

Ethics with Character: Virtues and the Ethical Social Worker

PAUL ADAMS

University of Hawaii at Manoa
Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work

This article explores the relevance to social work of those aspects of applied ethics that are not primarily about identifying and resolving dilemmas. It examines the potential of the ethical tradition rooted in the virtues and character of the practitioner—from Aristotle and Hippocrates to contemporary virtue-based ethics in medicine—to guide and enrich our understanding of the social work profession and the dispositions or qualities of character its practice requires and develops.

Key words: ethics, professional ethics, social work ethics, virtue ethics, Aristotelian ethics

In its emphasis on obligation, derived from values, principles, and standards of conduct, social work ethics focuses on the behavior required or expected of members of a profession (e.g., Congress, 1999; Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2008; Reamer, 2006a, 2006b). "Ethics"—in Strom-Gottfried's (2007) succinct definition—"refers to the embodiment of values into guidelines for behavior" (p. 1). [Here, it is clear from the context, she means the applied ethics of a profession, not ethics as that branch of philosophy also known as moral philosophy.] Social work's literature on ethics, like its curricula, emphasizes principles, rules, obligations, and dilemmas; it offers guidelines for professional conduct and for identifying and resolving conflicts of principles and the dilemmas that arise from them.

It is about making the right decision and doing the right thing. The *NASW Code of Ethics*, like the deontological codes (or codes of duty) of other professions, is an important tool for identifying social work's core values, summarizing broad principles, and establishing specific ethical standards to guide practice. These are standards to which NASW expects the general public to hold the profession accountable and to which, in principle, it holds its own members accountable—helping professionals identify and resolve ethical dilemmas, and socializing new practitioners (NASW, 1999).

So much is this approach to professional ethics taken for granted that it is easy to overlook how different it is from the traditional understanding of ethics, no less in the classical and Christian West from Aristotle to Aquinas than in the East in the other main religions and ethical traditions of the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In that older view, ethics is fundamentally about happiness rather than obligation, and about character and the virtues rather than about resolving moral dilemmas (MacIntyre, 2006; Pinckaers, 1995). This is as true for applied professional ethics, such as those of Hippocrates in medicine, as of general philosophical ethics (Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993; Pellegrino, 2008).

This article draws on classical, medieval, and contemporary virtue-oriented ethics to address those habits of heart and mind (Tocqueville, 2000) critical for ethical practice. It analyses the potential of what has come to be called virtue ethics, and in particular the classical Aristotelian-Thomist tradition of ethics (Aristotle, 2002; Aquinas, 1981, 2005) as developed by MacIntyre (1984, 1990) and other contemporary neo-Aristotelian or virtue-ethicists (Crisp & Slote, 1997; Darwall, 2003), to guide our understanding of the social work profession and the dispositions that its practice requires and develops.

Ethics' Loss of Character

After the death of Aquinas in 1274, both philosophical ethics and moral theology underwent a fundamental shift away from character, virtues, and habits of the heart to a narrower focus on the rightness or wrongness of specific actions (Pinckaers, 1995). The result in modern professional as well

as general ethics, descending from Kant (1724-1804) and to a lesser extent Mill (1806-1873), is that ethical decision-making activity tends to be abstracted from the life, development, and character of the decision-maker. The older tradition and modern virtue ethics, in contrast, conceive a human life as a history in which each choice we make disposes us to make similar choices in the future, so that ethical conduct becomes a matter of dispositions or character—virtues and vices acquired by practice and lost by disuse—rather than of episodic, purely rational choices.

The weakness of abstracting ethics as a decision-making activity from moral development and the character of the agent making the decision is sometimes recognized (Cohen & Cohen, 1998; Freeman, 2000; McBeath & Webb, 2002) or implied in the professional literature. Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2003), for example, assert that, "Ethical conduct grows out of sound character that leads you to respond with maturity, judgment, discretion, wisdom, and prudence" (p. 11). That is, it requires the master virtue of *phronesis* (*prudentia*), which all those terms denote. The Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) 2001 *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) required as its second foundation program objective that graduates understand the profession's values, standards, and principles, and that they practice accordingly; but the relation between understanding and practice is not specified. The link between understanding and action—that is, the character and virtues of the practitioner that are needed reliably to translate one into the other—is missing.

The psychoanalytic concept "professional use of self" directed attention to qualities of the practitioner in linking knowledge and skills to practice. It was a required program objective for student learning under the previous accreditation standards. EPAS (CSWE, 2001), however, dropped this objective, presumably because there was no longer a shared understanding of what it meant or how to achieve it. No comparable focus on the practitioner has replaced it.

Limitations of Decision Procedures

In a highly influential article on "Modern Moral Philosophy," Anscombe (1958) argued that the "law conception of ethics" was focused overwhelmingly on obligation and duty, drawing on abstract, universally applicable principles such as Kant's Categorical Imperative or Mill's Greatest Happiness principle, to serve as a test for maxims. The result of both Kant's deontology (or duty-based ethics) and Mill's utilitarianism is an unhelpfully inflexible moral code and, in Kant's case, a concept of law and obligation that was meaningless in the absence of an authoritative lawgiver. The force of those moral "musts" and "shoulds" of deontology were unexplained and lacked theoretical justification. At the same time, Kupperman (1991) argues, the resulting emphasis on decision procedures is indeterminate in the results it yields. For example, does Kant's deontology universally rule out suicide, lying, or theft? Utilitarianism, in its reliance on the maximization of happiness—understood as pleasure—to judge an action or rule of action, seems to make it possible to justify the most monstrous acts, such as torture of detainees or murder of children, if one reasonably calculates that the expected consequence of not doing those acts is likely to be worse (Anscombe, 1958).

With their focus on making decisions about how to act by applying universal principles, decision trees typically (though not always) neglect the decision-maker and the decision-maker's character, culture, history, and all that shapes the person who is to make the decision, as well as how the particular decision relates to other decisions in the individual's life (see, for example, the discussion of guidelines for ethical decision making in social work in Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2008). It is as if each of us were a computer with a program for deciding moral questions (Kupperman, 1991). But determining what inputs from the environment are relevant or salient, as an ethical decision-maker must do, is not a neutral task. How practitioners assess an ethically problematic social situation depends, in Kupperman's terms, on their moral sensitivity, training, and experience—in short, on their character. Traits of character not only suit us for life, "but shape our vision of life, helping to determine not only who we are but what

world we see," as Meilaender (1984, p. 11) puts it. The ability to apply a decision procedure, as Aristotle (2002) warned in different terms, thus presupposes moral education and experience. It requires, in particular, the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom (*phronesis*), which develops only with maturity and cannot be acquired at one's mother's knee or by a clever fifteen-year-old.

The decision-procedure approach to professional ethics orients the teaching of values and ethics to the identification of quandaries or "ethical issues," and to applying consistent, rational decision procedures to their resolution. It addresses itself, then, to individual decisions, without attention to pattern and continuity of character, or to the stable dispositions of the actor that make for virtuous professional conduct as a matter of conscious habit and will, whether or not a particular ethical quandary or dilemma is involved.

Virtue Ethics

Considerations like these led to a revival over the last half-century of the classical tradition of ethics that extends in the West from the Greek world of Aristotle to the high Middle Ages of Aquinas. This tradition understands ethics as about *ethos* (a Greek word for habit leaning toward the sense of character) and the virtues that are necessary for flourishing and well-being or happiness (*eudaimonia*) of individuals and communities. Virtues in this context are stable and firm dispositions to do the good, to act, for example, with practical judgment or wisdom (prudence, *phronesis*), courage (fortitude), moderation (temperance), and justice. These are the cardinal or "hinge" virtues shared by ancient Greeks and Romans and integrated into the Christian ethical tradition as part of a list that added the grace-dependent or theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. They are habits of the heart and mind. A virtue in this sense is a character trait—that is, a disposition that involves the will and is part of the stable core of the human being in question, as distinct from an automatic habit like fastening one's seat belt in a car.

However, such a disposition, like courage or wisdom, is not an isolated or single (even conscious or rational) tendency

to do, for example, courageous or wise things. "It is concerned with many other actions as well, with emotions and emotional reactions, choices, values, desires, perceptions, attitudes, interests, expectations and sensibilities. To possess a virtue is to be a certain sort of person with a certain complex mindset" (Hursthouse, 2008). Neither "traits" nor "dispositions" captures the full or classical meaning of virtues as an interconnected whole. The "virtues talk to each other," as McCloskey says (2006, p. 171). So, for example, courage, as distinct from recklessness, is balanced and completed by temperance and prudence. Social work is a field for the exercise of all the virtues together.

The concept of virtues, understood as positive and stable character traits, gets at what matters to professional practice—not our opinions, but how well we act, as a matter of habit and will in the professional use of self, in ways required for and developed by practice within the profession of social work. In professional ethics, virtue-based approaches, including the Hippocratic ethics that prevailed in medicine for 2,500 years until well into the last century, look not simply to those virtues needed for the end of human well-being, but specifically to those virtues required for and developed by the profession in question, given its mission and purpose. Unlike general ethics, it addresses the question of the character and virtues of an excellent professional, whether physician, lawyer, or social worker (Oakley & Cocking, 2001).

Limitations of Virtue Ethics

An objection frequently made to virtue ethics is its weakness as a guide to action, in particular to resolving quandaries, widely seen as the central task of professional ethics. Virtue ethicists have responded by providing detailed but not always convincing examples of how to resolve a dilemma without resort to principles, duties, or rules (for example, Hursthouse, 1995). More persuasively, they use a *tu quoque* (you too) argument, pointing to the large gap in principle-based ethics between ethical standards and concrete practice situations where precisely the master virtue of *phronesis* or prudence is most required (e.g., Hursthouse, 1991, 1995).

In any case, a social worker who aims to develop those virtues necessary to flourish as a professional (or as a human being)—to be guided in action by what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances—is not thereby obliged to disregard principles or consequences. A leading virtue ethicist, Hursthouse (1999), claims Anscombe and Aquinas as virtue ethicists rather than deontologists, but acknowledges that neither rejected the concepts of ethical principles or obligations, or indeed of exceptionless norms such as the absolute proscription on lying or the intentional taking of innocent human life (Finnis, 2005). For Aquinas, the principle of love of self and neighbor (and thus respect for the well-being of each and all human beings) was such that no human act could be judged as other than wrong if it was not in line with it (Finnis, 2005). In professional as distinct from general ethics, especially in the health and helping professions, ethicists who discuss the virtues tend to emphasize, as did Aquinas, the complementarity and mutual necessity of principles, duties, and virtues (Freeman, 2000; Pellegrino & Thomasma, 1993; Pellegrino, 2008).

A related concern is with the apparent circularity of virtue ethics—virtuous behavior is what the virtuous person models, but that person is virtuous who behaves virtuously. So how do we decide who is virtuous and therefore an exemplar in the first place? This may be less disabling an objection than it appears, especially in a society where there is general agreement on what a virtuous person is like and how they behave, as we agree on the color yellow or the taste of chocolate and teach those things to children by pointing to exemplars. But in a society where such consensus in the moral sphere is thin and often seen as a matter of personal or subjective values, the foundation of a shared moral tradition that would produce general agreement in identifying virtuous persons is weak or lacking. Even virtue ethics in this context tends to the subjective and relativistic (e.g., Hursthouse, 1991), to consequentialism in Anscombe's sense—Anscombe coined the term in her 1958 article to denote the idea that anything goes if the price is right (Anscombe, 1958; Coope, 2006). Anscombe herself (1958) argued that the intellectual work had not been done to make the virtues usable in moral philosophy and the

necessary tools for doing it were not available in the current state of philosophy.

One response to this problem is to point out that in terms of giving guidance for action, utilitarianism and Kantian deontology are again in no better shape. As Hursthouse (1999) puts it:

Act utilitarianism must specify what are to count as the best consequences, and deontology what is to count as a correct moral rule, producing a second premise, before any guidance is given. And, similarly, virtue ethics must specify who is to count as a virtuous agent. So far, the three are all in the same position. (p. 28)

Virtue ethics thus defines a virtuous agent as one who has and exercises certain character traits or virtues, the virtues then being defined as those character traits a human being needs for *eudaimonia*—that is, to flourish and live well as a human being. As Peterson and Seligman (2004) found, there is a strong convergence across time, place, and cultures on what the main virtues are.

Another response to the circularity objection is to point out that seeking guidance from a virtuous agent, far from being a mystery, is an everyday experience, especially perhaps in the helping professions. If I am unsure how to act in a given situation or grey area and I want to act honestly (with integrity), I will seek out someone I know to be honest, indeed more reliably honest than I. (If I want a way out of what honesty may require, I might look for someone I know to be clever at fudging of this sort.) I do not have to be a person of great probity myself to recognize such a friend or colleague, just as I do not have to be a carpenter to appreciate a well-made table (Boswell, 2008). Similarly, if I see the need for prudence or sound practical judgment, I will consult someone I respect for this virtue. If I am lucky, this may even be my supervisor! Compared with utilitarianism or deontology, which reduce ethical questions to one or a few basic principles, virtue ethics draws on the rich human vocabulary that societies have developed to define an action, not only as right or wrong, but, in the case of the latter, more specifically as dishonest, cowardly,

reckless, unfaithful, arrogant, unjust, and so on (Anscombe, 1958; Hursthouse, 2003).

It is thus false to claim that virtue ethics does not provide any rules for action. It supplies a great many. As Hursthouse (1999) says, "Not only does each virtue generate a prescription—do what is honest, charitable, generous—but each vice a prohibition—do not do what is dishonest, uncharitable, mean" (p. 16).

Even in a pluralist and culturally divided society like ours where there is wide disagreement about the application and force of moral judgments, the situation may be less desperate in the professions. Thus, Pellegrino (2008) argues, a higher level of consensus, a more widely shared moral tradition, is available to the professions and professional ethics than in society at large, and this makes the virtues both possible and necessary to them. Medicine and social work today may lack the classical and medieval understanding of the virtues as grounded in a philosophical anthropology based in natural law. But, as the NASW Code of Ethics (1999) puts it, "Professional ethics are at the core of social work." Social work as a profession has a *telos* in that it serves primarily the good and well-being of the client, as the good of the patient is agreed to be the primary end and *telos* of medicine. The importance of deontological codes to all professions—where the duties of practitioners are spelled out as part of the profession's self-definition, and enforced by the profession on its members—reflects, among other things, the need for a common understanding within a profession of its agreed purpose and mission. Notwithstanding the limitations of such codes of duties and the deontological theory underlying them—if indeed it can be called a theory at all since the force of its moral "must" is unexplained (Coope, 2006)—the common sense of purpose they reflect suggests that integration of the virtues has a better chance of success in professional than in general ethics. At the same time the collapse in the twentieth century of the most widely used and longest lasting virtue-based approach to professional ethics, that of Hippocrates, suggests both the difficulty of the task and the need to rebuild the moral philosophy of the professions on a different basis.

Why Virtues?

Like social work, virtue ethics is fundamentally concerned with human well-being and suffering, about which the ethics of obligation and decision procedures has little or nothing to say. In a profession where the character of the agent has long been understood as inseparable from the professional act or intervention performed, the virtues refocus attention on the character of the practitioner and the professional use of self. This reorientation accords well with the growing body of research suggesting the importance of the client-practitioner relationship as distinct from the specific theories or methods employed (Drisko, 2004; Graybeal, 2007; Wampold, 2001).

As social work is challenged to do, the virtues cross cultures and disciplines, despite the erosion of a common moral tradition in the West. They are not only central to the classical tradition in the West, but also have an apparently universal resonance, East and West, in Confucianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism as well as in ancient Greek philosophy and medieval Jewish and Christian theology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In their study of these great cultural resources, Seligman and his associates in the field of positive psychology found a high degree of convergence across cultures and history which they distilled into six core virtues: courage, justice, humanity, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For each virtue they identified a subcategory of strengths of character.

These researchers are developing a series of instruments and applications for assessing and building these strengths. Just as virtue ethics has recovered for philosophy a sense of ethics as rooted in human flourishing and excellence of character, so Seligman's positive psychology seeks to develop an understanding of virtues and character strengths in the field of personality psychology, and specifically current trait theory. The project of Seligman and his associates is nothing less than to "reclaim the study of character and virtue as legitimate topics of psychological inquiry and informed societal discourse" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 3). The implications of the ethics of virtue are being explored in many fields and professions, not only philosophy and psychology, but also

sociology, law, medicine, and nursing (Flanagan & Jupp, 2001; Oakley & Cocking, 2001; Hoyt-O'Connor, 1998; Lutzen & da Silva, 1996; Macaro, 2006). Social work, a virtue-guided profession with its own tradition of strengths and empowerment, its commitment to the well-being of individuals and communities and to the alleviation of suffering, seems well placed to draw on and contribute to this work.

Social Work, Social Welfare, and Human Well-Being

In the preamble to the NASW Code of Ethics, the term "well-being" occurs three times. "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being.... A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual well-being in a social context and the well-being of society." According to the 2008 version of EPAS (CSWE, 2008), "The purpose of the social work profession is to promote human and community well-being." For Aristotle, *eudaimonia*, translated as well-being, flourishing, or happiness (which in its classical sense resembles health in that it is not simply subjective—I could be wrong about being happy as I could about my health) connotes the good life. The virtues, in this tradition, are necessary for and partly constitute the good life, that is, the well-being of individual and society—the mission of social work.

For Aristotle, then, as well as Aquinas, and for that matter, the Dalai Lama, ethics is rooted in "real" happiness, understood as human flourishing or well-being, as distinct from pleasure (Aquinas, 1981, 2005; Aristotle, 2002; Pinckaers, 1995). As is the case for other animals, it is about what, given our nature, is necessary for humans to thrive as individuals and—inseparably from that—as communities. Aristotle thus roots the human need for the virtues in biology, in what it takes for humans to flourish given their nature (including above all the capacity for reason). Virtues are not *means* to human flourishing, however, but partially constitute it. For Aquinas, building directly on Aristotle, but sixteen hundred years later in the very different context of Christian theology, there were three types of good inherent in our nature as humans that defined our *telos*. Like all animals, it is a good for us (1) to maintain ourselves in

existence and (2) to reproduce ourselves and care for our offspring. In contrast to other creatures, it is also a good for humans (3) to develop and use the powers of rational thought and, in consequence, to know and love God (Aquinas, 1981; Williams, 2005).

Of particular importance in the development of a modern ethics, rooted in the sociology and history of the discipline and drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, was the work of MacIntyre, especially from the publication in 1981 of his groundbreaking work, *After Virtue*, through his 1999 book, *Dependent Rational Animals*. The latter has particular relevance for the understanding both of social welfare policy and of social work as a profession. In it, MacIntyre seeks to develop a normative ethics grounded, like Aristotle's, in nature. He sees humans as animals with a special capacity for rational agency. We are born, in complete dependence, into a network of relationships of giving and receiving. To achieve some relative independence, we need to develop certain virtues that we acquire with sustained help and guidance from others (especially, but not only, parents)—courage, justice, temperateness, and "the cheerful wit of an amiable will" (p. 92).

But human flourishing requires growth from and within our vulnerable condition of reciprocal indebtedness. We are born already indebted to others for our economic, linguistic, cultural, and other resources, depend on the care of others to thrive, and grow toward a measure of independence while always subject to weakness, disability, and illness. Disability is thus understood, not as a matter of us and them, in terms of the benevolence of the unimpaired toward those with disabilities. Rather, it is an important aspect of every stage of the life-cycle, but especially of early childhood and old age. Human flourishing requires a recognition of the need for all of us to make others' good our own, to give with just generosity and to receive with gratitude, courtesy, and forbearance. (Here, in contrast to Aristotle's great-souled man who is ashamed to receive benefits, MacIntyre follows Aquinas.) Our flourishing as humans depends on our developing the virtues required by our animal nature and recognition of our dependence on and duty to others in our continual vulnerability. MacIntyre rejects conceptions of social welfare that contrast individual and

communal goods, self-interest and public interest, individualism and collectivism, or that limit moral claims on us to "persons" who are self-aware, rational, and free to make choices, rather than to human beings as such.

MacIntyre thus offers a different, more sociologically rooted way of thinking about social welfare and, say, the ethical basis of social security, than those proposed from different political perspectives by Rawls (1971) and Nozick (1974). In comparison with MacIntyre, these theorists and others who start with individual *rights* and talk the language of social contract neglect the nature of human beings as irreducibly social animals and abstract their subjects, like Robinson Crusoe, from history, character, and culture. For MacIntyre, making the good of others my own supports the flourishing of the community which is necessary to and inseparable from my own flourishing.

A Virtue-Guided Craft

In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre (1999), like Aristotle, roots the human need for the virtues in biology, in what it takes for humans to flourish—and what for humans constitutes flourishing—given their nature. In earlier work, he argued for a more sociological approach that is particularly helpful to the understanding of social work as a profession and the place of the virtues within it. From this perspective, and leaving aside for the moment the question of social work's status as a profession, we would understand it in the first place as a social practice. A practice is a form of complex cooperative activity with goods internal to it—e.g., in the case of chess, "analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity" (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 188)—as distinct from external goods that may also attend the practice but are not intrinsic to it—such as money or prestige. These internal goods, which we learn and experience only as participants in the practice, are tied to the standards of excellence that are the practice's *telos* toward which participants strive and by which they are judged. To enter into that practice, the novice has to accept its standards of excellence, be guided and corrected by them, and work toward achieving them. By doing so, the novice acquires those virtues necessary for achieving the goods internal to the practice.

Without taking up the much-debated questions of what is or is not a practice in this sense, or how much explanatory work the concept can do, we may examine MacIntyre's (1990) discussion of moral philosophy (or inquiry) as a craft (his own craft) in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* in order to assess its applicability to the profession of social work. All the time when reading this section of MacIntyre's book (1990, ch. 3, pp. 58-81), we could try mentally substituting social work—its status as a practice, the virtues it requires, and the character it builds—for the craft of moral philosophy. Because achievement of the internal goods of moral inquiry depends on acquisition of certain human qualities or virtues, moral inquiry is not only a craft, but a virtue-guided craft. Virtues are learned and character developed through practice of the craft, in which one cannot excel without them.

To advance in the craft, the apprentice or student has to learn to identify her mistakes in applying its acknowledged standards, to know what is good and best for her at her present level, and also what is best without qualification. In the case of a watchmaker, or a physician, the apprentice learns what is required to do the best she can at her stage of learning, and also what constitutes the highest standard of excellence in her craft. It is toward that excellence that, with whatever success, she is working. Do we have such a conception of social work as a craft, with goods internal to it that can be acquired through development of the appropriate virtues? What is the highest standard of excellence in our profession and in whom would we find it embodied? (Difficult as these questions may be to answer in a way that commands general agreement among social workers, the task surely would be substantially more difficult in the case of human beings and the good life in general.)

Applied to social work education, MacIntyre's discussion of craft also points to how in social work, as in furniture making or fishing (or hula or meditation or moral philosophy), we need a teacher (or teachers) to help us actualize our potential to advance toward the *telos* of the practice. In the following passage from MacIntyre (1990), I have substituted "social work" or "professional practice" for the author's use of "moral enquiry." MacIntyre sees moral inquiry as a craft in which as novices or apprentices we need a teacher...

and we shall have to learn from that teacher and initially accept on the basis of his or her authority within the community of a craft precisely what intellectual and moral habits it is which we must cultivate and acquire if we are to become effective self-moved participants in such [professional practice]. Hence there emerges a conception of rational teaching authority internal to the practice of the craft of [social work], as indeed such conceptions emerge in such other crafts as furniture making and fishing, where, just as in [social work], they partially define the relationship of master-craftsman to apprentice. (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 63)

To carry out my responsibility as a social work educator, this suggests, I need to know the literature about the differences between how novices and experts learn and how this information can facilitate both teaching and learning in the path to excellence in the profession (Adams, 2004). In addition, I need to have thought deeply with my colleagues about the “intellectual and moral habits” we must help students cultivate and acquire—and that we must model—and how we are going to do so in our professional programs.

Craft or Profession?

The social work profession, of course, claims that it is more than a craft like furniture making or playing chess. Its claim to professional status is central to its historic push for accreditation and especially for state licensing that restricts the practice, or at least the title, of social work. The difference, and what suggests comparison with law or medicine rather than fishing, seems to be tied to the moral nature of the profession. Oakley and Cocking (2001) offer an instructive application of virtue ethics to professional roles, primarily in medicine and law. An action is right, according to virtue ethics, if and only if it is what an agent with a virtuous character would do in the circumstances. Acting in one's professional capacity one may be warranted or required to perform actions (treating an infectious disease, for example, or performing surgery) that would not be allowed or required of other citizens. A virtuous doctor

is one who applies her knowledge and skills with such virtues as prudence, benevolence, compassion and caring, courage, intellectual honesty, humility, effacement of self-interest, justice, and trustworthiness. Pellegrino (2008) and Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993) have proposed such a list for the medical profession and a similar list could be developed for the virtuous social worker. Her practice requires and develops goods internal to the profession (as distinct from such external goods as wealth and status) such as diagnostic acumen. This is no different in kind from the goods internal to the practice of playing chess, such as analytical skill and strategic imagination (MacIntyre, 1984). Medicine's claim to be a profession, in contrast to other occupations or hobbies, is that it deals with goods important for human flourishing, specifically the key good of health. Similarly, the profession of law serves (in principle) the key human good of justice (Oakley & Cocking, 2001).

Because of the greater importance of professions for key goods required for human flourishing, failure to uphold a professional role has greater moral significance than failure in other kinds of non-professional occupational roles. Such failure in medicine may take many forms, ranging from refusal to treat or else over-treating a patient for monetary considerations, all the way to Nazi physician Josef Mengele's medical experiments on concentration camp inmates. Oakley and Cocking (2001) argue that is partly because the traditional professions of law and medicine deal with unequivocally key human goods (i.e., justice and health, respectively), that other aspiring professions measure themselves against them. In support of their aspirations, occupations that aspire to professional status often put forward arguments that presuppose, in Oakley and Cocking's (2001) words, that "the more an occupation's body of special expertise deals with a *key* human good, the greater claim that occupation has to be properly regarded as a *profession*" (p. 80).

In this context, social work faces a familiar paradox. In the classical view, ethics is fundamentally about individual and community well-being or happiness, *eudaimonia*. The virtues are key to and partly constitute human well-being. But when we talk about social work as a profession, it is not so clear as for law and medicine what key human good it serves. Indeed, we

are tempted to say that it serves the key good of (or in Platonic terms, its essence is) individual and community well-being. The challenge then becomes one either of specifying the kinds of specific knowledge and skill that equip social workers for such noble and all-encompassing work or of delimiting more precisely the professional roles and competencies involved. In any case, we may conclude tentatively that social work is a profession that aspires to serve human goods that are important for individual and community well-being. To that extent it is a virtue-based profession.

Teaching Virtues

Whether virtues can be taught and how to do so if they can are questions at least as old as Plato. In the traditional Aristotelian view, virtues are learned and sustained through practice and habituation and they are lost through disuse. The education of character—i.e., in the virtues—is especially important in childhood, but is a lifelong endeavor. Some virtues, especially the governing virtue of practical wisdom or prudence, depend on the experience and maturity of adulthood.

To this I add the suggestion that social work education, in requiring certain outcomes for student learning, such as critical thinking or communication, is identifying the need not only for specific knowledge and skill, but also for identifiable virtues or dispositions that will ensure their appropriate use. To say that social workers need certain sets of knowledge and skills in order to enter and grow toward excellence in their craft—which I take to be uncontroversial—is to say that, unless those abilities or competencies are to remain unused or undeveloped, they need to be supported by specific virtues—strengths of character that are habits of the heart and mind, traits that are stable but sensitive to context and capable of growth and development.

How exactly the teaching of ethics, and of social work in general, may benefit from virtue ethics is not yet clear, but some prior work in social work and other fields, particularly in the area of critical thinking, is suggestive. Paul and Elder (2001) and Gambrill (1997) identify lists of intellectual virtues or traits that are required for and developed by critical

thinking. But they do not assume and it is not the case that such virtues as courage, humility, and fairmindedness are best taught in a social work program as discrete curricular topics abstracted from the theory and practice of social work. Rather, as Paul (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2005) argues, they require a shift in focus that makes the student's own mind and experiences the subject of study and learning. Through formative instructor feedback, peer assessment, and self-assessment, social work students, like watchmaker apprentices and violin students, learn how to identify and correct their mistakes in light of the acknowledged standards of the profession. From the perspective of MacIntyre's (1990) conception of craft and *a fortiori* Oakley and Cocking's (2001) conception of a profession, social work practice depends on acquisition of certain virtues. The social work student learns these virtues and develops her character and ethical use of self through the practice of her profession, in which she cannot achieve excellence without them.

Self-assessment—how did I do in relation to the level I should have achieved at this stage of my social work education; and where am I in relation to the highest standards of excellence in my craft?—and instructor assessment of the same questions are intrinsic aspects of lifelong learning for a social worker, as for a violinist, hula dancer, or watchmaker. As a violinist, I learn—from my teacher and through practice—the virtues required for and developed through violin playing. My teacher does not teach me those virtues directly, by having me study the literature on fortitude, perseverance, and humility. Instead she teaches me the violin and in the process I learn the virtues needed to advance to a higher level. Such an understanding of social work as a virtue-guided craft or profession necessarily challenges the philistine view of assessment in higher education as a purely extrinsic bureaucratic activity imposed in response to the demands of funders and consumers.

In their guide to critical thinking, Paul and Elder (2001) suggest a pattern in which students as critical thinkers receive learning opportunities to apply routinely intellectual standards (such as clarity, accuracy, fairness) to the elements of reasoning (e.g., purposes, inferences, assumptions) as they develop the intellectual traits (e.g., intellectual humility, courage, fairmindedness). Perkins, Jay, and Tishman (1993), in their

discussion of thinking dispositions, suggest a process of enculturation rather than direct transmission, one through which students develop character traits through immersion in a culture of good thinking. The process involves models of good reasoning, explanations about them, peer interactions, and opportunities for formal and informal instructor, peer, and self assessment.

Pellegrino and Thomasma (1993) argue that "The power of a faculty model to shape behavior for good or evil is enormous" (p. 177) and far greater than that of a lecture or course in ethics. This power, they say, "generates a serious *de facto* obligation for faculty members and medical schools to be critical of the value systems they express and transmit" (p. 177). The result of lax virtue, which can be found in all professions, is increased pressures for externally imposed rules and regulations that in turn limit professional autonomy and judgment.

The work of Seligman, Peterson, and associates, who describe their classification as "the social science equivalent of virtue ethics" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 89), offers a more direct approach to teaching the virtues—one that identifies signature strengths of character and uses scientific method to assess them and interventions to enhance them. This body of work has been developed so far in relation to its therapeutic prevention and treatment potential rather than as an approach to professional education, where it seems nevertheless to have clear application. It offers an approach to building and instruments for assessing the strengths of character, and hence the virtues, important for ethical social work practice.

Conclusion

Much conceptual as well as empirical work needs to be done before the implications of the virtues for social work become clear. The task of this article has been to provide an exploratory sortie into this area that may provide a starting point for wider exploration. Here we have seen how, beginning with the challenge posed by virtue ethics to our current ways of thinking about ethics, our inquiry has shifted the focus from the ethical decision to be made to the character of the practitioner who is preparing for or engaged in day-to-day professional practice,

from applying decision procedures to the ethical use of self. In doing so, we have moved inevitably from ethics as a curricular area to discussion of social work itself as a virtue-guided profession that both requires and develops the virtues in its practitioners. It is precisely because social work is an applied profession, with a shared understanding of the good and end it serves, that it has both the possibility and need to integrate the virtues and character of its practitioners into its professional ethics.

References

- Adams, P. (2004). Classroom assessment and social welfare policy: Addressing challenges to teaching and learning. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 40(1), 121-142.
- Anscombe, G. E. M. (1958). Modern moral philosophy. *Philosophy*, 33, 1-19. Reprinted in Anscombe, *The collected philosophical papers of G. E. M. Anscombe: Vol.III Ethics, religion and politics* (pp. 26-42). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.
- Aquinas, T. (1981). *Summa theologiae*. (Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Trans.). Westminster, MD: Christian Classics.
- Aquinas, T. (2005). *Disputed questions on the virtues*. (E. M. Atkins, Trans.; E. M. Atkins & T. Williams, Eds.). [Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy]. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Aristotle. (2002). *Nicomachean ethics*. (J. Sachs, Trans. & Ed.). Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, R. Pullins Co.
- Boswell, J. (2008). *Life of Johnson*. (Oxford World's Classics). (R. W. Chapman & J. D. Fleeman, Eds.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cohen, E. D., & Cohen, G. S. (1998). *The virtuous therapist: Ethical practice of counseling and psychotherapy*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Congress, E. P. (1999). *Social work values and ethics: Identifying and resolving professional dilemmas*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall.
- Coope, C. M. (2006). Modern virtue ethics. In T. Chappell (Ed.), *Values and virtues: Aristotelianism in contemporary ethics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Corey, G., Corey, M. S., & Callanan, P. (2003). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions*. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Council on Social Work Education (2001). *Educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS)* [Rev. 2003, 2004]. Washington, DC: Author.

- Council on Social Work Education (2008). *Educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS)*. Retrieved July 24, 2008 from <http://www.cswe.org/NR/rdonlyres/2A81732E-1776-4175-AC42-65974E96BE66/0/2008EducationalPolicyandAccreditationStandards.pdf>
- Crisp, R. & Slote, M. (Eds.) (1997). *Virtue ethics*. Oxford Readings in Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Darwall, S. (Ed.). [2003]. *Virtue ethics*. Malden, MA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Dolgoff, R., Loewenberg, F. M., & Harrington, D. (2008). *Ethical decisions for social work practice* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA : Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- Drisko, J. W. (2004). Common factors in psychotherapy outcome: Meta-analytic findings and their implications for practice and research. *Families in Society*, 85(1), 81-90.
- Finnis, J. (2005). Aquinas' moral, legal, and political philosophy. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved October 17, 2008 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aquinas-moral-political/>
- Flanagan, K., & Jupp, P. C. (2001). *Virtue ethics and sociology: Issues of modernity and religion*. New York: Palgrave.
- Foundation for Critical Thinking (2005). Critical thinking, moral integrity, and citizenship: Teaching for the intellectual virtues. Retrieved June 23, 2005, from <http://www.criticalthinking.org/resources/articles/ct-moral-integrity.shtml>
- Freeman, S. J. (2000). *Ethics: An introduction to philosophy and practice*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Gambrill, E. (1997). *Social work practice: A critical thinker's guide*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Graybeal, C. T. (2007). Evidence for the art of social work. *Families in Society*, 88(4), 513-523.
- Hoyt-O'Connor, P. (1998). Bioethics and medical ethics: Virtue and the practice of medicine. Retrieved June 7, 2005 from <http://www.bu.edu/wcp/Papers/Bioe/BioeHoyt.htm>.
- Hursthouse, R. (1991). Virtue theory and abortion. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 20, 223-246.
- Hursthouse, R. (1995). Applying virtue ethics. In R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence, & W. Quinn (Eds.), *Virtues and reasons: Essays in honour of Philippa Foot* (pp. 57-75). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hursthouse, R. (1999). *On virtue ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hursthouse, R. (2003). Normative virtue ethics. In S. Darwall (Ed.), *Virtue ethics* (pp. 184-202). Malden, MA & Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Hursthouse, R. (2008). Virtue ethics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (Ed.). Retrieved August 15, 2008 from <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/ethics-virtue>.

- Kupperman, J. J. (1991). *Character*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lutzen, K., & da Silva, A. B. (1996). The role of virtue ethics in psychiatric nursing. *Nursing Ethics*, 3(3), 262-211.
- Macaro, A. (2006). *Reason, virtue and psychotherapy*. Chichester, England: Whurr Publishers (Wiley).
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990). *Three rival versions of moral enquiry: Encyclopaedia, genealogy, and tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1998). Politics, philosophy and the common good. In K. Knight (Ed.), *The MacIntyre reader*, pp. 235-252.
- MacIntyre, A. (1999). *Dependent rational animals: Why human beings need the virtues*. Chicago, IL: Open Court.
- MacIntyre, A. (2006). *Alasdair MacIntyre: Ethics and politics. Selected essays, Volume 2*. Cambridge, UK & New York: Cambridge University Press.
- McBeath, G., & Webb, S. A. (2002). Virtue ethics and social work: Being lucky, realistic, and not doing one's duty. *British Journal of Social Work*, 32, 1015-1036.
- McCloskey, D. N. (2006). *The bourgeois virtues: Ethics for an age of commerce*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Meilaender, G. C. (1984). *The theory and practice of virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- National Association of Social Workers (1999). *NASW Code of Ethics*. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. New York: Basic Books.
- Oakley, J., & Cocking, D. (2001). *Virtue ethics and professional roles*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Paul, R. W., & Elder, L. (2002). *Critical thinking: Tools for taking charge of your professional and personal life*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Financial Times Prentice Hall.
- Paul, R. W., & Elder, L. (2001). *The miniature guide to critical thinking: Concepts and tools*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking.
- Pellegrino, E. D. (2008). *The philosophy of medicine reborn : A Pellegrino reader*. Edited by H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., & F. Jotterand. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Pellegrino, E. D., & Thomasma, D. C. (1993). *The virtues in medical practice*. New York : Oxford University Press.
- Perkins, D. N., Jay, E., & Tishman, S. (1993). Beyond abilities: A dispositional theory of thinking. *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, 39(1), 1-21.
- Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, and New York: Oxford University Press.

- Pinckaers, S. (1995). *The sources of Christian ethics* (3rd ed.). [Sr. M.T. Noble, Trans.]. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Reamer, F. G. (2006a). Ethical standards in social work: A review of the NASW code of ethics. Washington, DC : NASW Press.
- Reamer, F. G. (2006b). *Social work values and ethics* (3rd ed.). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Strom-Gofffried, K. (2007). *Ethics in social policy: A primer*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Tocqueville, A. (2000). *Democracy in America* (Perennial Classics ed.). (G. Lawrence, Trans., J. P. Mayer, Ed.). New York: Perennial.
- Wampold, B. E. (2007). *The great psychotherapy debate: Models, methods, and findings*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Williams, T. (2005). Aquinas and the ethics of virtue. Introduction to *Disputed questions on the virtues* (M. Atkins, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Copyright of *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare* is the property of *Western Michigan University* and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.