



# Applying Approaches from Moral Philosophy, Especially Virtue Ethics, When Facing Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work

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## Abstract

This article introduces readers to the application of three approaches from moral philosophy to ethical decision-making in social work. The *Statement of Ethical Principles* of the International Federation of Social Workers points out that social workers often encounter moral quandaries, some due to our function as both helpers and controllers. In addressing these ethical dilemmas, we are obliged to “take responsibility for making ethically informed decisions” and “be prepared to state the reasons” (IFSW, 2012: 5.10 and 5.11). In the United States (US), literature on ethics has relied primarily on two approaches from moral philosophy: deontology (based on principles, rules, and duties) and teleology (based on ultimate ends and consequences, e.g., utilitarian calculations). Social workers internationally have added the perspective of virtue ethics. Thus, discourse among social workers internationally is vital for a balanced strategy to address ethical dilemmas.

With a child welfare example, the article demonstrates how these three theoretical perspectives help in determining an ethical course of action. While principle/duty-based and utilitarian approaches keenly focus on an *act's* morality, virtue ethics first focuses on the *actor's* motivation and characteristics. The article concludes with suggestions on how virtue ethics can inform social workers' professional development and personal growth.

## Keywords

child welfare, ethical decision-making, ethics, moral philosophy, social work, virtue ethics

*“Human flourishing requires a recognition of the need for all of us to make others' good our own, to give with just generosity and receive with gratitude, courtesy, and forbearance”* (Adams, 2009: 94).

*“Because of the difficulty of applying ethical demands to actual situations and the difficulty of evaluating real situations, the questions raised can never be altogether satisfactorily answered. Neither social work nor philosophy will ever be able to establish rules of conduct applicable to every case. What must be done is to clarify general philosophy and make a constant awareness of his value system a habit of mind for every social worker”* (Konopka, 1958: 9).



### Introduction

We will begin with a brief conceptual overview of three perspectives from the western tradition of moral philosophy that I have found useful in developing the “habit of mind” required for ethical practice according to the esteemed German-American social work scholar Gisela Konopka (1910-2003). The first two perspectives, often categorized as deontological and teleological, have influenced many frameworks of analysis for addressing ethical dilemmas and have dominated the teaching of social work ethics in the United States (US). The third perspective, virtue ethics, has recently emerged as an alternative or complementary approach to the first two. Using the “ethics triangle” (Svara, 2007: 68), we will see how these three perspectives can be used together in thinking through ethical quandaries that social workers often face. As the *Statement of Ethical Principles* of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012) suggests, some of these typical dilemmas are due to our function as both helpers and controllers. (Interestingly, the Swedish statement of social work ethics lists as first among eleven common dilemmas: “Care, support and assistance versus control and demands” [Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2008: 6]). I offer here one such example from my practice in child welfare when I faced a decision regarding whether to become party to deception in the interests of a youth’s well-being. Finally, I suggest implications for ethical decision-making, in particular elaborations on professional development and international discourse from the point of view of virtue ethics.

### Conceptual Overview: Three Perspectives for Addressing Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical dilemmas are those difficult situations when we have to choose between courses of action that may at first appear equally good or bad, between ethical standards that conflict, or between competing interests. “An ethical dilemma is a situation in which professional duties and obligations, rooted in core values, clash” (Reamer, 1999: 4).

Typical examples include those when we are forced to choose between duties, for example the duty to maintain confidentiality and the duty to make a mandatory child protection report, or between the interests of children

and their parents. In child welfare, dilemmas tend to hinge on duties to protect the freedom of parents and children on the one hand or their well-being on the other hand. If it is easy to decide on the right course of action, such as when there is a clear legal and ethical prohibition against a particular action, we are not facing a dilemma. Rather, dilemmas arise when we must decide what course of action is ethically most right (or sometimes what is least wrong). Such ethical dilemmas are usually best sorted through using systematic and rational decision making processes to arrive at what appears to be the right action given the circumstances. Reasonable practitioners might disagree on whether that course of action was ethical, and we might ourselves in hindsight question whether we made the right decision. “Having made the choice, the impact of the dilemma does not go away, for even the least unwelcome alternative is still unwelcome” (Banks, 2012: 12). But if we have followed an ethical decision-making process, including using theoretical perspectives from moral philosophy to help both decide and evaluate the decision, we have proceeded as reasonably as possible.

### *Deontological or Principle/ Duty-Based Approaches*

Deontological theories are among the foremost perspectives to which social work scholars, educators, professional associations, and practitioners have turned in establishing ethical duties and addressing dilemmas. Leading American social work ethics scholar Frederick Reamer writes: “Deontological theories (from the Greek *deontos*, “of the obligatory”) are those that claim that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, or good and bad, without regard to their consequences” (1999: 65). These are also referred to as principle or rule-based approaches (often associated with the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Immanuel Kant). If we are justifying an action because it is abiding by a principle or rule, doing our duty (*deon*), or advocating for rights, we are thinking deontologically. “For deontologists, rules, rights, and principles are sacred and inviolable. The ends do not necessarily justify the means, particularly if they require violating some important rule, right, principle, or law”



(Reamer, 2008: 148).

Deontological approaches based on principles and rules that lead to moral duties have influenced the development of ethical standards, codes of conduct and regulations. British social work ethics scholar Sarah Banks writes that "...the principle of respect for persons...has been the most influential in social work ethics" and that it underpins "a set of general principles relating to the relationship between individual social workers and service users" (Banks, 2012: 43, 45). Many social work scholars have included *autonomy* (protect liberty and privacy) along with three additional principles as fundamental to social work ethics: *beneficence* (do good), *non-maleficence* (first do no harm), and *justice* (be fair). Banks identifies these four principles as elements of our "common morality" (2012: 57) and then adds respecting *human dignity*, promoting *well-being*, and especially promoting *social justice* as core principles for social work ethics (2012: 60). American social work ethics scholar Kim Strom-Gottfried includes *fidelity* (be trustworthy and honest) among social work's basic ethical principles (2007: 39).

Aligning with international conventions such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the IFSW's Statement of Ethical Principles for social workers sets forth two fundamental principles: *human rights and dignity and social justice*: 4.1 and 4.2). More specific elaborations and implications follow as guides for social workers' conduct in compliance with those principles, such as 5.3: "Social workers should act with integrity". In another example of a specific standard, the *Code of Ethics* established by the US National Association of Social Workers contains a rule prohibiting social workers from using deception: "Social workers should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty, fraud, or deception" (NASW, 2008: 4.04).

Generally, deontologists argue that there are no exceptions to fundamental, impartial moral rules that apply universally, such as to tell the truth, keep promises, and be fair. However, it is possible to make a deontological, principle- and rule-based argument that in certain cases, higher principles override the rule prohibiting deception. For example, there could be a rule that in those situations when deception is

required to save another's life, then it is ethical to lie as a way to comply with the principles of human rights, dignity, beneficence, well-being and social justice; this would be a universal rule to apply in all such situations.

One limitation of deontological thinking is that principles are often abstract and general rather than sensitive to specific cultural norms or practices; principles also tend to presume the point of view of individual actors rather than that of families or communities (Banks, 2012: 69; Boss, 2014: 334). In addition, many "real world" dilemmas do not seem readily resolvable if we are to strictly abide by one ideal principle above all others. Few principles in social work ethics are universally applicable or absolute. Even self-determination, arising from one of the historic core values in social work – respect for the dignity and worth of the person – is modified in the current US NASW code as it should be applied in practice: "Social workers promote clients' *socially responsible* self-determination" (NASW, 2008: 5, *italics added*). The modifying phrase "socially responsible" was not present in earlier iterations of the *NASW Code of Ethics*, and its addition in 1996 highlighted the understanding that there are occasions when social workers may ethically be required to intrude into the autonomy of a client when there is potential danger to the client or others. Finally, with a keen focus on doing one's duty as the essence of morality, some versions of deontology provide little direction for those situations when we might consider going beyond the call of duty; in moral philosophy, this is called "supererogation", and there is an extensive literature addressing whether or when supererogatory actions might be ethically required; (for more on this debate, see Flescher, 2003; Fowers, 2005; Heyd, 1982 and 2012; McBeath and Webb, 2002; McNaughton and Rawling, 2006; Reamer, 1993: 75-76; and Webster, 2011).

#### *Teleological Approaches: Utilitarian Consequentialism*

"The second major group of theories, teleological theories (from the Greek *teleios*, "brought to its end or purpose"), takes a different approach to ethical choices. From this point of view, the rightness of any action is determined by the goodness of its consequences" (Reamer, 1999:



66). Utilitarian philosophies are examples of this approach (developed by 19<sup>th</sup> century thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill). If we make a decision to take a particular course of action when facing an ethical dilemma based on the potential consequences of that action, we are using utilitarian thinking. Would our intended action result in the greatest amount of good or in good outcomes for the largest number of people? This approach evokes a principle called “utility” finding the “greatest balance of good over evil” (Banks, 2012: 50). However, it differs from deontological approaches in that it focuses on the actions that would result in good ends, purposes or goals rather than principles that would dictate conforming actions (Svara 2007: 59). Ethics educator and author Judith Boss clarifies that presenting “deontology as diametrically opposed to utilitarian theory... is misleading” (2014: 301). Both approaches view duty as important, though deontologists regard actions abiding by universal principles as good and moral for their own sake rather than for their consequences.

“Utilitarian principles have been the most popular guides to social workers’ ethical decisions” (Reamer, 1993: 71). Usually combining and integrating consequential thinking with the deontological approach, “social workers have sought to maximize the good and minimize harm while doing their duty and following their values, principles and codes” (Gray, 2010: 1795). Analyzing how 62 social workers in Israel approached ethical decision-making and reasoning, Osmo and Landau found that “the large majority of social workers in the study based their arguments on either deontological or utilitarian concepts” (2006: 872). McDermott (2011) conducted qualitative research in Australia on how practitioners actually reason when facing ethical dilemmas and found that in addition to ideal principles and rules, many participants in the study also relied on weighing the consequences of their actions. In a recent study of social workers’ decision-making in Slovenia, Sobočan (2013) found that although participants did not formally reference applying moral philosophy, they did describe making choices based on a combination of possibilities and consequences among a complexity of other factors.

Using utilitarian thinking, practitioners are more willing to make exceptions to rules that deontological thinking considers absolute. A typical example is that instead of rigidly following a rule that social workers should never deceive, a utilitarian approach would examine what the results of being honest or deceptive would be, and then if lying could bring about greater good, prevent substantial evil, or benefit many people, it might be morally acceptable to lie. The thought process here is conducting a “calculus” forecasting which action would result in the maximal good and minimal harm for clients, practitioners, agencies and society at large (Reamer in Banks and NØhr, 2012: 112). However, what is good for the majority can also be harmful for a minority (Reamer, 1993: 73-74; 2008: 148). And, as with deontological thinking, utilitarian thinking does not always result in a simple or clear direction; it is impossible, after all, to predict future outcomes with certainty. Moreover, within utilitarianism, some ethicists focus on the short-term consequences of a particular action (“act utilitarianism”) while others take into account long-term consequences if our decision becomes a precedent (“rule utilitarianism”). This can result in contradictory directions. Under act utilitarian thinking, a lie might be acceptable if it led to a good outcome or prevented a bad outcome in a particular situation; under rule utilitarian thinking, though, lying in general would not bring about the best consequences in the long run because doing so could erode trust (Boss, 2014: 301). In addition, Adams (2009) points out that utilitarianism could be used to justify heinous acts like torturing an individual who has information that could lead to stopping a terrorist attack (hurting one person in an attempt to prevent more damage to many others).

In the process of summarizing deontological and teleological perspectives, the above overviews may have oversimplified each and underemphasized the complexity and sophistication that philosophical thinking and traditions have brought to moral decision making. Readers are encouraged to explore more deeply the strengths and limitations of each as compared with the third perspective that we will be focusing on: virtue ethics.



According to Rhodes, both deontological and teleological perspectives share “three central problems” (1986: 32):

- 1) “Each can be used to justify conflicting actions”;
- 2) Neither takes into account social or political contexts; and
- 3) “Neither theory can tell us how to decide between them”.

They both also sometimes may draw us to focus on *actions* in response to an ethical quandary. We can use virtue ethics to examine in addition the motivations and goals of the *actor*.

#### *Virtue Ethics: General Introduction*

This section provides a summary of basic concepts before we turn to development of virtue ethics within social work. “The term “virtue ethics” refers to a variety of ethical theories or theoretical approaches that have a central focus on the moral qualities (“virtues”) of individual people or institutions” (Banks and Gallagher, 2009: 7; see also Adams, 2009; Annas, 2006; Banks, 2010 and 2012; Banks and NØhr, 2012; Barsky, 2010 and 2013; Boss, 2014; Clark, 2006; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Fowers, 2005 and 2012; Gray, 2010; Houston, 2003; Hursthouse, R., 1999 and 2012; MacIntyre, 1985 and 1999; McBeath and Webb, 2002; Peterson, 2013; Oakley and Cocking, 2001; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010; Statman, 1997; Webb, 2010; Webster, 2011; Winter, 2012). For two thousand years until the Enlightenment in 18<sup>th</sup> century, virtue theory was the “default form” of moral philosophy in both western and other traditions, especially Asian; after receding into the background behind deontological and teleological thinking for two centuries, it has recently re-emerged with renewed vigor, offering a “third way” that challenges and enriches the other two perspectives (Annas, 2006: 515, 533). “This revival has been in response, in part, to a sense that ethics cannot be reduced to the determination of right actions with respect to a set of rules or likely consequences” (Pinsent, 2012: 1). Virtue ethics now offers a “flexible alternative to rule-focused ethical theories” (Winter, 2012: 1), a useful “counterweight to deontological and teleological approaches” (Banks and Gallagher, 2009: 49). Before addressing the question “what should I do?”

virtue ethics focuses on “what kind of person should I be?” (Peterson, 2013: 33); “virtue ethics emphasizes *right being over right action*” (Boss, 2014: 384, italics in original).

Virtues are habits of mind and heart carried out actively in a manner that benefits ourselves and others (Boss, 2014: 395). They are to be cultivated throughout life and not in isolation – they require interactions with others within community to be sustained; they are both worthwhile in themselves and our means to flourish as human beings together in society (MacIntyre, 1985: 191, 219-220 and 273; see also 1999: 111-112). In other words, virtues are strengths of character that ideally are consciously and continuously practiced and reflected upon as contributing to the meaning of our lives. The term virtue encompasses an “overall constellation of particular virtues and the wisdom to enact them well” (Fowers, 2005: 9). No single virtue is seen as key, nor can they function well in a piecemeal fashion; instead, cultivating virtues constitutes leading a good life over time, and various combinations of virtues can be employed to reflect upon particular ethical issues or to address a given ethical quandary or dilemma in all its unique complexity and cultural context. Virtue ethics is thus concerned with the character and integrity of “an individual’s life as a whole and with how that life comes together through decisions and actions the person takes” (Fowers, 2005: 48; Banks, 2010; Webb, 2010).

One of the strengths of virtue ethics is how clearly it explains moral motivation (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 87-88; McDermott, 2011: 57). Acting rightly does not result directly from following principles or rules so much as “growing” from character strengths (Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 582; Fowers, 2005: 12). Among six variations of virtue ethics theory described by Flescher (2003: 287) is the predominant version that judges an action’s morality by examining the actor’s character and motivations; another version emphasizes that “acting rightly does not require that we maximize the good”. “An action is right, according to virtue ethics, if and only if it is what an agent with virtuous character would do in the circumstances” (Adams, 2009: 97). While not ignoring principles or consequences, then, virtue ethics concentrates



instead on comparing our lives and actions with how a virtuous person would live and act, examining our character and motivations in order to distinguish right from wrong (Clark, 2006; Clifford and Burke, 2009; McDermott, 2011; Webb, 2010).

Commentators on virtue ethics often trace the origins of this perspective back to the ancient Greek philosophers, in particular Aristotle. Virtue ethics also resonates with other religious and moral traditions worldwide, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Greek, Islam, and the Judeo-Christian tradition (Peterson and Seligman, 2004; Boss, 2014).

Blaine Fowers, an American psychologist, professor of counseling psychology at the University Miami, Florida, USA, and his co-author Barbara Davidov explain that from the perspective of virtue ethics: "*One acquires character strengths intentionally, through gradual efforts, by practicing them, by identifying and counteracting contrary desires, by altering one's cognitions in line with one's knowledge about the virtue, and by becoming the kind of person who habitually engages in these cognitions and actions.*" (Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 586).

Nevertheless, we are not always conscious of our virtues, or vices for that matter, even as we enact them since as personal characteristics virtues often become second nature (Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 586; Van Slyke et al. 2013: 2). Sometimes we may recognize the need to have acted in accordance with a certain virtue only when we notice in hindsight that our actions were contrary to that virtue.<sup>2</sup> For example, we might realize after the fact that we have not been fully honest with ourselves or we have failed to take a courageous stand.

One of the leading philosophers who have influenced the revival of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, adds that principles and rules also play an important though not exhaustive or exclusive role for evaluating whether or not we are being virtuous (1999: 111). Part of being trustworthy or having integrity is usually acting in accordance with rules, but there will be particular situations as well when no rule or set of rules suffices and virtues such as practical wisdom or courage are needed to guide moral actions.

In order to determine which virtues then we should develop to be a good person (and good

social worker), according to virtue ethics we should observe and learn from exemplars, paragons, or role models whose lives show the way to virtuous excellence (Banks, 2012: 90-91; Peterson, 2013: 39; Van Slyke et al., 2013: 2 and 5). These exemplars may include historic figures, current mentors, parents, teachers, supervisors, fictional characters, heroes or saints (for more on the latter three, see Flescher, 2003).

#### *Virtue Ethics as Developing in Social Work*

Recently, virtue ethics has emerged as an important perspective for social work ethics internationally. As Banks explains in the preface for the latest edition of her major text, *Values and Ethics in Social Work*, the main focus of the first edition in 1995 was "principle-based ethics" (including teleological approaches as well as deontological); McBeath and Webb call this "the persistent drone of Kantianism and utilitarianism" while remarking on the dearth of considerations of virtue ethics (2002: 31). In Banks' second edition in 2001, though, she added a new chapter covering "character and relationship-based" approaches to ethics....It also took account of the recent revival of virtue ethics in western philosophy (based on qualities of character rather than principles of action)" along with other approaches such as feminist ethics and ethics of care (Banks, 2012: xxi). Subsequent editions and work by other authors in the United Kingdom and Australia have developed the application of virtue ethics in social work further than in the US, where few articles have been published (one being Paul Adam's excellent 2009 publication), and texts tend to devote more attention to deontological and teleological approaches (e.g., Reamer, 1999).

As a resurgent branch of normative ethics that is congruent with multiculturalism (Fowers and Davidov, 2005), virtue ethics is a good fit with social work (Lovat and Gray, 2008). It is strengths-based. It provides a holistic view including both ourselves as moral actors and our actions in their social, cultural, and political contexts. "The practice of virtue developed through experience, reflection and circumspection is the very stuff of good social work" (McBeath and Webb, 2002: 1020; Webb, 2010: 113). Virtue ethics gives conscious



and keen attention to relationships, includes emotional intelligence in conceptualizing rational processes for decision-making, and as noted above shares common threads with a diversity of approaches from cultural or religious traditions. As we cultivate virtues aligned with social work's fundamental values, we may be better able to consistently and reliably bring those values to life.

From a virtue ethics perspective, how we make decisions when facing ethical dilemmas thus depends on our character: "...ethics is as much about *being* a certain sort of person as it is about *doing* certain things" (Flescher, 2003: 298, emphasis in original). A key question under virtue ethics is "What kind of person (or social worker) do I want to be?" instead of "What rules should I follow?" For example, Banks explains that:

*"Virtuous people tell the truth, it is argued, not because of some abstract principle stating 'you shall not lie,' or because on this occasion telling the truth will produce a good result, but because they do not want to be the sorts of people who tell lies.... We would have to ask ourselves what it means to be a 'good social worker'. 'Good' would be internal to the role of social worker and would be defined by the community of practitioners who do social work."* (Banks, 2012: 72).

Hence, the role of international discourse on ethical issues among social workers becomes vital, as we will discuss further below.

Considering virtue ethics typically will generate a list of virtues that have potential relevance for social workers facing ethical dilemmas. Table 1 offers a list of selected virtues that social work authors have suggested as pertinent. For comparison purposes, the table also includes a comprehensive classification of virtues developed by Peterson and Seligman (2004). (See also Table 3.2 in Banks, 2012: 73).

**Table 1: Selected Virtues Relevant for Social Workers**

Professional Practical Wisdom (Prudence)	
Openness to Others	Integrity
Care	Sincerity
Compassion	Honesty
Kindness	Judgment
Benevolence	Reflection

Tenderness	Diligence
Respectfulness	Loyalty
Empathy	Self-Discipline
Trustworthiness	Hopefulness
Patience	Perseverance
Justice	Gratitude
Reciprocity	Humility
Fairmindedness	Temperance
Courage	Liberality
Righteous Indignation	Just Generosity

"Caring social workers embrace six virtues" (Barsky, 2010: 378):

- Attentiveness
- Responsibility
- Competence
- Responsiveness
- Integrity of care
- Discernment

*Universal Classification of Character Strengths: 6 Core Moral Virtues\**

(which are expressed in character strengths or positive traits):

*Wisdom & Knowledge*

(Creativity, Curiosity, Open-Mindedness, Love of Learning, Perspective)

*Courage*

(Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality)

*Humanity*

(Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence)

*Justice*

(Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership)

*Temperance*

(Forgiveness & Mercy, Humility/Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation)

*Transcendence*

(Awe/Wonder, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality)

*From:* Adams, 2009; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Banks & NØhr, 2012; Barsky, 2010, table 1.1: 29-30;

Clifford and Burke, 2009; Fowers & Davidov, 2005; McBeath & Webb, 2002;

Peterson & Seligman, 2004\*; Rhodes, 1986; Webster, 2011

Adams argues that as a virtue-based profession, "social work is a field for the exercise of all the



virtues together” using practical wisdom to coordinate them (2009: 88). Thus, the virtue of practical wisdom or prudence (for which Aristotle used the Greek word *phronesis*) plays an important guiding role in finding the best balance of virtues to tap in any given ethical challenge (Fowers, 2005: 13 and 107; Bartlett & Collins, 2011: 313-314; Clark, 2007). It helps decide which action would be most ethical, perhaps following a given duty as in deontological thinking in one situation or taking into account expected outcomes in another situation (Putman, 2012: 143). “It is a quality that needs to be nurtured and developed, through working alongside experienced role models or teachers, and entails the ability to notice, pay attention and see morally relevant features in situations” (Banks and NØhr, 2012: 11).<sup>3</sup> The virtue of practical wisdom can also be critical in finding the middle ground between extremes of excess or deficit (Aristotle’s virtuous *golden mean*, the *middle path* of the Buddha, and Confucius’ *chung-yung*: Boss, 2014: 391). Practical wisdom can help us conceptualize where a virtue lands between two vices (Bartlett, 2011: see the chart on pages 303-304).<sup>4</sup> For instance, we can use practical wisdom to discern how to take courageous action challenging an unjust agency policy rather than choosing cowardly capitulation at one extreme or foolhardy oppositional tactics at the other (see Sherman and Wenocur, 1983). Similarly, in conducting an honest self-assessment, we can avoid the extremes of either overly positive exaggeration or overly negative self-effacement (MacIntyre, 1999: 95). As Banks points out (2012: 76 and 112), most social work codes of ethics are “predominantly principle based” and include few specific references to virtues, though many such as NASW do highlight the importance of “character”: “Principles and standards must be applied by individuals of good character who discern moral questions and, in good faith, seek to make reliable ethical judgments” (NASW *Code of Ethics*, 2008: 4). An exception is one of the Swedish social work association’s codes (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2008) which as Banks notes specify a number of virtues including integrity and moral courage (2012: 73). Integrity subsumes other virtues such as

honesty, reliability, and authenticity (Banks, 2012: 76; see also Banks, 2010 and Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 205), each of which appears with some frequency in codes of ethics or conduct. For instance, the *Code of Ethics for Social Workers in Slovakia* (Association of Social Workers in the Slovak Republic, 1997, cited in Banks, 2012: 112) lists under fundamental principles of social work and standards for conduct and demeanor the virtue of “Honesty” (*Čestnosť* : II.1.D), one of five headings in this section of the code. Likewise, the 2002 Declaration of Ethics for Professional Social Workers established by the Bombay Association of Trained Social Workers in Mumbai, India, declares that its members “pledge to work with people, guided by... “values including honesty, personal integrity and accountability” (Appendix IIIb in Joseph and Fernandes, 2006: 118). These are illustrations of one of the typical “ingredients in codes of ethics” that Banks found in her comparative analysis of social work codes globally: “professional practitioners should be honest, trustworthy and reliable” (Banks, 2012: 110). Moreover, Australian professor and author Stephen Webb points out that from the perspective of virtue ethics, attention to honesty is congruent with civic virtues endorsed by most societies; as applied to social work:

*“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. The client would never quite be at ease once she realized that the worker lied strategically.”* (Webb, 2010: 117)

As with other perspectives, there are limitations to virtue ethics. It can turn into a self-righteous personal or idiosyncratic crusade. With its focus on the individual actor, virtue ethics does not directly take into account systems issues or power dynamics including those related to privileges and vulnerabilities entailed with social identities and division, and thus virtuous social workers could find themselves coopted, exploited, or irrelevant (Clifford and Burke, 2009: 114-119). Virtue ethics might not give specific guidance in a given dilemma. It needs to be supplemented by reference to norms,





rules, laws or principles; and virtue “requires a community or tradition that teaches a vision of human life, gives an answer to the question “What is the human being for?” and teaches the skills needed to live out that vision so as to achieve its goals” (Boland, 2007: 190). Thus, it may be more relevant for the development of personal morality rather than professional ethics (Holland, 2010). Defining a virtuous act can appear circular: i.e., one is acting virtuously if one acts as a virtuous person would act. And a virtuous act, like being honest, can result in a bad outcome; e.g., telling a suicidal client truthfully but bluntly that the social worker has contacted the authorities to take the client to a treatment facility could cause the client to bolt from safe custody.

As this overview highlights, each of these three approaches (deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics) offers perspectives that social workers will find useful when thinking through ethical issues and facing ethical dilemmas. None is without significant limitations. Thankfully, we can use all three together, as the three perspectives tend to complement each other and fill in gaps not covered by the others; and we can rely as well on our central social work value of service to others to keep us grounded. I have found a tool for analysis called the “ethics triangle” (Svara, 2007) effective in guiding the integration of principles/rules-based, utilitarian, and virtue ethics approaches centered on service to others. To illustrate how this tool works, I share here a scenario adapted from my own practice in child welfare.

### Using the Ethics Triangle

The “ethics triangle” was developed by Professor James Svara (Arizona State University School of Public Affairs), a political scientist and public administration educator (2007). I have adapted it for social work. At the points of the triangle are three approaches to making ethical decisions based on principles/rules and duties (deontological), utilitarian analysis (teleological, consequentialist), and virtue ethics. Svara’s view is that any one approach by itself can lead us astray. “Using all the approaches together helps to prevent the shortcomings of using any of the approaches alone” (Svara, 2007: 68). Also, since he developed this tool for public administrators,

he put the duty of *public service* in the center of the triangle. I have shortened that to *service*, arguably a core value for social workers and the first listed in the US NASW’s code (2008).

## Ethics Triangle

Principles/Rules = Duties



To illustrate using the ethics triangle, we will work through the dilemma arising from following scenario, which I have composed for classes and training workshops. I ask participants to imagine that they are a social work supervisor in a child welfare agency:

### Scenario

**A foster mother has reported that a teenage boy in her care has just shown up in her kitchen after having been out all night without permission. The foster mother suspects that the youth has been drinking or using drugs, and without informing him, she has arranged for an inpatient assessment in a locked facility to which she asks your supervisee to transport the youth. However, she has directed the supervisee not to inform the youth about where they are heading because she fears that if the youth is told that the supervisee will take him to the assessment, the youth will run away again. The supervisee is not sure whether to refrain from informing the youth about where they are going or whether even to take the youth to the inpatient assessment.**



Each point on the ethics triangle serves to highlight considerations from one of the three perspectives from moral philosophy with which we have been dealing. The discussion here is meant to illustrate with selected samples the issues, resources, ideas, and further questions that each stop on the triangle can generate; in classes, workshops and consultations, many additional insights emerge. (And other perspectives from moral philosophy can be similarly instructive.)

### *Principles/Rules/Duties?*

Starting at the top of the triangle, we first identify which principles and rules might apply and thus how we may have a duty to act. This also serves to clarify the elements of the dilemma that the social worker faces. What duties and obligations arising out of core values and principles conflict with each other? On the one hand the youth's best interests, health, well-being, and safety must be paramount; the foster parent, who is the immediate legal guardian in charge of the youth's care, is recommending that the youth not be told about the arrangements for placement in the locked treatment center to assess his drug or alcohol use. In her view, fully informing the youth of the plans could result in the youth's endangering himself by running away and continuing to use illegal substances. The social worker's duty to help might entail taking paternalistic control of the youth in carrying out the arrangement for inpatient assessment for his own good. However, on the other hand, if the social worker abides by the foster parent's recommendation, that would be violating a professional ethical standard prohibiting deception as well as the youth's rights to self-determination and fully informed consent to services or treatment. As we noted at the beginning of this article, this is an example of a dilemma typical in social work practice when the social worker must simultaneously fulfill two professional roles: helper and social control agent (Dolgoff, Harrington, and Loewenberg, 2012: 5). And in each role social work's fundamental principles and standards from our codes of ethics can provide some initial guidance, though they too may conflict. IFSW's Statement of Ethical Principles (2012) lists "respect for the inherent worth and dignity

of all people" first, including the rights to self-determination (4.1.1) and full participation in decision and actions that affect their lives (4.1.2); these could require the social worker to object to the foster parent's recommendation. Later provisions in the statement under Professional Conduct indicate that the social worker should act with integrity, compassion, empathy, and care (5.3 and 5.4). These also could support disclosing to the youth the plans for transporting him to the inpatient assessment. Yet, respecting the foster parent would include giving serious attention to her recommendation. In addition, a competent knowledgeable social worker would realize that adolescents can be impulsive and not necessarily act in their own interests or safety; ignoring the foster parent's fear that the youth would run away again if told of the plans seems unwise.

American social work professors Ralph Dolgoff, Donna Harrington, and Frank Loewenberg have developed a popular tool for beginning to address a dilemma involving ethical principles and standards that conflict: the Ethical Principle Screen (2012: 80). This tool is a hierarchical pyramid listing seven core principles for social workers, with protection of life ranked at the top and with truthfulness and full disclosure at the bottom; self-determination is ranked higher than truthfulness and full disclosure, but still below protection of life. This ranking could lead the social worker to consider protecting the safety and health of the youth by securing the inpatient assessment even if that means not fully disclosing the plan to the youth.

The IFSW statement also declares that "social workers should act in accordance with the ethical code or guidelines specific to the national context" and abide by international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). So the supervisor and supervisee should be sure to check out provisions in the code of ethics relevant to their locality, which as discussed above are likely to proscribe deceiving people as well as prescribe acting in the best interests of the service user. If licensed or legally regulated (as increasingly social workers worldwide are – see Bibus and Boutté-Queen, 2011), the social worker should also refer to the rules and standards of conduct that may apply in addition to other legal provisions related to



status offences (behaviors that are crimes for youth but not adults) and use of drugs and alcohol. Agency policies related to service planning and relationships with foster parents should be reviewed; typical provisions call for social workers and foster parents along with clients to collaborate and coordinate as partners in working toward the best interests of the youth in care. Increasingly, policies also now require use of interventions that have been shown in research to be effective; this evidence-based practice should in principle involve the youth as a fully informed participant in the assessment plan (for an overview of evidence-based practices in social work in the US, see Walker et al., 2007).

Assuming that the youth is under 18 years old, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child applies in every nation except the US. It sets the best interests of the youth as “primary consideration” (Article 3.1), which could entail making sure he gets into inpatient assessment and does not endanger himself further. However, Article 12 stipulates that children or youth capable of forming their own views have a right to express those views, which implies that they should be fully informed of plans regarding their treatment in order to have voice in the planning; (see Toft and Bibus, 2014, for more discussion of children’s rights and responsibilities as citizens). Other provisions also may apply such as those involving placement in foster care and Article 33, which requires that “all appropriate measures” be taken “to protect children from illicit use of narcotic drugs” etc.

While recognizing that achieving virtues and being a person of good character are important, Dalgoff et al. focus their attention on the necessity that social workers “be trained and skilled in systematic approach to decision making itself” (2012: 72). In addition to rational analysis of the values (personal, professional, societal), rights, principles, rules, and duties that apply, they advise that social workers weigh “short- and long-term consequences” making sure that their actions result in the least harm possible. This is utilitarian thinking, the next point on the triangle.

#### *Consequences?*

Considering consequences of the possible responses to the foster mother’s recom-

mendation, the supervisor and supervisee would likely not have much time to deliberate, and of course they cannot forecast with absolute certainty any outcome. Their calculations and weighing of potential outcomes must therefore be tentative and include alternatives and adjustments to what actually happens. Certainly, an orientation to providing the best service possible to the youth and to the foster parent should be central. Given the complexities involved in such situations, knowledge of how to work most effectively with diverse family systems, with people experiencing difficulties with drugs and alcohol, and particularly with involuntary transactions is critical (see Bibus and Jud, 2009, and Rooney and Bibus, 1996). For example, understanding normal and natural reactions when valued freedoms are threatened could improve the accuracy of predictions of the youth’s response when he discovers that he is being taken to the locked treatment center (Rooney, 2009). Proceeding with due diligence then, the supervisor can assist the supervisee in predicting what most likely harms (or benefits) could occur if the supervisee does not disclose to the youth the plan to transport him to the inpatient assessment.

From an act utilitarian point of view focused on this specific situation in the short term, the youth might react in reckless or even violent ways when he realizes he is to be confined in a facility; he may feel betrayed and may never believe the social worker’s word again or refuse to cooperate with subsequent services including the assessment and follow-up treatment. From a rule utilitarian point of view, the social worker’s misleading actions could cast a pall in the long term on the reputation of social work as a trust-worthy profession. On the other hand, the consequences of not following the foster mother’s recommendation should also be considered; the youth might run away again as she fears, and she herself may feel discounted and let down, and she may conclude that her expertise as well as responsibility as the youth’s guardian is being ignored. She might discontinue foster parenting. Alternatively, the youth could be ready to voluntarily agree to accompany the social worker to the assessment and pursue sobriety; after all he has returned to his foster home. This could be an opportunity



to solidify his relationships with the caring adults in his life, including the social worker. Much thus rides on how the youth views the supervisee as a person as well as his social worker. Questions related to the character of the supervisee are the focus of the final point in the triangle.

*Virtues?*

Most models for addressing ethical dilemmas suggest questions raised by moral philosophy, some specifying solely deontological and utilitarian approaches. However, whether our decisions and subsequent actions are right or wrong cannot be determined only by comparing them to duties as set in universal standards or by looking at outcomes, which may be chance events (McBeath and Webb, 2002). Virtue ethics' resurgence is in part a reaction both to deontological approaches that may lead to taking certain actions because they are our duty rather than wholeheartedly and to a teleological focus on moral actions that lead to others' good not our own, instead of seeing such actions as good for others *and* ourselves. Virtue ethics generates a series of questions from a fresh perspective. (See Table 2). No matter which of the various models for analysis and decision-making that the supervisor and supervisee might use, these questions can be fruitful and help clarify what the right course of action is. (For decision making frameworks, I recommend those developed by Brodsky, 2010; Clifford and Burke, 2009: 191; Congress, 1999; Link and Ramanathan, 2011: 95; Reamer, 1999; Strom-Gottfried's six questions are especially useful: 2007; see also Banks' discussion of decision-making models and "ethics work", 2012: 203-205).

**Table 2: Questions from Virtue Ethics for Deliberating upon Ethical Dilemmas**

"How should I live?"  
(Banks and Gallagher, 2009: 34)

"What are my ultimate goals for my life?"  
(Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

"What kind of person (or social worker) do I want to be?"

(Banks and NØhr, 2012: 5; Rhodes, 1986: 42; Fowers, 2005: 64)

"What are my values?"  
(Banks, 2010: 2179-2180)

"What are my motivations?"  
(Banks, 2010: 2179-2180; Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

"What virtues will it take to achieve my goals and ideals in this situation?"  
(Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

"What consistent actions do I take now or can I take in the future to express these virtues?"  
(Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

"What does a caring response require of me?"  
(Imre, 1989: 22)

"Will I make this decision with integrity?"  
(Rhodes, 1986: 42)

"How does this decision fit with my ideals as a social worker?"  
(Rhodes, 1986: 54; Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

"What would a virtuous social worker do?"

"Not "What is good social work", but "what is a good social worker?"  
(McBeath and Webb, 2002: 1020).

"How can I best meet my caring responsibilities?"  
(Tronto, 1993: 137)

"What more is there left for me to do? What have I missed?"  
(Flescher, 2003: 310)

"What if I am wrong? Is there something I am overlooking?" (Barsky, 2010: 262)

"How can I act most wisely?" (Fowers and Davidov, 2005: 584)

Essentially, the supervisee should reflect on how congruent alternative actions are with the kind



of person and social worker she or he wants to be. "What are my ultimate goals and motivation responding to this particular dilemma?" Other critical questions are: "What have I missed?" and "What biases or personal values are influencing my thinking?" It can be helpful to reflect for a moment on what a virtuous social worker whom we admire might do in this situation or what we at our best have done in past similar situations. Such an exemplar would likely approach this dilemma by tapping into virtues such as courage, responsiveness, honesty, integrity, compassion, and practical wisdom. Competent multi-cultural practice would also require the virtue of openness to others (Fowers and Davidov, 2005). This in turn brings to bear social work's dual focus on person-in-environment and our central value of service. Some intensive and effective action on the supervisee's part is needed, but it must be measured so as to avoid doing more harm to the youth, foster mother or others; in other words, reckless snap judgments on whether or not to follow the foster mother's recommendation could be as unwise as thoughtless compliance with the wishes of either the foster mother or the youth. A social worker who misleads the youth would not likely be seen as acting honestly or with integrity. Likewise, a social worker who ignored the foster mother's recommendation would not be seen as acting professionally by either the foster parent or the youth or the youth's family members (or the supervisor!). So, any deliberate and forthright action taken will benefit from a compassionate rapport that the social worker establishes with both the foster mother and the youth. Each will want to trust and witness that the supervisee has the youth's best interests at heart. The social worker will be most authentic if she or he is wholeheartedly and genuinely honest with the youth and the foster parent. Yet not even the virtue of honesty should predominate in isolation here; the virtue of practical wisdom can guide whether withholding information from the youth is the only way to protect the youth or others from harm.

At this point on the triangle, the supervisee may be leaning toward not following the foster mother's recommendation but instead informing the youth of the plan for inpatient

assessment of his drug or alcohol use; the supervisee would proceed in manner that acknowledges the youth's values and goals and involves him in cooperating with a plan, not running away again, while also enlisting the foster parent's and family's support.

#### *The Decision*

Once having attended carefully and at a timely pace to each point on the ethics triangle, the supervisor and supervisee should center themselves on their duty to serve in this situation. Doing nothing is not an ethical option. Nor apparently is wholesale deception of the youth called for; from the information available, it does not appear that the risk to the youth's own immediate safety or others' rises to the level that would justify taking paternalistic action in his own interests but against his wishes. Thinking through the dilemma in a systematic, rational, and reasonably informed professional manner, the social worker with the supervisor's support should decide not to follow the foster mother's direction but rather talk with the foster mother about the potential risks in misleading the youth and the potential benefits of persuading the youth to accompany the supervisee to the inpatient assessment voluntarily. If time allows, consultation with colleagues or other resource persons, such as staff at the treatment facility or legal advisors could be helpful. There may also be another way to arrange an assessment that would address the youth's drug or alcohol use and other needs and goals without resorting to a more restrictive placement. The social worker may decide to advocate for a treatment protocol that is more appropriate for the youth given his social identity, history or other factors. Additional resources such as family members or friends might help in negotiating a sound plan that is mutually acceptable to the youth and the foster mother.

As the supervisee heads out to the foster home, she or he should be ready to engage the youth and the foster mother in a mutual assessment of the youth's circumstances, state of mind, goals, strengths, family, social supports, culture, health, safety, and danger to himself or others. The supervisee will need to be at her or his best to facilitate this kind of intervention, and the supervisor will also need to be available and



ready to help as unintended or unpredicted events take place.

### Implications for Ethical Social Work Practice

The above case scenario is adapted from a situation that I faced in my child welfare practice; I could have managed the dilemma better, but the end result was fortunate for the eventual well-being of the youth and my growth as a social worker. Through the experience itself and discussing it with colleagues and students over the years, I have learned the value of using a systematic process to consider duties based on ethical principles, the potential consequences of options, and the kind of trustworthy, responsive, caring, and responsible social workers we want to be. Social workers can enact the virtue of prudence or practical wisdom by following a reasoned framework for analysis in making ethical decisions. As Reamer writes, "we are, after all, seeking a certain form of virtue here, one that is informed by reason" (1993: 81). And the ethical triangle is a useful tool for this process.

As discussed above, social workers tend to rely on deontological and utilitarian approaches (Osmo and Landau, 2006: 872). Gray and Webb remark on the perspective that virtue ethics offers; their example relates directly to the deception dilemma that we have focused on in this article: *"For example, a consequentialist may argue that lying is wrong because of the negative consequences produced by lying, though a consequentialist may allow that certain foreseeable consequences might make lying acceptable. A deontologist might argue that lying is always wrong, regardless of any potential 'good' that might come from lying. A virtue ethicist, however, would focus less on lying in any particular instance and instead consider what a decision to tell a lie or not tell a lie said about the person's character and moral outlook."* (Gray and Webb, 2010: 113, italics in original)

Hence, deontological and utilitarian perspectives offer opportunities to deliberate on why and under what circumstances a potential decision and actions are right or wrong; and then virtue ethics' perspective supports reflection on how each option fits with the kind of social worker we want to be and what characteristic strengths and virtues will be

required to carry out our decisions. Adding other approaches from moral philosophy would further enrich these reflections. The ethics triangle tool could be reshaped into a polygon by adding such approaches as those from ethics of care, feminist ethics, existentialism, environmental, communitarian, contractarian, social-constructivist, narrative, anti-oppressive and other post-modern ethical perspectives. In the concluding chapter of their book on anti-oppressive ethics in social work, Clifford and Burke model applications of six approaches from moral philosophy to ethically reflective practice in organizations (2009: 212-218).

A wider range of perspectives will be especially apt considering the constrictive attention lately on conforming to specific standards and reducing liability risks. Among the helping professions and in social work globally there is a trend toward promulgating statutory rules and regulations that operationalize general principles and toward codes of conduct (also known as "practice acts") that are more specific and prescriptive than codes of ethics (Banks, 2012: 107; Bibus and Boutté-Queen, 2011). The primary purposes of licensing regulations are to set minimum standards and to provide legal recourse for service users whose social workers' practice falls below standards. Yet, "codes contain relatively few statements about the character or virtues of practitioners" (Banks, 2012: 111). They "often miss the wider context of ethical issues in terms of human rights, for example to health, clean water, and sustainable development of communities now and in the future" (Link, 2004: 88). While rules are necessary, since we do not always act virtuously or at our best (Banks, 2012: 91), we need to be ready to reflect beyond the strictures, prescriptions, or prohibitions in regulatory codes that focus on actions so that we also consider the actors' (our own) individual characteristics. We should also see the relationships we cultivate with others (including service users as well as colleagues) as keys to ethical decision making and practice.

International social work scholar Richard Hugman counts *relationship* as one of the four categories that lay "the foundations for the international statement and national codes of ethics": *duty, consequences, virtue, and relationship*



(2010: 123-124). In this article, we have focused on the first three. Inside the ethics triangle is the value of “service” – placed in the middle to keep us centered on the importance of promoting the “good of other persons through the way in which social workers act in relationship with them” (as Hugman defines “relationship”, 2010: 124). Focusing on relationships also enacts social work’s person-in-environment perspective. Reflecting upon these relationships can nourish development of ethical practice. Moreover, the role of international discourse among social workers relating with each other across borders as we share studies on ethics thus becomes vital.

For example, Sobočan’s 2013 doctoral dissertation examines how the ethical judgment of social workers in Slovenia is shaped by relationship with others, toward others and oneself as well. The development of systematized study and education on ethics in social work has just recently begun in Slovenia. Her pioneering study has found that decisions by social workers in the sample there appear to be influenced by reducing uncertainty and risks, negotiating relationships, attending to social workers’ own motivation, self-confidence, intuitive moral judgments and beliefs as well as their role expectations and professional identity, and considering whether choices are legitimate. Being a good moral person is key to being a good ethical social worker.

“Decision-making in social work practice is thus not a predominately rational or rule-based endeavor, where choices are a result of the calculation of the best options (for the service user – the “recipient” of the decision), but a continued negotiation process – between different voices, interests, powers, and values” (Sobočan, 2013). Social workers need an environment that supports discourse on ethical issues and clear definition and understanding of social work’s goals. Seeking “global dialogue” and sharing case examples internationally are critical for this discourse; equally critical is including service users in discussing and evaluating decisions (Link and Ramanathan, 2011: 95). Fowers elaborates on the need for this kind of mutual reflection among colleagues and service users: *“All of this makes it clear that virtue is inextricably communal. Humans gain*

*an appreciation of character from others, learn the virtues from others, engage in virtuous activity with others, pursue goods we can only hold in common with others, and practice many primary virtues (e.g., friendship, generosity, justice) only with others. Each individual must decide whether or not to engage in admirable activities, but the context, meaning, import, and recognition of final actions is profoundly social. The ultimate success of such shared efforts depends on one’s ability to recognize what is important and make wise choices.”* (Fowers, 2005: 104)<sup>5</sup>

Enlightened and encouraged by discourse with other social workers internationally, we are better positioned then to develop ethical practice. With its focus on the practitioner as moral agent, virtue ethics offers insights into such development (Boland, 2007: 162).

When facing an ethical dilemma, we should reflect on how a particular decision or action fits with the kind of human being we want to be, how in the past we have best conducted our life, and how esteemed colleagues might respond in similar circumstances. We must not give in to complacency but continue to strive to be more human in the best sense. We must be constantly vigilant and not retreat into comfort of moral neutrality or the *status quo*; it is ethically healthy to be “ill-at-ease” even when we are reasonably sure that we are right (Flescher, 2003: 309). “Our actions test our old habits and call upon us to reflect on our past actions and to reevaluate ourselves and our choices. Reflection, which is grounded in moral values, in turn generates a habitual moral response.” (Boss, 2014: 388). Conversing with colleagues and clients about ethical issues, listening carefully, reading moral philosophy, studying and reflecting on social work as our vocation, we can nurture the habits of mind and heart needed to be good, virtuous social workers.

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**Endnotes**

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- 2 See Doherty's 1995 discussion of courage: 161; Oakely and Cocking's 2001 identification of 'counterfactual conditions': 30; and Banks and Gallagher's 2009 observations on the role of emotions raising our personal distress when we realize that we have not been able to do what we think and feel is right: 67.
- 3 Chapter 4 Professional Wisdom in Banks and Gallagher, 2009, provides a useful discussion of this concept: 72-95; also relevant is Doherty's 1995 distinction of prudence as 'not about being cautious but about being wise': 164; see also Fowers, 2005; Rhodes, 1986; and Van Slyke et al., 2013.
- 4 See also Boss' Table 12.1: 392, and Clifford and Burke's 2009 discussion of the African concept of balance, 'ma'at': 108.
- 5 Houston, 2003, also highlights the importance of dialogue with others in forging virtues: 823.