

Virtue Ethics and Social Work: Being Lucky, Realistic, and not Doing ones Duty

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Few people can hush the small voice that tells us what is right.

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Summary

This article argues that in a complex socio-political world, social work ethics needs to re-cast the moral identity of the social worker in terms of virtue ethics. We review virtue theory's Aristotelian foundations and criticisms of Kantian and utilitarian theory and show how they apply to social work. Subsequently we offer an account of a virtue-based social work that questions the validity of several models of practice currently fashionable. Virtue theory emphasizes the priority of the individual moral agent who has acquired virtues commensurate with the pursuit of a revisable conception of the good life—the well-being of all in a defined community. The virtues are the acquired inner qualities of humans—character—the possession of which, if applied in due measure, will typically contribute to the realization of the good life or '*eudaimonia*'. The role of the virtuous social worker is shown to be one that necessitates appropriate application of intellectual and practical virtues such as justice, reflection, perception, judgement, bravery, prudence, liberality and temperance. This 'self-flourishing' worker,

in bringing together the capacity for theoretical and practical action makes possible a hermeneutic or interpretive praxis best appraised in dialogue with fellow-practitioners and clients. With a social work remit increasingly routinized by accountability, quality control and risk management there is an emphasis on regulation and duties. This has produced a culture of following approved or typical processes resulting in defensive forms of social work wholly uncongenial to the development of human qualities likely to promote social workers' engagement in critique and revision of what counts as best practice. In sum, our core proposition is that social work practice and education, to fit an unpredictable, non-linear world, should develop means by which professionals nurture the virtues. This would reflexively enhance social work itself.

In this article we will explore the potential of virtue ethics for social work. Rather than fit elements of a virtue ethics literature to aspects of social work practice, we propose to look at the place of social work within a framework of virtue ethics. By this we wish to remind the professional that they play a role in the production and reproduction of the public sphere and have powers to affect the structure of social relations contained therein. However, the notion of being professional carries ideas of closure, competency and control within the relatively determinate universe of a legal-rational administrative or economic systems. The literature on complexity which recognizes the fluid nature of social and institutional relations seems not yet to have been absorbed by social work.

If we start from a sceptical thesis that social work interactions and their results are often patterned but not highly predictable—what the complexity literature calls 'deterministic chaos' (Hayek, 1967; Eve *et al.*, 1997)—then we may have to consider moral action under conditions of uncertainty. However, if we could predict the results of our actions then, under Kantian imperatives or utilitarian calculative reason, we would know what to do morally. These two ethical paradigms prevailing in the social work literature in part hold sway because they fit snugly into—indeed mirror—social work's need to be efficient in terms of procedures and outcomes. Such elective affinities entail a moral narrative within the descriptive terms of social work rather than opening up an opportunity for a prescriptive moral ground outside of social work to which social work may have to adapt.

We wish to argue that social work should recognize that moral agents are constituted by a play of forces which shape the capacity for good (or bad) judgement and action. The identity of the moral individual is therefore dispositional rather than functional, and a result of patterns of experience and understanding broader than those which may be derived from the ethical dogmas already established in social work. Under these terms any homeostatic view of the social work professional and his environment may be questioned. We try to show that the kind of moral agent best fitted to social work under fluid conditions of a complex social system is that offered by virtue ethics which places emphasis upon judgement, experience, understanding, reflection and disposition. All of this adds up to what we might call the hermeneutic worker—the worker acting within a reflexive-interpretive process of self and other (Gadamer, 1981, pp. 69–139; 1989, pp. 312–24).

The relevance of virtue to ethics in social work

Historically, virtue ethics rooted in an account of how a citizen stood to the Greek city-state was pre-eminently a theory of the relation between individual character, morality and public life. The relevance of such an approach to today's society may rest on the question of how right moral relations can exist between state agencies and clients in terms of the character or 'excellences' of the worker, the nature of the organization, and the response of the client. This stands in contrast to the current trend in public agencies, and especially in social services departments (SSD) to engage in defensive decision making. This is a culture of departmental 'battening down of the hatches' by doing the least risky option that can be thoroughly accounted for in terms of laid-down procedures and/or deflecting criticism by announcing changes to a purportedly inadequate 'system'. Senior managers have confirmed to us the presence of this strategy and there is evidence that this extends beyond the UK, certainly to Canada. In British Columbia when Matthew Vaudrieul died, the Gove Inquiry was under enormous pressure to do something in the face of the ensuing scandal. To this end they grabbed at a set of Alaskan risk assessment procedures that an academic advisor had come across and said was good, and then imposed it upon Canadian professionals irrespective of its efficacy. Thus the right thing was seen to be done, that is inquiry and change to procedures, and most importantly the political pressure was relieved (Craddock, 2001). This may sound familiar. In the UK the same political logic is inevitably at work when child protection failures occur, that is to defuse the problem for the authority first. This can lead to bad procedures being put in place as the 'never again' lobby in association with the 'where's the report' lobbies get up a head of steam. At this point any alternative procedures must be better than the existing ones, and there is no time for careful critical scrutiny. Improvement of work is often cast in terms of updated procedures. Their strict application will have positive effect, it is claimed, if workers are adequately supervised. As an aside, Martin Davies and others have suggested that social work is about *maintaining* society's interests in society; rather it might seem first of all to be about *containing* sub-system crises.

However, our point is that the realization of the good society where it connects to social work is too often reduced to a re-negotiation of procedure irrespective of circumstance and human qualities. The Canadian example points up how both Kantian and utilitarian forms of reason can be corrupt if applied by persons lacking good will and a broad conception of good life. Politics tells us to act every time to minimize political costs. If our only context was the SSD then such a course of action would be procedurally right as well as goal maximizing. However, would it be right to live a life and live in a world that is so systemically defensive in character? There would be little room here for the rather dated sounding idea of 'use of self', and, by the same token, for the application of a virtue ethics emanating from immanent qualities of persons. Thus our question: can we escape the confines of a Kantian or utilitarian cage of morality by offering a less automated and functional account of the moral conduct of public bodies in terms of the 'virtues' of the citizen-worker in

the delivery of services? If this were achieved it would perhaps chime well with the Major-Blair citizenship ethos that wants to see public servants doing acts not merely by simple rule-following, but because they are persons disposed to do acts well towards others (Major, 1999, ch. 23).

Kantian and utilitarian ethics to a degree rely, respectively, upon the mechanical application of rights-claims and adherence to duties, or upon the comparison of anticipated outcomes. Virtue ethics makes foundational the qualities of ones character which are manifest in ones actions. Taking this along with a claim that virtue is a cultural product, we may see that a virtue-based ethics cultivates through experience, reflection, understanding and judgement a way of 'living a good life' in plural social domains. Such an account is clearly within striking distance of an existential phenomenological approach, but because of the very strong link with Aristotle and ancient Greek philosophy it does not quite connect to the ideas of Sartre or Heidegger (cf. Hodge, 1995).

Each of us is a citizen who ought to practise good conduct in regard of others as an aspect of being human, and not as a function of ethical or organizational imperatives. However, we do not believe that social workers possess some prior unitary concept of the good that they purposefully pursue *en bloc* each day they go into work. A little ethnography would probably bear this out. A generalized, if somewhat temporary, notion of the good acceptable to the community may result across time from the totality of activities by the SSD—it may make a positive contribution to the social welfare function. The idea, though, that workers have a rational plan for doing good which fits with an established and distinct notion of a common good rather than doing a job consisting of various kinds of actions, many of which are reactions to changing circumstances, invites the comment that this would be a case of the triumph of hope over experience. The pressing question becomes: what account of morality can be given if the link between means and ends is often weak precisely because social work is a contingent non-linear task? How can a worker do 'good' if their world is inconsistent? What price 'universalizability' of morality under the complex indeterminate world of social work? To reiterate, it is our view that virtue ethics enables us to characterize what it is to be moral in a world subject to frequent revision.

To connect a virtue ethics to social work one might put the question thus: what is the relation of morality to experience? Could the latter, in some way, produce the former? To fashion an answer to these questions will involve exploring the links between virtues, their cultivation, judgement and community. Some accounts of virtue ethics make virtues, as intrinsic qualities, logically prior to moral outcomes. Having already argued that the field of social work is complex and variable, we shall try to give an account of virtue ethics applied to social work which resists the claim of virtues being pointless without a prior determination of the goals of human flourishing, that is which needs prior value commitments. The point here is that a pre-setting of the purposes of action may work inside a discrete social system, for example social services, but this tends to make workers' 'virtues' functional imperatives of the routines of the organization independent of the broader human question of the good life, and how parts of its development relate to the whole. It may be that social work actually has no need

of an ethical perspective, but inasmuch as this goes against an important strand within the history of humanity, that is a practical as well as theoretical contemplation of the question 'how ought one to live?', then we should be concerned with bringing our encultured self into a right relation with the social whole. This calls for a genuine ecological perspective that examines the richness of play between the micro-, the meso- and the macro-levels of society. In regard of this, it is a pity that government and educators in the last few years have been so keen on reducing the broader social science elements of vocational training at the same time as there has been talk of reviving 'civics' in schools. It was perhaps no accident that the eighteenth-century political economy of Ferguson, Hume and Smith linked an uncertain universe to an analysis of the interaction between the political, the economic, the social, the moral and the cultivation of manners (Winch, 1978). The recognition that human behaviour was not causally absolute, obliged an emphasis upon evolving the best way of doing things likely to lead to outcomes conducive to the public good. Once more we are led to recognize the significance of an analysis in terms of emergent cultural-moral patterns over that of scientific prediction.

Everitt and Hardiker (1996) noted that, in the middle 1980s one or two writers in social work began to consider whether an Aristotelian notion of the good, defined in terms of the virtues, might be helpful as a source of ethics in social work. However, such attempts fell stillborn from the presses. None the less these few writers were to be congratulated for their prescience inasmuch as they were trying to introduce a moral theory which was only just being revived by professional philosophers such as Alisdair MacIntyre who saw that his 'communitarian' political theory was underpinned by virtue theory (MacIntyre, 1981). By the middle 1990s there were still only one or two who were considering virtue as a component of social work ethics, notably Richard Hugman and David Smith (1995), and Sarah Banks (1997/2001). That an 'Aristotelian' perspective in social work ethics was not taken up was perhaps testimony to the persistent drone of Kantianism and utilitarianism or, out of the depths of the 1970s, a mix of the two (cf. CCETSW, 1976) and to the ubiquity of an 'ethics' of anti-discrimination which, though pitched at a low level of critical analysis, none the less was given equal status to a higher order moral thinking inspired by Aristotle, Kant and Mill. The easily bought discussion of an ethics of anti-discrimination reduced humanity to narrow sociologically-driven categories of race, gender and disability. What looked like a way into ethical analysis was actually a closing off of discussion as most social workers and students saw the moral obligations towards these groups as self-evident and therefore they largely wanted to engage in considerations of practice instead of developing the virtue of providing philosophically informed *reasons* for action.

Social work traditions themselves have dictated the relevance of some ethical bases and not others, and the absence of virtue theory from any of social works' history or cognate disciplines in part explains its' continuing absence. The weakness of a rationale for developing a virtue perspective in a discipline other than philosophy—and even there it was lacking until the 1980s—has quickly extinguished its first glimmerings. However, in the last few years a virtue literature has been circulating (Crisp and Slote, 1997; Statman, 1997a) as has a post-Thatcherite political lan-

guage of citizenship, individual responsibility and the idea of a public ethics. Glossy HMSO documents have invoked phrases such as 'best practice' which reflect 'inclusivist' ideas of participation, commitment and, in effect, the making of a commonwealth. If we listen carefully to these statements we may faintly hear a language of virtue that commends the measured comportment of ones qualities of self into forms of social relations and the public sphere, and which if cultivated may lead to a moral society.

The relevance to social work should be fairly clear. Such an ethics gives moral meaning to modes of practice in everyday life whether in personal or professional settings. The practice of virtue developed through experience, reflection and circumspection—is the very stuff of good social work. These situated factors provide criteria for a profoundly human moral theory that is not perfectionist in its ambition, but rather is defensible in terms of the 'good enough'. This is precisely because the structure of human encounter, of setting, and of policy horizons are variable and dynamic. Only in a static world is perfection possible, and of all worlds the social work world is no utopia. Thus virtue ethics may fit well with a field of activity accountable to time, change, accident and flexibility. Herewith our reasons for giving another outing to this most ancient and contemporary account of moral life. The criticism that a virtue ethics cannot adequately be applied to moral problems of the 'what ought I to do in this case?' type points up a strength for our purposes, namely that at a time when social work aims to become more prescriptive and criteria-led, a theory of moral action rooted in the development of persons-as-subjective-agents is, perhaps, to be welcomed (Louden, 1997, p.184). In this sense, virtue ethics may be seen as partial but revitalizing in its focus upon the virtues of the social worker and not just of the work done. The former should not be isolated from the latter any more than a role can be performed in isolation from the abilities and qualities of the actor. Doing a task well is not merely a matter of rule-following; expressed in it are the skills and virtues of persons. This point may be used against the mantra of 'good practice' found in training manuals which tend to see the practitioner qua person as a mere cypher. Virtue ethics, then, may not tell us what must be done in this or that case to satisfy an image of social work as a moral enterprise; rather virtue ethics can be used to offer an account of the modes of moral existence shaping *the being* of a good social worker. More simply then, the basic question is not what is good social work, but rather what is a good social worker?

Having sketched out the position of virtue ethics with regard to the history of ethics and social work values and practice, for the rest of this article we propose to outline the character and context of Aristotle's notion of virtue, to review some of the main contributions to recent work on virtue and then explore some of the ways in which these can show how a virtuous disposition can be understood to be at the centre of agency-based social work.

Aristotelian virtue ethics

Essentially, for virtue ethics, a good act is good because it results from a good character that is intrinsically going to perform an action in line with one or more

virtues. Thus the goodness of the act is not a result of the (intended) outcome or of the indexing of ones moral actions by their universalizability and the duty entailed always to act similarly in similar cases. The connection between the actor and the acted upon whether in terms of respect or advantage given to the latter by the former is not of primary concern. It is not that the ends do not matter but that the (intended) result does not make the actor moral. It is rather peculiar to want to suggest that an action or its result, in and of itself, can be good. The goodness of an action lies in persons in a context of moral appraisal and their motivations and dispositions in the execution and aims of their actions. To account for the structure of this process is in effect to do a phenomenology of moral action, and this requires scrutiny of the making of the inner self not merely through a psychology, but through the identification of social and cultural factors which shape how the components of the inner life are intricately in the project of being human in the world. And this question exploring the meaning of the good life—the question of the best way to be—was central to Plato and Aristotle and the Hellenic world view.

Aristotle's notion of the good life placed greater importance upon the collective of the city-state than it did upon the good of the individual.

For even if the good of the community coincides with that of the individual, it is clearly a greater and more perfect thing to achieve and preserve that of a community; for while it is desirable to secure what is good in the case of an individual, to do so in the case of a people or a state is something finer and more sublime (Aristotle, 1976, p. 64).

Ultimately the interests of the state coincide with the interests of the individual—the well-being of the state is the *summum bonum* because it promotes the good of all individuals and is the entity which the individual thus aspires to promote and for which he does his best. The reciprocal nature of the relation between the state and the individual requires that good as happiness is a function of the disposition towards certain ways of individual conduct that is the virtues acquired through training and example. To be happy is to act not only in accordance with virtue—to live virtuously—but also to have material goods 'throughout a complete life' (Aristotle, 1976, p. 84). Human kind is therefore primarily active and practical, and secondarily contemplative. The good life, which all want in their various ways, can only be achieved through participation in the political culture which individuals develop by debating well and acting justly. These are precisely the means by which to improve the structural conditions which in turn improve the conditions of the individual. So the conception of a good life is bound to the practices of the virtuous citizen and the state. At root then, is the good will—the totality of virtuous dispositions the individual brings into his social and political activity. As we have seen these are matured by forms of education. Here we may quickly note that a good will—the impetus to act well towards an object or goal—is the concept Kant appealed to as irreducibly good when he opened the *Groundwork* (1785/1948). Identifying the good with a disposition to be good not surprisingly has led many to see that there is more than a whiff of virtue ethics about Kant despite it being widely held that he provided a form of ethical reasoning opposed to that of Aristotle (Sherman, 1997, p. 1; Baron, 1997, § 3).

Aristotle distinguishes between two classes of virtue: intellectual and moral. Under the former fall wisdom, prudence and understanding which are acquired by instruction which needs time and experience which add up to wisdom; under the latter fall into liberality and temperance, which are chiefly acquired by habit and the example of others. However, a virtue can become a vice where there is either a surfeit or deficit of it. With this idea in mind, Aristotle elaborates his well-known doctrine of the mean which has come to be captured in sayings such as 'you can have too much of a good thing' or 'don't go overboard'. He sets out a table of virtues and vices where, in the sphere of social conduct, the virtuous mean would be friendliness, in deficient form would be cantankerousness and in excessive form would be obsequiousness. Thus in Aristotle's ethics, to be virtuous is a practice of life which if done well is the process of producing the good life. It requires judgement of what is a just measure of action commensurable with the situation obtaining, for this is implied by the doctrine of the mean. How such judgement is acquired is itself a socio-cultural product. The relation between the good of the individual and that of the community is bi-conditional.

Having discussed the context and terms of Aristotle's virtue ethics we should now turn to exploring post-Aristotelian versions. For our purposes we will only consider work from the last twenty years inasmuch as this work represents a response to developments in analytical moral philosophy that have set the parameters of argument in applied ethics in recent times.

Contemporary virtue ethics' relation to ethical notions in social work

Contemporary virtue ethics is a reaction to the pre-dominance of Kantian, utilitarian and meta-ethical theories which concern either giving ethical directives to specific moral problems or defining the meaning of the predicate 'good'. Virtue ethics tends to dispense with criteria such as duty, responsibility and ends hitherto deemed essential to justifying actions. Given that our sense of how to evaluate morality is shaped by the dominant discourses of the time, it is not easy to abandon concepts we use for everyday moral reasoning.

Deontological moral discourse rests upon a notion of duty, but it is duty that is abandoned in the face of virtue. A basic argument for this is that if someone says he is doing an act from duty then he is not doing it by reason of an unadulterated will for the sake of the other person, but rather the act is being done for the sake of an abstract obligation. Michael Stocker gives the example of telling someone that one has visited them in hospital because it was ones duty. This carries the implication that one did not visit them because one wanted to. In this sense acting from duty is of lesser moral worth than an act done because one purely wanted to. One is neither doing the act for oneself or for the other (Stocker, 1997). The same would seem to be true for social work where seeing a client is often done not because we want to see that particular client with a view to doing good for them, but because

we have to see them if we are to do our duty as set out by the SSD. This breaks the reflexive relation between one's expression of the good life, one's own self as valuable, and the reasons for acting. With similar implications, Slote runs the argument that if duties have a reference point, it is that of the person for whom a duty is performed and not the performer (Slote, 1997). This Slote identifies as a self-other asymmetry that implies that the moral agent (performer) lacks positive moral worth, and that 'agents are viewed as mere tools for helping others' (Statman, 1997b, p. 5). In social work terms this underlines the not unfamiliar idea that social workers are increasingly becoming technical agents of the efficient distribution of welfare goods and construction of client life-plans (see Giddens, 1991; Ferguson, 2001). Doing something for the sake of the other person may, at face value, seem to be moral, but it weakens the relation between the agent and the act which is what makes the act moral—the virtuous impulse which carries the agent forth into action. Practically speaking, asserting the irrelevance of a sense of personal moral worth of one's own actions would be dispiriting and be likely to lead to a loss of morale individually and collectively. How often, if only anecdotally, has one heard comments from social workers about the lack of regard for what they do? This is not a comment about appraisal of their actions, but about their disappointment over the public's failure to appraise their worth as committed carers in difficult circumstances. They would like to be seen as being good. To decouple act from action would strike at the heart of the psychology of work satisfaction apart from any philosophical point. In this way then, the self-other asymmetry argument can reveal the functioning of important values in social work.

The two arguments above go to the heart of becoming a social worker. It is quite clear that there is a recruitment problem in social work, but why would one become a social worker today? At one time it was common to appeal to political or religious motivations; people committed to doing the right thing in relation to an ideological conception of the good life. Today the motivations are not so clear. Many perhaps enter the profession in pursuit of a public sector job that is relatively secure, but are also dictated by the consequent set of duties that prioritize social work as a task. This brings into play the self-other asymmetry and thus undermines the celebrated Kantian criterion of treating people as ends and not as means. The social worker who does the task because he or she is obliged—is duty bound—to do it once employed, lacks commitment as a self-responsible being pursuing the good life. Supplication to duty leaves the worker without moral identity because he or she is acting for the sake of others, that is for the SSD or the client. If a social worker does not recognize his or her moral identity and calling, then one may wonder whether such a person ought to do social work at all. We may see here that if we ignore the implications of the Stocker and Slote criticisms of Kantian ethics and ignore the need to reflect upon the idea of the virtuous life, the value of social workers as persons and indeed the value of entering social work, at all, is obscured.

A third point about deontology is what Bernard Williams (1985) has called the problem of moral luck. This points out that our duties are limited by our abilities such that contingency does not enter into duty based accounts of morality. However, the fact is that our lives are filled with the unpredictable, and affairs over which we

have no or little control. Given the latter, we cannot in most situations act morally. In other words, much of life is a matter of luck and traditional moral frameworks exclude this property as they view morality as only a matter of that for which we are entirely responsible. Applied to social work, moral luck builds in a realistic factor of uncertainty which is sometimes enabling of a good act, and sometimes not. It thus behoves us to develop an ethics of social work that is compatible with the facts of complexity and risk. It is a false utopia to pretend, as managers and politicians tend to do, that each case is essentially controllable and predictable. Positivist methodologies have taught us to believe that this is the case, but experience tells us it is not. The particular character of each case calls upon us to do our best, using our judgement and situational intelligence to adapt to changing circumstances. Here lies the skill of the worker giving concrete expression to Aristotle's intellectual virtues of wisdom in relation to prudence.

Against utilitarian theories which aim to maximize the welfare of persons and society, one telling argument virtue ethics runs is that it would be virtuous to do less than the optimizing action welfare-wise, if the minimizing action entailed transgressing virtue. Christine Swanton gives the example of someone refusing to betray a friend for the sake of optimizing the welfare of themselves or someone else (Swanton, 1997). To keep faith with friends is an act that shows that one possesses the virtue of friendship. This is the way one best performs friendship. One does not keep faith simply because of abstract rules of duty. In social work terms, if defensive social work which optimizes the interests of an SSD is a primary consideration and elected members are not to suffer unpopularity near election time, expensive services to a heroin addict should be refused. Giving the addict resources may be the best, most virtuous thing to do where virtue equals looking after clients, but may be contextually sub-optimal for the SSD and the local authority. The social worker should surely endorse virtue against the cruder instincts of obtaining the greatest utilitarian pay-off.

A second set of arguments in regard of utilitarianism emerges when we consider the relation of complexity to judgement. This goes to the very heart of our discussion which is about the human qualities which can be brought into conjunction with the world of experience. Let us draw a distinction between determinant and reflective judgement; that is between the application of a decision rule such as the greatest good for the greatest number and, action as a result of prudential consideration of circumstances or as Vico puts it: 'The wise man . . . who attains eternal truth by the uneven and insecure paths of practice' (Vico, 1709, p. 35). Reflective judgement, which represents the virtuous man, is a sifting process of circumspection. It develops wisdom by engaging us in the process of the cultivation of good judgement. Unlike the utilitarian, the person of virtue and reflection moves from the particular to the universal, that is from an encompassing perception of the circumstances in which we find ourselves to the recognition of a revisable rule as to how we might judge in similar circumstances. The component of reflection provides the critical distance that underpins revisability. Beiner puts it well when he observes that 'Human beings possess no god-like clairvoyance that guides their judgement; they inhabit a world of experience where insight is always a fragile achievement, forever subject to opa-

city and distortion' (Beiner, 1983, p. 105). The complexity of the world resists the unambiguous application of a universal judgement that covers all particulars. In other words the utilitarians mistake is to start from the subsumption of the particulars under the universal, that is determinant reflection. The ever-present excess of the particular over the universal cries out for a theory of judgement rather than for a simple appeal to some decision rule. Here we come to our other caveat about utilitarianism, namely that despite social complexity—which can be accommodated by a judge possessed of experience, insight, and reflection, utilitarianism 'precludes such an understanding of judgment because it recommends subsumption of all policy under a universal rule, namely, a quantitative calculus' (Beiner, 1983, p. 110). This in effect removes persons of their responsibility for judging and thus in practical terms provides no incentive for social workers to be concerned with the capacity for good judgement. In other words, utilitarians have no theory of judgement that can address the subtleties and shifts of practice-needs but provides reasons for action that evade responsibility. The absence of the latter retards the growth of moral consciousness in both the individual and society.

Virtue ethics is especially distinct from its rivals by pointing the ethical way back to the need for the cultivation of character, and thus to the precedence of the quality of the actor over that of the action. To this end we have reviewed some of the arguments which virtue ethicists have deployed against more established positions. To do this is to open a space for an alternative ethics. For our purposes, we have briefly sketched out *why* a virtue ethics might be applicable to social work, and given an outline of its philosophical position, developments and basic doctrines with some examples taken from social work. We must now try to further our account of *how* it can provide moral direction for the practice of social work. And this is what is important—virtue ethics from Aristotle onwards has been intimately connected to the question of the meaning of life—of practising a form of life within a community that redounds to the benefit of, and enhances the quality of that life and the political and socio-economic environments surrounding it. So, at least in part, our project is to reconcile the purposes and practices of social work with an eudaimonic form of life (gr. *eudaimonia* = happiness) via *aretē* (*aretē* = virtue/an 'excellence').

A social work virtue ethics?

Aristotle, as Bernard Yack has shown, gives an account of ethical life that accommodates the complex patterns of morality (Yack, 1993, ch. 8). This can be exemplified along two dimensions of the earlier discussed issue of moral luck. The merits of our actions are rarely solely derived from the singular connection between our intentions, actions and the world, but rather are often co-determined by the conditions obtaining at the time—what others were doing, their mood and so forth or, simply the state of the weather. Such matters are outwith our control but sometimes propitious in their complex, and perhaps ultimately unanalysable, relations to our intended actions which themselves are given content and shape by our virtuous dispositions.

Fortune shines upon us not only in regard of aspects of the lives of others which by happenstance are well-attuned to our actions, but also in regard of a favourable flux of the material world which is profoundly uncontrollable, as complexity theory in recent years has indicated. For example, we may ski excellently not only because of our skill (virtue) as a skier but, because of its conjunction with particularly good snow for skiing. Talking down the performance because of our good fortune with the state of the snow would seem churlish. Similarly, that the sun shines may just make a client happier and therefore more receptive to the visit of a social worker. We should not devalue the moral quality of the work just because the client was in a receptive mood. We are always in a world of circumstances. There is not a neutral world in which the moral worth of actions and the virtuous qualities of agents can be tested. We are always already thrown into a complex world and we may doubt whether we have an adequate cognitive framework for recognizing whether two or more situations are materially and therefore morally commensurable. This we take to be the thrust of Nietzsche's criticism of Kant's categorical imperative—that a complex world cannot be suborned by the regularity of the moral law (Nietzsche, 1886, pts 5 and 7). Trying to establish the right action to undertake in similar circumstances may fall foul of the changing patterns of reality. Thus the Kantian notions that we can only value actions for which we are wholly responsible is not plausible, unless no morality is possible at all.

Doing the right thing in social work is not a matter of applying a moral rule, it is not the work-as-activity that is morally right, but rather the worker-as-agent expressed in the range, and subtlety of use, of the virtues. In this sense the virtues are not specific moral concepts, but generalizable capacities of self, the application of which are acquired *pace* Aristotle, via training and experience. The morality of the agent comes from his disposition to do the best he can in the circumstances conjoined to good judgement and perception. We must not forget that judgement itself has a moral character in that it requires mental effort, commitment to thinking, and consideration of the state of affairs obtaining. Morality under virtue ethics has an intellectual and motivational content that culminates in practical action.

So, if we want to find ethical constants in a sea of change then perhaps we have to look to the reflected-upon character of the ethical agent in terms of his dispositions, and not the actions he actually does or that he will always do in similar cases (under his terms of recognition of what is similar). The individuals' character is the stable reference point, not the actions. In the case of the actions she actually does, these could be spontaneous and co-incidentally fit the circumstances—that is they would be pure luck and thus have no ethical value whatsoever and further, contain little possibility of being repeated in some way. However, the conjunction of a conception of the good life with one's virtues and resulting actions establish the morality of things. When we try to abide by the virtues, as we noted above, we try to act as best as we can in a manner and to a degree appropriate to the situation. We judge the situation and what is needed and this takes the successful action beyond mere serendipity. One does not shovel food into a starving child even though she needs lots of food; one feeds such a child in small amounts. In social work one tries to work with the grain of the social and cultural situations of individuals and

families, and not impose an abstract moral solution. In a virtue ethics for social work we emphasize the role of perception, judgement and flexibility.

The 'realistic' premises with which virtue ethics works—that we are lucky and there is small chance for moral determinism that tightly links intention to outcome—can be seen to entail two radical aspects. First, that the moral/non-moral distinction is redundant. The irrelevance of moral luck breaks down the split between the moral world comprising of matters that are wholly in the control of the agent, that is voluntary, and the non-moral, that is things which cannot be controlled fully. The virtuous agent is the person who strives to do his best granted that the world is in flux. Doing well is not purely tied to 'moral' matters, but to a broad conception of human flourishing or successful way of life. Happiness for Aristotle does not consist in a specific set of 'moral' goods which we must attain to be truly good. Happiness for him is the end(s) for which we strive and which is chosen for its own sake. We are most happy when we realize it best. Thus we realize happiness when it is in accord with excellence where the latter is expressed through virtue. In our idea, then, is contained the suggestion that social workers should be striving to reach goals which are done for their own sake, that is due to conscious commitment and circumspection, and not only because someone said so. Further, we want to do that task well because it will be best fitted to doing good social work for the client. Such dispositions of virtues carry the agent of social work forth to realize best practice. Equally doing good social work which is the 'goal' of the community (i.e. the SSD), is realized by striving to do the best social work in individual cases, the totality of which constitutes the *raison d'être* of social services. But we should remember that the reasons for welfare provision are as much to do with perceptions of what is virtuous—the obviousness of what one ought to do—as they are to do with the politics of the control of vagrancy and fear of revolution so beloved of the textbooks. It may be worth noting here that some readers might wish to look at the work of the Franco-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas who, in his *Totality and Infinity* (1961), argues that a moral relation comes forth because of the call to responsibility thrust upon us in our encounter with the face of the Other. Levinas is pointing out that the wellsprings of morality are found in the depths of grasping human suffering and joy in the countenance of other persons. Such a view is not surprising for a Jew who lived through the Nazi occupation of Europe.

The second aspect is that virtue ethics is linked to what has recently come to prominence in feminist thought, namely an ethics of care. Promoted by Carol Gilligan, (1982), Nell Noddings (1984) and others, it has argued that the human good resides not in abstract principles, most often adverted to by 'male' reason, but rather in the quality of human relationships and the 'female' qualities people (women) bring to them in everyday practice. This basic idea is mirrored in the debate between Kantians and virtue ethicists. However, in its feminist guise it implies a gender relativism that is not wholly warranted despite the empirical basis of Gilligan's justly celebrated, *In a Different Voice* (1982) for it is not clear that caring qualities pertain properly only to women.

Both these aspects give emphasis to our point that we can conceive of an ethics which has a far more inclusive notion of what it is to be human than either legal,

psychological or strict moral conceptions which have at various times prevailed in social work practice since the nineteenth century. To appeal to recent jargon, the (neo)-Aristotelian idea of virtue works within an ecological picture of society as a complex of interacting parts in which social workers may strive to promote the best kind of society, and do the best for their clients without violating any virtues. The practice implications of such ecological holism sit well with the thrust of practice texts that draw on this perspective. They exhort students to grasp the social, political, emotional, local and sometimes more global layers of reality, bringing such understanding and perceptions into a relation with one's judgement of what is the best type of action in the circumstances which will advance the cause of the client, the community (e.g. the SSD) and the moral worth of oneself—'I have not let myself down by what I have done'. Thus the latter addresses Slote's self-other asymmetry. The integrity of the social worker is not found in consistent action or maximizing pay-offs across cases, or in carrying out departmental policy or the law accurately, rather it is found in the fundamental orientation of good-will towards those who one works for and works with, and towards the activities in which one engages. The worker self-understandingly comports herself towards her own field of possibilities striving to realize the best outcome where such striving has become a virtuous property of character.

To the degree that we accept that any application of virtue ethics to social work may reflect Aristotelian strictures, we are obliged to consider human flourishing as a community enterprise. Such an appeal to a concept of community broadens the terms of the self-interpreting—the hermeneutic—worker. However, recent literature has revived the late 1970's themes of a patchwork model of practice where intensive work within a community can lead to prevention. This requires the enhancing of social support networks to reduce the instances of child-abuse and neglect. (Gibbons, 1992; Jack, 1997 and 2000). Here the social worker plays a planning role in getting clients involved in the provision of community support services. Undoubtedly this helps to set vistas of client self-flourishing by their participation in the management of risk, ideally mediated by a core group of persons relevant to the persons (children) most at risk. Christie and Mittler (1999) have argued that such core groups 'form another arena for . . . situated moral reasoning' (p. 235). This in small form may be seen as a process of making a virtuous community wherein individuals gain a moral reflexivity. On spec this seems most encouraging, but if we pay attention to the attendant ecological framework we see that this narrows the sphere of reflection to the specifics of childcare, parenting, and child abuse, and evades the potential for socio-political and economic critique so crucial to a rich grasp of the life-world and action in it. The functionality of this linkage between a narrow ecological model and risk-reduction via participation curtails the possibility of a deconstruction of democratic entitlements under a disequilibrium of power by partners in a dialogical process. To use Habermas's distinction, the meaning of the life-world can be limited and reified by the exercise of system-world powers held by the social worker or any other official appointees to the core group. (Habermas, 1984, pt. VI) The ecological framework in such models based on Bronfenbrenner sets out an exo-system the limits of which do not extend beyond matters relevant to childcare. Under this pre-

scription it is unlikely that the macro-system gets touched upon by social support networks or core groups. The enabling of neglectful parents to explain themselves in terms outside of child-care issues is not much in evidence. The circumscribing of 'relevant' discourses tends to limit the reflexive understanding of social workers themselves for whom a rich analysis of the macro-level of socio-economic, political and cultural factors may be seen as an intellectual luxury. The practical application of attenuated ecological models tends to preclude any inspiration on the part of social workers to think analytically about the boundaries between a conception of the good life and the dynamics of existing complex societies. Once more, models of practice restrict the interplay of understanding and imagination in social work likely to lead to the development of a proper application of the virtues (see Webb, 2001).

Since MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981), and Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) the primacy of community as a basis for political societies over that of the individual—the latter being set out in the work of Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974), has become well-established in the literature. Communitarianism has now become a powerful voice especially in the USA courtesy of Etzioni's manifestos for political change (Etzioni, 1994). In this the appeal to Aristotle is evident. As has been pointed out many times, Aristotle's polity which incorporated the acceptance of slavery would today be unacceptable. However, this aside, the basic idea is that the structure of the community that presumably wishes to realize its telos best, shapes and socializes the individual citizen towards that end. The evaluation of virtue is thus linked to the conception the community holds of its own flourishing. So while the virtues themselves as abstracts remain, their concrete application in terms of how much of a virtue one uses, is relative to the aims of any particular society or organization such as social services. The good life is thereby not a subjective account of the libertarian individual who makes it up as he goes along, however virtuous his intentions; it is a reflection of, and practice internal to the civic culture or a part of it in which the person is brought up. This would seem to imply the need for an imaginative co-habiting with others recognizing via experience what is good within a community. Such holism cannot be devolved to a system of rule-following as it rests upon the 'hermeneutic' grasping of the interplay between self, others and environment.

MacIntyre (1981) contrasts Aristotelian with 'Homeric' virtue where the latter condones pragmatic action to realize the ends of society. For Aristotle, virtues are more basic and thus universalizable with regard to the community as a whole. Under a Homeric scheme it is not entirely clear why we should not, as a matter of course, lie when it suits and so forth. We may note that this shows up the failure of moral theories which bring together utilitarianism and virtue ethics. In most societies not telling the truth, or deliberately misleading is not acceptable as a principle. Societal expectations preclude that much flexibility of judgement. Equally, we do not consider that lying is proper when it suits for some kind of activities and not others within a whole society. This seems to us to be as applicable to organizations as it is to individuals, even if the organization is led by pragmatic considerations of being found out. If an SSD covers up a child abuse case, they may well attract a full SSI Inquiry or worse . . . the interest of the tabloid press. The political fall out would be

considerable. But one would hope that an SSD as a matter of working culture and ethos, and for the general good of public standards, would not try to insulate themselves from accountability to the proper authorities. It was precisely this sort of thing that led to concern over ministerial use of Public Interest Immunity (PII) Certificates during the Scott Inquiry. There are, we suggest, Kantian side-constraints against lying as a matter of public policy. As Kant maintained, logically permitting a society of liars would destroy the trust structure basic to the flow of everyday society. Thus social stability would be wrecked. Secondly 'homer' pragmatism breaks the link between individual 'local' action, and striving to contribute to and play one's part in realizing a conception of the good life—which under the logic of lying would certainly not be achieved. A conscience against lying is good. At the level of social worker-client relations, the client would not want to engage with the worker who lied for advantage because, although it may be to the advantage of a client one day, it may be to her disadvantage the next day. The client would never quite be at ease once she realized the worker lied strategically. Further, if a worker lies, then the client may think that he can do the same which would tend to undermine effective work since neither side would be in possession of the correct facts or understandings for good decisions. So unless one adopts a rule-utilitarian scheme whose possibility complexity and uncertainty call into question anyway, using utilitarian reasoning undermines the basis for establishing an essential trust between social worker and client from the start. Homeric virtue falls into line with utilitarian morality and here virtue is pointless if it cannot be brought into a proper relation with the world because of misperception or misrepresentation.

The virtues, as the ground for modes of conduct that help reproduce society, act as society's conscience. Having been educated to be virtuous, we would not feel easy about abandoning them. It does not feel right to do things without reference to a system of virtues that help to ethically calibrate how we go about practices. Further, we often 'see' the virtuousness in others and rather wish we were like them. The inculcation of virtue is rather like Foucault's disciplinary practice (Foucault, 1977). That is, one may start out from being educated or trained to the virtues, but after a time they become internalized elements of character which are brought *a priori* to bear upon conduct. But unlike Foucault's idea, the virtues are not to serve the ends of a narrow governing regime (the SSD/the State), but rather, to direct moral agents who judge and then act upon the environment in which they find themselves. So we go about things in *this* way because we have learned qualities conducive to the production of the good society and how to apply them to varying degrees. Virtues connect the inner self to action; they set the baseline as to what we should not do; we should not act against their spirit. Virtues are the qualities of self that a society would consider desirable for each agent to possess and to use in just measure in any set of acts for the well-being of that society. In this virtues are valuable capacities in themselves, for example to be just, brave, prudent and so forth. As such they take on a universalizable aspect and therefore can be taught. If one cannot isolate virtues from the embodying act, then a virtue has no more value than a mere skill that automatically produces a right action or an accident of doing the right thing without any grasp of virtue. The moral worth of an action is derived

from the full presence of a virtue which can be recognized as being possessed by the agent. In terms of social work practice we would presumably want a self-flourishing social worker who can be shown and reflect upon what inner qualities ought commonly to be available in variable situations (see Trevino, 1986). Education by critical evaluation of many case examples thus becomes crucial. In training exercises and supervision it would be important for social workers to explore in dialogue with others what qualities are conducive to the ends of some cases and whether those qualities are found in other cases. There is a need for a multi-perspectival approach to such analysis wherein alternative actions and their worth are considered as well as counterfactual situations—‘what if this had been the case?’ Analysis like this will help to identify which virtues need accentuating. For instance, what is it to be brave in social work? Immediate intuition might suggest that it does not apply in the caring professions as it seems to have more to do with military situations and the like. But what about standing up to aggressive parents or children in a secure unit or the bullying middle classes who always claim to have a solicitor on hand? The virtuous social worker not only needs to recognize when these virtues fit in, but also needs to be able to think about how to judge the degree of appropriate action in relation to the changing situation. We are here emphasizing the importance of being able to identify the factors constituting good judgement leading to good ends that accord with a holistic conception of the good life. This encourages the practice of wisdom—of understanding.

Virtue ethics then, is not some doctrine of utilitarian relativism where each situation has a rationally calculable maximizing solution pursued by the social worker. Virtue ethics draws upon capacities of self—as we have noted—of perception, judgement and measure, and not just automated response. The possibility of the virtuous self is primordially a question of what it is to be human, and not a function of moments in our lives determined by pure self-interest. To be virtuous is prior to any particular configuration of life. The development of the virtues is rather like the development of the use of the senses. We have an inborn capacity to use our senses, but we can still be trained to use them effectively. We can be given guidance as to how we might see things better if we stand here rather than there and so on. We can be shown how to judge and we come to realize that this basic virtue can be used in any number of cases. This is a dialogical enterprise with peers and supervisors alike, not to find out how *this* case could have been handled better, but to explore how one might go about thinking, judging, reasoning, reflecting, imagining, feeling about the aspects of social work. This is to get a sense of what is possible as a social worker *qua human actor* in various situations and settings. Our image of a morally individuated social worker contrasts sharply with the now-dated arguments of the mid-1980s ‘discourse this and discourse that’ artists.

Some vulgar postmodernists in social work ethics (Rossiter *et al.*, 1999, p. 86) seem to think that a postmodern account is social constructionist in character and that social workers are therefore a homogenized result of determining discourses. Social workers in this account are denuded of self-identification in terms of ethical reflection. Such a preposterous reading of postmodernism seems more akin to the functionalist structural Marxism of Althusser than, say, to the flexible language-

game analysis of Lyotard. It should be clear that social constructionism is a high modernity whereby actions (obligations to the discourses-in-dominance) are automated responses to imperatives of meta-narratives of rational social planning. In contrast Ahmad (1990, cited in Walker, 2001) points out that a possible postmodern account of social work in terms of social workers who take 'risks with their own personal world view [by] considering how they might revise their perceptions of colleagues, friends and other professionals [in] putting them into play with and against those of other dialogue partners' (p. 37). Walker notes that Ahmad's work taken in conjunction with the 'dialogic-reflexive' approach of Turney (1997) infers that 'the concept of difference is opened up [to] acknowledge the way in which differences are structured into . . . complex patterns of oppression' (Walker, 2001). Whilst not appealing to virtue, Ahmad and Turney are making links between reflection, revisability and dialogue in the process of the making of the good social worker. There are connections we would wholly endorse.

This very flexibility of virtue ethics and that of the environment upon which virtue ethics bears—the luck element—would seem to entail not only the grounds for moral uncertainty, but an acceptance of excusable risk. This runs against the centralizing managerialist and policy-driven regimes now in place in social services. The iron cage of administrative rationality contrasts sharply with an account of practical action done from situational insight under the influence of a virtuous disposition. The reference point under virtue ethics for the rightness of action lies in the good will in relation to circumspection of the situation. In today's social work, rightness of action is determined in relation to a body of law or other rules which at one level usually specify clearly what procedures must be carried out, and at another allow social services to do or not do according to operational or financial constraints without necessarily referring to the morality of the outcome. This quite clearly happened in the implementation of the 1989 Children Act: firm on what workers must do, utterly flexible as to what social services must provide or on the procedure for implementation of the Act. In standard practice the limits of social work are set by the operational need to avoid error. This is essentially quantitative social work—how much output? how much cost? how risky? A qualitative approach to social work provision does not lead decision-making. The low risk rule-following approach to social work obviates the need for high quality workers even in child protection. Failure to keep up with recording and reviewing cases as and when appropriate is far more serious a matter than the quality of work between worker and client. This of course is a point emphasized in the burgeoning 'Quality Protects' literature for children and family work in Britain. However, quality comes from within the worker and is not so easily observable or recordable; that is, it makes evaluation and appraisal difficult.

A virtue ethics approach relies on a call to conscience in the worker, and is a function of reflection and self-understanding/self-monitoring. Resistance to the idea of virtue signals a bad conscience. Virtue ethics has often been linked to the phrase 'doing the right thing' and with social work, as with other welfare systems, we have a conscience about what we ought to do when constraints imposed by weaker moral, though stronger political reasons do not permit the action informed by virtue. We

might call this bad conscience the inconvenience of supererogation. That is, virtue demands as a matter of course that one do more than one's duty; indeed duty is not a moral factor. This we discussed in the previous section. There are no specifiable duties towards clients in terms of the quality of the work. Virtue calls upon the inner sense of the essential rightness of one's stance commensurate with the situation and the determinations of a moral dialogue with the rest of society.

To make moral demands outside of organizational constraints is inconvenient because it implies criticisms of organizational conduct for not doing the right thing—what should have been done in the case. This undercuts a defence in terms of following procedure correctly. At the level of conscience as well as propriety, substantive moral claims will invariably trump those of a formal character. That we know-as-sense of what we ought to do for the sake of the good indicates the fundamentality of virtue. That there are so many caveats for not doing the right thing is often a case, not of misfortune but of a highly determinate system of governance, ideology and vote-grabbing which leads to policies inimical to moral requirements. Purely utilitarian or Kantian schemas which have for so long gone through on the nod in social work education are by comparison negative moralities as applied to social services today. Unlike a virtue ethics they do not promote a moral and social richness of understanding between worker and client. They give reasons for not doing things—thou shalt not (Gregor, 1963, p. 81). The social work organization has become a jealous and self-protective god.

We briefly wish to note that the issue of moral and social complexity raises its head once more. Workers under an Aristotelian scheme, may have to take a critical path through competing conceptions of virtuous action—the tethering of ones actions to an idea of community circumscribed by the client, the SSD, the State, the public and other professionals. Contrary to a narrow closed system approach to ecological modelling which allocates conditional factors precisely within the micro-, meso- or macro-arena, virtue theory under complexity shows a lack of firm boundary conditions. The fluid play of relevant factors across time points out how important it is for social workers to be open to revising their action-plans, and thus of bringing into alignment capacities for perception and judgement.

A virtue ethics for social work would bring back to the centre of debate the importance of the individual worker, not in terms of his or her role, but in terms of character, of human being, of intellect, and as an agent able to make subtle discriminations. The virtuous worker must learn to bring together strength of mind, judgement, perception of situation and action in a highly analytical way, sorting through alternative courses of action as competing expressions of the good life—of eudaimonia; and these are capacities which have been much discounted by the dilution of the demands of social work training in its shift from CQSW to Dip.S.W.

Against a virtue model stands the prevailing orthodoxy of outcomes and competency-based training assessment which has parallels with cruder forms of sampling in social science that take snippets of de-contextualized and uninterpreted human behaviour as standing for the universal. Insofar as a student practitioner tries to account for why they did an action, the elements of that action will tend to be pressed into categories of approved procedure. They will not be treated as part of a

process-narrative expressing student reflection upon self-identity in relation to a rich ecological analysis of the work done. The outcomes approach undermines the idea of cumulative and revisable learning processes. The outcome type question of 'have they done or can they do X or Y?' undermines the role of explanation because it decouples reasons from actions so as to privilege statements visual, textual or verbal of the 'I did this and then I did that' variety. This is banal social work. It fails to recognize the factors of growth, cultivation and reflection that are so central to the idea of a virtuous social work that is liberal rather than reactionary in character.

Conclusion

In this article we have considered the philosophical and practical significance of virtue ethics for social work. We began by showing why and how virtue ethics is different from the moral paradigms that have been with social work for so long—Kantianism and utilitarianism. We then went on to explore both Aristotelian and contemporary perspective on virtue ethics, and finally to bring out their force in relation to social work, social services and the welfare relations.

What we have tried to argue is that virtue is not merely functional to particular situations, but is a structure of inner moral sense guiding conduct in particular situations. However virtue is not natural anymore than are humans. Virtue develops through training via the case study, the exemplary, which is how Aristotle conceives of matters. We are therefore suggesting that social work education needs to deepen the virtuous capacities and skills of workers to analyse the shifting sands of cases, seeing them in a genuine ecological perspective instead of merely uttering, mantra-like, the word 'ecological'.

In addition to this we have tried to show up the political and organizational ramifications of a virtue ethics indicating that it stands in the way of what we have called defensive social work which is managerially and legislatively top-heavy. There is a paradox at the heart of modern social work organizations which is that, in the desperate effort to get away from an image of failure that seemed unavoidable in the 1980s (culminating in Cleveland and Pindown) social services, in an age of ever-increasing complexity and claims of the need to work within the realities of government policy, are trying to impose a new perfectionism, a new utopia which depends upon duty to rules. A more vicious and perverse Kantianism one could not imagine. It may be better to be more realistic than this by recognizing the power of moral luck—of the essential indeterminacy of the morally pure act of social work. We should draw upon the insights of virtue ethics where self-conscious, analytical and reflective workers strive dialogically and experientially to grasp the possibility of good action in relation to the vicissitudes of the world—if, of course, it is an ethically informed social work that anybody wants in the first place.

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