

Workshop Report

The differing relevance to social work education of secular virtue ethics; and of spirituality, faith and religion: Are these two conflicting perspectives?

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Summary: Virtue ethics challenges standard ethical paradigms about what constitutes social work as a morally right and good enterprise, locating the source of all morality in a person's character. It posits that a virtuous (caring, compassionate, just and generous), social worker is one whose authenticity derives from what it is to be a true human being exercising such virtues. What it is to be a true human being is for many connected essentially with spirituality, faith and religion. The idea of characteristic virtue as a human defining feature is to be found in most religions and faiths. Virtue ethics locates this authenticity through a primarily secular philosophical perspective.

Both perspectives speak to what it is to be a good social worker but are they reconcilable? Does the secular challenge of virtue ethics to standard social work ethical paradigms also challenge the place of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education?

This report presents a conversation between two social workers about these issues, one a committed secular virtue ethicist and one personally committed to the importance of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education. The audience were invited to participate in asking questions as the conversation explored the complexities.

Keywords:

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Editor's note: The following debate is reproduced in a form similar to that in which it was developed in the conference workshop – 'warts and all' - and not presented as an academic paper. It is offered as a means of engaging readers with the subject area and making links to their own practice, considering some of the arguments and positions made and allowing readers to grapple with the shortfalls, complexities and problems of ethical reasoning so that these can inform social and health care practices.

Introduction

This workshop presented a conversation between two social workers about the differing relevance of secular virtue ethics and spirituality, faith and religion. Each set out their respective positions on the question and the issues that arise from addressing it. Peter spoke as one who is personally committed to the importance of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education and Paul as a committed secular virtue ethicist. The following report recounts their individual presentations as they were made by them at the workshop. Practical constraints unfortunately prevented a more extended conversation in the workshop between Paul and Peter following their individual presentations but they set the scene for an interesting ongoing discussion on the issues in the context of the conference themes for the future of social work education.

Peter

Firstly Peter set out his perspective on the importance of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education, relating this to the place of ethics in social work education and of 'virtue ethics' in particular.

My position is three-fold:

1. that spirituality, faith and religion comprise a dimension that is critically important to understand, incorporate and address in social work education;
2. that this dimension is integral to studying and learning about ethics in social work education and to the formation of ethical identity

and 'doing' ethics; indeed, that studying and 'doing' ethics is meaningless without it;

3. that virtue ethics shows this relevance and correlation par excellence.

My short answer therefore to the question above, '*Does the secular challenge of virtue ethics to standard social work ethical paradigms also challenge the place of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education?*', is 'no'. My slightly longer answer is 'no it should not, there should be no conflict if it is understood that 'secular' does not preclude spirituality; that spirituality, faith and religion are central to social work education; and that spirituality (including faith and religion but not bound or defined by either) is central to ethics'.

Some preliminary remarks are important to make. I'm delighted this conference has been organised to address what is for me the critical importance of faith, spirituality and religion in social work education. My own faith is something that is crucial to me. I have been in social work for 35 years and social work education for about 25 of those years and to have this topic on the agenda in this way is a great relief, it seemed to me it almost couldn't be talked about it openly in years before.

In terms of my own faith I am a Christian but my concern is with the importance of these dimensions for educators and students of all faiths and none, and of all religions and none, and however we apprehend the notion and experience of 'spirituality.'

I will underline this later when talking more about spirituality but share now that the Christian faith which for me gives focus, shape and meaning to 'spirituality' is one I've had for over 40 years. In multi-faith discussions I don't say I 'happen' to be a Christian because in my experience it wasn't, and isn't, happenchance. However, I think that maybe like very many people who have a Christian faith I did not have a single dramatic 'conversion' experience; I can't tell you a date or time or place but it was more out of a process of reflection over a few years in my teens and early twenties. Rather than my 'finding' faith it's more true to say that faith found me and God has a lot of work to do in me yet.

For me, faith is not like an on-off electric switch, like you've either got it full on or not at all. In reality it's more like a 'dimmer' switch throughout life and it changes. In my experience, if I look back over the years it's not always exactly the same; the faith of a young man or woman is not necessarily like that of an older man or woman; faith

does grow and change as we grow and change in life; the same faith may be different when you're in love or dying or bereaved for example. I say this because, as I will discuss later, this is true also of spirituality which in reality has certain fluidity about it. This is important when we come to think about the relevance of spirituality to ethics, to studying and learning about ethics, to the formation of ethical identity and for 'doing' ethics.

I also mention my own faith now because when discussing spirituality, faith and religion in general I have to draw on illustrations and metaphors from the faith and religion I know just because it is the one I know about and not because I have any one-faith agenda; I am just not equipped to draw on illustrations from other faiths or religions and hope I would not be presumptuous or pretentious to try.

I continue now in three sections. Firstly I will rehearse briefly why the importance of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education is so critical. Secondly I will explain the relevance of spirituality, faith and religion for studying ethics, to the formation of ethical identity and for 'doing' ethics in social work education. Lastly, I will show this correlation in relation to virtue ethics in particular.

1. Why the importance of spirituality, faith and religion in social work education is so critical

I will not dwell too much on why it is so critical that spirituality, faith and religion is incorporated and given serious, systematic attention in social work education as those reasons are the stated incentives for this conference and have been rehearsed elsewhere but I do wish to highlight some of them. We ignore this importance at our peril as educators because, for example:

- Religion and faith matter to a significant proportion of the UK population (the 2001 Census reported that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the population claimed to have a religion, 71% Christian). One course leader at this conference has said that 60% of his last intake was active in a religious faith of one kind or another.
- Religion and faith are increasingly prominent in public life. People of faith are no longer content to keep it private or keep it at home. From dress or the wearing of symbols at work and so on, through to religious extremism it's in public life as never before. It is clear that for some members of society their faith identity is of paramount

importance but others are not sure what this means for themselves, how are they to understand this fact, how are they to respond?

- Related to this is a strand of fear in society about religion and faith. If educators and students are not equipped to deal with this dimension then a vacuum of uncertainty and ignorance will be fed by stereotyping and maybe even unexamined fundamentalism on courses. Otherwise why should those who populate social work courses at any one time be any different from the general population in these respects? Incidentally, 'out there' this fear can be found in anything from, for example, a backlash against faith schools of all kinds, so-called Islamophobia, the apparent rise of militant atheism and the popularity of the writings of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins is a most entertaining writer and a good swashbuckling read but regardless of the content of his arguments I think he does feed into a general fear of faith and religion which is 'out there' these days.
- Reflective practitioners need to be able to locate themselves in the context of faith, religion and spirituality no less than in the context of race, class, gender or sexuality for example. It took a decade for us to take race on board, beginning with the anti-racist and anti-discriminatory developments and struggles of the 1980s and early 1990s; it's time for us to think similarly about spirituality, faith and religion as part of the reality of life and people's lives. I sense or at least hope that perhaps the time for this has now come as the time of anti-racism and anti-discrimination came before (and is now mainstream in social work education; it wasn't always so).
- There is an increasing emphasis on holistic assessments and care in health and care services that recognise that quality in life also equates to the meaning of life but other disciplines, particularly in mental health are more advanced in including faith, religion and spirituality in assessments than is social work.
- Spirituality is universal. It includes faith and religion but is not bound or defined by either. Spirituality therefore applies to all involved in social work education including those who may have no religious background or affiliation or no shared religious background.

2. The relevance and correlation of spirituality, faith and religion for studying ethics,

to the formation of ethical identity and for 'doing' ethics in social work education;

Now, to see the relevance of spirituality faith, religion to ethics in social work and social work education it is necessary to be clear at the outset about what we mean by these first set of terms and I will concentrate most on spirituality and its correlation with ethics. This is because while for some people their 'spirituality' is given meaning and is articulated by a faith (which may in turn be formalised in a religion), it is important to reiterate that spirituality applies to all of us, people of all faiths and none. Incidentally, if you Google 'atheist spirituality' you get nearly half a million hits; if you Google 'humanist spirituality' you get over half a million hits and 'Googling' 'secular spirituality' gets over two million hits.

My point to be underlined here is that spirituality is universal. It is an essential component of humanity, an essential aspect of lived experience. Importantly for understanding its correlation with learning about ethics and for the formation of ethical identity or 'doing ethics' it involves us in:

- Developing awareness and appreciation of the other;
- Developing capacity to respond to the other;
- Developing ultimate life meaning based upon awareness and appreciation of and response to the other. (The 'other' in this context may be the other person and/or other people and/or nature and/or the environment.)

Incidentally, although I have held the notions I am setting out here for a very long time, I was delighted to come across at least some of them being reflected in a recent book by Simon Robinson, *Spirituality, Ethics and Care* which I'd recommend if you are generally interested in this area.

The 'spirit' of spirituality is energy like the wind or breath or wind of life which animates our awareness and responsiveness and reflections. These may not necessarily be ultimately for good outcomes but it is important to note at the outset that moral responsibility lies at the heart of spirituality. I will expand on this core point later.

Spirituality can be communal. We talk of a 'team' spirit or a 'community' spirit. Spirituality has a transcendent quality but is not removed from earthly life at all.

The important thing, however, is that spirituality is essentially

relational and reflective. It is a creative, dynamic experience and dimension to life. Spirituality is not statically framed by set beliefs. It involves learning, growth and change as we develop awareness and appreciation of the other, as we reflect on meanings and implications for our values and beliefs and our response to the other.

For an example consider how our attitudes to the environment have changed and developed over the last few decades. As we have developed awareness and appreciation of the environment and importantly as we have reflected on our *relationship* to the environment and the meanings and implications of this for our values and beliefs and our response to the environment, i.e. this particular 'other', then so our attitudes have changed. This is as much communal spirituality at work as rationality. Note that scientific information about the damage we have been doing to the environment has been available and known for much, much further back in time without any effect on our behaviour before.

It follows that our spirituality is a dimension of life to be worked through all the time, even wrestled with. As we are animated by our spirituality to reflect on our values and beliefs about life we are at the same time working through and wrestling with morality. At the heart of spirituality and our spiritual journeys are moral questions that arise from our awareness and appreciation of the other and our responsiveness to the other.

My key point here is that spirituality therefore provides the framework for ethics. I would go so far as to say that it is central to ethics. It is not therefore ever a question of spirituality *OR* ethics but of spirituality *AND* ethics. They are neither separate dimensions, nor even should be separated academically although in Universities they may have historically become so as academic territories became artificially demarcated in academic institutions but this is no guide to their true correlation.

Like the spirituality that gives it a framework, ethics too are worked out in lived experience. Ethical deliberations are essentially situational. We are making moral meaning all the time. Ethics is not a neutral objective activity but takes place in lived experience in the context of our values and beliefs about life – which may or may not be religious beliefs. Morality without spirituality is sterile. Spirituality without morality is self indulgent.

Spirituality is not therefore some ontological basis from which ethical meaning is separately developed but is the framework in which

ethics can be worked through, ethical choices made, values and beliefs re-examined, and changed. It is through our spirituality that ethical reflection can occur as it does in real life. We don't 'do' ethics best, particularly in social work education and particularly in practice – based learning in real situations, by reaching for philosophical rules for ethical decision-making or for developing an ethical social work identity from cognitive doctrines. Ethical choices and decisions don't emerge seamlessly from set cognitive doctrines. The reality is that they are essentially worked out in lived experience, we make moral meaning all the time by wrestling with - working through - the complexities of diversity and tradition, particularly in values and beliefs about life.

Now, those who look primarily if not exclusively to how the purely philosophical, 'rational' schools of thought on ethics, from Plato to the post-Enlightenment schools and to most recent thinkers, to help us decide what is the right thing to do, or for what is the 'ethical' intervention in social work practices might not think immediately of spirituality as the framework for thinking about or doing ethics in practice.

The concept of spirituality may indeed be frustrating to the rational ethical philosopher, probably sounding to him or her rather vague and elusive. True, it is understood as much by imagination, poetry, intuition, metaphor, or art (and maybe for some, prayer or meditation) and is discovered most vividly, for example, in moments of laughter or joy or despair. But it is not non-rational. It is about the real world and is experienced in the real world. It involves and requires reasoning in and about that world. Its transcendence lies in that it moves beyond pure self awareness but is not removed from real life.

Ethics does not proclaim an objective world 'out there'. It concerns a subjective world within us; we are mind body and spirit. As the publicity and aims of this Conference event state clearly – 'We are all influenced by spirituality, faith and religion' to which I would add – 'to put it mildly'.

Of course, to some limited extent in terms of its usefulness in social work education the study of ethics, I admit, we can say that ethics doesn't necessarily *need* spirituality. It is perfectly possible to study ethics with great erudition and depth without considering spirituality or faith or religion. I certainly do not fall into the trap of saying that ethics needs religion or that ethics must flow from religious systems; this is patently not true any more though it may have been once long ago for the ancients. But I will say that the study and 'doing' of ethics

that disregards a *spiritual* framework is significantly the poorer for it and my contention is that for this paucity it is sadly meaningless for practice in the real world of everyday ethics.

It is also worth pointing out as well that a sense of spirituality can admit to acknowledgement of the sacred in life especially the sacredness of life that purely rational ethics or the ethical language of human rights alone cannot adequately speak to. For example for a person to be tortured is surely, to say the very least of it, a violation of the dignity of that person's life. And philosophy will be able to rationally study and evaluate the ethics and rights of that on a case basis and maybe support a consensus on the wrongness of that act but what more, what beyond this - for all of us - and for life itself - is violated by that act?

Alasdair McIntyre - a virtue ethicist - describes the moral life in terms of its direction towards the ultimate end or goal which is the contemplation of and union with the source of our being and becoming. It is our spirituality that animates and enables that direction.

3. *What about 'virtue ethics'- how do 'virtue ethics' particularly illustrate the relevance and correlation of spirituality to ethics.*

So, spirituality is central to ethics and is the framework for doing ethics in living situations. This applies generally but where does the mission, the work and the values of a caring profession such as social work fit in? In other words the key question is - what is the bridge for a social worker between morality and spirituality?

The bridge is the concept, the idea and the practice of *virtue*. The idea of virtue suggests goodness, which is something that lies beyond just doing one's duty. But here is where I locate virtues: virtues are the qualities of a person that enable a moral person to be brought into being; and for our purposes moral virtues enable a moral vision. In fact virtues don't make sense without a moral vision

The virtues of social work I would say you can detect in codes of practice (although maybe that's not the most fertile or meaningful place for them) and in social work literature. I can even still remember reading these in Felix Biesteck's book *The Casework Relationship* as a social work student many years ago and in others.

Now, virtues are embraced in the concept or 'umbrella' of love, a word not often admitted into social work education probably for good reason given it's a word that is overworked everywhere to the point of meaningless. But I mean love as recognised by the Greek word

'agape' - in social work this is the overarching and defining virtue. We were asked in this conference earlier to say what the soul of social work is – for me this is it.

'Agape' is a word that is found in the New Testament. It may be found in other religious scriptures as well but this is the one I know. It describes a love which is unconditional, that is open, sacrificial and given freely with no self-interest other than for the welfare of the other. For Christians at least, Jesus Christ epitomises agape love. For our purposes 'agape' expressed through social care can be seen as constant (i.e. not capricious or dependent on response), unconditional, prepared to take risks (i.e. it is not a calculated giving), empathetic, courageous, and having personal and professional integrity. There is an inherent vulnerability in offering agape love. It has a lot about it that we might recognise in social work principles. Agape is, in the social care context, a concept and an attitude as well as a virtue. It is based on a kind of covenant with fellow human beings purely because they are fellow human beings; it is not based on any contractual agreements - that would be conditional. Incidentally this sits awkwardly with contract-based social work; where is the covenant-based soul of social work there? It recognises in the other an *a priori* responsibility in which the giver develops awareness and appreciation of the other and develops capacity to respond to the other, which I said earlier were key components in the definition of spirituality.

When we see how agape works, we can see that it is entirely bound up with spirituality, or how spirituality 'works' if you like. The attributes of agape love, not least its unconditional and empathetic nature, demand engagement with the human condition for itself to the extent that ethics cannot ultimately be worked out in abstract, as it were, but are essentially worked through, and wrestled with, in living situations. Spirituality, the framework for 'doing' ethics, animates this. So, in other words, for the social worker to exercise the gift of agape with all its virtues is to engage his or her own spirituality in a working through, a wrestling with, the ethics of whatever the situation is.

Virtues in this way can't be charted in a straight line from doctrine or philosophical rule to outcome. Nor are they explicitly aimed at, so much as they are developed; they arise out of an agape journey.

To sum up, spirituality, faith and religion are central to social work education. Spirituality (including faith and religion but not bound or defined by either), is central to ethics. There should be no conflict

between spirituality and ethics. Virtue holds them together in social work practice. Any teaching or learning on ethics, including 'virtue ethics', that ignores or rejects the spiritual dimension in social work education is impoverished to its detriment.

Paul

Then Paul set out his perspective as a committed secular virtue ethicist.

I have the following three questions:

1. What actually motivates a social worker to become a social worker (source, purpose, rationale, telos)?
2. What is (proper) ethical social work identity?
3. What do these questions mean for direct practice including practice learning; and how do motivation and identity transform themselves into real action?

Ostensibly we, Peter and I, are at the opposite ends of the spectrum: I am a committed atheist with a Marxist tendency and, as I understand it, Peter is a committed Christian. Whatever else, we have some apparent common ground – what is it to be an authentic human being and, in particular, a good, that is a moral, person. We speak to this commonality through our own perspectives. One of my particular theoretical interests is in virtue ethics as a paradigm of moral action. If we speak of virtue and virtuous behaviour or actions we must speak of vice and viciousness. There is much that is vicious today in our material world and also in just how we relate to people and, indeed, in my view that viciousness characterises much of what now passes as social work. Social work practice with its technical rationalities, disciplines and governance has been grossly distorted by the homage to market values and the neo-liberal and neo-conservative cults of anti-social selfish individualism. It is as if the market can solve the problems it throws up and needs to sustain itself, yet social work is being organised to replicate that viciousness, not assuage it. Ethical goods are not to be found in the free-for-all market place of competitiveness and individual striving but in harmony, cooperation, solidarities and the intrinsic value of other

human beings. So let us explore together what it is to be a social worker from virtue ethicist and a faith and spirituality perspectives.

Virtue ethics(VE)

There has been a call in philosophy for a return to the ethics of virtue ever since philosophers savagely deconstructed the follies of modern ethical paradigms, that is to say those abstract, grandiose meta-laws of ethics that have applied top down to moral quandaries or dilemmas (Kantianism and the Utilitarianism.) VE as a bottom up counter discourse of particularity is now more or less mainstreamed as a rival to deontic and consequentialist perspectives offering different, sometimes competing, insights into the challenges of moral thinking. However, VE has never really percolated down into mainstream social work ethical discourse and only now is it only just beginning to do so. As with faith and spirituality motifs, VE forms part of a revived 'movement of hope' in social work, to rescue ourselves from our moral miasma and our fall from grace. Kantian and Utilitarian ethical reasoning has dominated social work value discourse but has failed to hold back the neo-liberal and neo-conservative onslaught.

According to Rachels (*The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 1999) virtue ethical discourse must do the following:

- explain what a virtue is
- list the character traits that are virtues
- explain what these traits mean
- explain why these traits are desirable
- address whether virtues are the same for everyone or differ from person to person or culture to culture, society to society

We would perhaps need to make this discourse social work specific and say just why it is relevant for a social work practice of value. I am going to leave this to the audience but to help you will offer up two illuminating examples, one historically true, the other a hard test case philosopher's conundrum.

What is virtue ethics? Example 1

A moral virtue is an inner disposition or trait of character to act morally. Virtue is often construed as a corrective, meaning that most if not all virtues counteract some problem thought to be inherent in the human condition. So we honour and seek to display, say, the virtue of moral courage and fortitude in the face of adversity and personal psychological or physical fear. People may have read about the so called female ‘Oscar Schindler’, Irena Sendler, a Polish social worker who helped rescue 2500 Jewish children out of the Warsaw ghetto. She persuaded mothers to give up their toddlers and by various means took these children to safety, until she was betrayed, captured, tortured, sentenced to death but escaped into hiding for the rest of the war. She died in a nursing home in May 2008, aged 98 (see article in PSW July 2008). She described her acts of heroism over 60 years ago as ‘a normal thing to do’. ‘I saw the Polish nation drowning. And those in the most difficult position were the Jews. And among them those most vulnerable were the children. So I had to help.’ She rejected the term hero. ‘The term irritates me greatly. The opposite is true – I continue to have qualms of conscience that I did so little I could have done more. This regret will follow me to my death. Every child saved with my help is the justification of my existence on this earth and not a title to glory.’

I don’t know if Irene Sendler was especially religious or even spiritual although she was born a Roman Catholic. I really have no idea as to her inner motivation but she was in my view a person of great virtue, an exemplar of moral courage driven by compassion, justice, endurance and perseverance, not to mention a person of many practical and even intellectual problem solving skills needed to be successful. I flag up here a link between moral capacity, intellectual understanding and purposefulness, capability and practical problem solving. What does Kantian or Utilitarian ethics have to say about all this? Not much, in my view.

What is virtue ethics? Example 2

I will try to simplify the shocking richness and oral complexity of a real story such as Sendler’s with a simplified hypothetical one, to begin to explain VE by way of an illustration which I borrow from Stocker in his classic article ‘The schizophrenia of modern ethical theories’ (*Journal of Philosophy*, 1976, 14, 453-66) It entails the peculiar notion of ‘self-effacement’.

Stocker's self-effacing hospital visit and a simple ethical story

You are recovering in hospital and your friend visits. In the course of the visit it becomes clear that the motive for visiting is to:

- Obediently conform to an abstract rule by doing one's duty; or
- Instrumentally, calculatedly, bring about the best available state of affairs; or
- Simply express friendship and being a friend

There are three sorts of ethical goods here. The first is associated with deontological ethical theory and the second with consequentialist ethical theory, two paradigms that have dominated social work values and theory. The third is equated with VE which is only just emerging in mainstream ethical debate in social work as a different perspective.

An ethical theory may be 'self-effacing'. Consider deontic duty theories. Let's say that the principle here is something like: when a friend is in hospital you don't go to the pub even though you may prefer to but make a point of going to the hospital. You sacrifice your own preferences, what you actually want to do, for supplication to the principle. But if I actually really don't want to come and see my friend in hospital but act out of some abstract sense of obligation, just what sort of real friend am I? Isn't friendship about just being there for another as the situation demands? I am being obedient and supplicant to the general principle, not loyal to that particular person. How would you feel if your visitor said on arrival it's good to see you because this way I am glad to have followed a duty or obligation and therefore I have acted morally and done the right thing?

Now consider a consequentialist approach. Suppose I calculate that all things considered I can maximise overall happiness of all by visiting. That is to say, I work out that I do more good in visiting than not visiting by some criterion of goodness. That's OK but what if my calculation comes to a different prediction? Moreover, is it OK? How would you feel if your visitor said I'm so glad to see you because I have calculated that in doing so I have maximised some criteria of happiness and hence I have acted morally. In both these paradigms the person in distress simply disappears from the moral equation, both the moral agent and the recipient of the moral action. If I want to hang on to the *centrality of that person* in this moral transaction, *my centrality* as a moral agent, and be *motivated* by her distress, not rules, then these sort of theories must ultimately appeal to other ethical criteria to rediscover that person and myself. An ethical theory is self-effacing if

its premises do not serve as motives for action according to the theory itself and we lose sight of the other person. To save face but to preserve the theory I think deontologists and consequentialists are committed to saying something like this:

- moral rules are such that sometimes in order to follow them the agent must be moved by considerations other than that of following the rules; or
- that the best consequences will be brought about by people who are not motivated to bring about best consequences and hence there sometimes is good consequentialist reason not to recommend consequentialist motives

What we value in social work is the person (or her family) in distress, not abstract ethical systems.

Let us assume that a hospital visit is an example of the most basic primordial ethical encounter, ontological altruism, the recognition of someone's distress and our ethical impulse to comfort because of the sheer fact of that distress. In reaching out and acting morally towards another person, to somehow share her distress, I am being a moral person: in one sense I myself can only flourish as a human being if I attend to the flourishing of another who is not flourishing. Not to visit my sick friend is not just to diminish her but myself as well. I don't need to obey deontic rules to be myself; I don't need some calculation rule of utility: both are on pain of implausibility the ethical negation of myself and the other. When we apply deontic rules or calculations of utility to a situation, we are not actually there, ethically present at all. But that is what social work has become – ethically implausible and self-effacing, an ethical non-presence or ethical simulacra. Our practice is regulated by codes, systems, procedures, cost calculations, and governmentality. The person – myself, the other – has disappeared.

Which ethical scenario best captures the Irene Sendler story? Was she motivated by duty, (obeying a rule), or consequences (that she acted in accordance with some calculation of utility), or some ontological friendship or altruism (an ethic of recognition, identity and responsibility, a meeting of and response to the needy and endangered, articulated through a discourse of security and safety metaphors)?

The social work moral impulse and gaze entails deep: respect -to look at and to recognise an other's humanity, to suffer alongside and with. Respect – from 'spectacle' and 'spectator'- is to see the person,

not the application of cold rules. To see the other in their fullness and humanity, to restore her to human fullness as far as possible is the telos of social work. It is to be contrasted with the rationalist deductive scientific technical models of 'modernism'. I offer, then, secular VE as an alternative discourse vehicle to reclaim our lost identity.

Virtue ethics: features

For me, virtues are 'dispositions of the soul' that make it possible for us to think, feel, reason and act in an appropriate way. They are a combination of affect and reason which equals moral action. VE is a conceptual cousin of an ethics of care or an ethics of compassion but privileges *moral character* through a mutually affirming self-other dialogue, that is to say, your well being is also my well being. Note Irena Sendler's critical self evaluation 'I could have done more'. On this account she had not fully realised herself. We don't just do what we have to do but go beyond the call of duty.

Virtues are moral excellences that dwell within us. They confer strength of purpose in recognising, evaluating and responding to life's vicissitudes and the realisation of the good life. A typical definition of a virtue in effect identifies it as a personality trait that is a disposition to act, to desire and to feel that involves the exercise of judgment and leads to a recognisable human excellence or instance of human flourishing. Irena Sendler flourished as a moral person even though she faced death; not to do what she did was not to flourish. VE is a theoretical perspective which holds that judgments about the inner lives of individuals (their traits, motives, dispositions and character) rather than judgments about the rightness or wrongness of external acts and/or consequences of acts are of the greatest moral importance (Louden, 1998). We do not admire Irena Sendler any less because she only saved 2500 children and maybe could have saved three thousand. We all identify with the hospital visitor who came out of friendship and what friendship entails. We don't actually measure a person's moral worth using the tools of modernity.

Here are some common responsive moral dispositions or associated character traits in recognition of the other. They reflect both other- and self- regarding ethical goods that benefit both the possessor and recipient:

kindness, felicity, benevolence, generosity, empathy, magnanimity,

compassion, care, tenderness, trustworthiness, loyalty, discernment, truthfulness, integrity, sincerity, conscientiousness, fairness, justice, patience, diligence, reliability, fortitude, courage, prudence, perseverance, hope, and so on .

These are stable enduring global characteristics that enable us to perceive and shape ethical responses in any ethically charged situation and to work with and alongside our clients. Virtuous activity involves choosing virtue for itself in light of a justifiable life plan. A virtue is the property of the whole person and the life that person leads. The question becomes not what is it to do social work but what is it to be a social worker. Social work is a characteristically virtuous activity built around a life plan and commitment to promoting the flourishing of others (and hence myself qua social worker) in social work situations, our distinctive domain full of safety, security and care metaphors. I do not act benevolently in order to be benevolent (a deontic rule) or to be seen to be benevolent by myself or others (moral reputation); or even to produce benevolence (calculated outcome). I act benevolently because the situation I face fits a description of a situation that elicits my benevolence and my suitably disposed character recognises it as such.

Three VE propositions and some discussion points. Consider the following

1. Slote: an action is right if and only if it exhibits or expresses a virtuous (or admirable) motive or at least does not exhibit a vicious (or deplorable) one;
2. Hursthouse: an act is right if and only if it is what a virtuous agent would not just do but characteristically would do in the circumstances;
3. Swanton: an action is right if and only if it acknowledges or responds to items in the field of virtue in an excellent or good enough way.

Consider Motivation

Aristotle (Nichomachean ethics) asserts that:

- Every art and every enquiry and similarly every action is thought to aim at some good and for this reason the good has been declared that at which all things aim;
- The good aimed at varies with each art and activity;
- The virtue of a thing is relative to its proper function;

- Certain virtues or excellences make a person good and make that person do her work well.

Apply this to the ethical social work role

(Adapted from Jane Green 2008, paper presented to Edinburgh Conference: 'Towards Practice Wisdom').

A morally charged social worker:

- has an abiding interest in the telos – the main goal or purpose or good – of her *métier*;
- pursues the characteristic good of that *métier* with creativity and moral imagination;
- has a particular responsibility with respect to the goals of that *métier*;
- thinks of these goals as belonging within a larger context that makes such ends worth pursuing and worth society's having her pursue.

A social work practice of value is based on:

An ethical career that aims at the good or well being of its clients and hence there are certain virtues which help the social worker realise that purpose and to become and remain a social worker. Her *métier* is the care, protection and security of those whose care, safety and security are endangered at any given point in life stages, within her distinctive socially mandated domain.

Virtue theory therefore has much in common with spiritual perspectives in that it makes for a transcendent ethical imagination in a commitment to distressed others and assuaging their discomforts. In stressing motivational factors grounded in caring and compassionate inner dispositions towards helping others it foregrounds the traditional values of social work. There is much productive dialogue to be had between the two perspectives.