no place for considered moral judgements of other agents than the thinker’ (van Thiel & van Delden, 2010, p. 187). They find it important to involve professional ethical insights and incorporate these in the deliberation process, because the experiences of professionals offer ‘expert-level knowledge and judgement in the fundamental pragmatics of life’ (p. 187). Expert knowledge will also point at difficulties and problems that certain moral issues will pose in practice. Another reason to involve professional experiences is to increase professional support for the results of moral deliberation (Van Delden & Van Thiel, 1998, p. 254). Based on this, they developed the Normative-Empirical Reflective Equilibrium model (van Thiel & van Delden, 2010). Interestingly, they continue to assume that the deliberation process is an intrapersonal activity. Others, like de Vries and van Leeuwen (2010) also present a specific type of RE, namely a *Network Model with Third Person Moral Experiences that is based on moral experiences from professionals in practice*. Rutgers and Heeger (2005) point out that the method of RE perfectly fits with professional practice, because it allows for the ‘clinical eye’ of practitioners. They are the first to suggest that not an expert ethicist, but practitioners should be able to use the method themselves when confronted with a moral dilemma.

2.2 *Interpersonal reflective equilibrium in professional-ethical contexts*

Besides Van der Burg and Van Willigenburg, only few examples can be found in the literature that suggests involving an *explicit interpersonal* perspective in the moral deliberation process (Daniels, 1996; Sadurski, 1990; Walker, 1998). Some, like Benjamin (2003) argue that we need to seek both personal and interpersonal coherence. Van den Beld points out that Daniels has been reflecting on the possibility of interpersonal deliberation, in search for agreement amongst persons (overlapping consensus) (van den Beld, 1998, p. 83), yet he rejects the possibility himself because it disregards fundamental differences of persons too easily (for example their religious beliefs): ‘I cannot see how it is a collective method without being a method of individual inquiry in the first place’ (p. 78).

Margaret Urban Walker argues that methods of equilibrium need to involve *shared moral understandings*, i.e. we need to learn to understand the moral relevance of certain considerations of others, to share moral views of others, understand their logic and the value they attach to considerations. Equilibrium is learning ‘a logic of interpersonal acknowledgement in moral terms’ (Walker, 1998, pp. 71–72).

Combining attempts to incorporate professional insights into the process of moral deliberation (along RE lines) with those that focus on interpersonal versions of RE may result in a version of RE that is specifically suitable to the context of professional ethics education.

There are several reasons to favour an *interpersonal* version of RE in the context of professional ethics education.

Firstly, an interpersonal approach suits the multidisciplinary and team-based context in which professionals nowadays often operate. Thus, the youth care professional in our case is not the only professional involved. Often schoolteachers, social workers, or social services are also involved as the problems within families can be quite complex: imagine that the mother has debts, the children are in treatment for behavioural or psychological issues, the school is involved when children do not do well academically, the police are involved if the children get into trouble, etc. The guardian will also have colleagues who face similar cases in other families. When confronted with a dilemma, current practice often requires cooperation between professionals. If possible they come up with shared decisions. When responsibilities for care are shared, it would be strange not to have shared deliberation on moral issues as well.

Secondly, interpersonal moral deliberations may filter inaccurate personal and subjective considerations. The guardian in our case tries to establish what is in the best interest of the children involved. Would they be better put into foster care, or is it better to support them at home? The interest of a child is a normative concept that is not easily determined; in practice, opposite parties in youth care often claim to know what is in the best interest of a child. When more people are involved in a process of moral deliberation, one’s own biases and interpretations of concepts will be cleared more easily.

Thirdly, professionals share general standards and codes that regulate the quality of their services to clients and patients. These standards offer collective professional guidelines that give individual professionals, irrespective of their personal background and opinions, a common starting point to handle moral matters in daily practice. Yet it is often complex to interpret these general standards appropriately in the specific circumstances of the case at hand. Collegial advice and assistance is then welcome and can help the individual professional to take his responsibility.

Fourthly, more and more patients and clients are also involved in decision-making. The guardian does not need to assume facts and considerations from the perspective of the children and the mother if he engages in a conversation with them about their situation. An interpersonal method of RE that is *dialogical in nature* opens this possibility and therefore, seems promising for professional practice.

Joint deliberation already occurs quite frequently in professional contexts. Moral case deliberation offers a variety of methods that are used by teams or in joint sessions (Steinkamp & Gordijn, 2003). When professionals collectively discuss a case, the scope of considerations is easily widened; reflection among the participants is stimulated simply by their different viewpoints. RE has so far mainly been a philosophical method, used by single ethicists. It has hardly been used in collective sessions. An interpersonal version of the method of RE promises to better accommodate the requirements of current professional practice than other (individual) methods do.

After this introduction of a specified interpersonal version of RE we need to argue why teaching students to work with this method is a suitable way of improving their professional ethical competence.

3. Critical moral reflection: distance and dialogue

A key point to our argument is that professional ethics education should first and foremost focus on strengthening students' capacity for *critical moral reflection*. Within the constraints of the curricula in which students usually receive their professional ethics education, focusing on this aspect of professional ethical competence is the best choice and learning to use the method of RE helps students to cultivate this capacity.

Critical (moral) reflection involves the capacity to do two things at the same time, namely to learn to *take reflective distance without becoming too detached* from the moral experiences of one's own and those of the collective professional practice.

The youth guardian in our case is involved in the family, meets them on a regular basis and has certain responsibilities towards the children and their mother. Regular contact often leads to a more intimate view in the family life; a view that helps to observe what kind of help is needed. Yet, too close involvement may also lead to blind spots or biases. In some cases, it can help to take a step back to

determine what is best for this family or child. The ability to take reflective distance is strongly related to the competence of *critical moral reflection* (Kole, 2011).

The notion of critical reflection and reflective professionalism is also found in theories on professionalism (Carr, 2000; Martin, 2000; Schön, 1983) and is a core aim in professional ethics education. We present two aspects of critical moral reflection. We label them, somewhat metaphorically, with dialogue and distance.

3.1 Dialogue with practice

Being involved with something is like being in dialogue with it. What we label as ‘dialogue’ and consider an essential part of critical moral reflection, refers to several ways of close involvement with practice and persons.

First, it involves empathy. Being empathic is considered a quality of a good professional in the field of health care (Barnbaum, 2001; Gillam, Delany, Gullemin, & Warmington, 2013; Maxwell & Racine, 2010), but is also found in law (Gallacher, *forthcoming*), and youth care (Crandall & Marion, 2009). Being empathic is a sign that professionals are *moved* and have *concerns* for persons in the situation at hand—that they are sensitive to specific aspects related to the well-being of and respect for people. Losing that sensitivity, no longer being affected by what and whom one encounters in one’s profession, is therefore a vice. For example, if a youth worker feels no ambivalence when taking a child into custody, or a nurse feels no reluctance isolating patients in their bedroom, an important moral awareness is considered to be lost (Maxwell, 2008).

Another way to be in dialogue with practice is to account for the moral experiences of professionals in one’s reflection. Professionals are often stakeholder in moral dilemmas. It is relevant to stay close to the moral ambivalence and perplexity that they experience in such situations. Some authors also point out that it is important to stay close to ethical insights and intuitions of experienced professionals (practical wisdom and gut feelings) (Stolper, Legemaate, & Dinant, 2010). They might help to pinpoint the relevant considerations of a situation more easily.

Thirdly, being in dialogue with practice means that one is sensitive to developments in practice. For example, moral responsibilities of professionals can change in time (van den Hoven & Verweij, 2013). New issues and emerging debates in professional practice may indicate such changes that can have large moral implications for professionals. For example, in the Netherlands, the guardian in our case could be ‘accused’ of so called ‘professional timidity’ if he hesitated too long to decide what would be best for this family. In the Netherlands, this new notion of professional timidity has become popular to point out the moral obligation of youth workers to act timely and efficiently. The notion was unknown a decade ago but now strongly influences the moral expectations that public and policy have of professional youth workers. Being in dialogue with professional practice means that one is aware of such new developments and takes account of them in one’s critical moral reflection.

To sum up: in the context of professional ethics, critical moral reflection implies, in our view, close involvement with professional practice and persons therein, in a least three different ways. We collect them, somewhat tentatively, under the heading of ‘being in dialogue’ with one’s practice. We consider such a practice-oriented approach essential to critical moral reflection of professionals. As we shall see later on, interpersonal RE enables students and professionals to get into dialogue in the ways specified above.

3.2 *Distance*

Being able to take distance is a second component of critical moral reflection. A morally competent professional is able to distinguish personal viewpoints from professional ethical standards when necessary. We expect a good professional, either being a lawyer, youth worker, doctor or psychologist, to use their expertise in a similar manner in similar cases. Our guardian cannot arbitrarily choose in each situation what to do, but needs to make sure that her personal emotions do not prevail. Thus, being able to step back and analyse whether one does justice to clients or patients, is an important element of good professionalism. Reflecting at some distance about one’s professional responsibilities is also important in cases where professionals need to respect patient or client confidentiality. Our guardian often works in a team of professionals. What information can she share about her client? And if the management urges her to fill in forms, how much does she tell about specific cases? Reflection by taking some distance and investigate which basic assumptions underlie patient confidentiality can help to set limits on acceptable ways of sharing information. It may also help to see opportunities to share information of patients with others. Taking a ‘step back’ and reflecting on a case helps to gain new insights and renewed moral motivation to live up to certain principles.

Distance also helps to reflect on one’s attitude, position and responsibilities as a professional in practice and to develop a reflective attitude on one’s professional practice. Customs and habits in practices sometimes need to be scrutinized, abandoned or adjusted to improve the quality of care within those practices. Where paternalistic attitudes by professionals were quite common a few decades ago, changes in society and professional practices urged us to critically reflect patient and client autonomy within institutions and change daily policy and attitudes.

Thus, critical (moral) reflection also involves the aspect of distance. It invites us to take a more distanced perspective in order to determine what conditions certain principles imply, what fair treatment involves and what boundaries certain principles set in professional practice.

3.3 *Moral reflection*

We identified two components of *critical reflection* as relevant aspects of professional ethical competence. We will now focus on what makes this critical reflection

critical *moral* reflection. Moral reflection aims to explicate and deliberate on the relevant norms and values that we encounter in practice. It tries to answer what ‘the right thing to do’ is. It is a search for the moral ‘ought’, not for the observable moral behaviours of people in situations. Most philosophers distinguish certain characteristics necessary to take the moral deliberative point of view: a viewpoint that is often taken to be impartial or impersonal (Nagel, 1986), to prevent us from defending our self-interests or prejudices. A moral perspective, it is argued, is a perspective that all moral agents could embrace and accept; hence the outcomes of a deliberation process should be justifiable to all. Such a perspective seems to fit better with the notion of detachment than to that of dialogue. Yet, Susan Wolf (1999) has pointed out that it is a mistake to believe that this automatically involves an impartial or impersonal perspective. Trying to determine our moral duties can also be done in a dialogical, all-person viewpoint (Friedman, 1991). Scanlon explicitly states that, when deliberating on what moral principles to accept, people are fully aware of their ‘*condition humaine*’ (1998). Thus, the moral point of view that moral deliberation involves can both be an impartial as well as an all-person perspective.

Central to moral deliberation seems the ability to structure, analyse, systematize and balance arguments in order to help determine what is justifiable in a given situation. Nothing in these activities requires persons to be either in distance from or in dialogue with practice: instead it requires an open attitude and willingness to question concepts and beliefs and balance interests in light of the question what would be the ‘overall’ right thing to do. Moreover, the ability to change perspectives and show empathy as well as an egalitarian or impartial weighing should be inherent part of the moral deliberation procedure, as it fits with concepts of good professionalism.

If students should become ethically competent professionals, they should, in our view, develop a capacity for critical moral reflection along the lines sketched above. And one way to cultivate this capacity is to engage in moral deliberation of an interpersonal RE kind.

4. Critical moral reflection in interpersonal reflective equilibrium

The methodology of RE seems a good candidate for education students in professional ethical deliberation because it can take account of the elements of dialogue and distance in deliberation from a moral point of view. How does it do that?

First, the method takes into account the importance of being *involved* in professional practice. The reflection process often starts with the thoughts, emotions and judgements of persons in a given case, and allows in all stages of the process to present viewpoints from practice. We already showed how several authors use practical wisdom or intuitions of professionals in the method of RE (De Vries & van Leeuwen, 2010; van Thiel & van Delden, 2010). Thus, it can account for the dialogical aspects of critical professional reflection.

Secondly, distance is accounted for by systematic examination in order to the support for certain judgements and beliefs. The deliberation procedure is a way to scrutinize initial judgements by structurally questioning assumptions, facts, concepts and principles. For example professionals learn to distinguish between credible and faulty experiences, intuitions and judgements, i.e. they can discover which of their views and experiences cohere or depart. The benefit of RE as a method for critical moral reflection is that the process helps to distinguish biases from *justified* moral considerations. If an initial belief cannot find support from any of the other considerations, we need to revise it. The method of RE can assist students to unravel biases from considered judgements and helps them to distinguish between sheer relativism and scepticism on moral beliefs with justified moral judgements. In other words, the method aids to acquire the moral competence of critical moral reflection by combining an empathetic stance to one's moral experience and professional practice with a more detached reflection on types of cases and assumptions.

Critical moral reflection is a process of going back and forth between the specific context and abstraction, between daily life experiences and more abstract notions. It is a way of both seeking *distance*—from one's personal perspective or one's perplexity in the situation—as well as of engaging in dialogue with people involved in the situation. The interpersonal approach represents the daily situation in professional practice. The structuring and balancing process in the method of RE is *dialogical* by nature: it is one of interaction and conversation. The method helps colleagues to critically examine, in a context of open communication, which normative aspects are relevant and sound in a specific situation. It is a shared search for justified moral answers that are (provisionally) justified in a given context.

5. Objections to reflective equilibrium methods

We have provided arguments for the use of the method of RE as a professional-ethics educational tool. Yet, as already mentioned, the method is not without criticism. Ever since its introduction in moral philosophy and bioethics, RE has been the subject of meta-ethical and practical-ethical debate. Naturally, this is not the place to summarize and evaluate a highly sophisticated discussion that started decades ago and continues until the present (see Arras, 2007; Beauchamp & Childress, 2012, pp. 404–410; Daniels, 2013; DePaul 1993; Strong, 2010; Van der Burg & van Willigenburg, 1998b). However, a plea for the use of the RE would hang in the air if its main counterarguments were not mentioned.

Basically, the criticism against RE can be divided in theoretical and practical counterarguments.

The theoretical criticism relates to more general debates in epistemology and theory of justification: RE is often presented as a *coherentist* approach to justification. As such it would suffer from the flaws that its counterpart, a foundationalist

approach towards justification, does not have according to its advocates (Olsson, 2014). In the ethical context, concerns about RE's assumed coherentism, have focused on the fact that the method seems to give a dubious status and corresponding role to 'considered judgements', 'moral intuitions' and to other 'ingredients' like moral principles (too little weight). Consequently, it would lead to disputable moral intuitionism, run the risk to lack critical impetus and imply the uncritical reaffirmation of moral prejudices and moral conservatism.

The practical criticism relates to the actual usefulness and fitness for daily moral practice: to what extent is the method of RE actually used, useful and applicable in professional and other moral practices (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012, p. 410; Strong, 2010), to which extent are the methodological goals of the method attainable (Arras, 2007; Beauchamp & Childress, 2012, p. 410)? Is the method able to assist professionals in arriving at justified and action-guiding judgements?

About the theoretical critique: According to the coherence theory of justification (coherentism, a belief is justified, in case the belief coheres (as much as possible) with a set of beliefs (Olsson, 2014). Metaphorically, coherentism views justification like building a raft on the water: it floats as long as all of its consisting parts hang firmly together. In a coherentist view what is 'right' is what is the outcome of the balancing procedure (van der Burg & van Willigenburg, 1998a), thus there is no initial priority of certain beliefs or considerations above others. In principle, every part of the raft is a candidate to be revised or removed. A coherentist view thereby counters a foundationalist perspective, which holds that some considerations within the deliberation process have more (justificatory) authority over others and thereby deserve more weight (privileged status) within the process—they are able to function as *basis* for the other beliefs. Foundationalism assumes the necessity of such a firm foundation to avoid an infinite regress because it presupposes that justification is a linear-deductive process: each belief requires another belief as its basis and so on. Thus, metaphorically speaking, foundationalism assumes that justification is something like building a house—it needs a firm foundation otherwise it collapses.

From an ethical point of view, three points concerning RE are particularly discussed in the foundationalism-coherentism framing of the debate.

The first is that RE gives substantial weight to 'considered judgement' or 'intuitions'. They are the starting point for moral deliberation and have the same status as other 'ingredients'. For some critics, this status of intuitions resembles an ethical intuitionist perspective, that is, a view that one's moral intuitions are initially credible or even true. Yet, intuitionism as such is a highly disputed position: why would one's gut feelings be credible at all? (Düwell, 2008). Additionally, this initial credibility attributed to 'considered judgements' and 'intuitions' runs the risk of undermining the critical impetus of the moral deliberation process. The 'garbage' one puts in at the beginning, is then the 'garbage' that one gets out of the process at the end (Brandt, 1998).

A second critique is that some elements do not receive sufficient consideration. The RE procedure requires that no element in the process has priority over others.

Thus, strongly held ('basic') principles like for example respect for autonomy or human dignity is as revisable and refutable as ones considered judgements. For some, putting initial beliefs (gut feelings) on a par with principles denies the relevance and ethical role of these principles.

A third point concerns the interpretation of RE. Often the method is presented as a type of coherentism, with all its supposed drawbacks. Yet, there is much discussion whether RE should be seen as either coherentism or foundationalism (Ebertz, 1993).

Apart from these and other theoretical discussion points (not mentioned here), there are (related) practical problems with RE. Assuming that we know what it means that your set of beliefs is *coherent* (there is still much ambiguity about that as well), it is difficult to know when someone will have reached a degree of coherence in his beliefs that suffices to make him justified in believing what he does. Apart from that, reaching a coherence as is envisioned in wide RE seems to be a 'hopelessly complex and clunky' enterprise and an unattainable ideal that requires too much of our intellectual capacities. It is 'a crippling justificatory burden for us mortals' (Arras, 2007, p. 69).

It is impossible to answer all these sophisticated criticisms. But we would like to make some remarks.

First of all, we think that it is not necessary for our method to function well in professional ethics education to be identified as either a coherentist method or not. Learning students and future professionals the meta-ethical difference and debate between coherentism and foundationalism is not the prime object of the kind or professional-moral teaching in which RE will be used as a tool.

We think that the acceptability of the method can, to a certain extent, be separated from the meta-ethical debate between coherentism and foundationalism and find support for this view in Beauchamp and Childress (2012). It is possible to use the method in applied ethics without engaging in meta-ethical debate on the status of our moral judgements (van den Hoven & Bolt, 2014). We think it would even be misleading to impose such views indirectly on participants who enter the process of RE, as the method is often used in the field of applied ethics without further knowledge on moral philosophy or meta-ethics.

Secondly, with respect to the criticism that RE does not enable real *critical reflection* due to the weight it gives to considered judgements and intuitions and because it runs the risk of reaffirming moral prejudices with which one started the process of deliberation, we would like to mention the following. The reflection procedure itself is meant to lead to the strongest balance of different considerations. This balancing procedure accounts for both aspects we distinguished in *critical moral reflection*. Reflection requires one to have an open attitude and to be prepared to revise intuitions, seek new facts and to look for new ethical concepts if traditional concepts fail in a specific context (like what 'autonomy' means when discussing a case of a comatose person). One can learn to interpret one's own views in, for example, deontologist, consequentialist, or virtue-ethical terms. This distancing challenges the person to rethink his initial beliefs and makes it possible to determine their

validity. We might consider this as a first filter to enhance the critical capacity of the method. Thus, the variety of ‘ingredients’ that one introduces in the reflection process enables participants, at least to a certain extent, to distance themselves from their prejudices and erroneous ‘gut feelings’ that they may have had in the beginning.

The quality of the reflection process will guarantee a more plausible outcome, one that might be contrary to one’s initial beliefs. We think that the interpersonal version of RE offers a second ‘filter’ to ensure that bias and subjectivity are properly sorted out, ergo, the filter of *interpersonal confrontation and evaluation*. Being able to respond to the challenges of others to one’s own moral judgement and exchanging the articulation of one’s moral experiences with others improves *critical moral reflection*. *Dialogical* deliberation stimulates professionals to bring diverse ingredients of the reflection process together. It assists correction and reconstruction of contextualized professional norms and tacit moral knowledge embedded in professional practice. Let us now return to the initial context of our debate, i.e. the practice of professional ethics.

6. Professional ethics education using the method of reflective equilibrium

We have gathered enough building blocks to return to our plea for our main claim. In our view, use of the method of RE in professional ethics education may enhance the capacity for critical moral reflection of future professionals. It may therefore be a useful tool for professional ethics education, especially given the four issues that we described. First of all, we proposed to focus professional ethics education on the competence for critical moral reflection and we analysed this in terms of the capability to take both *distance* from one’s own initial judgements, intuitions and common professional (tacit) moral knowledge while at the same time staying in touch with them through *dialogue*. Focusing on critical moral reflection as we analysed it, gives professional ethics education a suitable and comprehensive focus. The method of RE, on its parts, joins this goal easily.

Secondly, the method of RE can do justice to the moral background and outlook that students already have. It does not disqualify the considered judgements and intuitions of students but gives them their proper place within moral deliberation and justification. Teaching professional ethics in this way prevents students from alienation from their own, already, acquired moral knowledge. Thus, students in social work, for example, who may become a family guard later, learn that their moral intuitions concerning our case count (at least to some extent). These ‘considered judgements’, rooted in their own moral upbringing, give them a starting point for professional ethical deliberation. They do not have to start from scratch. This may empower students who feel insecure about the moral dilemmas that they may encounter in their future work (‘What should I do?’).

At the same time, using the method of interpersonal wide RE, students are also invited to assess their own moral considerations concerning cases like the youth care worker's case, in the light of the views of other students and in light of (amongst others) ethical theories that function as 'background theory' and are a genuine ingredient in the process of moral justification as well. In this way, students may learn to use ethical theory in a fruitful supportive way. It may appear that students unconsciously argue from consequentialist assumptions (as 'ethical background theory') about the case, focusing 'one-sidedly' on risks or damage to the children. Learning that they do so and that other theoretical background theories could be relevant as well may strengthen their competence for critical moral reflection. Deontological considerations about, for example, respect for the autonomy of mother to make her own choices about the life she wants to lead with her family, come into view and enrich the moral deliberation process. In this way, normative theory does not alienate students from their own moral opinions, but it critically complements them and supports students to develop their own reflective capacity.

Likewise empirically gathered 'moral wisdom' from the collective professional practice may be introduced in case deliberation along interpersonal RE lines. Introduction of such 'wisdom' enables social work students, even in class, without the context of daily professional practice of family guardianship, to get in touch with the moral experience of family guards who have developed a capacity for fine tuned practical judgement in such matters.

Finally, students will have to discuss and debate with each other what they think of the case at hand. In critical exchanges with each other, they are challenged to defend or to revise their own views. The dialogical interplay assumes that one's moral judgements should at least track intersubjective legitimacy. In this way, students learn to relativize. Students discussing the youth care case learn that debating moral issues with each other is a regulated deliberation process with a clear aim, not a non-committal exchange of moral prejudices and opinions at the pub. The well-being and dignity of the family is at stake. As (future) professionals, students are responsible to arrive at justified moral judgements about what to do with respect to the children and their mother. Deliberation with the method of interpersonal RE teaches students to develop a way of shared reflection; a structured method of deliberation that requires the input of diverse 'ingredients' and delicate interpersonal balance and refinement of considered moral judgements into justified moral judgements.

On the one hand, many who teach professional ethics to future professionals will recognize what we describe here as an example of the moral case deliberations and discussions about professionals dilemma's that often take place in the classroom. At the same time, however, we think that our description of what goes on in classrooms in terms of interpersonal wide RE may support improvement of this educational practice because it points at several important factors and processes that important for effective professional ethics education.

7. Conclusion

In this article, we have presented RE as a method for professional ethics education. The method, widely known in moral philosophy, is especially appealing for professional education if we adopt an interpersonal version of the method. We offered several arguments to support this claim. The first group of arguments focus on a changed practice that is more team-oriented and interprofessional and aims at shared decision-making with patients and clients. The other group of arguments relate to the central aim of professional ethics education, namely to stimulate the core moral professional competence of critical moral reflection. We showed that critical moral reflection entails both a dialogical approach to practice and one's own moral beliefs as well as a more detached viewpoint on one's attitude, practice and reflection on types of cases one is expected to treat equally as professional in practice.

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Notes

1. Cased derived from van den Hoven & Kole (2014), Even een stap terug. Morele reflectie in de praktijk van de jeugdzorg, in *Maatwerk*, 4, 2–4.
2. The definition of professionalism is a frequently debated theme in literature about professionalism and professional education. We assume that the claim that professionalism has an intrinsic moral dimension is widely accepted (at least with respect to client-centered professions) and that we do not need to provide a separate justification for this claim within the context of this article.
3. For readability reasons we use the terms 'professional ethics education' and 'professional ethical' throughout the text even in those cases where, strictly speaking, we refer to 'professional moral education' or 'professional ethics teaching'.
4. The merits and shortcomings of the theory and method of RE have been widely discussed in ethical literature for decades. We will return to some of its objections in section 5. Van der Burg & Van Willigenburg 1998b can be considered as a comprehensive source for relevant discussions until 1998. When Beauchamp & Childress adopted the method in their influential *Principles of biomedical ethics* (2012) the method became a recurring topic in bioethical and practical-ethical literature as well. See for example Arras, 2007; Nichols, 2012; Strong, 2010. Although less intensive than before 2000, discussion continues and new variants of the method are developed (e.g. practical equilibrium, Eggleston, 2014).
5. The claim that professional moral education is best practiced through moral case deliberation is a separate claim that needs its own justification. For the sake of argument we assume that there are sufficient reasons and evidence for this claim. For some relevant research about this topic in this journal, see Keefer & Ashley, 2001.
6. The method has been widely debated in practical ethics and bioethics and to a certain extent these domains overlap professional ethics. Yet, the use of the *interpersonal* variant of the method in *educational* and *teaching* contexts of professional ethics is at stake here.

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