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**A critical analytic literature review of virtue ethics  
for social work:  
beyond codified conduct towards virtuous social work**

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Doctor of Social Work  
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January 2011**

## Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to in part to another University for the award of any other degree

Signature

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**Doctor of Social Work**

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**Thesis summary**

This submission is based on a critical analytical literature review of the moral paradigm of virtue ethics and a specific application of this to social work value discourse in search of lost identity. It echoes the philosophical academy's paradigmatic wars between 'act' and 'agent' appraisals in moral theory. Act appraisal theories focus on a person's act as the primary source of moral value whereas agent appraisal theories - whether 'agent-prior' or stricter 'agent-based' versions - focus on a person's disposition to act morally. This generates a philosophical debate about which type of appraisal should take precedence in making an overall evaluation of a person's moral performance. My starting point is that at core social work is an altruistic activity entailing a deep commitment, a 'moral impulse', towards the distressed 'other'. This should privilege dispositional models of value that stress character and good motivation correctly applied - in effect making for an ethical career built upon the requisite moral virtues. However, the neo-liberal and neo-conservative state hegemony has all but vanquished the moral impulse and its correct application. In virtue ethical language, we live in 'vicious' times.

I claim that social work's adherence to act appraisal Kantian and Utilitarian models is implicated in this loss. Kantian 'deontic' theory stresses inviolable moral principle to be obeyed irrespective of outcome: Utilitarian 'consequentialist' theory calculates the best moral outcome measured against principle. The withering of social work as a morally active profession has culminated in the state regulator's Code of Practice. This makes for a conformity of behaviour which I call 'proto-ethical' to distinguish it from 'ethics proper'. The Code demands that de-moralised practitioners dutifully follow policy,

rules, procedures and targets - ersatz, piecemeal and simplistic forms of deontic and consequentialist act appraisals. Numerous inquiries into social work failures indict practitioners for such behaviour.

I draw upon mainstream virtue ethical theory and the emergent social work counter discourse to get beyond both code and the simplified under-theoretisation of social work value. I defend a thesis regarding an identity-defining cluster of social work specific virtues. I propose two modules: 'righteous indignation' to capture the heartfelt moral impulse, and 'just generosity' to mindfully delineate the scope and legitimacy of the former. Their operation generates an exchange relationship with the client whereby the social worker builds 'surplus value' to give back more than must be taken in the transaction. I construct a social work specific minimal-maximal 'stability standard' to anchor the morally correct expression of these two modules and the estimation of surplus value. In satisficing terms, the standard describes what is good enough but is also potentially expansive.

A derivative social work practice of moral value is embedded in an historic 'care and control' dialectic. The uncomfortable landscape is one of moral ambiguity and paradoxicality, to be navigated well in virtue terms. I argue that it is incongruous to speak of characterological social worker virtues and vices and then not to employ the same paradigm to the client's moral world. This invites a functional analysis of virtue. The telos of social work - our moral impulse at work - directs us to scrutiny of the unsafe household. Our mandate is the well-being of the putative client within, discoursed in terms of functional life-stage virtues and vicious circumstance.

I employ the allegorical device of a personal ethical journey from interested lay person to committed social worker, tracking the character-building moral peregrinations. I focus on two criticisms of virtue ethics - a philosophical fork. It is said that virtue ethical theory cannot of itself generate any reliable, independently validated action guidance. In so far as it does, the theory will endorse an as-given, even reactionary, criterion of right action, making 'virtue and vice' talk the bastion of the establishment power holders who control knowledge. I seek to repudiate these claims. Given that this demands a new approach to moral pedagogy, the practical implications for the suitability and training of social workers are discussed.

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## **Introduction**

### **Overview**

This thesis is based on a critical analytical literature review of the moral paradigm of virtue ethics. From it I construct a framework theory of value which I claim reconnects with lost social work identity and offers us action guidance in line with that identity. The precursor to this, my critical analytical study (Webster, 2006), looked at the emergence of virtue ethics as a counter discourse to the social work mainstream. I identified some major conceptual challenges resonating from the paradigm. A small number of social work commentators have begun to investigate these but such work is still in its infancy. In my study I made a passing reference to the nemesis of codification. I had begun to associate the establishment of a seemingly progressive set of rules governing social work behaviour with an existential professional crisis as to who and what we are meant to be and do. My present inquiry explores more deeply virtue ethics' philosophical anti-codification stance in order to bring to the identity debate some alternative social work value theory 'beyond code'. I do so by extolling the conceptual potential of virtue ethics and by working through some of the challenges.

### **Some basic concepts**

By code I mean a list of prescriptions or proscriptions determining action - basically 'do's and don'ts'. While there is little that is new in my underlying theoretical argumentation, synthesised as it is from the mainstream moral philosophic academy and cognate disciplines, my claim to originality lies in my particular theoretical adaptation of virtue ethics to social work as a unique historical narrative. I equate social work identity with a value discourse. Identity is founded in memory, so value discourse should retain that which needs to be remembered. I believe that it is impossible to sustain in memory what we hold that is of significance without paying attention to a supporting language. When we do not, we cannot but eventually cease to be who we would wish to be and will therefore fail in what we would wish to do. I contend that much of the contemporary social work discourse derived from today's codification of value invites a disjunction between the two states of being and doing. It leads us to

acquiesce into doing something less than social work, or at least does not stop us from doing what we should not.

By value discourse I mean our justificatory sense-making accounts of ourselves as practitioners. However, while we are forever necessarily preoccupied with our values and the relationship between being and doing, Banks (2008: 1244) points out that social work has drawn on concepts and theories from moral philosophy in 'rather piecemeal and simplistic ways'. If, as I hold, social work is nothing if not a construction of value, certainly now we need to be far more systematic in the way we draw on concepts and apply theory. I suggest that our casualness regarding a language of value is implicated in the crisis of identity in social work. Before the asymmetry of being and doing can be addressed, and some sort of collective response to the crisis mobilised, so must the under-theoretisation which plagues our lackadaisical language. My thesis seeks to sharpen our concepts and apply a theory of professional identity through the lens of virtue ethics.

I use the abbreviation 'VE' to refer to a theory of virtue in a tight technical sense rather than everyday virtue talk, although, importantly, they are connected. Moral theory must always resonate with and speak to our day-to-day experiences, indubitably so in social work. Generally speaking, I take a virtue to be a certain quality of character that is deemed to make a person 'excellent' according to the demands of the situation, someone who responds in an exemplary manner in the domain of activity covered by the virtue in question. My focus is on the moral sense of excellence and its valued directional capacity, where a person endowed with moral virtues is at least more likely than a person who is not to act in a morally apposite manner.

A compassionate person will be predisposed to interpret and act in a compassionate way when compassion is needed and disregard is not. This would make the possession of moral virtues desirable if not essential, at least for anyone who seeks to be a morally excellent person. I also take it that it is impossible to speak properly of the moral positives of virtue without referring to vice and vicious circumstance which would negate moral excellence, or at least the opportunity to express it. My version of VE is as much about the overcoming of vicissitude as it is about moral performance. The striving is part of the moral excellence.

A virtue defines and expresses value and a vice defines and expresses disvalue. I make the argument for an occupationally specific exemplar of moral virtue which is not just desirable but essential if we are to be morally adroit social workers. I argue that the exemplar, once laid out in VE terms, can provide a measure of worth which is the necessary condition for occupationally specific social work excellence in the face of much circumstantial, especially institutional, viciousness. I say necessary but not sufficient because a person cannot be forced to strive to be morally excellent, which is difficult enough even under benign conditions. It is just that if someone desires to be a social worker, she should try. (For convenience, I will usually employ female pronouns to refer to a social worker, client or carer.)

I claim that through an insidious process of the codification of social work value we have all but lost the idea of what it is to possess and exercise the relevant moral attributes; hence the loss of identity-defining moral acumen, although the shadow of these attributes continues to flicker, as it were, in our folk memory. The arrival in 2002 of the state's formal Code of Practice backed up by the legal force of regulation is, I contend, emblematic of our woes. Beyond code, the particular VE redemptive direction that I choose to take is to propose a framework of value within which an identity-defining historicised cluster of social work specific virtues can be articulated.

### **Researcher identity and VE counter discourse**

At this juncture, I present a position statement regarding researcher identity, defending the rationale for my thesis. My position cannot be explicated without first outlining the genesis of my thinking which began with my critical analytical study. Self-identity is a form of knowing oneself, here first as a social worker and second as a researcher. Outwith any legal requirements of registration, I take it that any claim to be a social worker should be voiced in terms chosen to reveal the distinctive moral truth of one's existence. As Bisman (2004:109) reminds us, social work has always been at core a moral activity. Where the top-down holders of power and controllers of knowledge devalue authentic identity to the point that it is being abrogated, as I claim is the case in social work, a counter discourse is required to challenge the hegemony. As an ex-employee of the General Social Care Council, the England regulator, I claim to speak

with some insider knowledge. (I may add that I have all along shared my emergent line of thinking with both staff and senior managers.)

The professional context is the malaise which undermines those practices internal to social work as a special sort of moral helping tradition. Social worker self-knowledge must surely centre on an understanding of the lived world of those people who become our clients and the reasons for intruding into it. Today, it is as if social worker self-knowledge and the lived world of our clients have come apart. Complicit in this is our present day normative language-in-use where, I claim, performative function has failed to match propositional content.

The more immediate motivation for my present inquiry is the all too frequent tragedies such as Baby Peter, the child who died of injuries inflicted over a period of time but who should have been saved by social workers. Behind the headlines, social workers too often fail their clients nowadays and therefore they also fail their profession and themselves. I identify two related explanations for this. The first is an institutionalised focus on and obeisance to regulations, procedures and targets, as formal inquiries all too often conclude. 'Compliance with regulation and rules often drives professional practice more than sound judgment drawn from the professional relationship and interaction with the family' (Community Care, 2010: 1). The second explanation is that with this monofocus on rules, social workers all too often fail to 'see' who the real client is, or should be. Critical perspectives on risk and social work are belatedly emerging. Munro (2010) writes about learning to reduce risk in child protection; Stanford (2010) writes about 'speaking back to fear' and responding to moral dilemmas of risk in social work.

The heavily loaded idea of failure operates at different levels and according to the person making the analysis. A typically overwhelmed practitioner might anguish over lack of direct client contact time, poor professional supervision and too much form filling. I see these kinds of explanations as symptoms of the deeper malaise. It is no coincidence that embattled, but as yet undefeated, social workers who live with the fear of failure 'spend as much time twisting, evading, bending and reinterpreting rules as they do being guided by or conforming to them' (Webb, 2006a: 210). I suggest that it is

the 'real' social worker left in them that compels them to do so. Authentic social work identity is not transfixed in a duty to merely do as we are told, as per the official text.

I see a clear link between researcher and social worker identity. Theoretically based research in order to generate alternative, revitalising text can form part of the strategy. The ontological and epistemological assumptions of VE are at odds with those that have come to inform social work's standardised value purview. An application of VE requires its own way of inquiring, one that critically reflects back and deconstructs the gaze generated by today's formulaic codified orthodoxy of do's and don'ts. I bring this outlook to a theoretical engagement with some redemptive VE and what Hart (2006: 23) calls the 'imaginary element to research'. I propose a 'release of this imagination', as Hart puts it, through a conceptual journey that follows through some VE sourced ideas to their theoretical conclusions.

Some key texts have proved to be invaluable and a constant reference point. The discipline of moral philosophy has its own distinctive intertextual genres, as I have come to recall from my forgotten previous life as a student of moral and political philosophy. As a social work researcher, the appropriately named *Becoming a Researcher: a research companion for the social sciences* by Dunne, Pryor and Yates (2005) has provided an invaluable travelling aid to managing the logic of my inquiry. I conceive the social work value tradition to be a self-organising process in the management of 'moral chaos': hence a search for moral theory to explain complex ever-changing situations. Over the years, the nomenclature has, in a piecemeal fashion, covered a range of different ontological and epistemological positions in pursuit of social work realities, ranging from what can be designated as vernacular positivist and naive realist through to postmodernistic and social constructivist stances. As Dunne *et al.* (2005: 20) suggest, with such a mix, the tensions will reverberate throughout. My framework thesis revolves around recognising and managing these tensions in my proposed accommodation of social work moral chaos.

The repertoires of language-in-use define the way social work practices are enacted and the subject position of those individuals engaged in them. I claim that there is much about social work's present day flattened value language that is in need of refurbishment since the institution of social work is gradually being dismantled, aided and abetted by

the codification of practice. I take it as a given that the loss matters and should be resisted. Methodologically, this resistance requires that we should suspend belief in the innocence of our everyday words and engage with the 'locutionary force' behind them (Dunne *et al.*, 2005: 105). The description of the philosophical journey and its technical milestones towards a social work telos beyond code involves, loosely speaking, what Dunne *et al.* (2005: 93) call 'worrying at words' and looking at the rules of formation of value discourse. This is not in the precise sense of fine grained close textual analysis but an engagement with some applied VE in light of social science's postmodern 'linguistic turn' and as a challenge to social work's reliance on increasingly discredited late modernistic normativity. Each milestone invites some consideration of the theoretical orthodoxy as an impediment to acquisition of authentic social work identity, and its role in the (re)production of dominance. VE heterodoxy offers a different transcript to re-engage with identity and to challenge the dominance.

### **The philosophical research journey**

Webb's (2006a) publication *Social Work in a Risk Society: Social and Political Perspectives* is another of my formative texts. I seek to re-establish a value vocabulary to reclaim that historic radical tendency involved in helping people through what Webb (2006a: 15) calls their 'fateful moments'. I refer to those sorts of good encounters between social worker and client which once used to characterise a 'practice of value'. A practice of value 'stresses the importance of caring, virtue and recognition as an antidote to extreme individualism' (Webb, 2006a: 18). Today, much of social work makes for what I would call a practice of disvalue, a view shared by other fellow travellers. Building on the work of Webb and a few other virtue orientated social work commentators, but going in my particular direction, I propose and defend a VE representation of social work value.

My thesis is predicated on an understanding of the current crisis of confidence that is sweeping the profession. By crisis of confidence I mean the corrosive widespread loss of faith by practitioners in their own efficacy as a helping profession, one no longer marked out by its own distinctive worthiness. The institution of social work today is much removed from the transgressive spirit of its 19th century philanthropists and the founding 'moral reformation' movement which linked personal well-being with social

justice. Modern social work emerged out of a concern to work with families immiserated by the wretched 'de-moralising' living conditions of industrialisation under primitive capitalism. The movement away from this commitment can be described as the difference between the narrative self in pursuance of honourable altruistic ends and the bureaucratic self - the latter day factotum subject worker in advanced capitalist society conveying the controlled production and distribution of personal welfare.

In recalling this once rich story now so impoverished, I draw on themes from the history of social work, the current standard training of social workers, the generic social work value literature available to practitioners and, of course, our Code of Practice. My thesis also assumes an acquaintance with some mainstream moral philosophical theory and concepts, including theories regarding the nature of moral ratiocination. For reasons of space more often than not, when alluded to, these themes are stated briefly. I outline the latest social work virtue specific literature, updating my previous review (Webster, 2006) not only to indicate what I have carried forward but also to illustrate the point of my departure. I have felt the need to go back to the historical sources of original virtue ethical theory and examine the historiography of its evolution.

While the idea of virtue discourse is gaining some belated popularity, with a few exceptions much of the current social work literature is, in my sense, VE technically undeveloped. I believe this hampers further application and we need to catch up with what the moral philosophers have been arguing about. Relying at the time mainly on the extant social work literature, in hindsight my critical analytical study was superficial in its purview and this submission builds on that acknowledgment. One of the exceptions alluded to above is Banks and Gallagher 's (2009) *Ethics in Professional Life: Virtues for Health and Social Care*, which has proved to be another companion. In describing a modular set of virtues for social workers, I have ended up taking an alternative approach, drawing on my pre-social work career as a qualified nurse to do so.

The main research task has involved dealing with the much broader and in-depth philosophical corpus of virtue ethical theory, selecting a range of differing positions within the paradigm itself and then interpreting and testing out particular slants for my express purposes. I adapt Hart's (2006: 13) definition of a literature review to mean a



study of key texts on the topic that contain information, ideas, perspectives, arguments and evidence where the purpose of the study is to be used for a particular standpoint for a particular purpose in a particular way. At one level this echoes Fink's (2005: 3-5) account of a literature review as a systematic, explicit and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating and synthesising the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars and practitioners.

VE thinking entails a paradigmatic mindset shift in the Kuhnian sense, away from principle-based moral theory which has dominated social work value talk. The rudiments of my redemptive framework are derived from the conceptual battlegrounds of the philosophical academy's relentless 'paradigmatic wars'. They provide a unifying organisational thread throughout this dissertation and in the formation of my thesis.

### **The paradigmatic wars**

I identify two elementary criticisms leveled against VE by advocates of principle-based moral theory, a kind of philosophical fork. First of all, VE struggles to generate any valid moral decision-making procedure - the casuistry problem - and secondly, insofar as it does, its reference point is always likely to be the already as-given normativity - the collusion accusation. Since these are in effect what I complain of about codified value talk, the irony lays down some obvious crucial themes to examine in the exploration of social work identity.

There are in moral philosophy some acknowledged seminal VE texts by eminent philosophers representing different schools of virtue ethics. Of equal interest are the on-going critical commentaries. In the modernistic corner, proponents of Kantianism and Utilitarianism dual with advocates of reprised VE theory. The aetiology of the latter is dubbed either pre- or post- modern depending on just how much its classical and even theological roots are emphasised. Irrespective of the provenance of the underpinning theory, moral philosophers have long argued the difference between act appraisal models of right action, which privilege abstract universal principles, and agent-based or agent-prior accounts, which privilege antecedent moral character as the primary source of value. It is important to stress at the outset the link between this seemingly arcane philosophical debate and social work practice, since Kantian

deontological and Utilitarian consequentialist derived discourses have dominated social work's value talk.

Deontology stresses moral rules such as Kant's Categorical Imperative; consequentialism pays attention to outcomes such as Bentham's Utility Principle for maximising happiness. Social work derivatives of these - albeit of that piecemeal and simplified variety - form the lynchpin of code language. At the commencement of the philosophical paradigmatic wars, now some sixty years ago, a VE caractereological anti-code perspective was presented very much as an antidote to the other two, and that is how I have come to treat and research the subject matter. In my view, not to do so is to miss the theoretical thrust of VE as a counter discourse diagnostic for social work. It challenges the deontological and consequentialist mind set, which I claim has legitimated all those rules, procedures and targets, sanctioned by the Code of Practice. It is no coincidence that such a mindset is favoured by the neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologues who now control social work and its language-in-use.

These days, any undergraduate moral philosophy primer will probably contain an introduction to virtue ethics, although not so likely in the social work equivalent, despite the sixty odd years of high-level debate. The on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is an easily accessible entry point for an overview of virtue ethics, key texts, themes and topics within it. The more theoretically advanced critical philosophical literature is expansive. Amongst all the postmodern renderings, the voluminous early classical and theological virtue accounts have never been quite forgotten. I have ended up proposing some theologically sourced notions, as it happens consistent with our narrative, given British social work's early Christian influences, but there is no necessary obligation to be either religious or spiritual to assimilate my arguments. Focusing on the revival of virtue ethics that ushered in the paradigmatic wars, and searching in particular for social work compatible accounts, my major source is Schroth's (2010) periodically updated web-based encyclopedic *Literatur zur Tugendethik (Bibliography on Virtue Ethics)*. Its current list of 450 or so substantive books and articles on the subject of virtue ethics is laid out chronologically with brief summaries of new key additions.

My aim is to move from the high-level technical VE debate and its concomitant ontological and epistemological presumptions down to the swampy lowlands of social work practice, negotiating the sticking points through a social work language derived from but also capable of adhering to VE throughout. A key practical text for me is *Working Virtue: Virtue Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* edited by Walker and Ivanhoe (2007). While none of the contributors write about social work, their ideas illustrate the feasibility of transfer.

Altruism themes underpinning several VE positions need to be complemented by supportive sociological, socio-biological and psychological perspectives. Here, another of my key texts is Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues: a Handbook and Classification* (2004), a meta-survey which provides a psychological foundation to the moral domain.

### **Organisation and structure of material**

Perhaps the best test of veracity, synthesis and authorship is the explicit research focus on what aspect is most likely to undermine the story that I want to evince. My thesis is presented as and through an identity-conferring VE framework. The framework is argued through a presentation of a number of linked conceptual themes including, where apposite, some existing supportive empirical studies. Since these themes are interrelated, there is no easy linear way to present this sort of iteration, so previously discussed ideas reappear later with different emphases and implications.

To assist navigation, I set out a VE social work journey. The narration moves from lay person to expert professional social worker, intertwining metaphor and allegory to carry the story along and to identify the conceptual and theoretical milestones. I seek to elucidate these through some VE vignettes drawn from the philosophic academy, alluding to social work practice. The formative VE material that I have selected for the first half of my dissertation focuses on a construction of social work value in a way that is intended to engage with the first major criticism of VE theory mentioned above - the casuistry problem. The material that I have selected for the second half is intended to engage with the second major criticism of VE theory - the status quo collusion problem.

The framework thesis which I draw out is intended to address both these challenges in a way that is at least good enough for social work.

In Chapter 1 I explore the view that social work identity is to be found in a VE defined alternative moral world to the standard one. I distinguish between the moral and the ethical, sentiment and reasoning, and highlight essential social worker integrity as a commitment to protecting the naive moral impulse towards the distressed other in the course of sophisticating it. The arguments rely on a distinction between 'big' and 'small' virtue ethical discussion and the moral primacy of agent appraisals over act appraisals. This distinction lays bare those critical challenges to the theoretical coherence of the VE paradigm.

Chapter 2 focuses on codification of value and its pernicious effects. I put forward the claim that any code will occlude the free authentic expression of social work identity. I argue how official text flattens and closes down value discussion, which can only be fully liberated through a-categorical thought. Conformity to the regulator's Code makes for what I call an alienating, infantilising 'proto-ethics'. I draw on a critical notion of 'concept amnesia' and an all but lost language of value to account for our ennui.

In Chapter 3 I update my previous review of the social work virtue ethical and related literature. Building on the idea of supererogation, 'going beyond duty', I introduce the theme of the social work paragon and a paradoxical notion of non-obligatory obligation within a laudatory sacred ethical space. I describe that space through a theory of paradoxicality, using some classical riddles from the field of logic to account for the search for moral order out of moral chaos. I link the world of paradox to the 'doctrine of double effect' and 'moral remainder'. In this peculiar world social workers respond to those extra-vulnerable others left unattended by those who would or should normally look after them. I introduce into the discussion the idea of a detrimental 'bystander effect'. This occurs when morally attuned observers in a crowd stand by as someone desperately needs assistance.

Chapter 4 argues for a natural conceptual affinity between this social worker world and the virtue ethical paradigm. Drawing on some seminal philosophical texts, I introduce

the neo-classical idea of VE as an elective ethical community. I describe morally active practitioners as 'ethical labourers' operating in the 'gap of omissions' left by natural carers. Surveying some VE positions from within the philosophic academy, I make the argument for a set of if and only if [iff] statements to lay down some threshold components of characteristic social work motivation and ethical labouring.

In Chapter 5, conceptualising social work identity as a distinctive form of ethical friendship, I explore the idea of philosophical 'self-effacement'. The technical as well as intuitive rejection of formulaic rule-bound reasoning in favour of a more natural discourse, about being there for the distressed other, sits well with my anti-code position. However, research obligation requires that I unravel an awkward 'tu quoque' argument. The claim is that if interrogated hard enough, behind the display of any form of moral naturalism and apparent spontaneity, there will be revealed a set of sovereign hard rules for decision-making. I look at standard learning theory to begin to engage with this.

In Chapter 6 I examine another relatively recent fundamental attack on VE in general and friendship in particular, coming from a different angle but just as potentially devastating, where moral theory encounters experimental psychology. This 'situationist' challenge queries the stability and unity of virtue to function under adverse external pressure, just when virtue is most called for. The tu quoque and situationist challenges have led me to an exploration of theories of moral pedagogy, and to a formulation of tacit knowledge as a skills-based fluent moral expertise. I argue that the moral expert continually checks on her reliable self as part of authentic social work identity, so, if reflexivity is a rule, it is a non self-effacing one.

In Chapter 7 I engage with the collusionist/status quo critique of VE to show how a historised account of professional tacit knowledge does indeed immerse social work identity in the management of functional virtues pertaining to a well-ordered society. I highlight the interventionist role of social work in relation to dysfunctional households and the amelioration of someone's extra-vulnerability through the production of what I call 'surplus exchange-value'. This sets out everyday virtue to be in accordance with the customary rhythms, cadences and mores that make up what is deemed to be a normal way of life. Social work theory long ago ceased to speak of the client world in terms of

virtue and vices: my VE framework invites a reprise. I introduce the prospect of creative social work beyond tradition built into the tradition itself.

In Chapter 8, using an idea of 'prototype' and 'role-contoured' virtue, I offer another riddle to describe the personalised pattern of social welfare exchange as a 'little-by-little' movement from 'moral fuzziness' through to 'supersharp' evaluation. I invoke moral satisficing theory to describe this movement, played out through well-being, care and control motifs. I argue that there is scope for a VE generated stability standard which can take the virtuous practitioner beyond merely servicing the as-given to critically examining it as part of her practice. The argument centres on two social work signature clusters or modules of virtues qualitatively expressed as 'righteous indignation' and 'just generosity'.

In Chapter 9 I draw upon a little-known hero to illustrate these clusters. The test of social work veracity is to give what is 'morally owed' to the client, according to, but not curtailed by, the normative standards of time and place. The exchange must generate value that minimally must be at least no less (but maximally greater than) what is taken away from the client, so that through ethical labouring the transaction can also exhibit the feature of a gift. Such a view leads to considerations of hermeneutical and communitarian dialogue but moral relativist theory indicates the problematic nature of patterns of exchange relationships in non-consensual cases.

In Chapter 10 I construct a social work specific minimal-maximal virtue stability standard to anchor correct expression of the two modules of righteous indignation and just generosity. The righteously indignant social worker scans and scrutinises the moral horizon for vicious circumstances in which people live and for the intolerable vices of neglect, harm and abuse. I describe what is social work good enough but is also potentially expansive to go beyond the minimum, provided we embrace rather than wrestle with the moral chaos, distinguish between the means and ends of practice and commit ourselves to the truth of moral uncertainty through an undogmatic fusion of horizons. I suggest that this stability standard is embedded in an historic care and control, supersharp-fuzzy dialectic.

In Chapter 11 I summarise the threads of my thesis in order to explore the scope for any practical application. I raise the prospect of a network of discourse sanctuaries for VE fugitives. These sanctuaries can re-privilege social worker identity in the very act of speaking of its absence. Drawing on relevant research, I suggest that some social work education regulatory training rules can be re-examined in light of my framework in order to inform a VE justified little-by-little praxis. I conclude by reflecting on my own professional research journey.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The logic of VE inquiry**

#### **Introduction**

I outline the standard moral world which sees traits of virtue as auxiliary to principle in the process of reasoning. A VE defined moral world locates the source of social worker identity in core virtue supported by reason. This approach exposes the critical challenges to the theoretical coherence of the paradigm. I do not believe these criticisms have been answered as far as social work is concerned, partly because the questions they pose are difficult practical ones. One way of responding is to argue for an alternative mode of theoretical inquiry to the one presupposed by questions derived from the perspective of the hegemony. Developing three descriptors under the rubric of an essentialist approach to virtue, I hold that each of these is implicated in social work practice and, to the extent that they are left unresolved, social worker identity is also negated.

#### **Character traits and virtue**

According to Rachels (1999), the five necessary conditions for a satisfactory virtue ethical discourse must, sequentially, (i) explain what a virtue is, (ii) list those traits that are virtues, (iii) explain what these traits mean, (iv) justify why they are desirable, and (v) address whether these virtues are the same for everyone or differ from person to person, group to group, culture to culture, society to society. Methodologically, Rachels is laying down a typical 'top-down' 'outside-in' phenomenological approach to inquiry, moving from a search for primary definition through a conditional sequence to applied specifics. This results in hiatus at any given level of inquiry where a given position yields no consensus, just unresolved disputation. That is not to say we should never ask Rachel's questions, only that they need not be answered in that particular way, let alone that order.



While there is some consensus as to the range and terminology of social work compatible virtues, we must avoid an eclectic and parochial list. From the realm of positive psychology, Peterson and Seligman (2004) provide an empirical classification and measurement of twenty-four widely valued globally ubiquitous traits. These are categorised under six broad banner virtues of wisdom and knowledge, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, and transcendence. The authors claim that these have consistently emerged across all history and all cultures and are constitutive of the generic human well-being of individuals and their communities. This makes the possession of these traits desirable, both to the possessor and to beneficiaries. I attach an Appendix providing a summary of their framework.

Methodologically, to examine the application of each trait to social work would be painstaking and in any case not required for my purpose. I will take them as given in general and begin to fit them into social work selectively. We might look at the claim that social workers have more of at least some of these than other people do, or alternatively that there is a distinctive type of overall virtue applying to social workers because of their particular activity, a matter of expression rather than quantity. My tack is to explore the idea of a distinctive combination of traits that encapsulate social work identity, as opposed to the traits of a virtuous person who happens to be a social worker but might instead be, say, a nurse or teacher.

I take it as given that a social worker is neither nurse nor teacher although much might be held in common and role boundaries may overlap. It is the difference as to ownership and signification of some particular traits that interests me. I will concentrate on aspects of three of Peterson and Seligman's global traits, humanity, justice and transcendence, although social workers also need to be wise, courageous and temperate. The overall virtue of humanity includes traits manifest in caring relationships, and in those loving and kindly dispositions to tend and befriend which are brought to bear in intrapersonal one-to-one relationships. The virtue of justice, whether of a redistributory or restorative kind, is a strength focusing on impartial and fair interpersonal civic relationships. The virtue of transcendence is a strength that provides meaning to life, looking into the future with hope, optimism and a vision of a better world. A nurse or teacher may legitimately claim these traits as their own too (alongside wisdom, courage and temperance), but not, I suggest, in the specific way that

social workers can. The journeys of the former would be, I am sure, different ones, each requiring its own analytical research inquiry. I commence the peculiar social work journey by beginning to describe a VE moral world.

My VE framework of social work value relies on a distinction between two very different ways of seeing and thus of speaking about the moral domains of humanity, justice and transcendence. As argued by Norton (1988: 181-182) and Kupperman (1988: 115-125), these two ways conjure up two very different models of the moral world and hence of moral decision-making. The modernistic way is a matter of deployment of appropriate moral principles which are universally available to all reasonable thinkers with the 'right' mindset. The codification of moral behaviour as foundational statements privileges much of this model of thinking. This model veers towards simple linear logical thought and the determination of cause and effect to produce a position divested of personal predilection other than following through the principle. The normative hegemonic construction of reality similarly presumes a clockwork-like system that, once discerned, is assumed to be constant and predictably reliable enough to know and use. However, when actually confronted by the sheer complexities of real practice situations, this standard model of professional expertise, which C. Clark (2007: 61-64) summarises as the 'Popperian hypothetico-deductive method', is in need of much refurbishment.

In the other model, a pre-modern way of thinking, an agent is assumed to have a formed character, or to be in the process of forming one, where moral decision-making is a situated instantiation of the present self. This model therefore intimately connects with an agent's past or future character development. Here, moral decision-making takes place against a background of habits, inhibitions and patterns of self-satisfaction. The agent has the desire (or lack) to become a certain kind of person and has the satisfaction (or lack) in being a certain kind of person in and through her actions. In the test of whether someone really possesses the necessary correct moral navigational attributes, what is crucial is whether or not she relishes behaving in the manner corresponding to them.

The two models may not logically directly conflict: it is possible to hold that the second model gives the best account of how someone can be prepared to make moral choices

and can integrate these into a sense of self, whilst holding that the first model is correct in pointing out that a rationally derived method is needed for the actual decision-making. However, the two pull in opposite directions.

### **The standard model**

In the modernistic model, using the radar of some untethered abstract principle, the impartial agent detects and demarcates a dilemma in which two (or more) courses of moral action are available. The agent then tests these against the principle. Any option that fails the testing is rejected. The one finally left standing becomes a duty. On this score, the accepted agenda of modern ethics is to formulate a supreme and universally applicable moral principle, together with a complete list of derivative rules representing the application of the supreme principle to all possible moral situations. The duty is to obey an appropriate maxim that is reasoned out to prevail in the particular moral situation. The right thing to do is unlocked by such ratiocination, and practical ethics becomes a mechanical discourse about how to turn some sort of encoded key to open up the combination lock. Much of social work's standardised value training is of this sort, revolving around pros and cons case studies.

There is logically always only one right combination to the lock that when turned should fully satisfy the principle, difficult though that search might be in practice. To facilitate that search under pressure of time and fast moving sequences of events, a suitably endowed key-holding ratiocinator, one with a virtue-like attribute such as perspicacity, will no doubt be advantaged in decoding the answer and be quicker. However, as Cohen (2006: 50-51) suggests, these attributes are better called instrumental virtues. I call these small 've', to be contrasted with big 'VE'. Adams (2006: 32) has as a similar term to my VE - 'capital *V* Virtue'. With small ve, the attributes of virtue are simply proffered in the more efficient heuristical pursuit of the supreme deontic or consequentialist principle which virtue is to serve. A person disposed to promote the Categorical Imperative or Utility Principle can 'make a virtue out of it', or be made to do so. Making someone virtuous, in this sense of becoming a better supplicant to a normative deontic or consequentialist axiom, is an ageless form of social engineering.

On this account, all v-language is really just another second-order way of stating or instantiating first-order moral rules established by other theoretical means. Virtue really depends on and is defined by those rules which it supports. A virtuous person honours, promotes and lives by the Categorical Imperative, so is derivatively respectful of others, non-judgmental, honest and courageous in its defence. Such small ve talk haunts big VE theorists, the entrapments intruding into the discourse. One entrapment, in particular, is that in spite of all the theoretical huffing and puffing, big VE must perforce acknowledge independent moral precepts in order to give its own internal argumentation conceptual volition. This makes it, in effect, an idle cog in the moral universe.

Known as the redundancy argument, the challenge needs unravelling since VE for social work will depend on some sort of social work accommodation, if not refutation of it. However, powerfully in favour of VE and a pre-modern way of thinking is a common sense view that virtues and morally right action are directly connected. People expect those with the requisite virtue to act morally rightly more often than those without. A person endowed with the disposition of moral courage is more likely than one who is not to act correctly in morally charged situations demanding moral courage. Whistleblowing is a standard example. I expand on this perspective by distinguishing between act appraisals and agent-prior or agent-based appraisals.

Theoretical moral philosophers ask which logically comes first in terms of explanation: morally right action, here the actual whistleblowing, hence a stress on act appraisals; or moral virtues, here the personal recognition of the need to and then the drive to whistleblow, hence a stress on agent-based or agent-prior appraisals. The latter two commit an advocate to something like the statement by Loudon (1998: 491) to the effect that:

Virtue ethics 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.

Referenced as a definition by Webster (2008a, 2008b), Wright and Webster (2008: 112) and Banks and Gallagher (2009: 34), the point of Loudon's summation is to contrast the

heterodoxy of agent-based and agent-prior construals with standard orthodox moral construals that an action is right if and only if [iff] it is in accordance with an act appraisal moral rule or principle, typically deontic or consequentialist, Kantian or Utilitarian.

The main difference between agent-based and agent-prior approaches is the degree to which external value criteria are allowed conceptual leeway. Either way, critics of VE theory sooner or later lead us to an awkward position for social work, namely that some actions are absolutely required (or forbidden) irrespective of the motive or character of the agent. We really ought to prevent certain types of moral digressions that produce harm of incontestable magnitude. Consider, for example, paedophilia, which surely has not much to do with agent appraisal other than the obligation of the moral agent to prevent or stop it. No doubt being endowed with some small ve attributes such as courage will help the practitioner succeed but that is not the point.

### **Features of the redundancy charge**

The general theoretical redundancy charge arrayed against VE theory is that, indubitably caught up in inner motive conversations, of itself aretaic agent appraisal theory lacks the conceptual wherewithal to generate public, reliably validated, right-making moral acts. As Louden (2001: 235) puts it:

It has often been said that for virtue ethics the central question is not ‘What ought I to *do*?’ but rather ‘What sort of person ought I to *be*?’ However, people have always expected ethical theory to tell them something about what they ought to do, and it seems to me that virtue ethics is structurally unable to say much of anything about this issue. If I am right, one consequence of this is that a virtue based ethics will be particularly weak in the areas of casuistry and applied ethics.

VE accounts of right action are vulnerable to the ‘insularity’ objection. Evaluating action surely requires attention to worldly matters external to the agent, whereas it is said that virtue ethics is primarily concerned with evaluating an agent’s inner states. Insofar as VE accounts are successful in meeting the insularity objection, they then invite the ‘circularity’ objection: they end up relying upon virtue-ethical considerations

that themselves depend on unexplained external judgments of rightness. They become intuitively plausible to the extent that they lose their distinctive virtue ethical features.

Right action becomes that which a morally virtuous agent would or should do, getting us nowhere fast. It seems that to establish virtue as the precursor to moral action we must refer to the idea of a virtuous person, but, tautologically, in order to identify such we must have some idea of what virtuous action is in the first place and why it is right-making because the virtuous person exhibits or displays it. No matter how hard we try, we cannot logically prove the moral rightness of an act from the mere fact of being a certain sort of person, even assuming it could be demonstrated she is one. It does not follow that Mother Teresa's every act is good just because she is Mother Teresa. These sorts of insularity and circularity objections may be linked to VE's peculiar 'inerrancy' thesis. According to this, if a virtuous person can ever be proved to have not been, say, just, then she was not, at least on that occasion, the sort of person we thought she was. An ex-post facto defence could be that the agent was on that occasion simply unlucky. Alternatively, we could say that we made a mistaken judgment as to her capacity for justice in the first place. Either way, the apologia smacks of a rather too convenient conceptual plasticity.

Such criticism of VE's inflationary claim, that elusive personality-trait psychology is the source of moral value, is a troublesome one for social work, hardly the stuff of some sort of redemption - perhaps more a misguided excursion into Utopia as Louden (2001: 243) puts it. Although I am, say, by disposition a just person, that disposition in itself will not provide specific action guidance and even if it does, then surely we need some other standard by which to evaluate the action other than its emanating from the possessor of that disposition. If so, more colloquially put, this would mean that VE cannot provide clear guidance as to what a social worker morally ought to do - or at least not without letting in again principle-based moral theory and its abstract maxims through the conceptual backdoor, always threatening to relegate any big VE talk to the small ve league. Louden (2001: 238-243) summarises what he calls these 'vices of virtue ethics' to also include the prospect of pernicious 'moral backsliding' and self-deception ('I am a fundamentally honest person') because a focus on long-term character may allow me many instances of minor dishonesty, all of which, of course,

add up. The triumph of 'style over substance' is where the appearance of virtue comes to count more than actually being virtuous.

This sort of analysis invites engagement with another persistent criticism of VE: namely, that locked up in personal caractereological attributes and lacking any universal moral reference point, VE is by default liable to resort to a particularistic - that is conservative, even reactionary - 'status quo' perspective in the attempt to prescribe right action. Put slightly differently, there is a tendency in VE discourse to drift into the impasse of moral relativism to ground its moral psychology. If that is the case, actual virtue (and indeed vice) will be restrictively defined in historicised terms of time and place. This either makes virtue and vice talk the bastion of those very same establishment power holders who control knowledge and normalise definition and usage, which I have claimed VE would seek to deconstruct; or VE becomes an exercise in social anthropological observation, where one community's lived-world virtue is another's vice and there can be no further arbitration.

If either charge holds, then the whole point of VE as a counter discourse is undermined, leaving a confused social worker in the middle. A stark, polarising example of this is 'female circumcision', a practice which any social worker might encounter in a putative child protection case. Is it a celebratory ancestral right of passage or offensive patriarchal female genital mutilation? I offer up the dilemma as a background test case to be born in mind as my thesis unfolds.

### **An alternative model**

So far, I have looked at VE from the viewpoint of its rivals, in particular the model of reasoning they employ. Virtue talk for social workers has usually been presented only at best as a moderating counterbalance to the dominant principle-based Kantian and Utilitarian social work value discourse because of the sort of criticisms I have sketched above. The thrust of my thesis is likely to be contentious since some might consider it ultimately revisionist, harking back to social work's own pre-modern days. The charge of revisionism is a foremost consideration in the choice of my material and structure of my argumentation. It is not one which I am at special pains to refute since my view of social work history recognises that while history may not repeat itself, the rhymes of the

narrative do. I seek to work with and so deflect the revisionist criticism, linking it to the cadences which have animated our historic narrative.

My framework foregrounds social work's historic mandated care and control mission in a manner that fully acknowledges and indeed thrives on the uncomfortable duality. I believe this makes virtue and vice talk very apposite. I argue that the social work remit has always been morally loaded because whilst the two dimensions of care and control are likely to elide, in truth the latter is more often than not in the ascendency at any given time even when we call it care. Social work self-identity will always vacillate between the two, shifting one way or the other between the call of vocation and obligations of profession. Any applied social work moral theory must comfortably accommodate that swing as part of the theory itself.

To this end, I will now draw out some social work orientated descriptors to capture the essential social worker in a way that the standard model and method of moral reasoning struggle to recognise. I earlier described the alternative model to be one where the agent has (or lacks) the desire to become a certain kind of person, and has (or lacks) the satisfaction of being a certain kind of person in and through her actions. The descriptors offer a way of reframing the moral appraisal debate in terms that explain this starting point.

### **The moral impulse**

Bisman (2004) argues that social work values form the moral core of the profession, perhaps suggesting that social work is also something else. I maintain that social work is none other than moral activity, making social work, value and moral core synonymous. My thesis is built on a primary assumption that to be a social worker is, to borrow Husband's (1995: 84) phrase, to be a 'morally active practitioner'. As a practical vocational profession which usually needs to act in the moment, especially in those hard cases involving life, death and liberty, the search for some sort of overarching directional moral order has naturally permeated social work's perennial value talk - as much a quest for perfectly safe as opposed to perfectly ethical social work. Husband's invocation of a hypothesised morally active practitioner draws centrally on Bauman's (1993) *Postmodern Ethics* and the conception of a 'moral



impulse'. Husband finds this vision of human moral identity - a personal responsibility driven by a wish to be for the other - intuitively appealing and persuasive. This is fully in accord with my own experience and expressive of social work identity, at least of the sort of social worker that I among many others would wish to be.

For my purposes it is not necessary to hold that the moral impulse towards the other is a universal human tendency, only that its exercise distinguishes a certain sort of person. I believe that the very idea of a moral impulse is embedded in social work's historical narrative, has shaped our stories and conferred us with a sense-making account of ourselves. The moral impulse is not unique to social work. However our social work history has left its own distinctive footprint. I link present day social work failure at least in part to the attenuation, disregard or even suppression of what should be social work's own indelible version of the moral impulse. Of course, the moral impulse is not without some naivety. As Husband (1995: 99) says:

By its untrammelled innocence and generosity it is the creative core of caring. However, the pure individuality of the moral impulse would render it an anarchic basis for organized systems of care in contemporary society.

This rejoinder serves to remind us of the complex relation between action and morality. Acting morally, that is being 'morally active', means a search for the social work contextually right response arising from any threat to the moral impulse in a world of competing demands. Balancing the naivety of the moral impulse and the nuanced sophistication of its defence in such a world is a precarious, ambiguous task. I distinguish between the two meanings of sophistication. One connotes a highly developed and worldly-wise approach, a manifestation of the virtue of prudence, as Peterson and Seligman (2004: 477-516) suggest, being careful about one's choices and controlling one's emotions. The other notion of sophistication ('sophistry') is of detrimentally taking away an object's natural simplicity.

I contend that authentic social work identity is locked up in the fraught endeavours of the former and that false identity lies in perpetuating the latter. Present day conditions of extreme institutional adversity muffle the proper expression of the moral impulse and restrain the correct exercise to the point that it can hardly be felt. This is how I interpret much social worker burnout and moral fatigue. There is no logical reason why the

impulse cannot be managed within principle-based act appraisal moral theory. However, since the impulse is sourced from inner traits and dispositions, there is no easy connection with abstract theory. The dissonance calls into question the relationship between 'moral' and 'ethical' questions, leading to my second descriptor.

### **Ethical careering**

Notions of the moral and the ethical easily elide in every day language but need not be treated as synonymous. For my purposes it is important that they are not. While many commentators choose one or the other or use either term interchangeably, as I too have done up to this point, following Appiah (2008: 37), strictly speaking I hold that moral questions properly concern what we should do; ethical questions properly concern what sort of life we should live in order that we do. In spite of the moral prefix, Husband's idea of the impulse conveys much that is ethical in Appiah's sense. From this point on, unless it obviously does not matter, I will use each term specifically in respect of these differences. I will do so in order to set up a discourse dialectic between what a patterned ethical life means - to become and remain the sort of person one wants to be in honouring the moral impulse - and such a person's specific 'in situ' moral responses.

I therefore speak of a motivating ethical pathway or career for a social worker, characterised by expressive moral activity which should build the ethical career in accordance with the life it prescribes. This makes social work nothing if not a personal ongoing journey of a distinctive professional kind according to the sum total of our moral acts and, when it is not, the practitioner must cease at some point to be an authentic social worker. When practitioners anguish over the chronic lack of client contact time and endemic substitute form filling, it is, I contend, because they sense that they are no longer following an ethical career in any meaningful sense. Acting less than morally, they are falling short of what an ethical career and its telos constantly demand. This leads me to my third descriptor.

### **Sentiment and justification**

I hold that there is a fundamental relationship between social work sentiment or 'emotioning' and social work reason or 'justification'. Each shapes identity as an ethical

career unfolds. While the two are interdependent, the former connotes what it is to be a social worker; the latter connotes what it is to do social work. The sentimental moral impulse is heart-felt; its reasoned application mindful. Our moral sentiment or emotioning tells a story about why we enter social work and what is wrong about the world we would, as impulsive practitioners, wish to put right. Our moral reasoning or justification tells a coherent sustaining story about how the sentiment is to be responsibly exercised and enacted, evaluated or measured in that highly normative complex welfare world to which Husband alludes. Any asymmetry - too much or too little or the wrong sort of sentiment, too much or too little or the wrong sort of justification - makes for a social work practice of disvalue.

As numerous commentators point out, the personal social services and modes of delivery continue to morph in ways that are at odds with the moral sentiments for entering social work and the justificatory moral reasons. It is as if the latter two have been parted so that social work identity is in jeopardy. Our hegemonic language of value has betrayed us. Alienation, anomie and estrangement themes reverberate throughout practice (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). The etymological root of alienation stresses separation, surrender, giving up, and transfer to a foreign allegiance; it also alludes to a sense of pretense or disguise (alias or alibi), being what one is not for the purpose of subterfuge. Alienation also picks up the idea that something akin to what is rightly ours has been taken away and in its place is something foreign, out of harmony and hence repugnant to the estranged (Schacht, 1972: 1-29).

Thus alienation describes a state of 'dis-order'. This disorder is, I contend, a pretty accurate picture of social work, a state of monumental loss, 'not to be oneself', derailing any prospects of an ethical journey. A sub-theme is of dispossession, the taking away of authentic identity, both our clients' and ours. This expostulation of mine leads to an examination of what I consider to be the moribund language making up our everyday act appraisal value discourse. In the next chapter I draw on an account of 'concept amnesia' to argue why codification is anathema to the moral impulse.

## **Chapter 2**

### **VE and codified value**

#### **Introduction**

I argue that codes occlude the free authentic expression of social work identity, which can only be fully liberated through a-categorical thought. I make an association between the imposition of Kantian and Utilitarian derived formulaic code language, the rise of the neo-liberal and neo-conservative regimes and top-down, outside-in control of the practitioner's ethical space. I draw on a notion of lost language and its relationship to integrity in support of the moral impulse. Codes are typically portrayed as the apex of professional maturity but I claim the opposite: they make for the infantilisation of social work identity.

#### **Concept amnesia**

I regard our present day rule-bound, target-driven practices to be at least in part the unfortunate legacy of social work's over-reliance on act appraisal precepts. The normativity with which these have come to be associated decentres the moral-cum-ethical impulse. Many commentators (for example, Webb, 2006a; Jordan, 2004, 2007; Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007) explore how neo-liberal market forces push the impulse aside, how neo-conservative welfare ideology pathologises it, and how the concomitant bureaucracy strangles or criminalises it. VE implores us to get beyond today's language of 'homo economicus' (Houston, 2010a) and the flawed moral grammar now so dominant in our piecemeal and simplistic value chatter.

As an organ of the state, the historic role of social work in perpetuating the hegemony has always been an uncomfortable one. I suggest that over time social work's commonsense and rich language of value centering on protecting and nurturing the moral impulse has been supplanted by today's impoverished moral grammar - a grammar by and large comprising ersatz versions of Kantian and Utilitarian act appraisal and small ve precepts.

My argument is that as the personal social services have undergone transmutation under the neo-liberal and neo-conservative hegemony, the piecemeal simplicity of our value language has proved inadequate to arrest our slide away from - never mind refurbishing and reconnecting with - our sense of historic self. The seemingly steadfast principles of Kantianism and Utilitarianism have lent themselves all too easily to the word colonising proclivities of the neo-liberal and the neo-conservative normative agenda with its categorisation of the population as either successful or failed 'atomised' market players. Historically associated with the political philosophy of acquisitive material individualism, abstract principle bends all too easily to reprised capitalist led constructions of well-being, reshaping social work as a profession. Such has been the context of codification as a way of classifying social work value. As Diamond (1988: 255), one of the VE's early commentators put it, at the commencement of the paradigmatic wars:

Our habits of classification of ethical theories and modes of ethical thought, based on false and oversimple notions of the aim of ethics, impede our understanding and distort our perception. No principles of classification are forced on us by the nature of ethics; we shape what ethical discussion is in part by what we choose to bring together, by the patterns of resemblances and differences in ethical thought that we trace and display.

Using the word 'ethical' in my looser sense to also mean moral, Diamond (1988: 275) poses the question: how can we judge whether we are worse off or better off when concepts change? I speak of the loss that the threadbare current normativity instills, depriving us of being able to name things properly, leading to mis-expression or no expression at all. We have deep commitments to social solidarities which require for their expression a vocabulary that we now lack. The contrast is not just between our present use of words and that of a social work tradition from which we have been cut off, and which still shapes our experience at some profound level, but between the present use of words and one adequate for the social work core moral task.

It is as if we have forgotten all that we know of what moral thought and moral discussion could be like because we have ceased to see ourselves as ethical beings. We have lost the capacity to use with conviction an older vocabulary such as 'helping others', by which we as social workers should be able to make sense of our relations with those in distress. As Diamond (1988: 255) says, such pre-modern concepts live on

as 'kind of folk-words - potent but unacknowledged - long after they have ceased to form part of respectable speech'. We have such words from an older moral vocabulary still used with commonsensical conviction but without legitimating approval. Instead, we have vocabularies of late modernity such as personalisation and consumer choice that cannot be used with any conviction at all.

We no longer see a spread out substantial picture of what it is to be human, set against a background of solidarities that transcend each individual yet delineate each of us. In this impoverishment the true social work story and our knowledge of its possibilities, weight and mysteriousness have no proper means of expression. To reconnect, I suggest that we must recall 'old concepts in our life still, as a standard, as something we can still use in our understanding and assessment of our own situation' (Diamond, 1988: 275).

### **Integrity**

Against this backdrop, at the heart of the matter, is the issue of professional integrity. I draw on Banks' (2010) threefold distinction between issues of conduct, commitment and capacity. Professional integrity is often construed to mean no more than 'morally right conduct', which would mean these days focusing on code-conforming behaviour rather than anything else. The result is rule-bound, defensive social work, the very sort that has been implicated time and again in our social work failures. Much of the piecemeal simplicity of which I complain is pitched at exploring this type and level of integrity.

However, outwith any code, professional integrity also means a life-long commitment to and standing up for a set of identity-conferring ideals. Here personal commitment to a morally worthy project springs from a deep conscientious sense of what is worth doing and why. It is potentially at odds with a formal code since the commitment to being a certain sort of person, doing what is worth doing and doing it well, may not coincide with what a code requires or indeed permits. To the extent that this primary commitment is not projected in the code, an agent may be at odds with it. It is this disjunction that prevails today in respect of the state controlled General Social Care Council's regulatory Code of Practice (GSCC, 2002), but even any voluntary

professional Code of Ethics such as the British Association of Social Workers' (BASW, 2002) is susceptible to such bifurcation. Both are an amalgam of deontic and consequentialist axioms supported by platitudinous small ve instructions such as being honest and reliable. The former prescribes 47 and the latter some 125 value statements.

Banks' third notion of professional integrity describes 'capacity' or 'competence' in the sense of an integral obligation to always work on one's own fragility in the search for self-improvement. Dealing with all the deafening contextual noise that would divert us, reflexive self-management must be a constitutive part of the commitment, otherwise that commitment would be less than it should. In an ever-changing, confusing world, this non-static notion of competence points to a process of continuous readjustment in order to affirm the stability of the original commitment. To balance the singular demands of discrete moral activity and the holistic requirements of ethical existence requires what Cohen (2006: 63-74) in his account of the nature of moral reasoning describes (after Rawls) as reflective equilibrium, a constant reworking of self in pursuit of some sense-making reliability. Also critical in my view is the notion of collegiality as a source of strength. The reference point for acting well is a steadying community of like-minded individuals, giving any shared project purpose, volition and direction.

### **Perfectly ethical and perfectly safe social work**

Integrity is also sometimes described as having an executive function holding together other desirable attributes. Peterson and Seligman (2004: 249-272) describe it as authenticity and honesty, making for a form of courage which entails speaking the truth, but more broadly as presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretence; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions. Good moral self-governance has always been historically bound up with the idea of the virtuous living a life of integrity towards some public good (Macaulay and Lawton, 2006). Invoking VE's pre-modern classical language, our historic quest for integrity is to stitch together a normative mosaic of scientific knowledge ('episteme'), theoretical wisdom ('sofia') and skills ('techne') nurtured by practice wisdom ('phronesis') in order to 'do things properly' ('eupraxia'). Just how all these can be transmitted through obeying a code, whether it be the voluntary one such as BASW's or a compulsory one such as the GSCC's, is a question which illustrates how simplistic language can obscure any

answer. These classical descriptors of good moral self-governance make for sophisticated discourse markers in promulgation of the moral impulse. Their absence would make for, to borrow Rossiter's (2006: 139) dramatic phrase, 'the promise of ethical death' or less terminally perhaps, the blocking of any possibility of ourselves as moral beings (Irving, 2006: 135).

The social work establishment has been mithering about codification ever since it began to consider itself, and wanted to be recognised, as a profession. Reamer's (1998) schematisation of the history of social work ethics offers an evolutionary, almost triumphalist view of code. Cataloging any history into neat discrete chunks is a methodological form of story telling that unsurprisingly seeks out and privileges the present as a culmination of achievement. As to any perceived maturity, the obsession with the language of competency geared towards technical-bureaucratisation (Dominelli, 1996; Malin, 2000; Gibbs and Gambrill, 2002) and the professionalising nostrum of a 'bias-free' evidence-based social work (Sanderson, 2003; Houston, 2005) make for the categorisation of the social work role into a series of identifiable hence more accountable behavioural tasks. Bisman (2004: 112-114) captures the historiographical angle to all this when she describes the early press for a knowledge and skills base towards a scientifically based philanthropy. This was followed by the search for a distinctive method and scientific body of knowledge, and an appeal to empiricism, measurement, sociological and psychological truths, all of which feed into the so-called 'what works' movement (Jordan, 2004). This preoccupation with metrics has secreted itself into value talk. Bisman notes how this focus on scientifically based practice has diminished the moral basis of social work, or at least distracted us from the need to protect and nurture it.

It would surely be foolish for us to return to something akin to the so-called 'mental hygiene' period and our early pseudo-psychoanalytical proclivities (Payne, 1999; Forsythe and Jordan, 2002; Jordan, 2004). However, compliance with tick boxes and performance criteria falsely equating to moral efficacy makes for a hollowed out discourse (Malin, 2000). The morally attuned street level bureau-worker described by Lipsky (1980) sought to buck the trend, working fleetly within the discretionary, alternative moral-cum-ethical space that agency policy and rules had not yet foreclosed. Lipsky's street-level social workers are still contesting control of the moral frontline



(Ellis, 2007; Ash, 2010) but the terms of contestation have much changed. One of the GSCC's rules (4.2) is that a registrant 'must follow risk assessment policies and procedures to assess whether the behaviour of service users presents a risk of harm to themselves or others', on pain of suspension, admonition or removal from the social care register. The issue is not whether a practitioner follows the rule well or badly, or even feels compelled out of conscience to surreptitiously usurp it; rather, it is the very idea of simply following such rules which has led to what I call the hubris of professionalisation and all that codification stands for.

### **The hubris of code language**

As a template for moral decision-making a code owes much to that theoretical top-down inside-out model described in Chapter 1. It is not clear whether actual codes are much use in practice at all, as a study by Rossiter *et al.* (2000) indicates. Banks (2003: 133) advises that it is important not to take codes too literally since they are rhetorical, educational and regulatory devices as much as they are guides to practice. As she says in her critical review of social work ethics, the inefficacy of codes is not a surprising finding (2008: 1241). Congress (2010) provides an update on the (usually small-scale) research findings to that effect, nevertheless arguing generally in favour of codes as a form of status enhancing accountability.

Codes of various types have shared features but are disunited by situational differences of provenance, theoretical outlook and political perspectives in relation to time and place. The difference between what the social work establishment calls codified ethics such as BASW's and codified conduct such as the GSCC's might be said to lie in who controls the agents subject to the code. Here the effect of the difference is, I suggest, not just a matter of rhetoric. The first one strives to create the conditions for reflexive professional insider ethical space. The other privileges outsider forensic scrutiny of its moral activists.

Elsewhere I have argued that a code of conduct exposes the inherent dictatorial logic of codification and the written word (Webster, 2010). As a surveilling process of the agent, all codes define failure and errant conduct as much as critical pathways to success. Applied to social work, the standard lighthouse metaphor (Clark, 1999) is

more searchlight than beacon, sweeping the profession for instances of infractions and disorderliness.

In our unhappy times, this is as much about the management of bureau-worker malfeasance as it is about wayward moral imagination. A code is a formal type of sanctified value chatter where the written word (codicil, codex, manuscript, ledger, tablet) carries extra gravitas. While all codes are an essay in what might be called authoritarian calibration, any particular code says as much about the authors and custodians as the message itself. The root notion of code as a covenant perpetuates a kind of formulaic mindset since it offers up a revered systematic body of law compiled by, written down and revealed through some inerrant source authority contained in the predictive text. It captures moral thought and then reveals what it has caught through a set of conventional symbols used to transmit, receive and decipher messages.

### **The power of codes**

Any code claims to be sanctified, neutrally posited text, elevated to a position outside and above competing counter worldviews. Advocates approvingly see a code as a homogenising ‘screen through which worldviews must be drawn to create constraints on professionals’ behavior’ (Spano and Koenig, 2007: 13). Antagonists see it as little more than a blunt ideological enforcer (Adams, 2008: 6). Any code is really a bullying philosophical autocrat although its form might dissemblingly suggest otherwise. Exegesis replicates and reinforces its authority. By their nature codes tend to persist because once written they are ensconced as a given so that their very form moulds moral substance. However, each one is conceived and gestated at a particular point in history and is a product of its time; so whatever else it is, a code is manifestly a cultural phenomenon, a way, but not the only possible way, of organising the construction of value.

Codes embody myriad rules, sometimes hierarchically organised into pyramidal segments, other times just catalogued. It is really the following of these rules which count, so that the act of compliance with the rule is construed as the substantive engagement with value. However, code truth is only a clumping together of the procedures used to establish it, under what Irving (2006: 132) calls the ‘thin carapace’

of modernity, where form falsely dominates ethical essence and assumes its moral mantle. In many ways, a code functions as the modernistic version of hallowed scripture re-presented as secular action-binding commands. Behind the modernistic phantasma of pure reason still resides the pre-modern assumption of some sort of external higher order fixer, only here it is presented as the unabridged power of the untethered principle that our own self-governing insight compliantly makes us obey. In this sense, we construct ourselves as modernistic prescription-maker but in substance we are still really pre-modern prescription-taker. Doing what we are told by a higher infallible order, because that is what 'being ethical' is, suits the times in which we live as social workers.

### **Acting well and acting correctly**

A modern code of conduct surreptitiously employs an ancient notion of ethics as 'consuetude', a conduced order of mind and behaviour, socially determined in accordance with function, rank and status, and with connotations of discipline, compliance and subordination to the infallible given. Here, well-moulded character and obedience are mutually interdependent. The well-ordered person reflects a well-ordered society: ethics and the ethos flow to and from each other.

In this sense, a code could constitute shorthand for a public bundle of prescribed goods that help a tradition to live. A social worker has to be a publically validated person of good repute, therefore she must be of irreproachable character. The edginess of the mandate requires that social work identity becomes a discourse about not only what you must be and do but also what you must not be and not do, a fusion of agent and act appraisals. Our impeccable bona fides and our conduct must be separated out by some fiducial line below which a fall from grace is ever present but supposedly self-correcting.

As social workers, we pledge, profess or make a kind of promissory oath to 'heal' or 'advise' in unimpeachable good faith. The antithesis is misconduct (Clark, C., 2007: 60). A code as text could perhaps be a convenient vessel to enhance our precautionary story telling. A code of conduct legitimises role by scrutinising for any violations of the code itself by those subject to it. This involves not just guidance but compulsion and

coercion, being escorted along the straight and narrow. Jettisoning the prescription-making versus prescription-taking convolutions caught up in a code of ethics, a code of conduct zooms in on what is not to be tolerated and so bluntly tells us who we must not be and what we must not do. I prefer to call that 'proto-ethics', a stentorian text that is transmitted through the alarming language of calumny, blame, punishment and defamation.

In all spheres of public life today there is to be found a Foucauldian 'centrifugalising' motif, which in our case heightens governmental concern to monitor and control social work, questioning its legitimacy and credibility. This purview looks askance on a self-regulating professional code of ethics as not even so much a complementary adjunct as an irrelevancy. In this sense a code of conduct colonises and then banishes a code of ethics. A code of conduct militates against professional autonomy and 'misdirected' use of front line discretionary time and space. Healy and Meagher (2004) document the insidious processes of deprofessionalisation (the oft-called 'proletarianisation' process) created by the routinisation and technicalisation of social work tasks. The parallel codification of social work conduct represents a subtle transformation from engagement with ethical desiderata to conformity with service standards - the transformation described by Hugman (2003: 1030) from acting well to acting correctly.

I describe the codification of value as some sort of flawed, fixated, two-step ethical dance, one step above and one below an artificial moral dividing line. A code of ethics, which aims at the codification of an expansive mandated beneficence while also privileging ethical self-autonomy and self-governance, struggles with the resulting issues. A code of conduct, which aims at the codification of maleficence, targets and closes down disorderly conduct. That is its rationale. Scanning for well-behaved social workers where virtue is synonymous with obedience, it patrols the fiducial line for slippage below it to 'out' the digressers. As a regimen of discipline, subjugation to a code of conduct has less to do with professional ethics and more to do with defensive and defensible practice (Orme and Rennie, 2006). A liberal code of ethics struggles with this conflation, wrestling individual conscience, consensual collegiate ethics and the demands of the employing agency. I maintain that a code of conduct removes the need to wrestle with moral complexities simply by arresting moral development and fixating moral responsibility. It is therefore ethically infantilising.

### **The tyranny of infantilisation**

A code of conduct eliminates moral complexity - the heart of social work moral practice - at a stroke, by making full compliance with its own precepts the extent of being ethical, muting a discourse of value. Much is made these days of the erosion of old fashioned tacit trust in professionals by the public, managed and brokered by the profession itself, and a move to contractual confidence in public systems of accountability managed by bureaucracies of the state - in effect, as Smith (2005) suggests, making for a seismic shift in perception. The latter foregrounds institutionalised confidence in regulatory systems to provide safe, reliable and effective service delivery but comes with some burdensome transaction costs imposed on the individual practitioner, skewing moral identity.

In the apparatus and paraphernalia of risk minimisation, the construal of professional conduct as the 'ordered well', subverts to little more than a discipline of the workplace. A code of conduct isolates the workplace as a site of fractious misconduct to be controlled by checklists, formal processes, policies, procedures, rules, regulations, and instructions. The would-be morally active practitioner is construed not as ethical fluent risk-taker but as assumed risk-maker. Conduct rules, as regulated moral panic, serve then to illustrate Foucault's contention that the agent herself becomes a conduit of the regulator's capillary power where ultimately the disciplinary gaze is continuous, automatic and internalised.

The sorry tale of the 'modernisation agenda' in social services redefines the deserving client as a litigious market price-taker and the trusting relationship to be a kind of price-fixing measured market consumable. That agenda also targets what McLaughlin (2007) calls an atavistic social care workforce, one which is adjudged inherently risky, in a mirror image of the construction of fertile clienthood that the neo-conservatives perpetuate. In this hostile environment, the professional is relegated to remain the pre-ethical bogey bureau-worker brokered by the restraining reins of an implacable, unforgiving overseer.

In this sense, as an adjunct to registration, a code of conduct becomes a technology of control for the regulator. Mimicking the Leviathan enforcer, it imagines that

malfeasance not just may happen but will happen unless it generates a prophylactic regimen that seeks to foreclose the eventuality. Each infraction that challenges the regulatory purview requires ever more interrogative diligence. In a vicious remoulding of that essential self-other symmetry, social worker behaviour is logically driven not by intrinsic regard for the other but by short-term preservational self-interest.

The empirical evidence is slim but one suggestion, made up of in-depth case studies of fourteen social workers, indicates that the advent of code and registration has a tendency to curtail or silence dissentious collegiate debate because registrants are frightened to stand out for attention, be different, and be reported (Meleyal, 2009). A poll of 293 social workers suggests that a colleague who has witnessed inappropriate professional conduct is likely not to formally report the matter (Community Care, 2008), itself a registration offence. Code of Practice rule 3.2 requires that social workers 'challenge and report dangerous abusive discriminatory or exploitative behaviour'. A culture of deterrence and fear of retribution lead to ethical-cum-moral paralysis.

Some social workers should always be accompanied with a health warning, as illustrated by an endless number of misconduct hearings churned out through judicial process. However, the critical point is that our social work *bona fides* are only a prerequisite for commencing an ethical career. Rather than create a vigorous expansive ethical environment, a code of conduct perpetuates an enfeebled, enervating one. In the absence of safe, honest and open discussion, following agency procedures, instructions and written conventions becomes a form of moral mimesis in the defensive task of reputation management. The GSCC's catechism of 'upholding the public trust and confidence in social care services' means little more than this. Out of this dispiriting form of consuetude and its ordered superficialities, its opposite subsists. Desuetude is a falling apart, a depleted identity in a moral world of ethical chaos masked by the superimposed order of regulatory obeisance. This does not make for *eupraxia*, the doing of things properly in any ethical sense.

Codes are made, but as moral artifacts they are already broken at the point of usage. Our present day conduct version is the logical concomitant of a befuddled, bedraggled profession that has lost its way. Our present day Code of Practice is not a panacea for

our ailments but a symptom. VE offers both a substantive theory of how we should live and also an explanatory theory of why we should live in that way (Crisp, 2010: 23-24). In the next chapter I describe a VE inspired vision beyond code based on the idea of supererogation beyond duty, introduced by Webb (2006a, 2006b) into social work discourse.

## **Chapter 3**

### **VE supererogation and moral paradox**

#### **Introduction**

Updating my previous review of the social work literature, I argue that, beyond a list of 'feel good' virtues, the key to satisfactory VE discourse is to build on the idea of supererogation - the social work paragon - and a notion of non-obligatory obligation. This introduces a theory of paradoxicality. Out of a caractereological moral world I develop an enhanced laudatory notion based on the doctrine of double effect and moral remainder. In this peculiar world, social workers respond to those extra-vulnerable others left unattended by their natural carers. I introduce the phenomenon of moral bystanding which threatens the moral impulse.

#### **Updated social work VE theory**

Until recently the mainstream social work specific value literature has generally lacked the intertextual interchange to make up a satisfying virtue discourse, partly due to its sparseness. There has been no consensus even regarding basic terminology, the difference, say, between 'virtue theory' and 'virtue ethics'. My employ of big VE is an attempt to combine a tight theoretical description with a common sense evaluative stance of virtue and vice. Simply espousing various traits such as reliability, equanimity and honesty does not get us very far. They are dispositions which many would regard as no more than necessary prerequisites for practice - components of the fiducial line - rather than an insightful account of our distinctiveness. It is a bit like being 'anti- this or that', a common enough posture in social work. There are many knock down lists of desirable qualities circulating in colloquial debate, but they tend to be much of an adjectival muchness, matching all and sundry that we value and hold dear, then aggregated and somehow juggled into a composite idea of 'good social worker'. They are not unimportant, just that it is hard to imagine anyone ever seriously proposing the opposite.



Explicit talk of virtue is encumbered by the taint of anachronism ill-befitting an unconfident profession forever trying to project itself into the future. In an attempt to distance ourselves from our philanthropic charitable origins, virtue talk invites ambivalence if not hesitancy. However, some of the more parochial objections are derived from simplistic misrepresentations of virtue ethics rather than through an open engagement with the paradigmatic disputes. Within the philosophic academy, VE has generated a torrent of high-level technical repudiations, so we might expect this to be no less true for any proposed applied social work perspective, wedded as the profession is to its protean ideas of Kantian and Utilitarian universal right-making principles. A change in the linguistic register is only just beginning to be recorded within social work discourse.

In my 2006 critical analytical study I identified and reviewed the emergence of what I now have come to recognise as two specific social work discourse threads under a broad rubric of virtue ethics. One aims at an integrative perspective alongside principle-based theory. The other is a less conciliatory radical politico-ethical approach, although the two can cross over. With regard to the former, the meld might be characterised as a ‘common morality’ approach frequently advocated in the medical/health care literature (Oakley and Cocking, 2001; Beauchamp and Childress, 2001; Leathard and McLaren, 2007), combining deontic and consequentialist principles but where moral character is given its due. This trend, a kind of adjustment approach to hitherto standard moral theory, has now jumped the professional gap and is working its way through the social work literature.

Since my original review, contributions by Bowles *et al.* (2006), Clark, C., (2007) and Clifford and Burke (2009) have appeared along these lines. However, the Banks and Gallagher (2009) publication represents the most comprehensive mainstreaming of virtue-based theory. It owes much to an interprofessional provenance although clearly it is intended for and has much to offer a social work audience. After highlighting the theoretical underpinnings and a history of virtue ethics, the authors explore practical accounts of professional wisdom, courage, respectfulness, care, trustworthiness, justice and integrity.

With regard to the second radical politico-ethical thread, in beginning my own research into virtue ethics as a redemptive project I was inspired by McBeath and Webb's seminal article *Virtue ethics and social work: being lucky, realistic, and not doing one's duty* (2002). This irreverent article employs a distinctive line of politically charged inquiry which can be traced to an earlier work, their *Political Critique of Kantian Ethics in Social Work* (Webb and McBeath, 1989). There, they described a social work political historical narrative the authenticity of which was being savagely short changed by the juridical imperatives of state mandated welfare activity. It was also being ruptured by the disciplining control exercised over the profession. They argued that the actualities of social work were beginning to sit uneasily with the drone of the Kantian universal Categorical Imperative, and invited an examination of alternatives. In my view, theirs is the first social work specific account to express the idea of an applied radical counter theory of virtue ethics. It produced an immediate strongly worded response from Downie (1989) in support of the establishment. This theoretical spat was laconically commented on by Gould (1990) who at least usefully aired the difficulties of conducting meaningful exchanges between advocates of separate paradigms.

Houston (2003) was the first sympathetic theorist to respond to McBeath and Webb's 2002 article, pointing out that the challenge was to establish the relevant virtues for social work and what these might mean in practice. I draw on this politico-ethical discourse thread in developing my framework, with particular reference to Webb's concluding chapter *The Practice of Value in Social Work in a Risk Society: Social and Political Perspectives* (2006a: 200-234). Since my 2006 critical analytical study, and while I have been authoring my own text, what I consider to be VE complementary critical theorising has appeared, mostly within a broadly hermeneutical, communitarian, sometimes Habermasian, moral interactive framework (Hayes and Houston, 2007; Houston, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c; Gray and Lovat, 2007; Lovat and Gray, 2008; Gray and Lovat, 2008; Gray, 2009; Garrett, 2007, 2009, 2010a, 2010b). The dialogue is sustained and exchanged through themes around self-realisation, identity formation, moral recognition, the right to difference, redistribution of social capital, symbolic interaction and interlocution between significant others. The Houston-Garrett interchange is indicative of the richness of the debate.

Gray and Webb's (2008, 2009) reassessment of critical analytical social work steers the conversation towards the merits of a reprised perspective. The preoccupation with affirmative identity politics and the othering process in relation to social work's constituency is being critically re-examined as a discourse category (Webb, 2009). This has generated another exchange thread (Sohlberg, 2009; Jose, 2010; Imre, 2010). I pick up on some of these issues in building my own VE account which focuses on the problematic nature of otherness and an 'ethics of other'. As Webb (2009: 312) suggests, an excessive reverence for otherness is a recipe for hypocrisy insofar as no politics can accommodate every other. Gray and Webb's (2010) recent book contextualises the broader counter discourse, including Webb's (2010a) chapter on virtue ethics and my own on Codes of Conduct (Webster, 2010).

### **Supererogative character**

Virtues have to be embodied in somebody, or at least in the notion of someone, to be meaningful. I claim that while a social worker may possess a virtue shared with other professions, that may not make the social worker in her. Peterson and Seligman (2004: 24-26) write about the 'consensual paragon', or whom they call a prodigy, someone who embodies those global traits that others admire and look up to. This invites an exploration of supererogation. Although, for example, Beauchamp and Childress (2001: 40-43) mention supererogation for medicine and Pukinskiene (2006: 41-42) for nursing, Webb (2006a, 2006b) is the first to explore it for social work. More exactly, what he does is put a name to something the idea of which is embedded but, for want of words, long lost in our narrative. Further discussion of its expression, especially of its conceptual subtleties has, I believe, been inhibited by concerns about the charge of elitism, since supererogation gives rise to the notion of a 'moral expert'. In pursuing that notion I echo here Foucault's aphorism which is that not to know and take care about our own professional self is a self-deception.

A theological concept, supererogation is about doing more than one's duty - in our secular case, to get beyond the salaried obligations of rules, procedures, instrumental efficiencies and technologies of care - performing beyond what is owed or required. This invocation depends on Webb's introduction of another key notion, that of individuals as strong and weak evaluators, giving rise to two types of people. Strong

evaluation may be construed as the exercise of an enduring psychosocial conscience; low evaluation is about short-term egotistical desires and wants. There is a supportive body of small-scale empirical studies through the voices of practitioners (for example, Lindsay, 2006) which shed some light on strong evaluators. Reported emotions of embarrassment, disappointment, regret, guilt, frustration and anger have also figured (Banks and Williams, 2005). These reactions can be interpreted as distressed responses to the experience of character violation in situations in which practitioners cannot be true to themselves.

Webb invokes Taylor (1985, 1989, 1992) who speaks of having strong attachments to certain valued ends which cannot be repudiated since the agent would therefore be repudiating herself. Taylor can be understood as a neo-Hegelian who identifies the good life in the dispositions of individuals linked to the well-being of community, one of those thematic anchors for VE from which Gray, Lovat, Garrett and Houston have helped develop the discourse. Webb maintains that the 'real self' is constituted in and through the taking of moral stances; hence the social worker has an ethical disposition to do the best for her clients insofar as she has the resources to do so. She uses these to maximise ethical ends in the production of social capital that may be accessed by the client to overcome distress and assist in life planning. Critically for VE, the social work self is, or should be, the most important resource. Webb's concern is that social work has almost lost, but retains the potential to be, a reflexive moral source for the articulation of strong evaluative goods.

Webb argues that it is the dispositional vocational commitment to higher constitutive goods which defines social workers. This commitment has action-guiding force and it has a central role in self-understanding and identity. Echoing Taylor, Webb noted what might count for strong evaluations: in every socio-cultural formation we find practices that express some aspect of concern, love or respect for other people. In line with Peterson and Seligman's global findings, this group of goods includes tenderness, caring concerns and compassion. Strong evaluation also includes the aspiration to human flourishing and living a meaningful and fulfilled life that is opposed to a shallow or empty life. Social workers want a meaningful fulfilled life for their clients and, through their clients, for themselves too.

Social work is a natural arena in which those so disposed can exercise being their higher selves, forming attachments to certain strongly valued dispositions that are legitimised and constantly renewed through practice. As Webb (2006a: 207) asserts:

In the broadest sense we can argue that social work is a constitutive socioethical good that has generative power for the social worker, in that it permits an ethical life to be articulated and channelled towards that which has intrinsic worth.

### **Types of supererogation**

Webb is of course describing social work's moral impulse by another name. As with many apparently stable philosophical constructs, supererogation invokes different theoretical takes. These are well documented in the on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on which I draw. The historiography of supererogation (outwith the original theological debate exemplified by the Christian Good Samaritan parable) is comparatively recent, starting with Urmson's (1958) seminal article *Saints and Heroes*, although Urmson did not use the precise term. The elementary idea of supererogation as 'paying out more than is due', as employed by Webb, invites a tricky debate full of theoretical entrapments as to whether there can be any morally good actions that are not required, and even if there are such actions, why they are optional (Driver, 1992; Zimmerman, 1996; Haydar, 2002; Kawall, 2003). Known as the paradox of supererogation and the 'good-then-ought-to-tie-up' debate, Loudon (1988) gets to the quick in asking the basic question, 'Can we be too moral?' I will draw out some aspects relevant to my own project.

The baseline supererogatory position identifies a distinct class of moral action in that there are admirable praiseworthy actions that are good to do and 'not bad not to do'. Thus, moral goodness and moral rightness need not be co-terminous, introducing the idea of moral merit adhering to some kinds of individuals. Wrapped up in this notion of merit, the supererogatory good is a source of triple value, namely, (i) the motivational force of the agent to inform decision-making in the selection of choices, (ii) the optional voluntary nature of the act undertaken, and (iii) the good consequences the first two promote which otherwise would not have occurred. The good promoted must be of an altruistic intent and other-regarding, even if in the free making of choices there are

subsidiary compelling duties to oneself (the sort of person one wants to be). Moreover, such actions beyond the call of duty cannot invariably be expected. Just envisioning a good state of affairs does not create a reason for every moral agent to bring it about. She must stand in a particular position to the hypothetical desirable state of affairs to make her have a conclusive reason to try and bring it about.

Supererogatory behaviour may be desired in a world of inexhaustible moral imperfections (if it is ever to be challenged and improved) but it is not required of everybody to attempt to do so - the opt-out clause. It can be expected only from those who subjectively feel the commitment to do it and who choose to revoke any opt-out clause, but then they must be blessed with the necessary strength of purpose, that is requisite character, to see it through. This declarative exemption view of supererogation is both very subjectivist (the individual deliberately chooses her 'elective duties' out of sentiment) and aristocratic, since it distinguishes between classes of moral agents, the few who are meritorious and the rest who are not.

Lay people may indeed acknowledge the primary benefits of a first moral premise (such as to abolish hunger, disease, homelessness, child and elder abuse) but on a second order interjection are allowed, that is excused from, personally seeking to act on it. Supererogation foregrounds self-sacrifice in the sense that, in spite of permission not to act, the agent is prepared to do so whereas others are excused, often in contexts where there may be some personal risk involved. That is why we usually admire whistleblowers but tend to recognise that for many people this is understandably a courageous step too far. Various commentators have sought to dissolve the paradox of supererogation. The technical literature is typically dense, giving rise to some basic classifications. I will adapt them for their applicability to social work and its moral impulse.

The 'anti-supererogationism' school argues that since all morally good action is infinitely expansive in a fundamentally flawed world, redress must be obligatory at all times and in every circumstance by all morally charged agents. Thus, there cannot be a separate class of action the omission of which is not wrong. There has always been a fluctuating strain of this over-demanding version in our social work narrative associated with certain social justice radical perspectives that would cast the social worker as a

political superhuman activist. Seeing behind every personal private trouble a systemic social ill in need of rectification is one matter; an overloaded ambition to overhaul the system is another, although the pioneers of our tradition sought to do so.

‘Qualified supererogationism’ assumes that there are some ‘perfect duties’ - prescriptions and prohibitions - which must be undertaken by every moral agent unless there is exceptional mitigation (such as loss of faculties), but not every moral act is of this obligatory nature. On this basis, there are actions which lie beyond the call of obligation where their value is derived from their being hypothetical, subjective, ‘imperfect’ duties, from which one may be excused. They are duties in a weaker conditional sense. Let us say it is obligatory to care for your own children but not for your neighbour's when in need, although you might.

An agent acts in a qualified supererogatorily way if, despite the general permission afforded to people to ignore the reasons, she decides to act on them in a particular instance (Raz, 1975). On this account, qualified supererogation is a limited class of moral action that arises in certain circumstances and is carried out by certain kinds of people when they encounter those circumstances invoking the moral election to act morally. From this class of actions there are, then, hybrid ‘supererogatory duties’ that will distinguish one person from another in relevant situations. Here opt-out permissions are based on a second order reason that allows the ordinary moral agent to disregard the balance of the first order reason. I suggest that if someone wants to become a social worker she must learn that there is no excuse for not doing what ordinary people are allowed not to do. The difference is that when a neighbour's child needs care we intervene. To become a social worker, any second order reasoning must reinforce the first, not vanquish it, since she cannot only casually exercise her imperfect duty in propitious circumstance. This moral threshold begins where ordinary people’s ends. However, some such minimal social work threshold of qualified supererogation can only be the start of becoming a social worker.

This hybrid, part-time status can be compared to the school of ‘unqualified supererogationism’, which states that supererogatory acts lie entirely and without qualification beyond the requirements of moral duty, imperfect or otherwise, and that is the source of their unique value. In this case, moral options promote a freely chosen

compulsory way of life. This entails the good will of the agent operating in a special field of liberty, 'licentia'. Her altruistic intention lies not in just intermittently actively exercising moral obligation, but in a systematic full-time engagement with the consequences of the failure of others who neglect their perfect duties, or those who opt out of their imperfect duties.

The idea of unqualified supererogationism tells us that action can be a personal initiative occupying an extraordinary moral world beyond impersonal duty, making for a 'freeing-up' of the agent to do what she has to do. Thus an unqualified supererogatory act is the source of extra-special moral value, in effect another moral world beyond the requirements of lay morality, since the inhabitant actively seeks out distress left unattended. Such acts are spontaneous, that is to say, originating in personal choice rather than from external demands. Unqualified supererogation allows for the life-long expression of care or concern for others and the creation of a special sort of dedicated personal space for that purpose. I suggest that on this account if and only if [iff] someone commits herself to a higher threshold life of unqualified supererogation will she ever become a full-time morally active practitioner. This aspiration or vocation becomes an authentic fiducial promise to oneself.

One ought to fulfill one's promises but making them in the first place is not required (Kawall, 2005; Heyd, 2005). Promising is an act of freely given obligation but then becomes a non-negotiable commitment to do the best possible in discharging that promise. Doctors, nurses and teachers will, or ought to have, such a commitment and so too social workers but in their own ineluctable manner. Demanding a much higher threshold of reliability, all this is a far cry from conduced regulation.

All theories of professional value purport to establish some sort of order into the management of moral chaos, a kind of (often subliminal) 'triage' notion into which the beginning professional is occupationally habituated. Green (2009: 118) speaks of those professional 'virtues of formation' required so that we may make wise judgments within our given *métier* - a fusion of 'magisterium' (mastery) and 'mysterium' (something into which one is initiated), which helps structure our thoughts and practical reasoning and by which effort ethical goods are to be realised. To temporarily lose sight of and feel for one's characteristic *métier* is a careless moral aberration; to lose it to the extent that



we have forgotten that it ever existed is not only a transgression but also a renunciation of ethical being.

### **The doctrine of double effect and moral remainder**

To act in its original sense means to take an initiative, to begin, to set something in motion for a purpose, to lead, take control of some raw substance and therefore eventually 'to rule' over it. Such is the 'vita activa' (Arendt, 1958: 177). To act in this sense is also the beginning of becoming and thus to act is not just to change and rule a disorderly hostile world but also to change it and rule our own destinies. Every individual moral action in this sense is an articulated disclosure of a person's own image.

The doctrine of double effect (DDE), which distinguishes between moral acts and moral omissions, and between unintended and foreseen harm, helps illuminate supererogatory theory. In social work, in any moral transaction there always exists a shadowy realm of other possibilities, some foreseeable, each of which have not come to pass but perhaps ought to have. This is especially likely with moral omissions when we do not (re)act at all, generating another immoral state of affairs off the back of the first. DDE also awkwardly reminds us of moral remainder, the unresolved residue of moral decision-making when our nagging conscience does not let us forget what we have ignored, left unturned or incomplete. Banks and Williams (2005: 1011-1012) raise the issue as one of regret or guilt. Armstrong (2007: 66-72), in his approach to nursing ethics, explores DDE through the associated idea of 'moral breathing room'. As supererogatory theory tells us, not to intervene is itself a moral decision being played out either by active choice or by default. Fitzpatrick (2008: 40) captures the idea of DDE in his rather non-social work language:

At every moment of my life there is an endless number of things I am omitting to do. While typing these words I am not sending any money to charity, not helping grannies across the road and not finding a cure for AIDS; in fact not doing an endless series of laudable acts to the *n*th degree of infinity. Does this mean I am partly to blame for underfunded charities, stranded grannies and the continuation of AIDS? This is either too stern an allocation of moral failure or a trite observation that we are all partly responsible for everything.

I will use Fitzpatrick's allegory as a point of departure from being a lay part-time moral person to a metiered full-time social worker. Fitzpatrick's scenario is hypothetical musing but imagine someone similar undergoing some sort of Pauline conversion and deciding to become a social worker. I will link this to the idea, as described in Chapter 1, of two different moral worlds arising out of two different value mindsets. Any ethical journey begins with an analogical imaginative quest which invites a discourse about moral horizon, scanning, focus, distance and proximity. As developed by Smilansky (2007: 77-89), a proximal laudatory as opposed to distant deprecatory view of morality celebrates moral worth as a vital opportunity actively worth pursuing. Morality is not an unfortunate obtrusive disturbance generating an inconvenience to bear as a felt loss. The more proximal that moral world is envisaged and the deeper the engagement with it, the more fraught the conscionable dilemmas and greater the moral remainder - the supreme social work paradox since we can always do more and better. This is what Baron (1988) refers to as a constant feeling of insufficiency - in VE terms, remorse and agent-regret. It is the impossibly demanding paradoxical world of the moral impulse.

### **Paradoxicality and a laudable moral world**

All supererogatory ethical journeys begin with troubling encounters with paradoxes. These paradoxes subsist, hardly recognised, in the deprecatory moral world; they intrude starkly in a laudatory moral world. A paradox is not the merely perplexing, nor is it a conclusion that at first sounds absurd but that has an argument to sustain it. In its stronger form it is an apparently unacceptable conclusion derived by apparently acceptable reasoning from apparently acceptable premises, making for some sort of acceptable absurdity (Sainsbury, 1996: 1). Quine (1976) distinguishes three kinds of this stronger version. A falsidical paradox involves the defence of false results and can be dissolved through the rejection of a premise or argument. A veridical paradox is a seemingly absurd result that is shown to be true and hence reasonable. A paradox of antinomy entails two chains of arguments leading to contradictory results each of which seem well supported, so that we cannot give up on either side. To say that a state of affairs is unacceptably absurd is to say something about the fundamentally alien relationship between this state of affairs and our sense of moral order.

Nowadays, altruistic helping hand motifs in social work invite automatic opprobrium. This is a bizarre posturing from a profession that absurdly but reasonably embeds itself in two such moral paradoxes described by Smilansky in *Fortunate Misfortune* (2007: 11-22) and *On Not Being Sorry about the Morally Bad* (2007: 59-66). Smilansky elucidates the conflict between the purpose of true morality to eliminate suffering and grievous wrongs, and the fact is that it is those very same detriments needing to be eliminated that call forth the moral actions that confer value. Put simply but boldly, social work derives its worth from the misery of others. 'Morality ends up being like one of those mythological animals that swallows their own tail' (Smilansky 2007: 7) - getting that helping hand dirty, not hand washing or hand wringing. Our stories have always really been about how we would go about holding out our hand with a modicum of equanimity as we consort with that paradoxicality and its brouhahas.

The laudatory world states there is little of significance for which an undefeated moral response could not be proposed to intervene. Unlike lay people, social workers are indeed committed to an endless series of laudable acts to the nth degree. Attending to and making up for other lay people's immoral commissions or moral omissions - abuse, mistreatment, neglect of others - serve to generate the momentum. Social work begins when lay people's responsibilities (as parents, offspring, relatives, neighbours and friends) have failed, ceased or have been overridden, for whatever reason, and the morally active practitioner responds to fill the void. The difference between being a moral hero and moral defaulter is heartland social work territory. Social workers' concerns and their laudable moral world begin where lay people's self-interests or preoccupations intervene to crowd out deliberations of moral intervention, leaving some people in need of care and protection extra-vulnerable.

### **The bystander effect**

I introduce from a standard social psychology primer such as Hogg and Vaughan (2005: 549-60) what is typically called prosocial behaviour theory and, in particular, the 'bystander effect'. The bystander effect states that only under certain optimal conditions will even a genuinely altruistic individual intervene to assist another obviously in distress. Individuals are less likely to take the initiative and help out in an emergency when they are with others in an anonymous crowd, rather than being present

on their own. That is hardly unsurprising if the bystander has no helping inclination at all, but it is perhaps shocking if she has, even more having made a vocational commitment to confidently intervene.

The lesson for anyone (especially clients and carers) anticipating the need for urgent help is to avoid seeking assistance from an amorphous group of strangers who do not know sufficiently who they are themselves to do something about another's plight. I argue that our vocational inclination to intervene to help distressed others has in many ways been collectively 'crowded out' (Webster, 2009). It is all too easy to become a moral bystander because, amongst all the rules of operation, we have lost our distinctive identity as unqualified supererogationists and become strangers not just to our clients but also to ourselves.

A stress on modernistic calculative reason will always invite the intrusion of non-moral prudential arguments such as cost accounting or worker compliance. Today, much of what passes as social work is run according to such deprecatory pragmatism. Yet the movement from that deprecatory world to the laudatory world marks our rite of passage as social workers. To seek and build an ethical career out of the thin material of the former is to invite inevitable repudiation of the effort, and to grasp the enormity of the latter is to commit oneself to a way of life and language that is way beyond what passes as normal obligation and duty.

In the peculiar language of the supererogatory world, an authentic social worker is not obliged to follow the rules at all except for one, which is the obligation to go beyond them. She cannot stand by. In different ways, I have been speaking about what I call the gap of moral omissions. An analysis of any social work case tragedy will reveal, I suggest, such a gap. As bounded artifact, by its very nature code leaves unattended, indeed generates, gaps of omission. In the next chapter, I adapt some VE technical theory from the philosophic academy to revitalise our language of paradoxicality. I do so in order to reoccupy those moral-cum-ethical spaces in between the rules.

## Chapter 4

### VE ethical labouring and theoretical synthesis

#### Introduction

I develop the neo-classical idea of VE as an elective moral (that is ethical) community. I suggest that the social work community is a socio-cultural manifestation of the laudatory moral world of supererogative agents concerned about those extra-vulnerable people in the wider society this community serves. I describe morally active practitioners as ethical labourers operating in the gap of other people's omissions who, through their endeavours, serve the moral impulse towards the other. Drawing on some present day VE theoretical positions, I make the argument for a social work compatible synthesis to lay down conceptual threshold components of ethical labouring.

#### Virtue ethics' postmodern neo-classical revival

The revival of latter-day virtue ethical discourse is usually attributed to Anscombe (1958). It would be a great improvement, she suggested, to cease endless debate over the impossible application of modernistic notions of objectified moral duties and their infractions. Rather, we should begin once again to name a moral genus such as the 'generous' or the 'benevolent' as exemplified by a virtuous person possessing such qualities and see where that may take us in the management of moral dilemmas. Anscombe makes the point that reified moral formulae are reasoned substitutes for discredited faith-based axioms but that in an age of atomised individualism and anomic secularism there is no longer any consensus, let alone final higher being, to arbitrate and tell us what to do.

Anscombe called for the rejection of deontological and consequentialist theories, shifting the focus of moral evaluation away from actions on to agents - what it is to be an excellent person and what qualities excellent people ought to have. The root meaning of 'ethika' from which the word ethics is derived is 'matters to do with character'. This is connected to the flow of society and its fabric, the ethos, the other

derivation from ethika. Moral-cum-ethical strengths are often referred to as correctives, meaning that some temptation or weakness needs to be resisted or that some motivation needs to be re-channeled into something good or better for the benefit of both that society and that individual.

In the early days of the revival of virtue ethical discourse, the VE opening shots were directed against the pretensions of orthodox normative theory and its artificial connection with the ethika. Following Anscombe, Murdoch (1970), Pincoffs (1971), Foot (1972, 1978), McDowell (1979), MacIntyre (1981) and Williams (1985) all proceeded on the basis that the concept of a virtue is the concept of something that makes its possessor good (for that society) rather than the maquillage of abstract rule of principle.

The original baseline VE claim was that it is quite unrealistic to imagine a set of rules that preempted considerations of biographical moral sensitivity. Desensitised abstract concepts of the morally good or bad and concomitant 'ought' notions are far better explicated in terms of being a good or bad person. This engagement may begin with the idea of like-minded good persons belonging to a cohering and unifying moral community; as Foot (1972) puts it, an army of volunteers, composed of agents who commit themselves to such moral ideals as justice and generosity, striving together to be the sort of people exhibiting those qualities. As with supererogational theory, moral imperatives become hypothetical imperatives rather than categorical: there are things an agent ought to do, if as part of her journey, she desires justice and generosity for those denied, but there is nothing an agent morally ought to do if she is neither first committed to these moral ideals, nor to the personal journey in engaging with them. On this early Foot model, what distinguishes VE from principled paradigms is that it construes the real moral agent as acting from real desires, or, as Foot (2001) later revised it, as at least acting from real motivating thoughts. What is deemed despicable or contemptible or admirable or honourable, rather than proscriptive or prescriptive, gives us the key to the problem of determining moral action.

Any VE account of social workers as morally self-organising within an elective ethical community will likely pay homage to the much quoted early work of MacIntyre (1981) with his notion of sustaining virtuous practices which are internal to the sentiments of a

tradition. Reminding us of Diamond's homily to lost discourse, virtues are those dispositions which enable us to achieve the goods internal to those practices (MacIntyre, 1981: 219). In his postmodern reprise of neo-classical virtue ethics and appeal to real, embedded moral histories, MacIntyre's account invites us to speak of stock characters immediately recognisable to the audience as in morality plays. So it is with certain kinds of historically constituted socio-cultural roles where formation and function according to psycho-social types are fused. The character-type morally legitimises a mode of existence for its bearers. Knowledge of the stock character provides an interpretation, meaning and signification of the actions of those who have assumed the character. The role places a certain kind of moral direction and constraint on the personality of those who inhabit it (MacIntyre, 1981: 27-30).

### **The gap of omissions and extra-vulnerability**

I see VE for social work as the search for some such lost stock character defined by unqualified supererogative, strong evaluative, self-other identity. As such, a social worker sees her own moral agency threatened, yet also animated, by the imbroglio of weak evaluative tendencies all around her. I adapt from Sellman (2005), who writes for nursing, the notion of extra-vulnerable or 'more than ordinarily vulnerable' to describe the laudatory world's heightened susceptibility to the suffering individual where other lay people's concerns do not materialise to intervene naturally. On my account, social work ministering to the extra-vulnerable is necessarily mandated to the extent that natural or spontaneous care and protection afforded by otherwise preoccupied kinship networks are absent, distorted or perverted.

By identity-conferring social work I mean those typically hard-core, often non-consensual interventions to assess and then assist any client who is exposed to preventable harm or at least to the likelihood of it. While it is true that a social worker may undertake other meritorious tasks, these do not make the social worker in her. (Similarly, other professionals may undertake associated tasks but that does not make them social workers.) Social work identity arises in the concern for others deemed to be in a state of 'normative abnormality'. This concern emanates from a kind of emotioning which, adapting a phrase from Wright (2005: 92), 'brings forth our [social work] world'.

By normative abnormality I mean a construct of what social work on behalf of society deems to be morally repugnant - child and elder abuse for example. The concern, and the concern about this concern, arises not in compliance with rational argument but from emotion because, although we may reason out the compliance, we first encounter the world in emotions (Maturana and Varela, 1992; Bilson, 2007). To this we may add history and ways of life. In this sense, moral practice and what I call the sophisticated defence and management of the moral impulse entail also what I call moral petitioning. Moral petitioning - meaning to assail, entreat, urgently request - is in order to bring about something morally desirable or to have prevented something morally undesirable.

Thus, social worker practitioner-petitioners are typically embroiled in the minutiae of disrupted everyday functional living and social relations. This can be phenomanalised, using Webb's (2006a: 15) phrase, as decisive 'fateful moments' in the particular lives of distressed individuals and their families whose helplessness results in the need for support. Colloquially summarised as care versus control (although we forever seek alternative less paternalistic and less pusillanimous descriptors), our endemic uncertainty stems from the realisation that any restitutive or restorative social work theory of moral repugnance will never work unless it beds itself down in a specific consensual way of life. Neither the moral agent nor the recipient of moral agency will easily adhere to any theoretical moral precepts unless the precepts weave themselves into the texture of lived daily existence and the cadence of what passes as normal existence. I refer to this commingling of precepts and daily life as practical working morality or, as I call it, ethical labour, making social workers reconstructive ethical labourers who aim to rebuild fractured lived ordinariness.

The social worker's relentless moral world of care, control and protection begins when the lay person's has for whatever reason failed. This demands not only vigilance over the deprecatory moral world which the social worker must transcend but also investiture of her laudatory one. The double effect of a social worker's own omissive non-interventions can permit an existing sequence of evil to persist or even initiate a new sequence, as serious case inquiries all too easily demonstrate. Omitting to address some reasonably foreseeable wrong, such as child abuse, is the social worker's worst moral nightmare and perhaps the ultimate moral failure, an utter repudiation of her own



identity. Seeing the wrong but then not doing anything, or not enough, about it is equally so.

Outwith principle and beyond code, the question then becomes just how applied VE might conceptually describe the authentic ethical labourer and the produce of the moral impulse nurtured in the labourer's sacred domain. Virtues are considered traits of character that involve appropriate motivation, emotion and perception towards a moral subject. There are four strands of VE analysis. I have already mentioned two (in Chapter 1) as agent-based and agent-prior accounts of VE in relation to right action. Agent-basing theory takes the virtuousness of motive to be determined independently of rightness of act, an evaluation of which is to be comprehensible only in terms of motive. Agent-prior theory requires good motivation but presupposes that virtues are qualities in order to attain good moral ends. The other two strands distinguish between long-standing character and occurrent states of virtue. The former deems a person's occurrent motives virtuous only if they issue from primary virtuous traits of character. The latter treats occurrent states of mind as primarily virtuous, so that character is the disposition to have or be in those states. I can have an occurrent compassionate desire to relieve your pain now, and long-standing traits of character such as compassion (Hurka, 2010: 58-59). Which is cause and effect establishes the relationship of virtue to right action.

Depending on how the four stands are combined, derivative consequentialist or deontological themes may be introduced, as in linking moral motives to good ends and occurrent states to a feeling of right action. In terms of VE, there are many ways of elaborating on all four strands in terms of if and only if [iff] statements depending on which theorist is foregrounded. I will concentrate on four theorists whose different positions I consider have much to offer the notion of social work ethical labour. From these, I will draw an outline of the 'essential social worker'.

### **VE motivation and Slote**

Slote (1992, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2001) defends an agent-based view that acts are only ever morally right if in fact done from virtuous motives, using the criterion of being admirable. Slote highlights the difference between doing the right thing (say preventing

child abuse) but doing it for the wrong reasons, and doing the wrong thing (failing to actually save the child) but for the right reasons. In more complex cases, wrong motive (for example, obediently doing as one is told) will ultimately tell, and this is where the fully virtuous person and especially her motives come into their own (van Zyl, 2009). Consider a case of whistleblowing with malevolent as opposed to beneficent intent.

If we act, as it turns out for the better, but only to protect our backs, that is surely unsatisfactory since a vital part of being moral is omitted. A social worker motivated to help a vulnerable mother because he finds her physically attractive is not to be tolerated, even if successful in the help and unsuccessful in realising his ulterior motive. Any code should try to tell us that. However, consider more discrete but also surely illicit 'attractiveness' motifs, which either exoticise or pathologise the client. After Slote, I argue that a social work act is morally right [iff]:

The social worker exhibits or expresses a virtuous (or admirable) social work motive, or at least does not exhibit a vicious (or deplorable) one.

Critics point out that strict agent-basing accounts can make for the self-centred or egotistical objection to VE explored by, for example, Williams (1973), Annas (1993) and Toner (2006). Caring for myself and not to hurt others, I may become a recluse for the very good reason of avoiding a greedy capitalist world. The criticism is that it is not the desires that the agent expresses, nor that they are her desires, but that all these desires are for the agent and not for others. At the very least, this raises the spectre of a well-intentioned operator lacking insight, whose practice really revolves around meeting her own needs. The standard riposte is that a caring person is capable of choosing many actions some of which may fail to express or exhibit a proper inner state of caring. Therefore both making and acting on the correct choice of kinds and quality of motives are central.

To act well, the properly motivated agent is concerned to determine all salient facts and an agent desirous of being, say, fully admirably caring is concerned to ensure that help is provided in a useful, suitable way on each occasion caring is called for (Slote, 1998: 171-94). Salient facts would include not just who exactly is needy and why, but also an agent's unresolved inner conflicts. One could say that this is what social work training

is or should be about. Thus an ethical life is a matter of securing good motivation and acting on it but is not independent of ascertaining facts about what is needed out there in the world (Slote, 2001: 17-18). Shades or quality of motive (well-informed, outward looking) can make a difference to evaluation of rightness (Sverdlik, 1996: 327-49). Slote (2001) himself has come to speak of other-regarding care and compassion motives to be some of those most admirable motives eponymous of virtue. In Slote's latest view, properly caring people are guided by 'a good heart that seeks to do good for and by people' (Slote, 2001: 42).

The criterion of admirability, a public sentiment, mitigates against the private world of self-centeredness. Despite this, the charge against agent-basing of morally supine laxity sticks. Driver (1995: 281-88) calls the convoluted attempts by strict agent-basing theorists to build in some external success criterion for right action 'monkeying with motives'. A simple enough social work VE position might be that if an agent cannot be convinced of correct motivation towards her clients in accordance with social work tradition, then there is no place for her. However, this does not avoid the possibility that even though generally admirably motivated towards her clients, outward looking and so on, a social worker may not actually be occurrently admirably motivated in a particular instance.

There is in the Slote position not only the positive of admirability but also the negative of deplorability. This invites further debate about occurrent states of minds in relation to standing character; hence a further debate also about characteristic behaviour and acting out of character. Recognizing human frailty, a modified version of Slote's motivational stance, as defended by Hursthouse (1999), identifies right acts counterfactually: only those done by an individual would count if, hypothetically speaking, they are what a fully virtuous person would do or would have done in the situation. To ensure that an act is to be truly admirably caring in this sense, the agent will have to look beyond herself and at least consider ways in which others considered to be truly caring people would characteristically act. This idea leads to a discussion about perfectionism and paragons and therefore, by another theoretical route, what attaining or falling short of full virtue entails.

## **VE qualified motivation and Hursthouse**

We tend to infer motives from actions simply because people's actual motives are rarely known to us, so we make reference to the right motives from which right actions might typically proceed. The Hursthouse position begins to address the enigmatic nature of actual motives and the links with right action and standing character through her 'qualified agent' account of rightness. After Hursthouse, I argue that a social work act is morally right [iff]:

It is what a virtuous social worker agent would not just do but characteristically would do in the circumstances.

However, the idea of a hypothetical characteristic agent acting characteristically leads us to the recognition/inerrancy problem outlined in Chapter 1. The notion of a paragonic character owes much to the ancient VE idea of 'exemplarism' as reprised by Blum (1988) and, for example, recently examined further by Zagzebski (2010). This position introduces the notion of deference to our more experienced moral betters. We may indeed like to think that we are caring enough, but then, hypothetically at least, another could always surpass us. We are destined to strive to do better against some ever higher hypothetical reference point. Moreover, a question arises as to what other virtues a fully virtuous person characteristically must possess, since the virtue of a caring disposition would presumably need to be balanced with, say, the virtue of a disposition to justice.

One less ambitious approach could be that the higher exacting maximal vertical threshold for generic overall rightness of characteristic virtue is dropped and we confine that standard to specialisms within life, since no one is ever likely to be virtuous 'tout court'. Hence, there might emerge an idea of what a fully virtuous social worker, as opposed to, say, a nurse, would characteristically do as a social worker. This approach also allows for the idea of threshold specialisms even within a particular way of life. In these instances it follows that non-specialists should defer to one who is identified as a specialist expert. In medicine, while I may value the virtues of my caring general practitioner, if I have a serious heart condition, all other things being equal, I am likely to value more the virtues of my caring cardiologist. I assume that both are admirably

motivated towards me characteristically within their roles. Another way to describe this threshold relationship is to use the VE metaphor of a target at which different professions, and within them generalists and specialists, might characteristically aim.

### **VE target theory and Swanton**

Building on Audi (1997), Swanton (2001, 2005) argues that a critical dimension of virtue is the characteristic target it aims at, allowing for the idea of characteristic and varying social work targets. Swanton uses a notion of good enough as a variable threshold concept. In a world of catastrophe and neediness, being target-centred embraces the good enough issue of how broadly or how narrowly we should understand the notion of moral virtue. A virtue's field consists of those items that are the sphere of concern of the virtue, and to which the agent should respond sufficiently in line with the virtue's demands (Swanton, 2005: 19-20). Hitting the target of virtue is a form of success in the moral acknowledgment of our responsiveness to items in its field. It is appropriate to the aim of virtue in the given context and the remit and capabilities of the aimer. For example, benevolence will be expressed in many forms depending on who the particular moral agent is and her mandate, and who the particular recipient is and why she is one.

Hitting the target will involve several modes of nuanced moral response. A good friend does not merely promote the calculated material good of her friend: the friend also appreciates, respects and loves her friend in infinitudinous expressions of friendship. Swanton refers to these modes of moral responsiveness which comprise the virtuous disposition in action as the profile of a virtue. The various modes of moral acknowledgment comprising the profile of, say, justice, reflect the demands of justice in a complex moral world. This idea gives rise to prospects for a profession-specific profiling of a virtue. This has several features that are relevant for social work.

Profiling and modality of acknowledgment envelop the Hursthouse idea of moral expertise characteristically discharged but allow for acceptable variation. The particular hit to be aimed at may be exactly in the centre, an expert's moral bull's eye so to speak, but need not be so precise where a beginner's hit is considered good enough. Suspecting child sexual abuse, a teacher or a non-specialist, inexperienced social worker

may rightly refer to a child sexual abuse expert. That we should at least know enough to know we do not know enough, but that others do, might be an instance of the trait of humility beloved of VE theorists. Of course, deference comes with high expectations. Far more morally sophisticated precision in the management of that child's suspected abuse is to be expected of the expert. We assume the expert to be even better at spotting child sexual abuse (the target) in the first place, whereas others might be excused for not spotting it. Such permissible variation in accuracy is a key feature of VE target theory, enabling us to have a view about the moral adequacy of acts according to the context and the type of possessor of virtue (Lavin, 2004). After Swanton, I maintain that a social work act is morally right [iff]:

It acknowledges or responds to items in the field of virtue in an excellent or good enough way.

One of Swanton's key points is that what precisely counts as a virtuous act is more heavily contextual and person specific than what counts less exactly as an action from virtue. While an action of giving, arising from the disposition of beneficence, is generically virtuous (an action from virtue), there are many occasions when to simply give would actually contribute to the wrong-making features of the situation. Here, only the much finer attuned specialist benefactor, familiar with the demands of the situation and the context, will generate a virtuous act. This has implications for just how the social worker's care and control remit is to be played out in a sophisticated way. It also perhaps explains why inexperienced newly qualified practitioners who are given premature responsibility for demanding case loads, requiring absolute precision of aim and target, are likely to fail.

Any means-end success imbued notion of virtue display and targeting makes for exploration of uneasy virtue predicaments. Swanton recognises that the target of some virtues, their modes and profiling, are not just other-external but self-internal. The target of anti-racist practice is not just an external endeavour to change an unfair belittling world that diminishes its victims. It is also an internal one, to change an unfair belittling attitude diminishing of ourselves as unwitting perpetrators. The target of courage is to take control of an external danger but it is also to control inner fear.

A line of thought by Driver (2001) takes the success argument to one extreme where moral virtues are ever only those traits of character that actually systematically produce good consequences, whether or not these be known to or planned by the agent. While a charming counter to the egotistical claim, not knowing just why, if or when we might be successful, and how that may differ from a lay person or another professional, is hardly a recipe for replicable social work practice. Adams (2006) holds the non-consequentialist view that pursuing 'virtue for virtue's sake' is intrinsically desirable for anyone. However, in social work our particular moral aim and target set a far more stringent test than that of virtue for virtue's sake. In some theoretical permutations, particularly discussion about virtue display, virtue as a means to an end and virtue as an end in itself coalesce, giving rise to complex moral epistemological and ontological debates. One practical answer, at least for social work, is an idea of baseline and higher-level 'V-clauses'.

### **VE axiological theory and Hurka**

Hurka's (2001, 2010) 'recursive' notion of causal explanation argues that the connection between right action and overall virtue need not rely on the assumption that one is to be derived from the other. Instead, each involves a relation to a shared third moral property which links them. He gives an example. It may be that smokers drink more than non-smokers and drinkers smoke more than non-drinkers. But the explanation of this correlation need not be that smoking causes drinking or vice-versa. Some third factor such as sociability or fondness for partying may cause people both to smoke and drink without any causal connection between the two. The same possibility exists for right action and virtue. They may be connected not because either is identified in terms of the other but because each involves a relation to some third moral property, which explains their frequent coincidence (Hurka, 2010: 59-60).

Hurka calls this third axiological moral property an intrinsic moral baseline or 'base-clause' towards which a virtue, as a recursion-clause higher-level moral concept, is identified by its intentional relation. A base-clause starts by stating that certain states of affairs other than virtue are viewed as intrinsically good. A recursion-clause is then added about the intrinsic goodness of a certain attitude to what is base-clause good. So, if an abuse- or neglect-free childhood or a happy fulfilling old age for all elders are

deemed intrinsic goods, then loving or desiring or taking pleasure in their achievement and in eradication of their counterfactuals are also intrinsically good.

Not all who concur with the base-clause then commit to it, as the Fitzpatrick scenario described in Chapter 3 suggests. Committing to the base-clause is an independent state of mind requiring an independent stance, so a good in itself. Commitment is shown in 'V-verbs' such as to prize, protect, restore, and overcome. Regardless of whether any V-verbing action succeeds in its aim, its origin in a desire to honour the base-clause makes it a form of loving that good. Hurka's idea is that a recursion-clause attitudinal state of hating an evil may generate further recursion-clauses. One may love knowledge (for example, of the aging process, of welfare policy impediments, of indirect institutional discrimination, of cultural variation) in order to be more effective in overcoming neglect of elders and securing for them happier, more fulfilling lives. Hence V terms such as curiosity and critical thinking, as described by Peterson and Seligman (2004: 109-196). Yet again, love of curiosity and critical thinking is a relational not a conditional clause, since not every sympathetic concerned person commits to or has the capacity for systematic learning about elders.

While knowledge here is at one level instrumental - all the better to help elders - loving knowledge for knowledge itself is an independently justified virtue. This is because the thirst for knowledge, love of its possession and its deploy make the owner the sort of person she wants to be, one who characteristically sets out to bring about a better world for elders. She wants to be not just someone who sympathises with the plight of at-risk elders, but also one who wants to know all about and actively engage with elders in a sophisticated way. These various claims employ a simple pattern. After Hurka, I claim that a social work act is morally right [iff]:

The social worker acquires, exercises and develops appropriate recursive attitudes to social work baseline evils.

There are social work evils such as elder abuse. The appropriate attitude to that evil should be strongly negative, so it is virtuous and intrinsically good to be pained by and hate that evil and to desire and seek the absence of that evil, actively looking for opportunities to do so. Recursively, it is virtuous to want to stop someone hurting



elders but then to understand why some do, all the better to stop it. The social worker's intrinsic good end is correlated with the elimination of social work evils through a characteristic exercise of all relevant recursion-clauses. Love of knowledge about the particular world of the elder may also then recursively generate an appetite for self-knowledge. The social worker will want to examine the impact of her social work self on the ageing client in case she unwittingly duplicates writ small what is base-clause wrong with the world writ large. I examine the notion of self-effacement in the next chapter in order to stress the problematic developmental relationship between social work base-clause motivated naivety and characteristic recursion-clause sophistication.

## **Chapter 5**

### **VE and moral schism**

#### **Introduction**

I present a critical notion of self-effacement to describe the negation of the moral impulse as an ethical friendship. This latter requires a supererogative moral gaze, centred on the distressed person, a 'looking' skill acquired through a maturational process of moral pedagogy. I describe this through the notion of 'moral continence'. Early VE theorists claimed that principle-based theory - hence any code - is technically self-effacing, meaning that either the person disappears from moral sight or else the theory does. The tu quoque counter-attack is that VE ultimately is no different. The dispute revolves around the nature of spontaneous fluent behaviour. I introduce some relevant standard learning theory to engage with this.

#### **VE continence theory**

One of the strengths of the VE paradigm is that it invites a debate about agent effort, deviation and error proneness in the attainment of virtue. In the Aristotelian psychological language of continence, a less than fully virtuous person could be either 'enkratic' or 'akratic' (Stohr, 2003). One can over-indulge or under-indulge in beneficence and it can even be of the completely wrong property, missing the target entirely. A person may also have some coarser antithetical tendencies such as rank selfishness. The enkratic person performs benevolent acts of the right kind, level and intensity although only through strength of mind does she overcome competing motivations, holding back contrary internal pressures. She is described as continent. The akratic person also has competing motivations but being weak-willed fails to overcome them and can at best only perform much diluted benevolent acts, so is described as incontinent. The vicious person does not have competing motivations - the agent is not conflicted at all. In the name of beneficence she is simply disposed to exploit another's vulnerability because it gives, perhaps, some gratification. I am not suggesting that too many social workers are of this sort, only that today social workers

are much preoccupied and diverted by other counterveiling pressures impairing their moral vision.

The paradigmatic debate around the language of self-effacement is about the enigmatic nature of being fully (as opposed to being less than fully) virtuous, a moral perception gap, and the would-be social worker's movement from the deprecatory to the laudatory moral world discussed in Chapter 3. This movement aims for the idea of ethical labouring as ultimate moral fluency - the journey from naivety to sophistication. This is problematic, not in the obvious sense of being a personally daunting error prone journey, but because it encounters those conceptual challenges arising out of the broad redundancy charge introduced in Chapter 1. McDowell (1998: 73) captures well the moral perception metaphor which informs much VE:

Occasion by occasion one knows what to do, if one does, not by applying universal principles but by being a certain kind of person: one who sees situations in a certain distinctive way.

I equate supererogative modality with the development of moral perception, leading to a characteristic social work look or gaze. Our intrusive, ever urgent curiosity should make for a distinctive 'spectacular' regard for the distressed other, looking at and looking again with due deference at that person in her predicament, hence our value discourse about who we make out, how and why. We project how, through elimination of the distress, the client could be restored to some sort of human completeness. On entering into the life of another, a social worker must always stare intensely in order to recognise and give a name to that distress, and a value regarding its elimination. She must deal with it, exit, and as far as possible leave behind a restored person. To fail to work this complex moral mean - being there for the other person, for the right reason and in the right measure - is to violate not only the client but also the social worker's authentic self. In the transformation between motivation and action and the production of value through ethical labour, to lose the balance, that is the pivotal centrality of the client, is to void the point of being a social worker.

## Self-effacement

To efface is to rub out, erase, obliterate, or eclipse. I will refer to self-effacement technically and also analogically, expanding it imaginatively to mean that form of moral blindness where we fail to see our clients and who they are because we fail to see ourselves and who we should be. A moral theory is said to be technically self-effacing if it tells us that at least sometimes we should not be motivated by those considerations by which its own inner logic would have us justify our acts. This gives rise to an unreasonable absurd paradox where the argument turns in against itself. With mainstream social work discourse still fixated in 1960s and 1970s moral formula talk, this momentous self-effacing claim has passed us by, but surely we feel it through our lived experience. The paradox is perhaps most famously put by Stocker in a much quoted article, *The Schizophrenia of Modern Ethical Theories* (1976), one of the important early position statements in the virtue ethics movement. Stocker uses the story of a hospital visit and the motivation for it to try to show the superiority of virtue ethical moral vision over deontic and consequentialist ones. However, thirty years on, Keller (2007) put forward an alternative hospitality scenario, to illustrate why he believes virtue ethics is also technically self-effacing - the tu quoque argument.

I will lay out the baseline Stocker position, drawing on Keller's own phraseology before outlining my interpretation of Keller's tu quoque riposte and its relevance for social work. In building his own argument Keller helpfully selects some illuminating quotes from Stocker which I replicate since they seem to me to capture the issues in contention. As Stocker (1976: 459) puts it of deontic and consequentialist paradigms:

What is lacking in these theories is simply - or not-so-simply - the person . . . . The person - not merely the person's general values nor even the person-qua-possessor-or-producer-of-general values - must be valued.

Stocker's basic claim is that these theories do not retain plausibility because their accounts of how people should be motivated differ from their accounts of what gives people reason to act or makes their acts right, hence defeating themselves as theories. They are therefore self-effacing. Stocker (1996, 2003) subsequently developed his original moral schizophrenia argument to a position which locates value firmly in emotions, emotional identification and the closeness and size of the target. Armstrong

(2007: 51-52) for nursing, Webster (2008a, 2008b), Wright and Webster (2008: 110-112) and Webb (2010a: 114) for social work, and Banks and Gallagher (2009: 67) for health and social care, discuss or mention Stocker but I do not think Keller's technical riposte and its implications for practice have been anywhere fully articulated. I will stay with but embellish Stocker's allegorical hospital visit to illustrate and expand the argument because it applies just as well to any social work scenario.

A friend comes to visit you in hospital. She tells you that her motive for visiting is not some expression of concern but rather to conform to a moral rule ('visit hospitalised friends'), or to bring about the best available state of affairs, which the visiting does. A hospitalised Kantian or Utilitarian philosopher may feel comforted by this display of theory at work but surely most emoting patients in a state of vulnerability would not. The visitor does not really value you so much as the moral prescription to visit and, as it happens, paying you a visit was the best way for her to serve that value today, rather than, say, staying at home and writing up her doctorate. Having decided to visit, she is not paying her friend a visit but paying a call to the moral prescription after costing out the inconvenience. Here, the moral 'debt' and its discharge are to the moral rule, or to the conduct, not to the person in need.

A visitor might know that there are putative benefits to the patient accruing from a visit, but I hold that the good consequences are conditional on the primary motivation of being there in the first place. Just as it is hard to imagine a true friend saying to me that her friendship is actually conducted in line with a reified set of rules, it is no less so for a social worker's transactions. True friendship (paying one's respects) is not according to a rulebook and its procedures but is a composite of mutual histories and shared directions projected into a jointly constructed future. As Smilansky's account of the paradoxical reminds us (Chapter 3), our interdependency is deeply affirming since without it each could not be the person we have become and would like to be. While not necessarily borne out of adversity, friendship is mutually helping each other through the vicissitudes of life, a weaving of each person's pathway. For friends, the inevitable misfortunes of each afford the opportunity to affirm their friendship.

To the extent to which social workers are motivated by following codified rules they cannot be genuine friends. Yet as Stocker (1976: 462) puts it, the action-guiding

immediacy of genuine friendship is surely one of the most morally valuable things there are. The connection with social work is that it bespeaks a very special intense type of person-centred, self-other moral transaction. If social workers are forced to be moved by some alien logic lacking the person, our value discourse is bound to be also self-effacing, of our clients and of ourselves.

### **Implausibility of standard moral theory**

Stocker's basic technical position is that if it is argued that people should be moved directly by consequentialist or deontological concerns then no room is allowed for genuine friendship, or for many of those other personal relationships that play an intuitively essential part in normal life. Invoking the language of Keller (2007: 222-223), for the consequentialist, cases like Stocker's therefore give reason to absurdly conclude that the best consequences will not necessarily be brought about by people who are motivated to bring about the best consequences; hence there are sometimes good consequentialist reasons not to recommend consequentialist motives. For the deontologist, the task is to explain how someone can engage in valuable personal relationships while being moved by deontic rule considerations. As Keller notes (2007: 223), on the Stocker argument, the deontologist may prefer to embrace self-effacement by saying that deontic moral rules are such that sometimes in order to follow them the agent must be moved by a rule of consideration other than that of following the rules. It seems to me that many social workers can relate to both conclusions.

Either way, the consequentialist and deontologist are skewered, making for the double bind moral schism that I claim is encapsulated in codified conduct and that nowadays we feel as social workers. Stocker's parable tells us to grapple morally and act in ways that are not schismatic, where a social worker's heightened careful emotioning and careful reasoning are in harmony, where there is no headlong flight into the false security of rules, policies and procedures but instead an encounter with the distressed other as a human being. As social workers we do of course want to eliminate or reduce real harm as a matter of principle and because of the undesirable consequences; we may even want to try to measure that harm, prioritise it and cost out the remedies, but it is neither the harm nor the costs that should drive us to act but the real person, the one who is being harmed. All the rest is, or ought to be, supportive paraphernalia.

A rebuttal might be that our service ideal is purposely not about personal friendship but a professional relationship better managed by impersonal cold reason. But this is exactly what I have been criticising. Affectivity or feeling for another is nowadays reduced to codified instruction about impropriety. In losing the person as friend, such risk aversion inevitably privileges a bureaucratic perspective where good encounters are to be measured by slide rule panjandrums. We sometimes literally do not see a bruise on a child because the accusation of intimacy in looking is far more powerful than the evil that is rendered invisible.

Self-effacing theories are of the falsidical paradox type described in Chapter 3. They cannot tell us as social workers what should properly motivate us, so they do not fully tell us how to live and be as social workers. Self-effacing principles preclude the attainment of an important good, namely the good of a psychologically harmonious social work life where the high evaluator agent is motivated by, and acts on, the things she takes to be genuinely important. Being there for the other person begins where the ties of benevolence of natural sorts of friendships (parents, offspring, family neighbours, community) fail. As Stocker (1976: 454) puts it:

We should be moved by our major values and should value what our major motives seek . . . . such harmony is the mark of the good life.

The term ethical friendship is of course a tautological one. In the reunification of word and deed, on a laudable proximal account one cannot be a social worker and not be a friend, just as one cannot be a friend and then, morally, not respond. Social workers have failed to pay attention to the language of friendship underpinning their historical narrative. This is the real nature of our deprofessionalisation. It is as if we no longer have a self-referential standard of friendship internal to our practices by which to evaluate and measure ourselves, and which is of intrinsic value itself.

### **An internalism argument**

To see with perspicacity the misfortune of a distressed extra-vulnerable other and to address her fully and the misfortune proportionally are the hallmarks of social work

friendship - the sine qua non of our professional being. These hallmarks emanate from and sustain our good traits. Their obverse can only make for bad traits. Rephrasing Adams (2006: 3), such good and bad traits are a major factor in how well our social work life, not just our day, is going morally. These traits are commonly seen as determining the extent to which each of us is a reflective self-directing ethical person as revealed through our chosen projects and allegiances over time.

VE brings forth the language of moral spontaneity, amounting to, in Adams' sense, virtue for virtue's sake. Surely, first and foremost, we want to be there for our clients and not for implausible rules. The question is to what extent all this spontaneity - the hypothetical 'moral party for two' syndrome - flatters only to deceive. The issue goes back to just how the naive moral impulse is or can be defended in a sophisticated manner by a morally active, fully virtuous practitioner, and to what extent those not yet in fully virtuous states (akratic or enkratic) can survive the journey.

We have seen with Hurka in Chapter 4 that there is a necessary but not sufficient connection between value and motivation (the internalism argument) since people need not be fully motivated to act even by those values that they embrace. Moreover, only some will fully engage with the full range of, say, benevolence. Epistemic qualities of excellence, such as intellectual open-mindedness (Riggs, 2010), and those related self-management ones such as humility, arise out of full awareness of our fallibility as human beings. Such qualities should enable us to work with an acceptance of moral complexity and ambiguity, humbly entering our clients' private worlds. A person with the quality of open-mindedness is motivated to attain the whole picture truth yet be willing to consider alternative ideas even as a truth is established. A social worker will never be complete, therefore if she thinks she is done, she would be completely finished as a social worker. Hence a fundamental VE acknowledgment that our ethical journey never ends no matter how morally fluent we would like to think we have become.

As with moral virtue, our intellectual qualities may fall short, so that we do not know what we need to know well enough to function correctly towards our ends. Knowledge needed to be VE-standard excellent requires its own grammar of expression (Battaly, 2010a). The resultant discourse revolves around habituation or 'habits of the mind' and the direction of moral movement. The Hurka position tells us that a fully caring agent



must also care about the truth of that caring and its various modes. Reliability, itself a candidate recursion-clause virtue, invites a discourse about what is epistemically constitutive of reliability. Reliability is not just trivially doing what one said one would do, but, for example, unravelling the knowledge required to always do the best possible for the particular client in any situation. Whereas a vicious social worker will have a closed mind, it would be hard to imagine a virtuous one who does.

Lacking temperance altogether, counterfactual corresponding cognitive states such as ‘epistemic self-indulgence’ (Baehr, 2010) and even ‘epistemic malevolence’ (Battaly, 2010b) are not just analogues of akratic or enkratic states of mind but of two sorts of moral vice. The indulgence one is manifest in social work as, say, more or less any moral stance goes so long as it is effusively declared upfront. The malevolence one thrives on deep personal enmity and permits us, using a term coined by Baehr (2010: 191), to ‘enemize’ our clients, as with racist or gendered negative constructions of clienthood and in our periodic moral panics. Bearing such internalism arguments in mind, Keller's (2007) *tu quoque* argument challenges the very idea of full virtue in an epistemic sense. It can be linked to the broad redundancy argument against VE described in Chapter 1.

### **The *tu quoque* response**

The continence argument that renders only the right sort of internalism plausible as the basis of ethical friendship also renders VE vulnerable. This undermines those features of internalism that make it an attractive doctrine in the first place, namely the connections it forges between values and the explanation and the justification of action (Johnson, 1999). In this vein, Pollard (2003) poses the question of whether virtuous action can be both habitual and rational since acting habitually without thinking about it is hard to reconcile with the idea that actions are for deliberate good reasons.

We should not need to think hard about visiting a friend in hospital. Bearing this in mind, Keller describes a hospitality scenario in which three friends observe a family struggling to erect a tent in a storm. The scenario is intended to question whether the very idea of full virtue is epistemically plausible. His three moral agents agree to provide the family with shelter and sustenance. Keller proposes that the three hosts

enter into rescue mode for a different mixture of reasons and sentiment. The first one is automatically motivated to relieve the family's misery; the second person is motivated to act generously and deduces that supplying shelter is the correct way. The third person is motivated to do what the fully virtuous person would do, and reasons that the fully virtuous person would indeed offer this kind of hospitality in this very situation. Keller's point is that what this third moral agent is really motivated to do is in effect to emulate such a person. She is driven by the thought 'here I am acting as the virtuous person would' (Keller 2007: 226).

As Keller (2007: 227) says, from a virtue ethical perspective there is something deficient about the latter two moral agents since their motives would seem to preclude them from being fully generous. In order to be fully generous, a moral agent needs to be moved in action by thoughts that are neither about her own generosity nor indeed her resemblance to a fully virtuous person. Keller suggests that having the governing motive of acting like a virtuous person logically precludes the possibility of being one in the full sense of moral immediacy of the sort Stocker envisaged. At the very least, Keller (2007: 229) maintains, anyone being fully virtuous would have to make sure that the thought of acting like a fully virtuous person is not the motivation when she comes to perform fully virtuous acts of her own. Keller therefore concludes that even having that consideration as a governing motive is structurally, in Stockers' own term, 'schizophrenic'.

Just what might be the implications of this seemingly pedantic conclusion for a social work practice of value? It at least illustrates how knowing just what a fully virtuous person would actually do in the circumstances in order to be one is inevitably contestable and an error prone exercise. However, Keller does allude to the possibility that if we are making an honest effort to improve ourselves then it is helpful to focus on our own thoughts, qualities and some guiding ideal. Recasting this theme, I adapt and embellish the Keller scenario in terms of moral pedagogy. The Keller allegory, a symbolic comforting the stranger rescue, is in line with the VE position that a moral agent does not rationally act benevolently in order to be benevolent (a deontic rule), or even to produce benevolence (a calculated outcome). The agent acts intuitively benevolently because the sudden situation she faces fits a description of one that elicits

this quality in the right measure and the agent has the requisite moral capacity to feel, know and respond appropriately to that situation.

Redefining Keller's hosts, I propose one to be a moral novice (my term) who, requiring instruction, is learning by doing as she is told. In this case, she didactically imitates the act of a paragonic master who spontaneously exhibits fluent hospitality. Seeking to please by obeying (or imitating) is reasonable since, after all, she is only a novice. I designate the second host as a more advanced moral sophomore (also my term) who observes the expert's exhibitions of fluency over a period of time and extrapolates from them what typically to do. She has internalised what to do as a mental blueprint to apply to similar situations. This is not dissimilar to rule-based deontic and consequentialist theorisation because the sophomore needs some sort of mental structuralisation. She has acquired some handy rules such as 'if you were in that situation wouldn't you like somebody to offer you help?'

The VE ethical trajectory suggests that one learns to be correctly hospitable by passing through the two formative stages, eventually attaining a summative moral perceptual capacity. This marks out my third type, the fully mature kind person whose hospitality is one moral card in a long suit. In this seemingly straightforward helping hand case, the outcome is the same by all three, but that will not always be so in more complex, morally ambiguous situations, the sort social workers typically face. The VE argument is that kindness itself is a capacious, contextually sensitive phenomenon, requiring a particular mode of acknowledgement and hence a proportionate response.

Motivation to this sort of kindness does not require thought because it is an immediate context sensitive moral response which if reasoned out would therefore likely miss what is usually a transitory target briefly in focus. This sensitivity is, as McDowell (1998: 51) says, a sort of expansive perceptual capacity and the morally attuned person sees and extrapolates the specific demands of kindness by feeling them according to the situation. Sometimes, as common sense tells us, the kindest act is not to be kind at all. By way of contrast, the novice or even the sophomore will be prone to exhibiting what are sometimes called faux virtues, forms of virtue expression which through lack of moral maturity may lead to situational error of judgment. The VE idea of akratic and enkratic states is linked to this.

My Slote-Hursthouse-Swanton-Hurka VE template, described in Chapter 4, would be activated by employing some similar pedagogy as set out above but this hits a snag. Getting back to Keller's scenario, one implication of his technical point is that, at least on some occasions, even the master expert must first consider and only then act. Prudence seems to require that you would at least pause to check out your expert inclination and make sure that being spontaneously kind is the correct course of action, even for apparent like-for-like situations. You will therefore still have to have call on a guiding Hursthouse-like thought such as 'right action in this instance is that which a fully virtuous person would perform'. This surreptitiously lets into the expert's equation a necessary consideration of emulation yet again, thus providing a reason for action that is not the same as the motive to help. Yet if we are committed to actually being a virtuous agent, not just acting like one (even though on the Keller argument we must not have the thought of either when we do act), the VE story about good motivation seems to come apart.

One implication for analysis of the source of value is that to delay spontaneity for even one second to reflect, no matter how briefly, on options, is to be referring to some extraneous maxim. The fact that this checking out may be undertaken enigmatically, leaving no external epistemic markers, does not change the substantive point. In critical dilemmas, the very sort encountered by social workers, it is good spontaneous habit not to be habitually spontaneous but to appeal to some organising principle to check whether the situation is subtly or soberly different from all other previous encounters. If the demands of morality require us to interrogate good moral habit to ensure it is good, then we need a standard other than the habitually given by which to measure it. I further explore aspects of this position through some standard learning theory.

### **Standard learning theory**

The Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986, 1991, 2004) model of learning outlines a process of five stages of capability acquisition - novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient through to expert. The process is characterised by the balance of context-free and situational rules. The learner begins by taking instruction, often by copying the behaviour of the more experienced. She progresses to more intermediate, detached, abstract and consciously analytic behaviour applied to a particular situation. Finally,

she exhibits skilled behaviour, which is based on intuitive, non-stereotypical recognition of similarities with, and differences from, past experience. Moving through stages, the learner gradually develops situational rules which cannot be objectively defined free of the situation or context.

The trainee is increasingly able to prioritise correctly the importance of situational factors in her decision-making, generating a chosen perspective to deal with the situation. Eventually, the perspective and analysis are intuitive in that no conscious choice or plan is needed. Actions follow from understanding which has been developed through recognising patterned similarities to past experience, only pausing to reflect on and incorporate what is novel and thus banking ever more refined precedent for future action. Benner (1984) speaks of a continuum of skill acquisition from rule-bound beginner fixated on slavishly following the rules even when they do not appear to fit at all, to learning how to apply and adapt the maxims to particular cases and eventually knowing when and why to ignore them altogether.

Dall'Alba and Sandburg (2006: 399-405) describe this understanding as a critical movement of difference arising out of a horizontal dimension of skill acquisition (which consolidates capability based on learning from like-for-like situations) and a vertical dimension based on transformative variation in understanding (arising out of interrogation of not like-for-like situations). The capacity of non-routine thinking to perceive what has never before been encountered, and hence is unique in any situation, requires an unrehearsed and creative response. This might be said to be the apotheosis of insouciant expertise.

Applying this to the moral domain, consider the view that interrogating moral habit is an actual excellence of mind. A 'reasons internalism' view makes room for some habitual actions to count as motives for reasoning where reasoning itself is a habitual action. In VE terms, moral creativity sets apart the expert, one who recreates herself anew in each act as an affirmation of enduring self. The habit of always looking again more deeply at the distressed other after the first emotive glance, to see beyond restrictive conventions of engagement, is essential if we are to see the authentic face of the hidden real person. Making a moral rule of embracing careful spontaneity is what I described in Chapter 3 to be, after all, a reasonable absurdity in the acknowledgment of

another's unadorned uniqueness. It is surely part of respect (to look at with esteem, so in a non-injurious, non-insulting or non-degrading way), the aim of which is the diametrical opposite of effacement. Behind all the sophistication, this interhuman 'rule of uniqueness' aims to make for a decluttered moment of recognition, one of Levinas-like pure non-indifference to the call of the other pure and simple.

The internal target of knowing oneself fully by suspending one's as-given responses is a part of the peculiar self-correcting V-method and an ethical skill in itself. This is characterised by a lifelong commitment to reflexivity, punctuated by endless pauses to the nth degree, in order to become a less error prone person. I maintain that an internalist based narrative for dealing with the ever-present prospect of moral failure is a reasonably absurd accommodation of Keller's challenge. To develop this argument, in the next chapter I look at the idea of moral expertise as a special, demanding, accountable sort of knowing reasonableness. To contextualise this for social work practice, I first examine the recent social science situationist critique of VE theory that would derail any such biographical journey. The situationist challenge makes for another sort of self-effacement charge against VE but from a different direction. Any internalist reasonableness argument intended to counter Keller's charge also needs to accommodate the externalist one.

## **Chapter 6**

### **VE fragility and situationism**

#### **Introduction**

The situationists' deflationary critique of VE is the second major attack on the credibility of VE moral psychology, this time about the fragility of virtue. I suggest that the sophisticated defence of the moral impulse against situationist claims lies in context sensitive moral knowledge formation as part of ethical labouring. I explore the idea of phronesis in this way. However, for some, this makes for a confused and confusing story about what is entailed in attending to ethical friendships. They argue that being a friend to a particular other must also involve adjudication of competing external moral demands. This brings us back to the conservative-particular/radical-universal dichotomy said to affect VE.

#### **The situationists' deflationary claim**

The situationists' deflationary claim is that VE fails as a theory of moral action because of the flawed assertion that behavioural moral consistency can be explained through the cultivation of indefatigable personality traits. This claim hooks up with Keller's internalist inflationary claim but hits from a different, externalist, direction. Taken together, they cover the two basic criticisms of VE - internalist casuistry and externalist conformity - that I outlined in Chapter 1.

The situationist argument is that if our good moral acts are ordered by robust traits protected by ongoing self-correction, systematic observation should reveal behavioural consistency. At best, the argument goes, what passes as virtuous action is elicited only in narrow, well-traversed settings, not in shifting situations of moral ambiguity where good character fragments and becomes unstable. This social psychological critique of VE, based on a fundamental attribution error, is associated with Harman (1999, 2000) and Doris (1998, 2002, 2005). It challenges VE's claim to be a unifying normative theory as empirically unsound. Presented as a fault-line that sunders VE, situationists claim that under experimental conditions people's apparently steadfast character-

dependent behaviour is not found to hold cross-situationally. They do not act morally as they would like to have acted but behave immorally in ways that they would not before or after approve. It is as if Stocker's hospital visitor obediently did some harm to her friend because on arrival she was told to do so.

Borne out of Arendt's (1965, 1973) 'banality of evil' Holocaust thesis, the situationists refer to Milgram's (1963, 1974) series of obedience experiments which induced naive subjects to inflict pain on decoys. They also refer to the Stanford simulated prison exercise (Haney *et al.*, 1973) where those in role as warders quickly and gratuitously brutalised those in role as prisoners. Across a range of situations it is claimed that a person's behaviour will tend to converge on obedience to the collective norm for the situation, irrespective of the intrinsic good or evil of that norm. The social psychology of group conformity is a contested one but well researched and documented (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005: 244-273). I have already alluded to this in the bystander effect in Chapter 3, where confused 'good people do nothing at all'. One step further, summated as the Lucifer effect (Zimbardo, 2007), and colloquially put as 'good people do bad things', the protective armoury of moral character seems to fail completely when subject to an authoritarian regime and the pressures of group dynamics.

This abductive argument posits that the variability of human behaviour, much of it conflicted or failed, if not vicious in VE terms, is best explained by the conclusion that moral traits are not robust but inconsistently instantiated. People's actions are determined by the overwhelming external circumstances (especially group pressure) in which they are immersed. Behavioural reliability of what we traditionally call virtue is not revealed in systematic observation of behaviour. Situationism makes explicit the occurrence versus standing character strand in VE, as described in Chapter 4.

It is far-fetched to suggest that nowadays social work is a bit like an obedience experiment. However, just how a person draws on her reserves of redemptive character strengths in those very situations when she is in most need of them, but which get overwhelmed because of the situation, is a moot point. Situationists say that VE is based on too exacting a standard which few, if any, people can or will attain because of the cognitive and emotional dissonance between one's preferred and actual acts. VE suggests that we learn to be good in those very situations of moral peril that would put



us to the test and surely if we fail to act well, we are not good after all. To be a strong social worker in those very circumstances when our personal weaknesses are most exposed is daunting, querying the efficacy of any VE moral pedagogy. The situationist debate continues (Merritt, 2000; Miller, 2003; Kamtekar, 2004; Solomon, 2005; Annas, 2005; Webber, 2006; Adams, 2006; Kristjansson, 2008; Jost and Jost, 2009). To date only Webster (2008b, 2009) and Banks and Gallagher (2009: 55-56) have acknowledged it for social work.

### **Motivational self-sufficiency**

One aspect of the situationist debate is whether virtue or its lack is a matter of voluntariness (Montmarquet, 2008). Appiah (2008) provides a succinct response for the conciliation between moral philosophy and moral psychology. He sees virtues as ideals that regulate our moral choices, so philosophical accounts of the normative character ideal need make no assumption about how easy or widespread the necessary dispositions may be. Difficult is not the same as impossible and perhaps we can ascend the V-gradient through aspiring to the full-fledged ideal (Appiah, 2008: 48-49). VE tells us that although we may trespass as moral agents we should continually work on changing the kind of person we are currently, learning from our failures. So long as we are humble, that is surely part of what being virtuous means. As Machery (2010) says in his account of the bleak implications of moral psychology, Appiah's remedy has done much to exorcise the basic situationist threat. However, for social work, there are still three points to bear in mind which do not permit too casual a dismissal of the critique.

The first one is whether we can take seriously an ideal that many individuals must fall so far short of attaining even after trying. This is the flip side of any perfectionist account which builds in elitist tendencies, creating a moral meritocracy - but then why should our clients suffer with anybody less? The second point is about the 'unity of the virtues'. I do not mean here the usual debate as to whether, say, courage, justice and temperance must go together in the one person. I am referring to whether being a certain kind of person one wants to be can be separated from everyday second-order transient moods and emotions. At any given point in time virtuous character is not something one might have in addition to these.

Mood, especially feelings of self-confidence and self-worth, hopefulness and successfulness (and of course their opposites) may act independently on type and quality of action, subverting the very sort of person we ideate, so that in our angst and anomie we simply cannot be compassionate or caring. The prospect that our moral agency can be at least partly disunified in this way is always a possibility. Given my depressing account of social work today, having resilient strength of character does indeed call for a moral meritocracy if we are to arrest our fall.

The third point is that an obedience to conformity syndrome can also easily be disguised as a justificatory discourse about the virtue of loyalty at the expense of justice. This would reinforce the charge that telling us what we ought to do, other than merely endorsing the hegemony, is something virtue ethics cannot reliably do. Satisfactory answers to these three points about difficulty, compounded by low mood and conformity, involve motivational self-sufficiency of character (or MSC). This begins with regaining control over our inner lives in the determination to be the sort of person we want to be. Such 'self-containing' optimism advances a strong ideal of MSC. It calls for the possession of virtue not to be independent of adverse factors outside of oneself, but for those factors to be an inspiration rather than an impediment to acting virtuously.

### **A narrative for checking failure**

Thus, in response to situationism, VE invites a heightened discourse about the unedifying prospect of personal moral failure. Its conceptual underpinnings and engagement with vice lead us to explore what it is to be as much unsuccessful as successful. A focus on character will always spotlight the ways character could and does go wrong since we are all mere humans. However, an authentic social worker should hold true in situations that would distort her reasoned sentiments, seeing those situations as an opportunity to exercise them. This in turn leads us into a discourse about transcendence.

As Peterson and Seligman (2004: 569-582) argue, the strengths of transcendence forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning, expecting a good future as something that can be brought about. This built-in compass is a redeeming strength of

VE, making for a dialogue with oneself and others about tracking personal responsibility for what we can and therefore should change. As Becker (1975) notes, agent appraisal theory provides the very language and conceptual wherewithal to see what may have gone wrong. VE allows us to differentiate between tragic heroes and naïve fools. We can view the foolish or dangerous behaviours that flow from personal biographies in their proper light and weigh up whether any foreboding circumstance should have been foreseen or whether the pressure of a genuinely unpredictable situation came into play.

Surely the first step in repudiating the situationist account is for a social worker to learn about its dynamics and be always aware of its externalities, including any instrumentalities of control to which she might be subject. Knowledge of vice and viciousness is itself a virtue. That is what an ethical journey is about, taking control of the situation and not being controlled by it. Situationism only demonstrates that there are many covert influences external to the inner self-shaping ones. Since we are subject to both, we need to be ever conscious of each. Seeking to overcome the situation as well as one's incomplete self exposed by the situation is the journey. That is why we must always pause to consider before we act, not just reflect in shame and regret and beat ourselves up afterwards.

Our social work group norms, which should heighten group identity against the threat of outsider influence (Hogg and Vaughan, 2005: 81-111), may be failing, yet I see in that very analysis scope for a revalorised framework. Today, it is as if the social work community of practitioners has opted to become self-effacing and then, as with the situationist argument, behave as if it is bound to be true, confirming the truth of the argument. By way of contrast, as rationally emotive moral beings we must always be fully in charge of and responsible for our character and our dispositions. We must negotiate the chaos, drawing on our integrity to do so. Contra Keller, this very much means pausing to consider. I examine in more detail the requisite moral expertise as a skill in itself.

## **Moral expertise**

Standard professional learning theory as outlined in Chapter 5 describes an end state fluency. The development of moral expertise as a skill in itself, although it is rarely called that, is strongly associated in our social work tradition with epistemic virtues such as reflexivity. Annas (1993, 1995, 1998, 2003) has perhaps done most of all VE theorists to recover the ancient idea that virtue is structurally similar to a skill. I have argued that VE epistemology invites us to accept a reasonable social work paradox along the line 'it is good intuition not to act on intuition'. Just how the sophomore makes the skilled transition to enigmatic master expert level, so that moral blueprints may be discarded, invites further consideration. Acquiring, say, kindness, seems to require practice, imitation, and habituation of raw feeling into sophisticated patterns guided by growing emotional intelligence and social feedback. This in turn requires developing attention to the concrete particularities of actual persons and their situations. It involves overcoming moral simplification by an increasing capacity for sharpened moral perception, freed up imagination and enhanced sensibilities. It engages with the idea of paragonic inerrancy, yet one where the paragon must always learn anew so is always also a beginner as well - a reasonable absurdity. The fully virtuous person has to elide super swift habituated responses derived from some tested action with critical reflective caution. This requires suspension of habit and deliberation.

The paragon-as-beginner argument leads us back to a debate which leaves virtue looking suspiciously like just another form of abstract principled theory, albeit one locked up in inscrutability (Keller's point), balanced with one which can look suspiciously like functional conformity to the given (the situationists' point). The question for social work is just how an acculturation process builds in a capacity to challenge itself, so that being acculturated demands a critical examination of what is being acculturated. This can be re-presented as the conservative-particular versus universal-radical debate. Our social work tradition seeks to combine and work both (Forsythe, 1995; Payne, 1999, 2005). To explicate this I now return to the VE epistemology of an advanced moral practitioner.

Keller's challenge at least suggests that an ethical journey can never be completed since the moral practitioner is always learning. The situationist challenge at least suggests

that whatever we may learn is easily unlearned under duress. An endless journey where there is no final destination only another departure at the very point of arrival is an odd concept of progression but may be construed as one of moral thesis, antithesis and synthesis. It stands in stark opposition to that short course called code of conduct and its backwards pull. Every moral gesture, no matter how much nuanced, will leave a moral residue in need of resolution. VE both refines and expands moral perception ad infinitum as the agent encounters new moral experiences and new ways of recognising, and therefore honouring, the moral impulse and engaging with the distressed other.

### **Tacit reasonableness**

VE theory claims that at some point the kindly disposed person will see in her mind's eye what to do to be kind and respond appropriately to what she sees, at the same time continuing the learning. However, recalling the insularity and circularity charge described in Chapter 1, it will not suffice simply to declare that only the virtuous can see what to do and that is what makes them virtuous. Aristotle referred to the kind of tacit practice reason or wisdom acquired from engaging in practical action, whether this be the governance of states or households. Thinking of Diamond's forgotten conceptual language here (Chapter 2), this idea of practical reasoning, or *phronesis*, is not easily grafted onto today's world of a different time and place to classical Greece.

Banks and Gallagher (2009: 72-95) discuss *phronesis* as one of their key virtues for health and social care, as also does C. Clark (2007: 67-72) for social work. *Phronesis* combines knowing what is good or bad, what can and cannot be done, and should or should not be done and also how to do it. It differs from scientific knowledge (*episteme*) which social workers certainly need, and from technical knowledge (*techne*) which they also certainly need. *Phronesis* is not just about what is true but what would be good to do in, or truthful for, the circumstances (*eupraxia*). It is not equivalent to grasping some theory (*sofia*) or just having command over a set of skills. It is more than both since it forms an intrinsic part of a person's mature character and helps define who she has become and hence what she can do.

My VE for social work is committed to something similar. The politico-ethical discourse thread which I identified in Chapter 3 interrogates *phronesis* as *praxis*. Even

in classical language, Aristotle offered several versions. I use the term in conjunction with VE partner concepts such as 'eudaimonic' ones that relate to a well-lived life in pursuance of some intrinsic good. An indicative range of theories and critical summaries, all of which may be considered relevant to social work, might include Stichter (2007) on virtue as a skills model of ethical expertise and Jacobson (2005) on virtue and moral perception as both seeing and feeling. Subject specific analyses of practical reasoning include Svenaeus (2003) on virtue, hermeneutics and medicine and O'Dea (1993) on virtue and musicality. Lavin (2004) examines the link between practical reason and the possibility of error through insistence on the normative character of such reasoning. Lavin's argument is that for it to be correctly said there is a practical rule, it must allow for the possibility of being able to break that rule. Here, reasoning is activity governed by some norm, so the very idea of this activity must contain the distinction between correct and incorrect, although deviation need not be erroneous. It will also allow for some flexible application of the norm. In music, jazz might be said to exemplify this feature, raising the question of why not something similar for social work?

Highlighting the possibility of error, a reasoner is only subject to a norm if she can go wrong in respect of it. Highlighting the possibility of variance, a reasoner is able to differently go beyond that norm. Pollard (2003), on virtue, moral rationality and habituality, explores what is reasonable to do through habit. Silcox (2006) examines the idea that skilled agents, in circumstances where it might be inferred that agents need not be held responsible for the unlucky outcomes of their actions, should always exercise a specific type of epistemic obligation, making for their own luck. As per the Hurka VE position (Chapter 4), this includes the obligation to inquire, to be prepared, and hence a distinction between culpable and non-culpable ignorance.

Phronesis is a capacity to explore the intrinsic good (of medicine, of music, of social work) deliberately, as in developing a 'feel for the situation', the intellectual-cum-practical virtue concerned with domain specific activity. This does not mean that phronesis governs moral virtues independently, as if virtue came from pure reason itself as in Kantian or Utilitarian ethics, only that exercising or striving to exercise moral virtue itself requires a certain practical wisdom in the correct balance of emoting and reasoning as well as exploration to find new balances.

The practically wise person is likely to face the charge that McDowell (1998: 132-133) levels against that conceptual cousin of VE, moral intuitionism, which is that it turns the epistemology of value into mere mystification. (Hence the question of why any of its deliverances might deserve to count as moral knowledge, or at least any more so than those of other ethical theories it seeks to debunk.) Keller's argumentation is also centred on what he sees as a bogus epistemology dressed up in some superficially appealing theoretical apparel. In deconstructing fluent hospitality, one implication of the Keller position is that what we have left is but in another name a set of rules governing hospitality, no matter how snappily applied. All the standard consequentialist or deontologist needs do is think and work a bit faster, like the virtue ethicist is said to do, to end up in the same position.

I maintain that Keller's expert host is relying on her practice wisdom, which as Wall (2003) might say, is a kind of reasonableness fitted to her finite mode of being and characteristic of her expertise. This type of practice wisdom is often presented in the professional literature, as for example scoped by Green (2009), as a group counter to malevolent state interference. I will reposition it as that positive moral force needed to vitalise social worker sacred space, without which it can never be sacred.

Keller's line of argument suggests that a moral skill, unlike other sorts of skills, must at some point meet the test of articulated justificatory reason. This would be external for the edification of a critical audience or for any inner conversations the moral agent must undertake with herself. This expectation also depends on the premise that the demands of giving an account of one's actions are much higher in the moral domain compared to a non-moral domain. As Stichter (2007: 193) says, this is partly due to the seriousness of the subject matter, partly because there are usually fewer concrete success conditions for acting well, and partly because there is less agreement as to who are the experts. These contentions revolve around profiled knowledge outwith the rules.

### **Profiled knowledge outwith rules**

There are many experts in every field who are able to act well within their disciplines but are not able to explain it to themselves, never mind teach other people. From an admirer's vantage point each is no less an expert. Moreover, if being an expert is one

who generally acts well without consciously applying rules and principles, it is no surprise that she will often find it difficult, even undermining of that expertise, to adequately explain her action in conventional terms. As Driver (2001) reminds us, being virtuous is ultimately a matter of acting well, not articulating why or how it is well. Bloomfield captures the conundrum as a regress. As he says (2000: 39), speaking of the expert:

Research shows that the process she articulates [post facto] is very often not the one actually used: experts are often less able to give an account of the justification of the decision making process they actually use than are beginners.

In social work there are very good reasons for a virtuous social worker to be able to articulate her reasons for acting well, and sometimes this may be to a sceptical or hostile audience. I suggest that it is as if social workers have been turned back into inarticulate moral beginners for the wrong reasons. As morally active practitioners we struggle with the language of competencies, performance indicators, evidence-based practice and the new managerialism. Deprived of a supportive language, we have grown back down to such an extent we almost deny having any special moral expertise at all.

From the world of teaching, Luntley's (2007a, 2007b; 2008a, 2008b) studies of proliferating modes of inarticulated knowing are salutary for social work. In the attempt to wrestle out of inarticulate awareness some articulated defensible propositional knowledge, Luntley explores the ambiguity of professional expertise, its ownership, and the uneasy relationship that emerges with the rest of the world. As he explains, professionals are professionals precisely because they know and decide in the moment using knowledge that is tacit, adaptive, context sensitive, fast and frugal.

According to Luntley, it is not so much what professionals know but how they learn which marks them out - the difference between propositional 'knowing-that' and activity dependent 'knowing-how' statements. Employing know-how obligates contemplating knowing-that, but correctly contemplating knowing-that requires know-how. The problem for any publically mandated activity is that if it cannot be articulated, that is pinned down, this makes for 'stressed' knowledge. In search of some sort of de-stressed resolution, what may happen is that the tension eventually allows



inarticulated activity to be kidnapped or saturated by sterile covering concepts of knowing-that. The concepts reach into activity and redefine it to serve the concepts. This, I claim, is what has happened in social work. How then may the Bloomfield regress be reversed so that a social worker may articulate with confidence what it is to be virtuous?

### **Phronesis and particularism**

It is, in fact, the elusive nature of knowing-how linked to moral creativity that underpins Keller's hospitality account. Yet the Keller story lacks an important orientating point for social work, namely that neither easy habit nor tortuous deliberation takes place in a decontextualised moral vacuum. Along these lines, I will pick up on Wall's (2003: 319) ironic suggestion (based on his interpretation of MacIntyre) that phronesis does not actually produce anything new at all. What it does is perceive the good that has already been determined and deliberates on how to best reach it. The wise person, the 'phronemos', understands the nature of a good, but one that is already written into the fabric of human nature and the conventions of particular communities in which that nature is mediated.

On this argument, knowing-how work has the function of applying well to the particular situation already socially constituted moral virtues, shaped by given moral truths inherited from tradition. It focuses on the means to already traditionally embedded ends through its own particular historicity. Even the advanced practitioner who goes beyond a historicised rule is still a supplicant to it: the connection restricts how different might be any new direction. This restriction on creativity reintroduces those crude charges of epistemic moral conservatism and unbrokered cultural relativism laid against VE. The question, indirectly posed by the Keller story, is whether or not there is a transcendent notion of hospitality which the phronemos applies wisely, adapting it to any particular situation but retaining its universal features; or whether she is simply replicating local custom hospitality, albeit 'done well'. Supposing Keller's rescued family held the unshakable view that their servant who had accompanied them should be left outside. Such a dilemma for the host (I take it to be one) throws into stark relief VE's potential to deal with moral dichotomies.

Nussbaum's (1999) ever present critique of VE puts it bluntly. She calls the VE story the confused and confusing story. She says it is told with satisfaction by some who, rejecting ambitious abstract theories of the Enlightenment, argue for moral theory that is historically grounded and worldly. The story is told with deep alarm by others, who see in the ascendancy of particularity and local knowledge a grave threat to the Enlightenment's noble aspirations to social justice and human equality. With a reference to childcare practices that might have had social work in mind, Nussbaum (1999: 164) says of the VE story that:

It links elements of the moral life that are not at all necessarily linked and that may even turn out to be in tension with one another (can one be a good parent for example if one refused on principle to criticize local traditions in the name of justice and equality?). By accepting the confused story we must come to believe that in order to attend to friendship we must give up on universal justice, that in order to care sufficiently about history we must abandon general theory, that in order to care about the psychology of character we must abandon rational reflection. Such conclusions would be as practically pernicious as they would be intellectually unwise.

The question most pertinent to social workers and raised here by Nussbaum is the tradition dependent cultural relativity one. It is not clear if the virtuous social worker is meant to bestride the world like some moral colossus in search of some vitiating cultural-historical breath, or more modestly go with the grain of cultural and social situations. The two make for very different sorts of agent appraisal.

As indicated earlier in Chapter 3, one VE discourse thread invokes ideas of dialogism and hermeneutics to bridge the hiatus. Ben-Ari and Strier (2010) make a case for cross-cultural competence within a Levinasian self-other framework. An ethics of welcome (Rossiter, 2006) as much as of responsibility (Tascon, 2010), the question becomes just how ethical labour can be exchanged in a way that does not simply subject the receiver to the giver's own frame of reference, nor vice-versa. In the next chapter I defend a functional perspective to locate a morally attuned practitioner within a traditionalist framework, one who can be radically creative in a non self-effacing way.

## Chapter 7

### VE exchange-value and functionalism

#### Introduction

Phronesis can be contrasted with 'poiesis', introducing the idea of creative social work. The amelioration of someone's extra-vulnerability takes place through the production of what I term surplus exchange-value. I recast the sophisticated care and control role of social work in relation to dysfunctional households using an idea of socially cohering virtue as the operative middle way between the management of disrupted given ways of life and moral principles of organised living. Within this context, I show how a historised account of virtue immerses social work identity in notions of normal living and the management of functional virtues pertaining to a well-ordered society.

#### Creative social work

England (1986) speaks of social work as being as much art as science, emphasising the soft, joyous, aesthetic side of the social worker. The sentiment is often used as a defence against hard empiricism and proceduralism. However, the idea of art can connote idiosyncratic or non-productivist activity. Gray and Webb (2008) stress that art also involves radically agnostic struggle and resolution in search of truth, emphasising social work as a productive endeavour, as much grief as joy. Picking up on this point, phronesis can be viewed alongside the less familiar but twin concept of poiesis, which carries the expansive notion of that which is novel. Phronesis seeks to fully work out and reveal all the hidden human commonalities pertaining to a situation - hence doing something well. Poiesis is based on what is potentially unique in that situation - hence doing something differently. For social work, the assumption is that over and above any human commonalities each situated client is unique; hence again my point that practitioners need to pause and then to delve beyond the similarities to differentiate and innovate. Authentic social work should be about imaginative, productive artistry in recognition of commonality and uniqueness, a defining capability we have almost forgotten that should be part of our identity.

Today's routine bureaucratic mode of social work mistrusts anything to do with moral creativity. Our philanthropic forebears strove to create as well lived a future as possible for the dispossessed and immiserised. The idea lives on as social worker subterfuge and what is left of moral discretion, carving out and working the squeezed ethical space in between the stifling rules and set play social work. One way of responding to Nussbaum's relativity comment (Chapter 6) is to construe it to be a question about eliminating, or at least reducing as much as possible, the moral remainder adhering to the situation through social work creativity. In Chapter 1 I introduced a test case of female circumcision. For some, this is a way of life, an identity-conferring rite of passage; for others, this is a barbaric form of child abuse. Encountering a runaway young person desperate to avoid the procedure and irate parents, the question might be what sort of wise moral care and control decision could someone like Keller's expert host make?

Rachels (1999) poses this very sort of question as the final one in her set of v-questions which I summarised in Chapter 1. With this question in mind, I return to the ethos and its normative relationship to notions of extra-vulnerability as described in Chapter 3. I present the ethos as a number of pliable value membranes or normatising tissues making up the tensile societal fabric. My proposed VE framework of social work right action flows from this metaphor.

### **Protection and repair of lived ordinariness**

Any community will comprise individuals, families and kinship networks based on role ascription. The historic social work specific task is to protect and repair this ethos where socially endorsed caring relationships (call this a moral economy and ecology of care) are sundered. As I have already proposed in Chapter 4, the social work mandate is to locate and target the moral dilemmas exposed in the breakdown of ordinary lived existence and ascribed role failure. Social work aims at the refurbishment or replacement of those caring membranes and capillaries of cohesiveness that have been fractured. It does so through a discourse of care, safety and security stratagems based on what I call 'moral tagging'.

Moral reactions are a distinctive kind of recognition of people, events and circumstances which exhibit a property that Levy (2004: 81) calls the 'supervenient'. If the 'convenient' or conventional is construed as suitable and not troublesome (call this normal routinised living), supervenience suggests some sort of disturbing variation from the norm. For Levy, what makes one situation a moral concern and another not is that there are real differences of troubling signification; that is to say, there is some sort of interruption (or supervenience) to some condition or process that acts as a signal of moral concern and cue for moral action.

Social workers tag the expressed or ascribed needs of those who are not cohering well, when the fractured ordinariness of people's precarious lives reaches a point where individuals are in need of care or control. All this is according to the mores of time and place and as defined by the standards of the hegemony. Ethical labour, here maintaining and restoring the ethos, means a proxy process of 're-moralising' broken caring relationships in a way that recreates that which is valued but which has been jeopardised in individual situations.

Ancient Greek political philosophy refers to the private intimate realm of natural familial associations and the ecology of care under the one roof - the 'oikia' (Arendt, 1973: 28-37). This is where concerns gather regarding the lack of basic support, sustenance, comforts and appropriate caring kinship relationships deemed necessary for a normal flourishing life according to one's expected station, age and life stages. Hence social work's preoccupation with domestic normativity, household taboos, dysfunctional living arrangements, mistreatment, neglect and abuse of vulnerable household members. We are aroused when the household and the hearth, ordinarily the loci of natality and mortality and the basic necessities of life, protection, growth and nurturing, turn out extra-ordinarily abusive or neglectful of its members. We track which responsible or irresponsible adult lives within or has access. We spend much time discussing whether this scrutiny amounts to a form of oppression and repression or, more elusively, salvation of or emancipation for the client under scrutiny.

Thus is social work's sacred space delineated by the moral territory of the oikia within which operates social work's occupationally specific correctional business. This business targets morally reprehensible supervenient states of affairs, focusing on the

intimacies of the household. We may foray into the 'agora', the market place, pushing the client of the cloistered household into the world of respectable waged work, economic self-management and self-reliance. We may even foray into the 'polis', the political sphere, when sometimes we contemplate the idea of an empowered client-citizen managing her own life chances and taking control of her own destiny. However at core our concern is endless iterative versions of household welfare - and, of course, the virtues and vices therein.

Our iconic philanthropic forerunners operated on this basis, never forgetting the connection between the grind of vicious circumstance and the dehumanisation of their clients (Forsythe, 1995). Social historians such as Himmelfarb (1995) and 19th century philanthropic philosophers such as Green also indicate as much. Overholser's (1999) account of promoting virtue in everyday life offers a contemporary psychotherapeutic take on this. Van den Bersselaar (2004) speaks about virtue ethics and the moralising empowerment of clients in the art of life. A step too far for some, Schwartz (2000) argues how the poor can fight poverty with the virtues of thrift and providence. A step too far for others, Lister (2004) and Tessman (2005) argue that those who battle against oppressive conditions require virtues which embody the goal of liberation.

### **The social work gaze**

Social work has its origins in the 'domestication of stranger relations' (Webb, 2007a, 2007b), the client's immediate private concerns, contributory environmental living conditions and sometimes the public troubles that may have generated them. Permutations of the terms respect, respectability and inspection emblematically describe the fraught and morally loaded complexity of our defining social work gaze. Erikson (1963) reminds us that in life we all need to move through psychosocial stages and develop those maturational qualities (loosely virtues) to achieve their successful resolution. Society provides institutions associated with rites of passage from cradle to grave for cultivating these qualities as individuals progress through life stages. The provision may fail some people, or they fail the provision. Beginning with the pre-natal and ending with the move into senior age and even dying itself, social workers faithfully patrol the norms of family life which prescribe the life cycle relations of society.

Ferguson (2008, 2010) speaks of 'liquid' social work and welfare interventions as the flow of 'mobile practices' between public and private worlds - the office, the car journey and the client's home - as personified by the social worker on the move. Much of what is described as social work stems from negotiating the doorstep in tracking down the domestically supervenient. We wrestle with a language of conditional permissions to justify our literal and metaphorical entry into the normally sacrosanct private realm. Our casework orientated knowledge base is grounded in the home visit and assessment of householders' characters. Putting aside the entry etiquette, variants of which we share with probation officers, midwives, community nurses and doctors, this mandated social work gaze permits us to speak of a tradition dependent ethical-cum-moral encounter for social work. Contiguous with the client's ordinarily private realm, this encounter needs to be cherished, protected and nurtured.

The social work gaze and ethical labouring are as much about a good encounter with oneself as with the other - the endangered, marginalised, immiserised, dispossessed, unlucky, incapable, maladjusted or dangerous - in the discharge of our mandate. Our profession takes its life-breath not then from atop the rarified peaks of detached, disinterested reflection but from the thickly descriptive, indubitably messy, swampy lowlands. The politico-ethical tectonic plates that have determined that landscape grind out the moral faultlines that entrap the unwary or naive practitioner. They are the location for that passionate endeavour in rescue and hope we call social work, historically a profession which has insinuated itself into the grittiness and rancour of the human condition. In their moral encounters, practitioners pursue purity and innocence while forever sullyng their ethical hands, treading ever so diligently through the morass.

### **Patterns of exchange welfare**

By morally good encounters I mean generation by the social worker of 'surplus moral exchange-value' through the production of ethical goods in any transaction with her client. I adopt this notion from Pinker's (1979) classic analysis of compensatory patterns of altruistic exchange in social welfare. As Pinker (1979: 46) says, 'exchange relationships are intrinsic to all types of welfare practice'. For social work, Jordan (2007) has developed a similar notion of servicing hidden value, the 'interpersonal

economy' orchestrated by social workers to build social capital and solidarities. By moral exchange-value I mean that any moral encounter between two individuals involves both a giving and a taking. Clients must give up at least some of their independence, autonomy, privacy and dignity, even identity, in the encounter: social workers must at least take away some elements of these in the construction of clienthood. This exchange may prove to be symmetrical so that both may receive their worth, or it may be asymmetrical where one gives more than takes.

All too commonly, the exchange is distorted by an insidious process of stigmatisation or pathologisation of the inherently weaker party. It is beholden of a truly respectful moral practitioner-cum-petitioner - the mark of her own legitimating worth - to ensure more is given back than is taken from the client. That obligation is the spur for creative moral engagement. It is one of social work's absurd paradoxes that only by giving back more than she takes does the social worker fully discharge her debt and achieve moral parity. Not to generate surplus exchange-value - a bad encounter - would be to reduce the transaction to one of diminution, manipulation and oppression. Nowadays, social workers do not easily generate surplus moral exchange-value and to that extent they are no longer the paradigmatic ethical labourers who once did.

The idea of a nobility of self, and a longing and pious devotion to nobility, is often underplayed in contemporary virtue ethical accounts (Bartlett, 2002). Solomon (1988: 12-31) speaks of 'agape', a kind of selfless love of humanity, flawed though the latter may be, where the flaws are the objects of this emotioning. The old sense of 'caritas' invokes a key VE idea that ethical practice cannot be construed impersonally but must begin with a deep emotional engagement before ending with a reasoned out disengagement. Hugman (2005: 50) points out that affectivity is the very essence of self and any intelligent emotional response to perception of value. Imagining another's misfortune and its redress is a fraught task, especially when that person is the distant mythical stranger that social work would purport to comfort but who is often feared by society. Reducing and hence humanising this sense of distance - which may exoticise, label, or pathologise, as much as celebrate, the stranger - is the fundamental social work ethical challenge. To be a social worker is not just to love people but also to do so when they are at their strangest, most vulnerable and needy. It is possible to speak of the social work specific domain as a regenerative moral economy in which, through her



distinctive ethical labour, the morally active practitioner procures a remedial, compensatory or even transformative good for the client.

At their best, through their own version of the invisible hand, social workers become moral entrepreneurs creating compensatory social capital for those in need. The semiotic visions of the noble moral citizen (Manning, 1997) and the barefoot helper (Hamer, 2006) are never far away. In spite of a certain peripatetic roughshodness, our indelible moral footprint forever tracks our peregrinations in a slippery and often hostile landscape. Reaching out and walking alongside the other, sharing her travails, surely makes social work what it truly is, or could be once again. When the accompanying discourse is undertaken through a VE perspective, I believe that also commits us to the view that both carers and the cared-for enjoy virtues and suffer vices (and those in between states). The lack of caring relations or the struggles to maintain them may themselves be derived from vicious circumstances that motivate social workers to intervene. The morally active practitioner navigates between the client's and carer's and other people's virtues, vices and vicious circumstances.

### **Virtue's middle way**

As the Nussbaum quote in Chapter 6 suggests, the social work debate about caring relations is between a teleological account of self-other virtue towards some motivational higher transcendent end, compared to a restorative functional analysis of the here and now. Social work aspires to both, reasserting the normative status quo and sometimes surpassing it. Our tradition is replete with its own chequered history of collusive unfairness of a time and place in the name of the universal good society and client well-being. It has also been a progressive force for justice. Early VE analysis such as Pincoffs' (1986) asserts that virtues are qualities of ordinary people functioning well in a way that is deemed appropriate to the common life, albeit a common life within which different individuals and groups will pursue a range of different ends. For Clark (2006: 84-85), the social work question is the explicit relationship between what he calls generic and context sensitive values and establishing the middle ground. I will dwell on a historico-anthropological theory of 'V-functionalism', a perspective which is derived from Yearley's (1990, 1994) comparative analysis of virtue.

Comparing Mencius's Confucianism with Aquinas's Christianity, Yearley (1990: 3) endeavours to discover the similarities within differences and the differences within similarities between two very diverse societies. He detects three moral realms always serving a similar purpose. The first of these contains macro-type injunctions which present broad overarching rights and duties intended to deal with both the normal usual and abnormal unusual, similar to what I have referred to as the convenient and supervenient. Broad assumptions regarding a well-lived childhood or old age could be said to count as macro-level beliefs.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the realm of ways of life, are micro-type modes of conduct. These give a person's attitudes, behaviours and actions coherence and direction, and which, taken collectively, compose the distinct texture of a society. In the middle, what I call the meso-realm, Yearley posits virtues which contribute to maintaining the homeostatic order between the other two realms. Ways of life that are supported by the injunctions are picked out and protected by the virtues. Virtues provide a middle way of justifying overarching injunctions and prohibitions on the one hand and amorphous, taken for granted, ways of life conduct on the other.

The value of Yearley's middle way for comparative analysis is that it attends to the concrete textured specifics to avoid facile claims of similarity yet is sufficiently abstract and integrative in purpose to avoid equally facile claims that all similarities are illusory. Admired personal virtuous qualities compose the distinctive texture of any society and are organised into hierarchies of importance according to valued ways of life. Suspicious of categorical injunctions, because of their abstractions which lack important local detail and their conflicting claims to universality, and wary of unmediated simply given ways of life that we might call inherited, middle-level virtue theorising helps us discern form and pattern while preserving concrete specifics of experience. As if an Aristotelian mean, a meso-level virtue focus interprets and gives meaning to the interaction of people and their beliefs, both describing and guiding lived experience and linking it to a transcendent concept of existence.

### **Caring relations as modes of acknowledgment**

Consider Yearley's framework for an applied ethics of social work along a Slote-Hursthouse-Swanton-Hurka axis, now with a focus on that middle way. The apposite sociologically balanced virtues will contain both embedded particularistic and universal transcendent features. A meso-level discourse recognises that moral language changes over time (Diamond, Chapter 2). Its vocabulary overall may expand beneficially as the profiling and modes of acknowledgment of a virtue increase, calling for an adjustment to the equilibrium between the three levels; or it may sometimes contract for the worse.

MacIntyre (2006) addresses why all human beings need the universal prosocial altruistic virtues as central to well-lived lives. He references virtues in terms of local communities of giving and receiving based on the ever-present fact of every human being's constant vulnerability. All of us are normally dependent on the care and concern of others. Sometimes, abnormally, our lives can be catapulted into heightened dependency. The friendship virtues are cohering of a network of compensatory caring relations which any dependent rational being would value.

Now combine MacIntyre's core idea of a specific moral community of practitioners but attending to society's middle-way virtues and their counterfactuals. As social workers we are fully aware of those abstract injunctions of which Yearley speaks and around which society is nominally organised and normatised, whether they be modernistic abstract universal principles or religious fiat. We are also aware that we must operate in a specific time bound society where ways of life are inherited and conduced, not freely chosen. We live both realms through practical engagement with the middle way virtues or, more specifically, their dearth. A Yearley-MacIntyre framework of tradition dependent social solidarities reminds us that social work grew out of the zeal of like-minded moral agents working to restore some humane equilibrium in disrupted times (Payne, 2005; Lavalette and Ferguson, 2007; Jordon, 2007; Webb 2007a, 2007b).

Meso-level analysis will always invite a prudent approach, or temperateness of habit, as the ancient virtue of 'sophrosune' became known (MacIntyre, 1988). Virtue talk is, as Peterson and Seligman (2004:3-32) call it, 'a manual of the sanities'. The association of temperance with uncritical social conformity is a conceptual burden that MacIntyre, for

one, has been at pains to refute, as when describing how virtue may indeed demand a person to become 'socially disruptive'. Sometimes it is indeed appropriate that 'the virtue of sophrosune like the other virtues can be a virtue of revolutionaries' (MacIntyre, 1988: 11).

Our social work history illustrates just how our other-regarding moral virtues (humanity) have always had a political hue to them (justice), more often than not in the name of liberation of the dispossessed towards a better life (transcendence). Sophrosune has at its root meaning the quality of 'being of sound mind' - hence a connection with sanity - but became understood as a virtue, the possession and exercise of which provided knowledge of the boundaries of appropriate behaviour. This quality is functional in respect of some modes of life but not in others. It can be the case that there are socially or politically determined forms of common life with which certain persons are in conflict in serious and long-term ways and against which they deem it appropriate to resist. Challenging the given order's own pretensions to a conformist value of obedience where there is only disvalue, and also knowing what is achievable, are what distinguish high from low evaluators. This is why the cardinal virtue of courage - physical and moral - is always foregrounded in VE stories, the supererogatory high evaluator's calling card.

VE advocates say that we all have to make choices when faced with conflicting and incommensurable moral demands, exercising a composite emotive-cognitive capability. Nagel (1979) claims this reveals itself over time in individual decisions against a backdrop of external constraints, rather than in enunciation of general principles. Tessman's (2005) account of burdened virtues and liberatory struggles and the subsequent symposium dialogue (Calhoun, 2008; Friedman 2008; Koggel, 2008; Tessman, 2008) provide insight into the meta-ethical vices of either indifference or domination, all too easily obscured by faux virtue talk. One of Tessman's key points is how people may only flourish as a member of a collectivity, but then whose well-being depends upon the suffering of those excluded, where someone else's oppression is a condition of the another's privileged sense of flourishing.

Such oppression transects classed, gendered, religious and racialised constructions by clients themselves as well as more subtle forms of socially constituted abusive power,

sometimes perpetrated by social workers themselves. But then social work is functionally anchored in an historic way of life so we need to deal with it (since that is in fact our job) and the resultant tension is the dynamic that informs the telos of our moral narrative. VE does not just provide us with a way of checking out our inadequacies; it also gives us the idea of scope for improvement through an exemplarist thesis. Moreover, it analyses the extent to which we individually can be held responsible for what we voluntarily believe, even though many beliefs underlying large stretches of our social and institutional life which we reproduce are not voluntary since we do not choose to believe them.

Social workers cannot be responsible for all that is wrong with the world, only those parts which are their business and their own contribution to any wrong-making in the course of their business. Depending on which virtues are profiled, it is those characteristics which make their possessor into what Peterson and Seligman (2004:16-28) would call an excellent 'specimen of their kind'. There are many types of good life to be lived according to this pluralist criterion. Tacit knowledge formation, its moral pedagogy and a self-defining standard of excellence lie in this sort of account. For social work, I suggest that to be an excellent specimen of one's kind entails the precise shaping and configuration of prosocial virtues in line with the Yearley-MacIntyre functional supposition. In the next chapter I draw upon a specific idea introduced by Swanton (2007) to present a sophisticated defence of the moral impulse as role-contoured virtue.

## **Chapter 8**

### **VE supervvaluations and modules**

#### **Introduction**

I give an account of major and minor premisses as part of the meso-realm moral activity, employing the idea of prototype and role-contoured virtue to build a more detailed picture of social work identity in action. Using a classical riddle about 'moral fuzziness' and 'supersharp' evaluation, I highlight the problem of universal moral predicates and their conditional relationship to the particular. Drawing on moral satisficing theory, I discuss the idea of a social work stability standard. This centers on two social work signature modules of virtues qualitatively expressed as righteous indignation and just generosity.

#### **Prototype and role-contoured virtue**

Swanton (2007: 207-224) maintains that role virtues are not set aside from a generic account of how to be a good human being overall, but are a constitutive part of being one. Roles make up the complex pluralistic narratives and myriad structures of our social life. We all learn about the virtue of friendship and other-regarding virtues on our mother's knee as kind of v-rules such as 'be kind,' 'tell the truth' and 'behave responsibly'. They are preliminary versions from which more refined forms are cultivated. The virtue of friendship will look quite different depending on whether it is a friendship of peers, of student and teacher, or between lawyer and client. While friendship in the raw prototypical sense might manifest as a mutual desire for the pleasure of each other's company, the contoured friendship of a lawyer towards a client is closer to a contract of loyalty rather than one of affection. The connection is not lost though, since the raw affection of close friends - being there for the other - also includes loyalty.

Consistent with Yearley's sociological account of virtue and the moral realms, while contoured virtues do not hold categorically but get adapted and nuanced, the normative

idea behind prototype virtues will later on in life hold a person up short of, say, meanness, selfishness or irresponsibility. It may be a contextual understanding in our consumerist society that a salesperson will exaggerate the superiority of her product, since we all appreciate that her job is to make the sale, but she is not permitted to actually misrepresent. In that case she has gone beyond an occupationally specific normative pale laid down by the prototype virtue. A lawyer's loyalty might require an adroit presentation of the facts in the most favourable light, but it does not allow her to lie in court on behalf of the client.

The aim of role-contoured virtue is to realise institutional goals in an excellent or good enough way internal to the tradition of the institution. The tradition is always tethered to the raw demands of the underlying prototype virtue, as in the idea of justice in the legal profession, but through practical reasoning the process of contouring can also mould the prototypical virtue. In social work, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practices are modes of redistributive and restorative justice borne out of prototypical/contouring dialectic, as both the commonalities between all humans and also their differences (race, gender, class, sexuality) are explored in relation to extra-vulnerability. The core ideas of justice and fairness move on and expand in the process, although not necessarily so. Even with best intentions, there is also a risk of going down discourse cul de sacs in the name of justness or fairness.

The social work moral community is an arena in which to develop, exercise and test out what may be prototypical/contoured conflicted. Only thus can the moral impulse be sophisticated while retaining its source value. Without some evolving normative account of contoured moral virtues we are unable to pursue good aims, but without a questioning prototypical moral voice we cannot do so either. The capacity to communicate through moral language in an occupational learning network provides the opportunity for declarative learning, pushing the boundaries of the moral imagination beyond the as-given but at the same time not overstretching it.

As Swanton (2007: 217) argues, prototype virtues provide anchors for our moral thinking in role contexts, alerting us to possibilities of excess and other deviations. However, they may also provide springboards as their potential is revealed. As we grow morally we find appropriate novel ways of exercising virtues, hence revisable

action guidance, but it is only through action that the revision is realised. Pausing to V-reflect on both society's and our own moral habits, committing to reflectively explore and refresh the dynamic balance between Yearley's overarching injunctions and ways of life in pursuance of the *vita activa*, are the ethical markers of the authentic social worker.

### **The major and minor premisses**

Prototype virtues are contoured to yield role-differentiated virtues according to the distinctive field of concern and target. With role virtue the field is delineated by appeal to the point of and purpose of the role, which in turn is understood in terms of the purpose of the tradition in which the role is embedded. It is this contextualised understanding that yields the specificity of the virtue in terms of action guidance. Relevant here is Green's (2008) description of the Aristotelian difference between a major and minor moral premiss. Compare the uncontoured demands of generosity in general (the major premiss) to what is contoured as the variable last moral fact in any particular situation (the minor premiss). A member of the public might generally generously give money to a beggar but not if the supplicant is raucously drunk. A community outreach worker might give of her effort and time to get the drunken beggar to a place of safety.

A minor moral premiss reveals inhibitors, rejoinders and modifiers in any moral situation impacting on the major moral premiss, depending on who you are. The demands of honesty require us to honour the person by telling the whole truth but sometimes the person's situation permits us to not do so, maybe an understatement rather than a gross denial of the fact in question. It might be permissible for a friend to underplay the seriousness of a patient's medical condition, less so for the doctor, nurse or social worker. Considerations of concern correctly applied are nuanced by both situation and role. The situation itself and hence its moral demands may be seen differently according to a role-contoured perspective within its field of concern. What a nurse sees and what a social worker sees might be quite different.

I have argued in Chapter 6 that a social worker is true to both clients and herself [iff] she routinely interrogates her own habits and customary ways of doing things, so that



her identity is legitimated anew by invigorating moral action, not replicated as deadening past behaviour. Creative social work entails exploring to the full the hidden contoured possibilities of meaningful engagement while remaining true to prototype in understanding the particularities of any given situation. This can generate an expansive moral economy through new ways of building surplus exchange-value. An occupational notion of contoured virtue does not mean that it need lack depth or richness. Contouring is not a technical exercise but an imaginative one.

As something akin to what Arendt (1958: 175-247) calls the disclosure of the agent in activity ('praxis') and speech ('lexis'), virtue contouring has two features germane to social work identity. First of all, it allows us to distinguish social work as a specific other-regarding prosocial tradition. Secondly, contouring through that tradition requires that the tradition itself be interrogated so that it is refined by everyday work. A social worker habitually but reflexively lives in the world of other people's moral omissions and everyone's moral remainder, including her own. It is only by constantly weighing up what is still omitted and remains undone that she is being ethical. As Arendt (1958: 177-178) says:

It is the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. . . . Action and speech are so closely related because the primordial and specifically human act must at the same time contain the answer to the question asked of every newcomer 'Who are you?'

I return to Nussbaum's test case and the instance of how to respond to the runaway young person. We need to ask Arendt's question and there is no simple answer, if only because even a complex answer, whether about other or self, will depend entirely on the particularities of the situation. Recalling Yearley's three moral realms, what an altruistic lay person might see and prototypically do is likely to be very different to what a social worker in role ought to see and contour do. Furthermore, what a social worker might do now is not likely to be the same compared to twenty years ago. The question of how we know what is right action becomes how we measure contoured success. The need for a stabilising standard takes us back to that source criticism of VE. I will elucidate a proposed VE sensitive standard by using a classical riddle which I believe can be employed to capture well successful social work practice.

### **The Sorites paradox and satisficing theory**

Known as the ‘heap’, ‘little-by-little’ or the ‘Sorites’ argument (Clark, M., 2007: 80-87), this paradox entails a conclusion or end state of truth reached by a chain of repeated applications. Take a recognisable heap of grain as a metaphor for social work moral truth and the addition or subtraction of individual grains. If the final outcome is a recognisable heap made up of so many single grains, the addition of one more grain would be a little nearer to the virtuous truth than the antecedent. To remove a grain from the heap makes for a tiny error which if propagated down through the chain will yield a wholly untrue conclusion, as surely as the continuous subtraction of a grain eventually destroys the heap, but just when is not clear. As Clark explains, if a pile of grain  $N$  is a heap then so might be a pile of  $N-1$  grains. Eventually it will fall short of the truth by a significant degree because each of its reduced instances deviates ever so slightly from the accepted ideal and eventually falls all too short of what is perceived as a heap. When does a heap of grain stop being a recognizable heap? Or to reverse the argument, when does a number of grains become a heap, and in either case what or where is the borderline?

The Sorites argument is about the illusion of assigning categoric values. I hold that the metaphor fits well with Swanton's prototype-contour continuum. For example, our ordinary prototypical moral language contains many vague nouns and adjectives relating to maturation, such as child or adult, even abuse and neglect and it assumes cut-off points. However, it would be absurd to say that there is a child at a precise time but one exact second later she is an adult; likewise with abuse and neglect. One argument might be that though we may not know where the cut-off point is, this is simply because our powers of discrimination are limited and we have to implicitly recognise and work with margins of error. However, this only says why we cannot easily detect a cut-off point; it does not show there really is one.

I might say of someone who is aged 16 that she is a child but if she grows another year the claim is less close to the truth. However, we would not consider her as more or less an adult or child unless society attributes some special moral significance to childhood. Social work contoured accounts of moral significance lie in identifying the supervenient

(Chapter 7) for particular life stages in terms of cut-off points and justifying what to pick out and not leave unattended.

Of course, much of this is prescribed by the artifact of statute and policy. One way to grapple with this problem morally (as opposed to what the law says) is to construe value borderlines by invoking 'supervaluations' (Clark, M., 2007: 85) to provide a way of making vague terms more precise (either 'supertrue' or 'superfalse'). Anyone, say, under sixteen is deemed a child for a particular purpose sharpened further to those, say, under six to be definitely more so. We tend to have far stronger sentiments about the neglect or abuse of a child or senior adult according to age, which is usually correlated with certain sorts of extra-vulnerability.

There are some forms of mistreatment we have come to consider so evil that we regard them as simply inadmissible, for example, paedophilia where the notion of vulnerable childhood spans a wide age range. But even here both the idea of a 'sixty-five year-old child' and the idea of one being subject to a paedophile's attention are palpably false. Other putative forms of mistreatment, and hence the moral gravity, revolve around less clear contested cut-off points. In my example of the runaway eleven year-old young person still under the care of her parents, there would be a little-by-little moral (as opposed to legal) difference in approach depending on whether she were a few years younger or older.

Moral fuzziness is implied in my account of moral bystanding in Chapter 3. Overcoming fuzziness can be re-presented as that dialogue between emotioning and reasoning. We could presume a fuzzy indeterminate range where the borderline lies, but that would still mean that there would be cases where it is also indeterminate which side of the borderline they are on. Learning to deal with this sort of moral fuzziness is what becoming a social worker means. She needs to aim in practice so that borderline cases are simply those we start to hesitate to classify as morally salient. The point at which we start to hesitate will vary from time to time and situation to situation.

Admissible positive hesitation is germane to my notion of social work identity as reflective moral pausing. Inadmissible negative hesitation, or prevarication, makes for those tragedies which afflict social work. True ethical labouring requires that the

morally active practitioner must look for (but can never guarantee) some kind of determinate supertrue easement, so must learn to live in the moment with moral fuzziness as part of what being a social worker means. On my account, a moral expert, one who is an excellent specimen of her kind, will be the most proficient and insightful in living with fuzziness, knowing when to be indifferent to it and knowing when to determine supersharp moral truth.

### **Towards a stability standard**

The little-by-little argument helps us understand what is 'good enough'. Another angle to moral indetermination is to say that we are not always in full possession of all the particular moral facts to make correct supersharp decisions. Nonetheless, out of practical reasoning we can opt to choose the next best alternative. This is based on satisficing, a well-established philosophical theme (Byron, 2004) little considered for social work but apt for a social worker's moral economy of exchange-value. Satisficing is intrinsic to Swanton's VE model of targeted virtue. Hurka (2004: 71-76) suggests that satisficing theories require only that the moral agent bring about outcomes that are good enough in one of two senses. In the first sense, an outcome is good enough if it is above some absolute threshold of goodness yielding what Hurka describes as absolute-level satisficing. In the second sense, an outcome is good enough if it is as reasonably close to the best outcome an agent could bring about, what Hurka calls comparative satisficing.

Satisficing may be applied to an idea of a social work 'stability standard' as an expression of self-management and practical reasoning in pursuit of exchange-value balance. As a deliberator, a social worker must pursue ends for good reasons which pick out good options linked to the reasoning. The question is whether there is a reliable way of testing out whether our reasoning is good enough to produce good reasons. The features which make an option reliably good or bad, better or worse, direct us to have reasons that are stable on appropriate reflection, where the considerations are evaluated on the basis of their fit with the agent's pattern of VE commitments. In this light, I adapt a practical reasoning stability argument by Tiberius (2002), suggested by C. Clark (2007: 69) as apt for social work. I postulate its potential for VE action guidance.

Tiberius is concerned to overcome a common view called instrumentalism associated with practical reasoning. Instrumentalism holds that norms of practical reasoning may help us take the necessary, available and most effective means to our ends, but there are no rational norms that allow us to evaluate the ends themselves since ends are simply objects of desire or pro-attitudes. (This recalls the insular argument encountered in the VE casuistry challenge, although that is not Tiberius's immediate concern.) Countering the strictures of instrumentalism, Tiberius proposes a stability standard as an explicit satisficing norm of practical reasoning 'insofar as if we do not take violations of this norm to be relevant considerations in reasoning, we cannot count as engaged in reasoning at all' (Tiberius, 2002: 339). Furthermore, Tiberius suggests it is a standard which we can explicitly employ in order to deliberate about our acts or desires themselves in a way that does not require that ends are prescribed or determined by reason alone.

Tiberius suggests that we could think of practical reasoning as analogous to a game that we might play. We play the game in order to find good reasons for making choices and decisions, so that the norms of appropriate reflection to which we are committed are the 'rules of the game' (Tiberius, 2002: 347). These form the standard by which we must proceed in order not only to arrive at an end but also to call an end the desired one. A person may be engaged in picking and choosing but if she were really interested in what she has reason to choose then she would not ignore this standard for what counts as good reflection on her reasons.

I will adapt an example given by Tiberius (2002: 348-349) to illustrate the stability standard of reasoning. Let us say that I believe I am a fair person and am by nature an easy-going person, so at work I will look to resolve disputes amicably and search out compromises. I consider such traits to be my main virtues, making me who I think I am and like to be. When having to make choices I have a distaste for confrontation. Thus my commitment to fairness and to being accommodating and to not being confrontational forms a stable part of my conception of appropriate reflection. My deliberation is marked out by extra attention to facts bearing on potential confrontations in order to either avoid or accommodate them, and extra attention to facts which invite co-operation, such as staff shortages and the build up of unallocated cases. Work being work, it is likely that I will end up ignoring some salient matters regarding fairness if

they can only be resolved with confrontation, so fairness will not have its proper due. It is not fair to clients that I acquiesce in taking on too heavy a caseload and it is not fair to colleagues whose resistance is weakened by my collusion. I am also not being fair to myself.

If I come to recognise in my pattern of reasoning that I avoid confrontation actually out of timidity then, if I value the value of fairness, I will examine the part of my pattern of reasoning which leads me to those reasons which favour cowardly ends. I will judge that timidity is a bad reason for choice. My future deliberations will be marked out by special attention to facts about what should and should not count towards compromise. As a person given to harmonious relations, which I still hold dear, I now will engage in conflict but it will have to be for serious reasons. The new me is expressed through a modified pattern of reasoning arising out of a revised pattern of motivations, the consideration of which leads to sometimes quite different ends.

This story is relevant to a practice of value and the dynamic of *sophrosune*. It invites a consideration of which options we have good reason to choose and to not choose against a stable pattern of commitments to choosing options and their reasons. The stability standard is relative to the agent's commitments, where a reason for an option in pursuance of an end is one the agent approves of as a good enough supporting consideration. I hold that this idea allows us to link the VE idea of practice (as emotionally driven ethical labour which produces a good) with a reasonable way of evaluating both the good produced by that labour and the labour itself. For social work, the stability standard for this kind of reasoning would consist in an ideal of a stable pattern of emotional commitments to the moral impulse, and a stable pattern of reasoning in consideration of options intended to honour the impulse. When we employ the stability standard we are assessing our options and reasons for the chosen option against these patterns of commitment and reasoning.

This standard has a number of stabilising features relevant to a practice of social work value. Paraphrasing Tiberius (2002: 341-342), I suggest that an ideally stable social work pattern of commitment to options and their reasons is such that (i) there is a relationship of support between sentiment, the chosen option and the reasons; that is to say, confidence in the option is increased by reflection on both our reasoning process

and those reasons which emerge; (ii) we will have emotional commitments to the reasons since we are confident that these considerations are favourable to those ends to which we are emotionally committed; (iii) neither of these two states of mind would change upon our appropriate further reflection. An option is a stronger one insofar as we think we have no good reason to choose some other option that is also stable on reflection. The option is also stronger when the pattern of reasoning does not change after appropriate reflection.

Tiberius's stability standard tests out the strength of someone's practical reasoning. Appropriate reflection here means such that if an agent were to articulate what is involved in her reasoning, she would approve of it as a good process for making choices. She would also approve of reflection on the pattern of that reasoning which gives rise to the reasons for an option. We should be suspicious of any pattern of reasoning that is deeply at odds with our good intuitions. As illustrated by my amicable, easy-going and fair example, we approve of the process of reflection because it reveals the parts of our committed selves that are admirably enduring and those less desirable parts which embed themselves in our pattern of reasoning. Our stabilising deliberations take the form of reflecting on what we stand for and reflecting on traits of character we want to champion. This leads us to make choices that we are truly motivated to follow in line with our character.

As Tiberius notes (2002: 342), the judgment about stable attitudes towards our pattern of reasoning is not an empirical prediction but a normative judgment, since what an agent has reason to approve may change overtime as she learns from experience and improves her own capacity for self-reflection. This idea of stability is a regulative ideal in the sense that we can use it to make judgments about the ways in which our own choices could be improved, to become even better at being the sort of person we would want to be.

The stability standard is not an ideal that determines correct choices independently of the defining process of reflection-in-and-on pattern and action. Nor will it make us into somebody we do not have within us to become. I may never overcome my timidity, but then if I cannot, perhaps I should not become a social worker. Since we cannot completely disassemble our destabilising features of character and hence our pattern of

commitments in an instant, our patterns of reasoning will evolve slowly rather than be upturned through catharsis. The point of the ideal is a minimally good enough standard to urge us towards improvement, not to ever describe a state of perfection. It offers a way of capturing the emotive-cognitive process of an agent's moral pausing. Love of it as a good in itself makes for a Hurka-like recursion V-clause (Chapter 4).

I suggest that the appropriate social work stable patterns of commitments and reasoning can be located within certain occupationally specific clusters or modules of virtue which therefore provide the substance of a stability standard. An idea used by Adams (2006: 125), I shall be employing the notion of modularity in a different way to him. As Adams (2006: 81) notes, there is something morally misshapen about caring for social justice without caring about the well-being of people; a commitment to justice that is not normally combined with benevolence is something unattractively chilling, lacking one of the most admirable features of motivation for justice. I go one step beyond an overall unity of virtue and propose a stabilising role-specific combination of virtue traits. I outline two distinctive modules of virtues for social work which, although we may have lost the words, I maintain have always informed the authentic social worker's own inherent tacit stability standard.

### **Righteous indignation and just generosity**

Building on my previous presentations of the idea (Webster, 2008a; Webster, 2009), I suggest that this social worker specific stability standard is to be exercised through the V-modules of what I call righteous indignation and just generosity. Righteous indignation is, in the language of Aristotle, a concomitant of well-balanced relations between people, the mean of neither envying another's good fortune nor taking malicious enjoyment in someone's misfortune. This recalls the social work paradox of fortunate misfortune described in Chapter 3. Today, righteous indignation carries a negative secular connotation of priggishness and haughtiness, sometimes associated with do-gooding. The theological term refers to that sort of properly directed anger which is without guilt, false pride, haughtiness or peevishness and is directed at injustice meted out to another human being. Stocker (2003: 120) alludes to it as a feature of emotional identification. As an affective motivational state, righteousness,



derived from being wise and bounteous, conveys a sense of moral uprightness and steadfastness with regard to correct perception about what is wrong with the world.

In general, we feel disgust about perceived moral baseness in others towards others (callousness, indifference, cruelty, abuse, oppressive behaviour), sometimes even self-disgust where we also recognise our own transgressions and weaknesses. Righteous indignation is an attitude of affront when confronted by a disgraceful or shameful state of affairs constitutive of moral disorder and which remains unrectified. Righteous indignation emotes to overturn what is wrong-making and is a counterfactual to the moral indifference of others. Social work righteous indignation is the moral impulse sanctified.

Just generosity is also a theological notion, originally associated in Christianity with Aquinas. It is expounded by MacIntyre (2006: 119-128) in his account of what makes us all dependent rational animals. Dependency modes and displays are exhibited in those altruistic networks of giving and receiving that communities develop over time and of a place. Such communality would see each of us acting from and with a certain kind of affectionate regard for another's distress. Here, justice is both restorative and redistributive of beneficence owed by the community, a kind of debt to one of its stricken members. Just generosity captures the idea that some measured action is due to a distressed other to relieve that distress and that there is a minimum required in the reckoning of what is due. That requires the transaction ensures respect for and maintains the dignity of the distressed person. To understand another's distress as our own is to recognise the other as a neighbour. Similarly, Aquinas' notion of 'misericordia' refers to grief or sorrow over someone's distress just insofar as one understands the other's distress as one's own, a form of pity but without the current association of condescension. The idea of an exchange-value moral economy as restitution and redistribution makes full sense only as just generosity in action. Social work just generosity is the moral impulse sophisticated.

Various personality traits can make for righteous indignation and just generosity but it would be the role-contoured interaction of the eleven traits covering humanity, justice and transcendence (see Appendix) which are primary social work module candidates. They are cardinal for social work, based on the idea of identity-conferring contoured

‘signature strengths’. I adopt this notion from Peterson and Seligman (2004:18-29). A virtue is a good trait but not all good traits count as distinctive virtues. A personality trait becomes a character virtue to the extent that it expresses a number of outstanding signature features making the possessor very distinctive. I may find the humdrum courage to go to my viva examination - a modest triumph over temporary fear - but I cannot claim to be the exemplar of a student, one who is characteristically brave, since the student role does not typically require bravery. I do not exhibit the signature courage of a Nelson Mandela who, as a freedom fighter, spent twenty-seven years in gaol.

Evidence of outstanding signature strength includes a deep sense of ownership and authenticity (this is ‘the real me who I must be’) vis-à-vis the strength. There is an intrinsic motivation to use the strength and a sense of yearning to act in accordance with the strength, together with a feeling of both excitement and determination while displaying it. There is a feeling of inevitability in using the strength, as if one cannot be stopped from displaying it. There is also continuous learning of new ways to enact the strength and so it invigorates rather than exhausts the agent. Critically, the strength entails the creation and maintenance of fundamental projects that revolve around it (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 18).

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 23) distinguish between signature strength ‘tonic’ features which will show themselves steadily and readily across time and place, and signature strength ‘phasic’ features which can be intermittent, coming and going because of critical variation in relevant settings that trigger them. I also distinguish ‘tropical’ and ‘magnetising’ features whereby the agent actively turns towards and seeks out those epicentres of distress which fall below a certain moral latitude. At the same time, she will be repelled by those immoral states of affairs at the epicentre, attracting her only in order to void or ameliorate them.

Conjoined in these four patterned ways, just generosity and righteous indignation are therefore always likely to draw on qualities that gravitate towards each other as co-terminous dependencies and will be embodied in a certain sort of person who reasons in a certain sort of patterned way. The link between righteous indignation and just generosity is an elusive one because the connecting elements, their profiling and modes

of acknowledgment are not only historically contoured in the long run but also tacitly situation dependent. The modular signature strengths of righteous indignation and just generosity cannot be decomposed into other positive traits without losing something of that distinctiveness which describes both attitude and action and their relationship.

We might be generous in some non-threatening contexts but not necessarily always indignant in the face of injustice, at least not enough to do anything about it. Here the unjust situation is avoided, rather than the injustice voided. Quite properly, it may not be one's immediate business. I am sure that a nurse is orientated to a generous but just allocation of her resources but in the normal course of work she is not primarily motivated by the injustice of a patient's medical condition, only its healing. Nursing a neglected child or mistreated elder is of course where the values of different professions try to come together.

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004: 22), another way of establishing a signature strength is that being able only to phrase the opposite of a trait in an infelicitous way counts against its classification as a signature one. Assuming flexibility is a social work trait contributing towards the goal of just generosity, the antonym of flexibility needs to be not the vice of inflexibility but the virtue of steadfastness, which is what is surely demanded by righteous indignation. Another way of putting this is that a signature strength is evidenced by the existence of other people who exhibit a lack of such distinctive patterning (Peterson and Seligman, 2004: 26), in some cases because they have their own patterning as opposed to none at all.

Possessors of signature strengths make things happen which matter to them, which is surely demanded of just generosity. In Chapter 4, I mooted Hursthouse's idea of a paragon. In the next chapter I describe the achievement of an historic figure to illustrate and then develop the idea of supersharp, righteously indignant, justly generous social work virtue in action. According to my account of the stability standard, her work can be evaluated in satisficing terms of a debt owed and a gift freely given.

## **Chapter 9**

### **VE heroism and moral indebtedness**

#### **Introduction**

To illustrate righteous indignation, just generosity and their pattern of reasoning at work, I describe the prodigious rescue achievements of a little known hero who disobeyed all the rules and followed her conscience. Seeing with unadorned clarity what must be done and finding a way of doing it, her story is a powerful example of supererogative social work at its most supersharp. I examine communitarian and hermeneutical dialogue, moral relativism and perspectivism as considerations in patterns of reasoning to suggest how grappling with moral fuzziness and contested cases in VE social work may be undertaken.

#### **The story of Irena Sendler**

In Chapter 1, I explained that to establish virtue as the precursor to moral action VE directs us to refer to the paragon of a virtuous person. However, in order to identify such a person we must have some idea of what virtuous action is in the first place and why it is right making, not just because the paragon displays it - the circulatory problem. Peterson and Seligman (2004: 24-25) say that we can speak of consensual prodigies because they compellingly demonstrate a given positive trait. Speaking within a nursing context, Pukinskeine (2006: 2) says:

The title 'hero' is the determination of the 'high price' or value that is given a person by people as an attempt to show their thankfulness and admiration for their great generosity.

According to Peterson and Seligman (2004: 21), a display of signature strengths does not diminish other people in the vicinity; on the contrary, it invites emulation. Therefore the paragon generates what I describe as an aura of the canonical. Heroism is a moral concept with many dimensions. A paragonic description of righteous indignation and just generosity expresses the truth of exemplary social work character.

As an example, I choose the story of Irena Sendler, a municipal social welfare officer who rescued 2500 Jewish children from the Warsaw ghetto (Gilbert, 2003: 141-142). Even a cursory study of her good works will illustrate supersharp working virtue on the very edge of moral compossibilities (Wright and Webster, 2008).

The gist of the story is that after the sealing of the ghetto, Sendler obtained special passes from the epidemic control department that allowed her and a co-conspirator to enter the ghetto at will, ostensibly to help control the spread of disease. As well as secretly taking in food, medicine and clothing, Sendler persuaded distraught mothers awaiting transportation of their families to the gas chambers to give up their children to her. She provided each infant with false birth and baptismal certificates and a new identity. She secreted them in places of safety (orphanages, convents, schools, hospitals and private homes). In addition, she recorded the original names of all the children and where they were placed so that after the war surviving relatives could claim them. Sendler was eventually captured, tortured and sentenced to death but managed to escape into hiding to survive for the rest of the war, as did most of her rescued children. After the war she tried to find the parents. Almost all had of course been murdered.

Sendler died in a nursing home in May 2008, aged 98. She described her acts of courage over sixty years ago as 'a normal thing to do'. To Sendler, helping was not just carrying out her official health remit, itself of some benefit to the lives of the wretched. Driven by what I have called righteous indignation as to what she saw as evil, Sendler called upon her own inner resources to effect a remedy in the direst situation imaginable. She concentrated on saving infants because they could be more easily smuggled out than older children. Sendler's story is a dramatic one in shocking times. What it illustrates is the supersharp moral fact that only some such rescue mission met the full demands of humanity and justice and that it required at least one prodigious moral person with a transcendent vision and the correct pattern of reasoning to imagine it.

### **The contoured gift relationship**

It can be said that, under the circumstances, Sendler gave as much of herself as she possibly could to the ghetto victims. She felt the overwhelming burden of a personal

debt, the minimum feasible due, but her rescues were also a gift. Social workers do not have a monopoly on righteous indignation and just generosity. (Sendler has also been described as a community nurse or community worker.) However, it is social work's institutional positioning which lends itself to these role ascriptions and the nature of their transactions. Social work rescue themes are not normally anywhere as dramatic as Sendler's but I believe that her story exemplifies them.

Sendler's work leads again to the idea of satisficing: only by giving the best possible of herself under the circumstances could Sendler do what was at least good enough. She could have carried on with her routine administrative duties in the ghetto, 'perfectly safe' practice, but chose to go way beyond - a maximal proximal unity of self and other. I suggest it is this signature strength capacity for elevated moral imagination from the merely given - part phronesis and part poiesis - which distinguishes individuals like Sendler and makes them paragons. In her case, doing the minimally good enough (in Hurka's term comparative satisficing) and doing the maximally possible (absolute satisficing) converge. Sendler had to at least and at most do what she did. Such know-how resides in maintaining the connection between what the situation realistically is and what is potentially transformative in the given. Few of us will ever match Sendler's maximal achievements yet we should at least remind ourselves who we could and sometimes should be. Her moral imagination regarding distress opened up the otherwise unimaginable alleviation of it.

### **Pure and applied non-indifference**

For Sendler there was no querying what was evil, by whom and against whom, and hence no querying her responsibility. Aquinas' notion of misericordia (Chapter 8) invites a supertrue discourse about moral status, pity and the need for undisputed protection from harms and threats. Our deliberation in response to someone's moral status assesses the gravity of the combined wrong-making features. Moral status is based on an intrinsic property of the person and an extrinsic proximal harm. In VE terms, this helps us to define the scope or field of our response to, say, the vice of cruelty and to define what behaviours, by whom and against whom, would be deemed cruel and why (Hacker-Wright, 2007). The emergent responses need to be

proportionate to the need of the victim since sentiment unbounded by reason becomes cloying sentimentality (or over-identification).

Jaworska (2007) speaks of an obligation to afford full moral standing (FMS) to anyone as a sentient creature, one who can experience suffering, or at least to whom we can attribute the experience of suffering. I will borrow this idea and adapt it for morally active practice. It also leads to a debate about which of the client's selves (past present or future) is the salient other who we ought to regard. Jaworska (2007: 460) argues that a core constituent of FMS is an inviolability of the uncared for other which transcends all other values. Our obligation to recognise and respond to someone's full moral standing is especially tested out through a person's disrupted life stages. Jaworska describes the case of someone with reduced or impaired faculties and how the carer must distinguish between the contemporaneous interests expressed by the person in her charge (say, to go out undressed and unattended) and those vital interests (such as dignity and common sense) that she had at a time when she possessed normal abilities. It is as if there are in focus two beings with different interests, the present one with impaired faculties and the other who was once fully responsible for herself. It is the idea of the latter (a safe person appropriately dressed) which requires our primary obligation and only then do we try to accommodate the former.

We do not always look backwards to envisage a person in possession of her faculties. In some cases, say a person with an acute mental health problem unable to be her normal self, we project on her behalf what her normal self would like to be now and in the future. Similarly with infants and young children who are too young to envisage a future. However, there are two FMS social work caveats. First of all, not all discomfort counts as suffering to be concerned about. We must discriminate between prohibited behaviours (such as rank child abuse) which are crucial to defining our collective moral lives, and those which, while deemed undesirable, are not prohibited, for example, different sorts of child rearing. The difference is between that which we find morally repugnant and that which is to be tolerated; the difference, that is, between supertruth and acceptable, indifferent fuzziness.

Secondly, the attribution of FMS and our notion of moral indebtedness have changed over time. Our moral attention has a horizontal dimension, inviting us to look wider

beyond the given, and a vertical dimension looking within but deeper. The histories of progressively inclusive moral communities are wider horizontal and deeper vertical transformative accounts of who may qualify as deserving of pity, why and how much. Even as past injustices of exclusion are eventually recognised and overcome, contemporaneous new moral challenges (the plight of, say, asylum seekers) arise. Within broad policy and legal frameworks, the institution of social work contours motifs and modes of just generosity on the level of personal welfare services. It spends much time examining and deciding what is crucial in the organisation of our collective moral lives, what is morally repugnant invoking our indignation, the boundaries of sentimentality, and a reasonable moral response.

The Sendler story is clear. Assuming that all life is sacred, an absolute baseline good, and that premeditated murder of any child is a baseline evil, Sendler's motivation and action towards a good end, to redress the immoralities of the perpetrators and even the moral omissions of bystanders, make for a fully redemptive practice of restorative FMS. Through herself she gave back inestimably more than she took in each fraught and dangerous transaction, moral surplus exchange-value to the nth degree. In return for rescuing each child, she not only saved a human life but also returned to the despairing family that child's life as a type of vicarious hope for the future. The ancient Talmudic expression that to save one life is to save humankind is surely apt and Sendler personally saved many.

Here, any moral residue is, by any reasonable observer's account of her achievements, objectively immaterial, although Sendler subjectively felt otherwise ('I could have done more'). This regret can neither diminish her nor her actions. Quite simply, Sendler expressed quintessential social work on the rawest of unadorned moral edges; literally life and death ethical labour and the creation of the most primordial compensatory social capital of all, life itself. In one sense that makes any decision-making and action beyond choice. In Chapter 3, I discussed different types of supererogative commitment. In facing sheer evil, Sendler gets preciously close to validating the 'anti-supererogationism' school of argument. This states that moral redress is obligatory at all times and in every circumstance by all morally charged agents so there cannot be a separate class action the omission of which is not wrong. Here righteous indignation was to her inseparable from non-negotiable action.



The spontaneous Levinasian gesture prior to any impersonal laws, the response of the moral impulse without condition, is a pure supreme moment of non self-effacing moral truth. Social work rescue is rarely described so uncompromisingly if only because our world is usually less grotesquely evil. Sandler's ethical story is set beyond an imaginable normative moral pale. Its starkness serves to return us to everyday questions about resolution of morally fuzzy contestations and their causes.

### **Contested moral fuzziness**

In Chapter 8, I argued that righteous indignation and just generosity are profiled virtue clusters allowing for an orderly discourse about modes of acknowledgment and patterns of reasoning which stabilise the search for not just safe but transformative practice. By disorder of discourse I mean any purported language of value, the deficiencies of which would leave us fixated on and stuck in a zone of moral fuzziness. What the burdened virtuous social worker must always do is aim to move from the borderlines of the morally indeterminate to a supervaluative truth of absolute moral certainty and intervene accordingly.

Our ethical governance is such that we must always labour little-by-little to a point of certainty. So, we should surely aim to know if and why female circumcision (or whatever we choose to call it) is to be celebrated and promoted, or tolerated as an acceptable cultural deviation, or prohibited as child abuse. Social workers aim to target the zone of sharp moral supervaluations but more often than not hover around the borderlines of fuzzy moral indeterminations in search of the correct modes of moral acknowledgment. We must live with the truth that for some encounters there are only indications of moral certainty, one possibility of which must be imposed. Today, our impulsive social work non-indifference to the plight of others is heavily mediated through the rigid superimposition of impersonal laws, policies and procedures. Case closing imperatives, performance targets, risk-regulatory and cost-saving regimes institutionalise the fuzziness. Such language also militates against the moral imagination.

I make the assumption that, outwith the laws of the time, motivated by the virtue of *sophrosune*, Sandler did not have to dwell on convincing distraught parents to give up

their children, making for a perfectly ethical-cum-moral covalency amidst all the anguish. However, even within our own present day laws, the spectre of contested virtues and vices within a nexus of functional social relations is a challenging one. The idea of addressing other people's virtues and vices sits uncomfortably with current social work sensibilities. I argue that such an aporetic outlook is derived from the fiction of neutral impartiality and the illusion of dispassionate moral intervention in which social work has got itself caught up.

Sometimes called the ideal judgment theory, or the ideal observer or impartial spectator theory (Darwall, 1998: 237), and as I have already argued in Chapter 1, this positivistic framed myth would have a social worker disinterestedly contemplating the fuzzy moral scene like a judge assessing the merits of a case, weighing up the evidence and laying out the reasons for a clear final decision. The modernistic neutral observer versus the postmodern ethical relativist has riven social work value talk, and we have come to oscillate between the two in search of moral relief. How any resolution is brokered depends on our views of what ethical relativism, proportionalism and perspectivism mean. First, I examine the politico-ethical discourse thread that I mentioned in Chapter 3 which seeks to circumvent the myth of impartial spectatorship.

### **Hermeneutics and communicative action**

The hermeneutical and communicative action discourse strand which McBeath, Houston, Webb, Lovat, Gray and Garrett have initiated reminds us of the theological origins of hermeneutics as the dialogical search for sacred truth. They engage with theorists such as Habermas (1990), Benhabib (1992) and Tam (1998) to stress unified communitarian theory. In some expressions of this discourse thread I detect a hint of something akin to liberation theology and hear the distant echo of social work's 19th century social welfare reforming gospel. In contrast with mere contemplation, the thread stresses praxis as liberating action arising from true belief, through cultivating the competence (or 'orthopraxy') of people to collectively live well together. This centers on the notion of inclusive communities using co-operative inquiry as a way of validating what is accepted to be true. Moral decisions flow from a set of conditions that govern the linguistic interactions that take place between interlocutors affected by the decision. Ruch's (2007) application to childcare work, Bilson's (2007) application

to teamwork and Hayes and Houston's (2007) application to case conferences illustrate the emerging day-to-day practical guidance to be derived from a commitment to proportionist communicative action.

The classical virtue ethical eudaimonic idea of the good life naturally generates a search for a dialogical organic community - one in which virtues are consensually bounded and honoured and vices condemned, taking for granted the relational power dynamics of the moral sphere unifying the oikia, agora and polis. However, our postmodern world lacks this sort of cohesiveness and unity. The resurgence of communitarian ethics, which focuses on the primacy of communal goods and social capital, is rooted in a shared interlocutionary understanding of the good life, or at least not a bad life, within a particular community or society. While building that community through a coalition of social workers, clients and carers has an immediate feel good appeal, it can be perhaps a little too beguiling. Recalling my days as an approved mental health officer coercing people into hospital under the Mental Health Act, and as a child protection officer removing children under a Place of Safety order, I find it difficult not to end up seeing this approach as either an idealised democracy of the agreeable many or an overly cosy moral party for and of the few.

The problematic is not those caring, consensual exchange relationships where the client and carer express a need which is shared with each other and with the social worker; it is the not shared, 'dissensual' ones which test out moral theory. In Chapter 5, I described the Aristotelian idea of VE continence and the difference between enkratic, akratic and vicious behaviour, all of which fall short of virtue but arising from different states of mind. Clients and their carers are no different. Therefore these states of mind which may pertain to them inevitably inform the exchange relationship.

Working with someone who at a particular point in time can overcome competing demands affecting her behaviour is different from working with one who is unable to do so, or one who is downright recalcitrant. Different types of conflicted responses within one family network greatly complicate matters, compounded by multifarious ways of life within any one large society. It seems to me that what is demanded in dissensual exchange relationships is a rigorous theoretical interpretation of what is meant by moral (or as it is often called ethical) relativism. Moral relativism is a term covering several

positions that are poorly articulated in the social work literature and we are prone to conflate them. I look at this in the next section.

### **Ethical error theory and moral relativisms**

Relativist talk comes in all shapes and sizes with various claims as to what may count as moral veracity. Different positions seek to manage fuzziness, colouring any sense of unacceptable moral remainder (which I outlined in Chapter 3). 'Ethical error' theorists maintain that a moral response is a property conveyed in an attitude towards a state of affairs brought to bear on the situation under inquiry (Darwall, 1998: 63-70). The moral relativist positions covering this property and the attendant paradoxes can be found to varying degrees in, to borrow Nussbaum's phrase, confused and confusing social work practice.

Descriptive relativism provides a de facto account of how and what different people (of time and place) hold to be morally true and according to which they conduct their behaviour. This tells us how people behave, not how they should behave, although description and prescription can all too easily mingle. Descriptive relativism posits that what is right or good, bad or evil in any particular setting, is simply that which is determined by a recognisable sovereign party, whether this be an individual or an affiliated group, a culture or a community. On this account, tradition will have its own warrant so that there are no other upstanding prima facie duties or obligations. So, for example, slavery will happen to be morally condoned, or condemned, or at least not prohibited.

Forays into descriptive relativism do not logically entail a normative commitment to 'polyphonic' moral truths. It is still feasible to argue that some individuals and some cultures and communities will make mistakes in thinking about and determining moral values. It would surely be hard for a social worker to conclude otherwise. The power of Sandler's rescue story arises from the claim that there are some absolute evils producing an attitude of absolute abhorrence. It is clearly possible for descriptive relativists to investigate a true state of affairs (how people are) but to hold that what is being observed is morally wrong. One attempt to avoid any felt dissonance here between observer and observed is to propose a kind of moral system that may be short

of claims to full objectivity, settling for the lesser proposition that moral propositions can have a validity that is relative somehow to the context of judgment.

Since they are made in different historicised situations, this can lead to a view that it is possible for two antinomous moral judgments to be both correct because there is no way of making a like-for-like comparison. So whipping a woman in public is morally permissible for one sort of society, if only because its true positive meaning is not accessible to an outsider who attributes negative meaning. This invites the prospect of different but evolved equally right modes of moral functioning as concurrent, and often competing, ways of life. Such entrenchment can of course be manifest in communities within communities and sub-cultures within cultures, particularly where the source tradition is an exogenous one.

In order to even begin to make any meaningful comparison of moral attitudes, there is often debate about whether two historically constituted ways of life, as perceived and expressed by different groups, share the same moral provenance. However, even assuming such contiguity, two different moral judgments about the same agreed context could be equally valid because, from the viewpoint of one or the other judge, the judgment is sourced from different incommensurable preferences. While one judge privileges a way of life she happens to favour, the other says that her judgment is based on another preferred tradition which will have none of it. Such sorts of positioning invite animated debate - what Shaw (2001: 22) calls 'emotional ejaculations'.

If social work is a dialogue about sophistication of the moral impulse, the morally active practitioner needs to know just what is deemed relativistically germane at any given point of contestation. Recalling the FMS caveat as to what is tolerable or not, she needs to know what sort of moral relativist she thinks she might be, and which is the correct one for a particular case. She then has to work the pluralist differences and similarities accordingly in the quest for supersharp evaluations of what must be prevented and what restored. Prevention here refers with clarity to a harm that if it were to be committed, or is in the process of being committed, would produce more or less irreversible consequences. A child's death is a case in point, but so might be a clitorectomy. An unavoidable part of the propensity for fuzziness is that a typical social worker simultaneously works for the state and for the client, so that she must render

what is owing to the state and to the client, not to mention to the client's carer or to the client's community, or even communities within communities.

I suggest that the social worker's starting point cannot be any other than a supposition that there are indeed objective moral facts relating to extra-vulnerability. What any moral relativist talk should remind us to do is to immediately seek to contextualise the moral facts of the case to either confirm or modify the supposition - the VE pause again. Our social work language should capture and elucidate this complex dialectic. Common sense tells us that in order to function as a society we need to agree pragmatically on some basic moral standards regarding care and the definition of an infraction inviting control. Not everyone within that society needs to agree all the time on everything but yet, for the most part, peacefully co-exist. Some aspects of moral fuzziness can be restated as a debate about VE perspectivism. A qualified moral relativist needs only hold that a predominant moral perspective regulating ways of life be accepted, but only after listening to and learning from all sides.

### **The virtue of perspective and proportionality**

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 181-196) suggest that the virtue of perspective is a form of wisdom, a capacity to provide counsel to others which entails ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people. I have already suggested that VE can and should make us humbly question our own inherited values; not only these, but also the concomitant judgments we make, and how as-given beliefs propagated by the self-serving powerful have been oppressive and discriminatory. Taking away from, rather than giving to, the distressed other is ethical failure. Causing additional distress instead of eradicating it at the point of intervening is double ethical failure. Taking away and giving are irreducibly normative, conspicuously so in contested cases. The transaction may be in Slote's terms (Chapter 4) admirably motivated or deplorable. I have suggested that rather than sanctify and replicate the given, the moderating psychological structuralisation of righteous indignation and just generosity - *phronesis/poiesis/sophrosune* - demands a stable commitment embracing cautious, proportionist innovation.

Peterson and Seligman (2004: 95-196) describe cultivation of those positive traits of creativity, ingenuity, originality, open-mindedness, curiosity, novelty seeking, love of learning and critical thinking as indicators of the virtue of wisdom. Creativity produces ideas that are recognisably original, surprising, ingenious and which are problem solving and adaptive. Open-mindedness is linked to broad-mindedness and lateral thinking when challenged by complex data. That drives a person to continually learn about and from the world she has entered before she may seek to change it. Perspective refers to an ability to take stock of life in broad terms in ways that make sense not just to the self but also to others around you. It entails the agent listening first to others before she interjects. Listening, here, is not just for the accumulation of information to confirm a pre-judgment but to see another's point of view and hence build the picture. This signature strength of receptiveness invites a practice confidence amidst all the fuzziness in order to get beyond it. Even Sendler did not just turn up one day and take babies. She riskily entered into a dangerous dialogue with the besieged community and its families before working out a plan of action, its implications, and how to be successful.

It will be recalled that the FMS caveats invite us to distinguish between changing levels and types of moral debt and how that debt is to be credited. In the working of this complex moral economy, value words get deleted and updated, and new ones enter, shifting the register and the relationship of meanings. Multiplying ways of life, some augmentative, some nefarious, impact on and transform the moral landscape. In the search for some co-operative accord with our clients and carers and their ways of life, we must not easily be discouraged or despairing of our personal resources, nor be overconfident or overestimate ourselves in any situation. Beckett (2007: 271) speaks of the need for realistic pragmatism out there. I prefer the term clarity.

At some practical point of no return, when any imminent harm is adjudged irreversible, we need to say unambiguously with defensible reason why the runaway extra-vulnerable young person in her distress - and hence her immediate life world - is the primary target of our emotional intervention and field of inquiry. We need to be clear about why we have a moral debt to her and then work out how we intend to discharge it. Our aim will be to eliminate or reduce her extra-vulnerability, accepting and living with any collateral damage - the moral remainder - that cannot be resolved. In her moment

of certainty, the social worker is obliged to follow through her non-negotiable commitment to do the best she can. In this sense - the 'good-then-ought-to-tie-up' debate - there cannot be a class of action the omission of which is not wrong. In order to live properly with any remainder we need to be absolutely clear about the difference between means and ends. In the next chapter I describe in more detail the features of the stability standard which, I hold, enable us to do so.



## **Chapter 10**

### **A VE framework of value**

#### **Introduction**

The distinction between the means and ends of practice can be obscured by loose moral relativist discourse. In this respect, a distinction needs to be drawn between constructions of clienthood and constructions of carer identity. As interpretive researcher, the morally active practitioner considers the difference between consensual, non-consensual and dissensual interventions, whether it is the means (including the quality of the relationship), the end, or both which are being contested. I develop the stability standard in critical/transcendent realistic VE minimal-maximal terms to target and aim at degrees of reliable social work moral certainty.

#### **The moral researcher**

Reflecting the Hursthouse qualified VE position described in Chapter 4, a client or carer becomes a characteristic sort of person in role, seen to behave characteristically so, and is treated as such. In line with Hurka's VE baseline and recursion-clause analysis, our social work narrative includes a normative discourse about relational definitions of client extra-vulnerability and carer capacity, where the latter is deemed a good in itself. Echoing Slote, we can admire or hold despicable any person who is normally a carer depending on whether she excels in her role or culpably fails it. As per Swanton, we aim and seek to hit the target accordingly in the determination of who is client and who is carer. Modes of acknowledgment come into play in line with some typology of extra-vulnerability in relation to failed caring modes.

I hold that any social work VE fortification argument needs to separate out a reasoned commitment to establishing (i) an emotive supervaluative starting position; (ii) a confident, confirmed decision as to a moral statement of concern; (iii) the actual practice of engagement and how we go about dealing with that moral certainty once established; and (iv) the desired end which would resolve the concern. In Sendler's case, starting position, process and end speak to each other since there was only one feasible moral course of action. In contrast, much of our day-to-day confusions and our

prevarications can be attributed to a conflation of ends and means. The former must always be embedded as a supersharp confident belief; the latter often spirals indeterminately. In considering the runaway child whose safety and well-being are paramount, the VE practitioner has to move in a virtuous circle from (i) to (iv) managing the chaos in between.

In the search for moral order social work seeks to posit an ‘alloyed bad’, such as child abuse, as the target of its practice, as if protection is a self-effulgent activity. If the alloy metaphor is extended, the question might better be whether there is a number of base behaviours, each of which we would emote about and understand as abuse, to be amalgamated into the one overarching notion of evil, of which they are instances. The cosy moral party syndrome alluded to in Chapter 9 encourages a symphonium of sometimes unruly voices. This is an untenable social work position because it leaves in the air just what the particular components of child abuse might be and therefore just what might be an identifiable, intolerable risk. Garcia *et al.* (2003) make the case for a transcultural integrative model of counseling. Islam (2007: 704) raises the ‘paradox of cognitive relativism’ in which a ‘virtue approach to multiculturalism seems to be at odds with a multicultural approach to virtue’.

In a sense, VE theory seems to demand that the morally active practitioner becomes some sort of (moral) action researcher. Necessarily reflective, practitioners are interested in improvement (the elimination of some ‘pure evil’) rather than in understanding for its own sake, beginning with the reconnaissance phase of moral tagging through to neutralisation of the harm before it is too late. Social work ends and means are obviously connected in terms of characteristic VE performance (being and doing, ethical and moral, aims and targets, recursion-clauses, habitual moral pausing). The interplay of phronesis and poiesis relies on this dynamic, forging a link between moral action, evolving notions of sociality, and evolving attitudes towards social structures in which extra-vulnerability is signified. If the mobilisation of moral meaning is undertaken through a process of value contouring in the context of practice, any preconceived desirable moral end state can be transformed into another unpredicted but more desirable end state, since the process itself may recast the terms of reference - the ‘double hermeneutic’ as described by Giddens (1991). This in turn can become part of a confluent account of revised moral sensibilities, inviting a comparison with

a 'catalytic' process of action research (Dunne *et al.*, 2005: 88) and the elision of the researcher and the researched.

This dynamic also serves to highlight the penetrating, confrontational nature of the social work gaze and how the client's story is translated back into the idiom of contemporaneous social work value. The morally active practitioner is committed to analysing how her knowledge base and trajectories of moral meaning, hence her language of intervention, are bounded by the socially constructed conditions which generate them. Using her emotional intelligence, she is committed to finding out about herself and her impact. However, she must also be the final arbitrator, reassembling and repossessing any ruptured knowledge for her particular purpose. The essentially invasive nature of the social work mandate, the logic of its reconnaissance remit and control of the process sit uneasily alongside a commitment to client emancipation. As social worker researcher, the morally active practitioner will always have to contemplate what Dunne *et al.* (2005: 89) call 'acts of ventriloquism' in the problematic representation and reconstruction of the safe other.

### **Client and carer attributions**

Skillfully working and living the differences thrown up by relativist incursions deconstruct perspectivism and the nature of morally active research in discomfiting ways. Who is the client in the runaway scenario? The young woman or her parents, or perhaps only the mother? Maybe the family unit itself or even their community? This depends on the shifting normative correlations of risk, vulnerability and crossover between client and carer status.

We may retain from Aristotle the fundamental idea that the self is not prior to its socially constructed roles and responsibilities but is at least partially derivative of them. For Aristotle, the good for an individual has to be the good for one who inhabits well those roles defined by social structure. That can be double-edged since some household role constructions, for example, mother or housewife, are more or less imposed, and performance failure can be attributed to the role holder's presumed deficiencies rather than to the weight of expectations, the press of a debilitating situation or the grind of circumstance. Performance failures associated with ascribed roles can lend themselves

to a moral movement in social work's pursuit of the abnormal, from being seen as the one who does the caring to being projected as a needy client. As I have argued, the movement can also be justified through virtue and vice talk.

In the very construction and contracting of client- and carer-hood something is always taken away from the other, beginning with a normative pre-definition of need, then throughout the moral transaction. No matter how temporary or what the terms of endearment, these do not eliminate the violation of the other's dignity in our urge to redress a morally tagged discomfort. The other must always yield up something of her unique visage no matter what the euphemistic term might be to obfuscate that transfer and social work's compulsory purchase. Consensual exchanges hide this feature of the transaction; non-consensual ones where the client realistically or passively conforms, obscure it; dissensual ones foreground it.

Non-invasive social work intervention through an agreed process towards an agreed socially ordained end is a myth caught between the Scylla of value-free positivism and the Charybdis of aporetic relativism. It is the nature and extent of this vacillation that sustains social work moral fuzziness. Some medical texts look at what it means to be, say, a courageous or self-caring patient (Lebacqz, 1985), even 'dying well,' in recognition that the patient is a lead actor in the health care encounter, not just the professional or the agency which employs her (Campbell, 2005). The end in this case is quite literally the inevitable. What is not inevitable is any jointly constructed process towards the end. Similarly, then, for the moral action research odyssey we call social work and what it is for the client to feel not just 'cared for well' but 'controlled well'.

Borrowing a term from Byrne (2002: 148, cited in Dunne *et al.*, 2005: 83), VE engages with 'in vivo codes' derived from the language of the researched. Here we need to bear in mind my claim regarding the intractable nature of any codified value, which will also apply to the various code worlds of the social work subject. Rooted in tradition and history, social workers are, in the manner of Bhaskar (1979), researchers who cannot abandon the transcendent realities of abuse and neglect, while at the same time knowingly work with the impossibility of a fixed single account of them. As part of the human condition, abuse and neglect of others are intransitive moral facts.

Paradoxically, social work knowledge of this also needs to be logically transitive in order to retain under reflection a core stable (prototypical) concept of abuse and neglect.

Kekes' (1993) 'reserved' version of pluralism denotes a position in which no value is held to be paramount but in which not all values are equally acceptable. The basis of this distinction is between primary and secondary values or goods. The former (say the idea of care for the distressed other) are understood at a high level of generality where claims to relativistic standpoints are not plausible; the latter (care for this particular distressed other) are concerned with culturally specific goods. Responsibility and responsiveness involve modifying other people's vices and/or vicious circumstance for their own benefit, or for the protection and well-being of others under their roof. Consistent with Yearley's framework (Chapter 7), discussing, cultivating and building requisite virtues in others to assuage some particular person's plight seem to be fully in accord with social work's historical heritage. That means leveraging human flourishing, through the strategising of client self-help or through help imposed, or any critical realistic position in between.

### **Comfortable moral fuzziness**

The Sorites paradox not only reminds us of the difference between supersharp evaluations and fuzzy moral indeterminateness but also, equally importantly, it invites us to be clear about the legitimate zone of fuzziness, where Bhaskarian uncertainty is not uncomfortable but instead to be comfortably expected. To illustrate where this can take us, I will use Hugman's (2005: 19-21) example of research by Azmi (1997) who examines the meaning of health and welfare interventions from the perspective of a traditional Islamic community in Toronto. Azmi concludes (rightly or wrongly) that the difference of worldviews between traditional Islamic faith and the western secularism of professionals is such that they are implacably opposed. Azmi mentions attitudes towards domestic violence, where he argues that the indigenous explanation is entirely at odds with the state professional's condemnation. As Azmi suggests, it seems that the only plausible choices for the professional are to either withdraw from the moral frontline or, making no pretence to conjoint ethical expertise, to engage in a reconstructed neo-colonial imperialism. As in some ethnographic research inquiries, this would amount to no less than what Bar-On (1999) calls a 'missionary zeal to whip

the heathen along the path of righteousness'. As I intimated earlier, righteousness, the do-gooding sort, is a contestable sentiment.

Azmi is not defending domestic violence but posing a moral question as to who should intervene and how. For the traditional Muslim, family honour requires that the local Imam, whose moral authority is grounded in the community, should mediate. It seems to me that if we lack moral certainty about the difference between means and ends and what is rightly uncomfortable or not, we will forever wander between the two in the search for ethical veracity. As often as not, we will end up mithering in an impasse but without the wherewithal to extricate ourselves even though we cannot afford to simply languish. Blum's (2007: 225-250) idea of 'working racial virtues' suggests one way out, inviting a different, new journey of moral understanding. Having in mind the United States with its particular history of racism and the continuing legacy of racial inequalities, Blum argues that race-defined virtues matter in indispensable ways in the course of pursuing a professional ethical life.

As with all virtue ethicists, Blum takes the idea of the virtue tradition to articulate the source of all value and disvalue. His point of departure is a difference between wide ranging, standard issue virtues (including their counterfactual vices) such as justice, care and compassion, and the possibility of distinctive, in this case race-related, virtues such as recognising and positively valuing black group identity and a black person as a black person. Blum invites us to consider the view that a comprehensive analysis of the pernicious, reprehensible racist beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of in-group individuals and their institutions will demonstrate the need for new forms of virtues. He argues that working only from those classic single-word virtue and vice qualities such as justice or injustice misses some salient features of racism. These are better confronted by introducing virtue neologisms, multi-phrased virtues such as connecting justice with being black, an example being his argument for a specific virtue of 'civic racial egalitarianism'.

Blum's technical VE debate is whether or not race-related positive attitudes are 'too local' to count as distinctive virtues in their own right. For Blum, racism is not simply explained as an instance of the inferiorising vices of malevolence and disregard towards the different other. It is more than that and why we tend to think that race-based ill will

(as expressed in the idea of a hate crime) is a far worse form of ill will than many other types. To hate a person for their colour is one of the nastiest of evils. Blum goes on to say this suggests a call to the virtuous for an equally strong distinctive counter positive which is more than seeking the absence of the vice of ill will.

In this vein, Blum explores the themes of 'colour blindness' and 'colour muteness' where they express a well-intentioned desire to emphasise the common humanity of all people irrespective of colour or racial membership. He notes how this expression in law and policy may in fact have some unintended race-differentiated adverse effects. He also discusses the virtue of seeing the other as an individuated person, here as a black individual, not solely or predominantly as a member of a racial group. Although in some contexts a black person is happy to be regarded as a proud representative of a racial group, this homogenising process can also be a burden, replicating the racism it was intended to redress. One of Blum's points is that looking for commonalities in difference and differences in similarity and negotiating the gamut ranging from denial to over-identification demand considerable moral skill.

Blum (2007: 242) explains that one's emotional and cognitive reactions to a particular member in question should not be only those triggered by the group itself. This means not making unwarranted assumptions about the individual based on group membership. Virtuously recognising black people requires giving someone's racial identity its due but not allowing racial identity to loom too large in one's responses, a point made by Webb (2009) in his critique of identity politics. The lived sense of a racial other as equal is not the same as the lived sense of a racial other as individual. As Walker and Ivanhoe (2007: 29) remark, Blum's analysis deepens and extends our understanding and appreciation of racism. It also illustrates in a compelling way the particular strengths of virtue ethics as a researcher/practitioner tool. Blum's proposal that there are time and place defined virtues and vices which cannot be best explained and actioned by reference to generic ideas of them also indicates the sheer complexity of a Slotte-Hursthouse-Swanton-Hurka VE framed practice. Blum might be said to be a VE 'neologian', one who has a tendency to adopt an increasingly rationalistic worldview in attending to transcendent spiritual emotion.

As VE technicians, we may or may not hold to Blum's idea of a new species of virtue emerging out of its genus in the evolutionary arena of practice. It is a new direction requiring further exploration. For now, however, his idea invites an analysis of supersharpness as an end state with fuzzy indeterminateness as permissible process, through an undogmatic mode of moral communitarian acknowledgment. Certainty emerges from recursion of preconceived understanding and lived experience in the field, redefining both the situation and the understanding. Practical knowledge is not merely informational fieldcraft to replicate the as-given but can be transformational of attitude (Fowers and Davidov, 2006, 2007).

Blum's neological approach need not be confined to racial identity. Similar arguments can be proffered for specific virtue formations relating to other group identities linked to class, gender, sexual orientation, disability and religious persuasion. The Azmi perspective could be reconsidered in light of this approach. Indicative of the scope for morally fuzzy emoting and reasoning, membership of one oppressed group does not provide immunity from the charge of oppressing another. The belief that, say, certain racialised groups are bound to practise wife-beating, or forms of child abuse, in the name of collective identity, is a vicious hegemonic worldview. Recognising that abuse of women or children may occur within one group context, as in any other, is not.

### **Undogmatic communitarianism**

As Fives (2006: 211-212) points out in his critique of MacIntyre's tradition dependent communitarianism, there is no proper way, no standing ground, to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting or rejecting reasoned argument apart from that way which is provided by some particular tradition or other in which we are already immersed. However, as we have seen with *sophrosune* (Chapter 7), it does not follow that the values behind those practices need be the sole reason for commissioning a moral action, nor reason enough to not follow it through into the beginnings of another value position. This surely describes morally charged social work, and a morally charged social worker could not want to do otherwise. Wall (2003: 321) argues that although the ends of *phronesis* are always determined by tradition, the ends themselves are somewhat plastic: they transform, and can be transformed, over time.



Yearley's framework (Chapter 7) will hold that traditional ends, such as forms of child protection, are not just inert deposits from the past but arguments over rival traditions that have to be made and remade. I maintain that a living reproductive tradition such as social work is a socially embodied argument about way of life goods constitutive of that tradition. Repeated test case moral dilemmas (including the lessons from social work failures) will expose the incompleteness of accepted arguments as the world changes. Social/ethical way of life goods are necessarily tradition constituted but traditional goods themselves are constituted through a modifying process of historical discourse, especially through engaging with the under-histories of the dispossessed.

It has been argued that the origins of virtue and vice lie in evolutionary beneficial explanations because other-regarding altruistic dispositions generate co-operative synergy and efficient division of labour for the purposes of group survival (Ridley, 1996). From a socio-biological perspective, Levy (2004: 83-86) suggests that the idea of morality began as survivalist self-deception, convincing each other and ourselves that we will act for the sake of others in moments of need. Through a progressive process of 'exaptation' the other-regarding virtues become valued for their own sake. Notably, this includes moral responses not just to kinship in-groups but also to outsiders, redefining the boundaries of group membership and sense of belonging and community.

I see the history of social work as exaptation in action. It is a proud pioneering history of gradually including within its moral domain those marginalised groups hitherto denied full recognition by others and by social work itself. This is sophisticated contouring of righteous indignation and just generosity in action. I suggest that the dialectic can be articulated through Gadamer's (1989) notion of truth and method as a never-ending 'fusion of moral horizons' and openness to the suffering of others. Fives' (2006) account of what he calls Gadamer's 'undogmatic communitarianism' expresses what I have described in Chapter 7 as the connection and difference between phronesis and poiesis within a relativist's landscape. We aim to see with moral acuity the sheer bare face of the stranger in our midst who needs comforting, acknowledging both group identity and personal distinctiveness and then nuancing practice accordingly. It was the wretched lived experience of black slaves and their personal stories of dehumanising brutality that 'little-by-little' led to the passionate clamour for abolition, first of the trade and then of chattel ownership, as two classes of evil.

The justificatory principle, a movement of reason from pro- to anti-slavery sentiment, came later. Our present day anti-racist bona fides owe much to those early interlocutors of virtue who spoke out against the viciousness of their times. VE talk constantly alerts us to the fact that at core social work must be about correcting unacceptable human tendencies, partly by creating the correct nomenclature to identify them. Blum alerts us to the moral fact that racism is still with us. We will always have our prejudices. However, the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we continually have to test our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come.

Fragmentation and conflict are part of today's society and those communities within it. Our vocation is discernment and insight but our understanding comes from iterative occurrences. This requires the coming into play, and the playing out, of the content of tradition in those continuously widening possibilities of significance and resonance extended by different people living it. As Gadamer (1989: 370, cited in Lawn, 2006: 75) says:

A person who wants to understand must question what lies behind what is said. [S]he must understand it as an answer to a question. If we go back *behind* what is said then we inevitably ask questions *beyond* what is said. We understand the sense of the text only by acquiring the horizon of the question . . . . .

### **Minimal and maximal value**

In Chapter 7 I described the idea of surplus exchange-value. In our sophisticated role-contouring, we should never stray from a root prototype virtue such as justice, whether this merits a 'new' double-barrelled virtue in Blum's sense or not. One elementary mother's knee account of justice is to give someone her due - an indebtedness to restore that which has been taken away or to distribute a good of entitlement not yet forthcoming. As we search for the indeterminate borders demarcating the difference between comfortable and uncomfortable moral fuzziness, reaching for supersharp evaluations, we weigh up what is owed. I suggest that this idea of proportionality and weight provides us with a stabilising VE anchor for measuring exchange-value and the

tracking of the moral impulse. Consideration of options according to moral debt owed follows from our pattern of commitment to righteous indignation and our pattern of reasoning for just generosity.

The underlying moral debt is generated as a mode of acknowledgment according to the degree of moral certainty and practice confidence regarding the occurrence of extra-vulnerability and the likely permanence of any harm not undone. The more unresolved the moral dilemma as to permanence, the greater the hesitation and the more cautious we should be in our bridled response. The less fuzzy, the more certain we are of the unadorned other in distress, the clearer the nature of the moral wrong, the greater the size of the moral debt. The minimal position generates an indebtedness of actually doing no harm ourselves, what must not be done. The more maximal the position, the indebtedness will be revealed as the most that can and must be done, as in, say, Sendler's case. Scope for imbalance even in quotidian routine practice is considerable. The moral fact of indebtedness to the distressed other is the same in all cases. It is the weight, volume and effort of response which vary and must be justified.

We can say that, as a satisficing VE fiducial threshold, giving the client her social work due means to adopt a chosen strategy of intervention the worst outcome of which is superior to the anticipated worst outcomes of all other alternatives. The catechism of doing no harm is a venerable rule of thumb in social work as seen in, for the most part, forgotten theories of radical non-intervention. Knowledge in action should serve to prevent further violence to the other by all others, including social workers. This should at least arrest the wrong-making features of the situation, not compound them, ensuring no further human value is taken away.

Actively considered non-intervention may be the situationally correct strategy of toleration but default behaviours of omission or bystanding can never be. A teenager may run away to a social worker because her parents disapprove of her dress code. We would normally tell her to go home. On more certain moral ground, a cautionary step beyond the minimal requires a reversal of those wrong-making features, restoring or substituting lost human value. If the runaway is being threatened with physical beatings or imprisonment in the home, we think twice. In such moments, the moral

consequence, as something to be preferred to the moral consequences of all other alternative possibilities, is not always comprehended, let alone welcome.

Maximally, in the supervalueative world of moral sharpness way above the VE fiducial line, an unqualified full ethical practice of value serves to reinstate the other's lost, denied, stolen humanity in an expansive maximising strategy. Non-violent knowledge means that nothing is taken away from the other that is not, in constructing the response, thereby added back and enhanced. This entails not just reversing, even equalising, but transforming the wrong-making features of the situation by creating additional or surplus value which enables the client to flourish, not merely to survive or cope. These replacement and gifting modes are akin to a deontologist's principle of what to do and not do, and the consequentialist's principle of utility, but the reasoning is of a different conceptual provenance.

The purpose behind the VE moral pause towards the moral impulse is in order to interrogate a would-be strategy of intervention along a minimal-maximal continuum. This strategy directs us to move out of moral fuzziness to moral clarity, engaging with the supreme social work paradox of producing indissoluble sameness out of indissoluble otherness. In Chapter 1, I quoted Louden (2001: 235) as saying that 'people expect ethical theory to tell them something about what they ought to do', suggesting that VE was particularly weak in the area of casuistry. A VE framed social work tells us that there can be no simple answer that can tell us exactly what to do. Social work truth is an open condition that lies in a stability standard on where, why and how to engage with human suffering, never the act or result itself. Social work moral activity is the establishment, disruption and re-establishment of sameness and difference through the interpolation of extra-vulnerability and extra-ordinariness, neither radically undogmatic nor dogmatically radical.

Confirmation of social work identity involves an escape from the very same tradition that once may have convinced, such as the acceptance of slavery and child labour, but is now seen to have deceived us. Being social work undogmatic means never forgetting the danger of being deceived and a commitment to non-deception. Experience is a kind of suffering to that effect as we change others and ourselves in the doing. Social workers may speak of the immanence of truth which stands forth as an occurrence that

may initially subtract but then endures and is preservative. Everything depends on the contextualisation of value which, in the idiom of Derrida, remains open and non-saturable. The target is always a supersharp evil, without qualification, to be eliminated. It is those occurrences of practice, our ambiguous encounters with distressed others and the intrusion of the habitually deceptive that lead us to question and change our presuppositions. Virtue is about what is difficult but if virtue is to be durable it can never settle.

### **Truth, hope and sincerity**

A social worker will characteristically hold a view about a way of life, as does a client or carer, and where a disrupted way of life is perceived by at least one of them to generate distress, the process of engaging with the amelioration will lead to a more or less consensual resolution. We develop virtue only when the reasonable truth adhering to a situation is acquired but we acquire reasonable truth only in virtuous activity. Virtue has permanence only as communicative, transitive activity. Through engagement with the moral chaos, righteous indignation and just generosity are built on social work passion for a will to ethical truth - of self and others. As rational emotive moral beings we negotiate the complexities, drawing on our integrated virtues and our commitment and reflexivity to do so in the best way that we can. The moral world is chaotic and the social worker's task is to restore some acceptable order to it. 'Moral luck' (Rescher, 1993; Statman, 2003; Silcox, 2006) runs out where matters are prevented from running in the tracks of ordinariness.

Williams (2002) speaks of the intrinsic value of the concept of truth and the virtue of valuing truthfulness. Social workers should be committed to recognising the disvalue of distress, even though we may never settle on the final truth. The twin ideas of hope and truth, as Peterson and Seligman (2004: 570-582) point out, have a long history but always refer to states of mind and positive expectations about good matters that have a reasonable likelihood of coming to pass and bad matters which may be overcome. A virtuous social worker is a hopeful, ingenious but also humble practitioner in her moments of certainty and uncertainty. She aims to instill hope in clients, even in dissensual cases. This requires the right sort of honest relationship as a moral enterprise. Social work is a cognitive, emotional and motivational stance towards a

good future, acting in ways to make it more likely. A shared feeling of confidence that it will ensue, even if only ever a small triumph overcoming day-to-day adversity, lies at the heart of moral practice.

Sharp moral facts of concern to social workers require the search for sincere belief which holds stable under reflection. This does not require consensus with clients, desirable though that may be. The intrinsic value of this particular truth is grounded in the structure of the commitment of those who value it and the obligation to not remain silent but speak out. A social worker's dialogue also ultimately involves standing up for the truth of her perspective. Although it will never tell us what to do, a commitment to the truth as a fidelity procedure is always action-guiding and it is the truth of reasonable hope that we seek to gift to our clients and carers, consensual or not, in their fateful moments. The stability of truthfulness follows from the instability of its opposite. I will not deceive others, not even myself, since the truthfulness to which we are committed must be bearable. Virtue narrative is both exaltation and exhortation.

Truthful people care about the accuracy of what they say. Williams (2002) explains accuracy as the virtue that encourages people to spend more effort than they might have done in trying to find the truth, not just accepting any belief-shaped thing that comes into their head. So we are committed to finding out the moral truth of female circumcision: why, for example, it might be a corrupted anti-racist stance to ignore it, or where the motivation to intercede may itself be racialised. Williams' is an action-guiding ideal, not just a way in which we hope we will be disposed but a necessary corrective to our susceptibility to wishful thinking and any negligence in honouring the demands of the truth. One primary expression of a commitment to accuracy is the care one takes against the obstacles to accuracy. The only way to do that is to care about the difference between what you are motivated to believe - the naive moral impulse - and what you can defend to others and yourself - its sophisticated expression - as you search for the truth.

In my final chapter, I summarise key themes leading to this position of conscience in order to illustrate how my proposed framework of value can revise practice. As an example, I focus on social work training rules (my most recent area of professional expertise), concluding with some related thoughts on my own research journey.

## **Chapter 11**

### **The VE project**

#### **Introduction**

I summarise the previous chapters leading to my idea of a redemptive VE specific framework of value. The threads of my argument draw together themes of authentic social work self, loss and reclamation. I highlight what I claim is original, what that helps illuminate, and how the framework can be mobilised into a project of practical action. I propose that mobilisation commences with the promotion of unruly discourse sanctuaries that can attend to the moral impulse. The educational institution is a key site for the promulgation of state social welfare, and social work training is the starting point for a professional career. To illustrate the prospects for action, I point out some training requirements, the received wisdom of which is reconsidered in light of my framework. By way of personalising a political strategy of resistance, I conclude by reflecting on the convergence of my own professional and research journeys.

#### **Recovery of identity, self and ethical space**

My starting point was that social work practice has lost what is moral about it and is therefore all too often failing its clients. I linked the loss to our simplistic value discourse, which I claimed has failed to nurture our identity-conferring moral core and therefore failed to check our digressions. Associating such shortcomings with an over-reliance on act appraisal moral theory, I have explored an alternative agent appraisal discourse that stresses the primacy of good moral character over moral acts.

I have undertaken this mostly uncharted exercise in recovery through a self-other dialogue, describing social work core identity as a distinctive friendship reaching out a helping hand to those in need. I claimed that, anomalously, as subject-in-language, this identity has been gradually erased by modernistic maxims which have supplanted our historic supportive language. I have spoken of the derailed self, one whose sacred ethical space and distinctive domain of moral activity have been denuded through lack

of self-care; hence today's existential crisis of confidence as to who we are and what we should do.

Seeking to overcome what I have called our conceptual amnesia, my search for lost identity has entailed looking back in a certain way to reclaim what is recoverable. While I have sought a theoretical perspective to reclaim the confident moral certainty of our pioneering tradition, a revitalised discourse need not replicate the psychodynamic sermonising that featured so heavily in the early days of social work. Any recovery has to carry forward all that has been progressive in social work. At the same time, our disorderly world of postmodern moral uncertainties, which looks askance on any shared meaning of progress, also needs to be accommodated in my redemptive framework.

My framework is derived from the philosophical academy's paradigmatic wars, where agent appraisal virtue ethical theory battles with act appraisal deontic and consequentialist principled theories as to the primary source of value. I argued that principled theory reduces virtue talk (my 'small ve') to the role of handmaiden in support of principle. This has made for a moral asymmetry of social work self and client; hence a much impoverished social work value discourse. Using a notion of 'big VE' to indicate my theoretical stress on the primacy of moral character over principle, I have sought to recover those traces of characteristically 'being there' for one's client.

Restoring a relation between occupational function, authentic social work self and characteristic virtue traits, I have sought to contribute to the growing but still relatively small body of social work literature on the subject of applied virtue ethics, and in particular, to what I have called the radical politico-ethical thread. I proceeded by making a critical distinction between being the sort of person one wants to be ethically, and then acting morally in order to be that person. In making this distinction I have engaged with some of the key technical criticisms of virtue ethical theory that so far have been little explored for social work. The most pertinent of these is whether the theory can generate credible action guidance statements while at the same time not just reinforcing the status quo. My social work specific framework of value addresses this conundrum, yielding prospects for a distinctive ethical career built on an emancipatory account of virtuous social work practice.



### **Narrative self versus bureaucratic self**

Reprising our narrative in terms of virtuous sentiment, my starting point for recovery was to reinstate social work's waylaid moral impulse towards the distressed other as the legitimating source of practice. This makes a social worker a morally active practitioner, one who learns to balance the naivety of the moral impulse with a sophisticated reasoned defence of it in a complexly antithetical world. I have therefore described our lost social work tradition as an iterative emotive-rational dialogue. I have argued how othering themes have shaped the explanatory and justificatory discourse as the view of mandated distress transforms over time.

I have reinserted the once common enough proposition that social work interventions (the idea of which I have termed ethical labour) have traditionally focused on disrupted and disabling patterns of family domesticity where extra-vulnerable individuals are deemed in need of care and/or control. I have described these disordered states as fractured ordinariness. Borrowing from social biology the homologous idea of membranes always in need of repair, I argued that social workers seek out, detect, evaluate, classify and fix any normative rupture. The social worker's moral gaze and what I have called her moral tagging of any rupture also remind us that constructions of household normalcy have always made for an uncomfortable set of power relations played out through contested hegemonic attributions of deserving clienthood. In managing the gaze, the troubling sense of the sort of social worker we want to be, one who truly comforts, compels us to constantly review our discourse categories.

I have maintained that, outwith their psychodynamic beginnings, our social work forebears also forged an expansive, genuinely caring ethical space within their discretionary domain. In order to scope the rejuvenating nature of its empowering transactions, I described this aspirational activity as a social work moral economy. I coined the term moral entrepreneur to describe such a social worker operating in between the rigid rules of engagement. Stretching society's mandate, her street acumen once gave rise to plastic practices that could build compensatory social capital to offset discomfort and distress. Social workers have traditionally gone about that business (which I have called moral petitioning) on the hegemonic edge, constantly exploring the

relationship between sensitivity to another's private ills and sensitivity to the unjust public causes of them.

In answering the perplexing question as to what, therefore, has changed for the worse, I alighted on social work's hubristic pursuit of professional status and corresponding language. In line with other critical commentators, I have noted with alarm a movement from a heightened sensitivity to another's suffering to the routinisation of that sensitivity associated with the imperceptible drift from nascent welfare reformer to bureau worker. The proletarianising tendency of rational-technical discourse distances the social worker from her clients and also from her own entrepreneurial ethical self. This derailment has opened up a schism between the primordial sentiment of the moral impulse and its balanced sophisticated conciliation.

I claimed that social work's standardised moral decision-making models - applied deontological and consequentialist paradigms underwriting rational-technical thought - serve to control both social worker and client. Late modernity's aggressive market-defined account of neediness has displaced the humanistic language of social solidarities which once defined our remit. The straightjacket mentality of social worker as bureaucratic factotum in this colonisation is exemplified in what I have called the state's codification of social work value. I have made the disturbing claim that the Code of Practice is not, as many assume, the apex of a grown-up profession but the binary opposite, a tyrannical, infantilising fixation on a de-moralising set of do and don't instructions. The de-centred moral impulse can barely find a purchase in practice at all. From social psychology, I have introduced the disturbing idea of the bystander effect, the failure to offer a helping hand when needed, to illustrate our paralysis.

### **The supererogative reframed self**

I sought to unfetter social work's moral impulse by pitching anti-code VE theory against the establishment's pro-code deontological and consequentialist theory. I have drawn on the technical philosophical notion of self-effacement, expanding it allegorically to describe our schismatic codified separation from our clients. My key argument is that authentic social worker identity lies in fully seeing and responding to the client in her immediate distress, rather than only seeing and responding to an injunction, policy or

procedure, which is where act appraisal theory leads us. Focusing on the necessary VE moral pedagogy, I proposed the idea of the conscientious beginning social worker in search of non self-effacing moral refinement, whose characteristic virtue display is to be measured against some tradition defined standard outwith code.

Introducing the notion of paradoxicality into the measure, I argued that a social worker needs to acquire the mentality to inhabit a peculiar laudatory moral world in which her vested moral interest lies. Describing access to this world beyond mere duty in terms of supererogation, I have claimed that hers is a promise to herself to eliminate distress caused by the continual moral omissions of others. The realisation of social work self as ethical labourer is predicated on the idea of actively seeking opportunity to do good works arising out of people's inevitable misfortunes. To miss the opportunity is to incur those avoidable tragedies which impugn the profession. I linked this with the philosophical doctrine of double effect, the recognition that any complex moral intervention will as likely as not leave behind some moral remainder. Learning to reduce as much as possible the moral residue, but also owning what is comfortable about it and foreseeing what is not, is the social worker's ethical journey.

To minimise the double effect I introduced into social work the good enough language of moral satisficing. I proposed that any successful social work intervention depends on a set of self-disciplining if and only if VE covering conditions. Synthesised from contemporary mainstream virtue theory but a hitherto untried application to social work, I offered these V-rule action guidance descriptors as a non self-effacing counter to code do's and don'ts. I argued that a social worker should act characteristically admirably, as one whose appropriate attitudes towards social work defined evils enable her to aim accurately enough to hit the appropriate target of her concern, depending on circumstance, capability and experience. Based on these V-rules, I defended the idea of specific virtuous occupational activity and even specialisms within that activity. No mere human can excel in all spheres of moral life but it is possible to do so in one through dedication and focus. Marrying theoretical philosophy with historical narrative, my thesis regarding distinctive social work identity relies on this practical position.

I also asserted that my V-rules lend themselves to the heuristic of an enigmatic paragon of social work, one whose laudable moral mastery is to be emulated. Describing the

feasibility of such a character in technical virtue terms in a way that also retrieves our lost social work narrative has been a critical exercise. It has conjured up one of those key paradigmatic skirmishes, the *tu quoque* challenge. Here, the task for the virtue ethicist is to move from being motivated by the thought of emulation to exercising virtue without that thought, if, according to the moral analytic logic, she is to avoid her own version of self-effacement. As a response to that impasse, I presented a fortifier derived from models of skills learning to consolidate social worker identity.

I made a non self-effacing virtue out of fallibility in order to bolster the idea that paragonic moral agency is more than just formulaic thinking masquerading as moral intuition. Adapting the classical axiom that the more one learns, the more one realises there is more to learn, there is always going to be an ideated better self in the making who we must strive to become. This commitment to paragonic modelling is as much conceptual as literal. It can be both, since we can and must always learn from our betters, as my account of the hero has suggested. I have therefore posited the reasonably absurd idea that being a fully realised social work self can only ever mean a distinctive sort of perpetual reflexive becoming.

I concluded that the moral expert is always learning to become someone better through a virtuous circle inscribed by her practice. Reflexivity is a familiar enough theme in social work. Picking up on that theme, I have claimed that the authentic social work self is discernible only through a perpetual reflexive process. My key point is that a VE epistemology of moral gazing entails always pausing to reconsider what the moral agent has up to that point taken for granted. If we really want to see the client in her unadorned uniqueness and not her hegemonic clothing then we are committed to always looking again beyond the first stereotypical glance. This commitment is as much conceptual as temporal, although it is both since we constantly learn from reflection in and on practice.

The other paradigmatic challenge to the idea of a moral paragon posits the unreliable fragile self, who therefore does not pause to hold true to her conscience just when situational steadfastness is most needed. In response, I have offered the contentious view that authentic social work can only be a moral meritocracy of the relatively few and therefore should be open only to those with the right attributes to sustain

motivational self-sufficiency in adverse situations. Based on what virtue theorists call moral continence, this burdensome journey can be conceptualised through skills-based leaning theory when external pressures are successfully negotiated by virtue of one's increasingly dependable moral holding. With an emphasis on acquisition of tacit, fluent practice wisdom, I outlined the movement from earnest but clumsy beginner, relying on precarious mechanical instruction and then principled rules, to insouciant expert who characteristically finesses opportunity for poetical, innovative practice.

### **The righteously indignant, justly generous self**

Translating such characteristic social work moral know-how into some knowing that propositions, I have hypothesised what a fully virtuous social worker might publically be willing to declare in terms of her own self-governance. From the world of positive psychology, I introduced the concept of signature character traits to distinguish special dispositions from the desirable but humdrum. Then, drawing on some recent practical accounts of virtue theory, I introduced the idea that we can conceive of occupational signature trait dispositions which have been contoured especially for social work from prototype other-regarding virtues. This has made for an original contribution to social work discourse in the form of proposing two cardinal virtue modules for social work. I have labeled these righteous indignation and just generosity.

Imagining a lifelong ethical curriculum for caring professionals, all of whom share many desirable attributes, the conjoint modules of righteous indignation and just generosity would comprise the social worker's specialisms. The emotion of righteous indignation is the social work moral impulse sanctified; just generosity expresses it in a reasoned out way. The sophisticated justly generous management of the emotion entails the return of what is morally due to the distressed other through production of what I have termed surplus exchange-value and a gift relationship. There must always be a personal loss to the client in the moral tagging process, a relinquishment of uniqueness, in order to be considered deserving. Avoiding any further detriment, the fully virtuous social worker minimally gives back what is morally owed but also aims to expansively gift more than she takes in the encounter - virtuosity exemplified, moral remainder minimised.

I proposed that this exchange encounter is managed through a reflexive self-referential stability standard where correct patterns of commitments to righteous indignation and just generosity and patterns of reasoning in support of those commitments are conscientiously played out within the field of concern. They make for the social worker's own affirmatory satisficing rules of the game according to my V-rule covering conditions. I claimed that assimilation of the two action guidance modules under these stabilising conditions will exercise the social worker at the level of her essential best.

My social work modules thesis is embryonic, inviting much interrogation conceptually and empirically, either by those who detect in it its possibilities or by those who reject its premises or dispute the logic of its conclusions. In foregrounding the idea of modularity of moral excellence, the easily lost idea that is to be guarded, and therefore articulated well, is that a social worker would consider herself neither a nurse nor a teacher, nor they a social worker, and that there is something precious about each of their distinct businesses. I have claimed that to ignore the difference amongst all the similarities is to invite much role confusion and some dire consequences for our clients.

### **The reconnected puzzled self**

To support my idea of modularised domain authority, I re-traced the origins of social work to a 19th century communitarian discourse about client virtue, vice and vicious circumstance. Drawing on a functional perspective, I have recast the social work tradition to be a meso-level focus on cohering societal virtues, which picks out and maintains a homeostatic balance between ways of life and prescriptive abstract injunctions. While contemporary social work writers may speak increasingly of social work virtue, most if not all have shied way from speaking about client virtue and vice, as our forebears unashamedly once did. I maintained that such analysis is even more apt in today's increasingly pluralistic society: it is key to hermeneutic action-guiding discourse about moral relativism, perspectivism and proportionality.

Reformatted in such a way, I have proposed that the intrusion of postmodernism into the homeostatic balance requires the virtuous social worker to become a kind of moral action researcher - a transcendent critical realist - in the discharge of her mandate. I introduced from the world of paradox a little-by-little, fuzziness argument as to the

supervaluative threshold for moral certainty. I claimed that at some exigent point the righteously indignant but puzzled social worker must assume an absolutist supertruth view as to what is morally repugnant and not to be tolerated, knowing very well that today the moral relativist's critique will haunt her aspiration to justly generous practice. However, in the search for moral clarity we must always distinguish between the fuzzy means and the clear end of social work. A commitment to an unconcealing of our own prejudices through the juxtaposition of means and end can yield an understanding of what gives rise to the prejudice and hence what may lie beyond it.

Our own partiality need not cut us off but open us up to the matter at issue in such a way that what is taken for granted is capable of being revised. In reprising the role of the past as a legitimate source of knowledge, skirting with the ideological conservatism charge, I have rehabilitated prejudice as a positive, not just a problematic, for virtuous social work. Drawing on a Gadamerian perspective that sees prejudice as an anticipatory 'fore-structure' of better understanding, I have posited the mutual interrogation of righteous indignation and just generosity of each other by each other as an ongoing, hopeful fusion of moral horizons.

### **The practical transgressive self**

Any theoretical professional thesis will always have to justify itself in terms of practical application. However, although easily mislaid amongst all the technical talk, theory and practice are but one here. Theory informs language of choice which in turn questions in its own way the performance of both the subject and those institutions in which she performs. My research voice has shouted out that, as reflexive moral agents, social workers are beholden to inquire systematically into moral philosophy if they are to truly apply themselves to questioning their moral performance and that of their institutions. This is exactly what I have attempted to do. Not to do so is itself an act of moral omission, a contradiction in terms of self-identity. The collective mentality that we have come to inhabit can be examined in the hope that the less than virtuous activity in which we have come to engage by default can evolve into a reinvested set of practices.

All along I have mooted the idea of vicious institutions. In Bourdieusian manner, I have therefore been calling for a set of unruly social practices to emerge, aiming for the

virtuous circle of a revised habitus within a repurchased field of social work to challenge both workplace and ourselves. My framework seeks not only to read more critically the demoralising establishment rules of the game but also to rewrite them in VE adapted language to once more generate distinctive symbolic and cultural social work capital. Meanwhile, we cannot easily detach ourselves from those shibboleths that we would change, since improvisation without a guiding script is frightening. I have proposed the first draft of an alternative script to assist those who are brave enough to wish to try. It offers what I claim is a technically reliable account of moral action guidance which concerned social workers can comprehend and could begin to apply in their day-to-day business. I believe that makes for practical working virtue that is fully in accord with social work's all but lost tradition of incremental transformative practice.

The actual working exercise is one of reclaiming an authentic ethical space undertaken little-by-little. That depends on a prudential, temperate, albeit subversive feel for the game, which, I have argued, my version of the VE counter discourse can provide. The nature of this challenge is illuminated by the story of mariners who need to replace each plank of their leaky boat while also at the same time continuing to sail in it and not sink. We may critically scrutinise each suspect plank but can only do this while standing on the other suspect planks of the boat. At some indeterminate point of transition the old boat becomes more of a new one but only if, in the meantime, the ever-present risk of sinking has been averted. Then, of course, as soon as the end of the boat is reached, the whole exercise must begin again. This recurring mariner's tale indicates the nature of any practical day-to-day application of my theoretical framework. I have come to call this the VE project. The subtext here is just where might my thesis lead, hence the question 'What is next that would make for a little-by-little virtuous difference?' I suggest that any answer lies in the establishment of virtue ethical inspired discourse sanctuaries to generate stratagems that may operate in between the establishment rules

### **Discourse sanctuaries**

VE for social workers may be considered a project of return to a lost world. However, this is not some ghostly absence: the fugitive social worker seeks some sense of revitalised permanence in a revised reality that can never and ought not to be the same as that which was lost. The movement from fugue existence - the loss of one's identity



coupled with disappearance from one's proper habitat - to revalidation makes for a politics of resistance. Any practice of value will take place in what is left of social work's unfettered spaces, seeking to reinsert the omitted through the openings that contradiction reveals. Our language of value can be re-privileged into the present via speech and writing. As code breakers, those of like mind can make dedicated professional time and space through the unruly written words of journals and publications and the disobedient spoken words of conferences, seminars and even team meetings to begin to refortify the moral impulse. This has been my personal strategy, inviting peer scrutiny of my emerging ideas of VE and what is after all only a rough sketch.

The last few years have seen a resurgence in affirmational collegiality and a coming together of hearts and minds to reconnect with our value base. Articles as diverse as Ovrelid's (2008) Buddhist account of moral character are starting to appear. Reminiscent of Foot's elective community as described in Chapter 4, there has emerged a manifesto (Jones *et al.*, 2007) seeking to explore and reclaim lost identity through a new engaged practice. Webb's (2010b) argument for an integrated social justice and recognition political strategy sees this not as a job for individual theorists but rather as a collective project for researchers, practitioners, clients and carers - 'a re-assembled Left'. The learning network literature is germane here (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005). The upsurge in value talk is no coincidence. In the wake of a sequence of avoidable child abuse tragedies, social work and social work education in particular have been subject to intense scrutiny by the political establishment and over the next few years will be subject to some wide-ranging reforms. A VE discourse learning network is not for idle chatter but little-by-little strategising. I will lay down what I think are some key VE moral pedagogical stratagems within higher education since, as an inspector, social work training has been my most recent domain of professional expertise.

### **Social work education**

The educational institution encapsulates all that I have said about the VE traveller and her ethical journey, beginning with the trite observation that unless she were a saint at the beginning, no one becomes a VE fluent moral expert within the course of a degree in social work. The tensions between formal academic study and on the job vocational

training are set to increase with the advent of more employment-based direct entry routes. The tensions are part of the historic fabric of social work training, which began with academia's 'scientification' of good works, all the better to 'aim and hit the target' of charity. The present day function of higher education in both perpetuating and challenging the hegemony is a complex one, especially given the overweening influence of employers and the control of government in the production of social workers.

A social work course is a socially constructed depository of authoritative text and hence a hub for its replication through controlled and measured dissemination. As a distinctive speech community, a social work course propagates state welfare ideology but also provides a forum for interrogating both the subject matter and itself in the process. The V-question becomes whether knowledge as power in this context weighs down the interlocutors and/or whether the press of conformity can push them to traverse the hegemony. Social work training regulations take the form of descriptive text and a set of discourse permissions and non-permissions. Study of the text can amount to little more than fine-grained interpretation, closing down discussion rather than liberating the production of expansive identity. In many ways a social work course can become an elaborate code itself and all that is entailed by this.

I have left unanswered all along just what a virtuous civic institution might look like other than intimating the simple answer that it is the sum of the good qualities of those people who inhabit it minus that which is taken away through internal and external threats to integrity. Parrott (2006: 135-152) offers a standard type of analysis of ethics in social work organisations, exploring the scope afforded to the practitioner by the Code of Practice itself to challenge institutional behaviour such as discriminatory, unlawful procedures, inadequate services and unsafe practices. Macaulay and Lawton (2006) for public administration, Nixon (2006) for higher education, Wilkinson (2007) for teacher education and C. Clark (2006, 2007) for social work offer some virtue insights into civic behaviours. While not employing a VE framework as such, Tronto (2010) explores the idea of a caring institution.

The virtuous social work tutor faces similar problems to the virtuous social worker. The idea of *sophrosune* is relevant here. I no longer have the direct opportunity which once resided in me to influence the national education scene but I make the following

suggestions based on my framework analysis. I will focus on some symbolic sites of virtuous intersections which cross the orthodoxy, lending themselves to the prospect of a parallel heterodox curriculum. In my critical analytical study I began to itemise some implications for social work training and practice. I now return to these.

### **Recruitment and selection**

Educational institutions function as the gateway to the profession, making educationalists potential strategic VE operants. Reid (2007) queries whether, as a social work qualified lecturer, he should resist the pressure to register with the GSCC since its requirements may be at odds with his competing obligations as a teacher. Cowburn and Nelson (2008) and Nelson and Cowburn (2010) query whether they can ever risk taking on a highly suitable student in all other respects but for the fact that she has a criminal record. In the same vein, McLaughlin (2010) argues how, lacking transparency and accountability, the regulator's heavy surveillance of students contradicts social work's avowed commitment to social justice. Cowburn and Nelson are raising the fear factor and the issue of their integrity as educationalists as to the morally right thing to do. A VE analysis in this situation would surely ask courageous questions about an applicant's circumstance, insight, remorse and the learning that has been gained in preparing to become a social worker, and not focus solely on the act of criminality itself. Of course, risk-averse employers may elect not to place such a student even if the educational institution is persuaded of her suitability.

In signing up to a viable VE project in relation to formal education, one empirical research question relates to whether or not there is any evidence to indicate the presence of characteristically motivated social workers out of the 80,000 or so current registrants in England. This raises a critical mass paradox. Without sufficient numbers of righteously indignant people entering the profession and attracted to social work as a way of expressing that sentiment, any VE project for practice is likely to be stillborn; yet the project is needed all the more if social work becomes increasingly unattractive to the right sort of people and increasingly attractive to the wrong sort. Any remedy must surely begin with a critical analysis of initial motivation on entry to training and how that ought to be managed.

Re-examining some motivational research (American, British and Australian) that I surveyed for my critical analytical study, and updating the literature in light of my theoretical account of righteous indignation, I find Sweeting's (2006) distinction between those who 'seek' out social work, those who 'find' it, and those who 'settle' for it, still remarkably apposite. Typical comparative analyses of social work students and non-social work students show that the former are attracted by the opportunity to 'work with people' and the 'desire to help others' (for example, Eber and Kunz, 1984; Black *et al.*, 1993; Vincent, 1996). More distinctively, significant life events, parental dysfunction and family trauma can also differentiate career choice (Russel *et al.*, 1993; Rompf and Royse, 1994; Christie and Weeks, 1998; Parker and Merrylees, 2002). The argument is that such exposure makes some people more sensitive to the needs of others to the point of seeking a professional caring career, whether this is because they received the right sort of help at the time or did not. Contact with inspirational social workers when in the care system as a child client can motivate, perhaps to give something back (Sellers and Hunter, 2005).

Consistent with the idea of righteous indignation, Humphrey's (2006) longitudinal study indicates that the main determinant for students positively choosing social work as a vocation are life-shaping first, second or even third hand accounts of abuse, disability, death, poverty, injustice or prejudice. Humphrey notes that some students come with what I call a cognitive-emotional surplus capacity, enabling them to genuinely feel for others in similar situations. In her opinion it is these who are best received by clients. Another type of research looks at personal accounts of career motivation based on reflective narratives. Analysis of such stories leads Cree (2003: 157) to the conclusion that 'there was something about the value base that allowed people to feel more at home with themselves'. As Cree continues, 'this comes close to the old fashioned idea of social work as a vocation or calling'.

Research findings about somewhat mixed motivations to become a social worker, albeit altruistically framed, are emerging. On the one hand, Furness (2007) continues to note common themes. These include making a positive difference to others' lives, working with others and with like-minded people, reducing discrimination, helping people to reach their potential, improving the lifestyle of those in need, working with people to achieve growth and change, and the impact of positive and negative life experiences.

On the other hand, secondary explanations such as market factors, job security and perceived promotion prospects are being evidenced in some findings (Christie and Kruk, 1998). Anecdotally, relatively low academic entry points and the material benefit of bursaries have also adversely impacted in the sense of attracting people driven only by those reasons.

Some of the research focuses on the gendered nature of career choice and the relative attractions of the profession to women and men. Sweeting (2006) looks at the difficulties of recruitment and retention of male social workers. He suggests that socially constructed inhibitions on men about showing and cultivating care and compassion, combined with suspicions as to the motives of those who do, effectively perpetuate an uncomfortable balance between masculine and social work identity. Men with families who regard themselves as traditional breadwinners will also find the prospect of student poverty unappealing.

The relative dearth of men may give credibility to a core focus on those virtues of 'being for the other', compassion and caring, and the nurturing that traditional gendered female roles imply. Social work training itself usually entails sustained sacrifice of personal time and resources. One might speculate that men aspirants would need to be exceptionally strong other-regarding evaluators to negotiate entry and survival. Ironically, the premium given to cold abstract formulaic principle might have perhaps appealed to more typical male mindsets, inviting re-engagement with Gilligan's (1982) controversy with Kohlberg about emotional intelligence and gendered constructions of moral belief formation.

Recent research by another Gilligan (2007) suggests that applicants these days tend to view social problems as individually rather than socially caused. This is hardly surprising for a generation exposed to neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideologising, illustrating how deeply cuts the epistemological fallacy generated by a culture of late modernistic individualism. However, Gilligan also reports that a number of applicants still enter social work for explicit social and political motivations concerned with social justice, stopping abuse and protecting others. On my VE account of suitability and readiness, testing out the candidate's already accumulated repository of righteous indignation and her potential for a sophisticated practice towards just generosity should

be critical criteria for selection. Naïve best intentions too deeply engrained can end up as 'disabling help' (Beckett and Maynard, 2005: 116).

Guggenbuhl-Craig's (1985) veritable account of the inquisitional power of the helping professions still offers up a startling reminder: themes of faux altruism mix up self-healing and self-restitution motifs. A student's 'readiness to practise' status before the first field contact with clients needs to be confirmed through VE evidenced confidence, as does her continuing professional suitability throughout the course. As Lynn (1999) points out, social workers must be capable of comprehending the day-to-day practical connections between ideals of justice and the delivery of personal caring.

Moriarty and Murray (2005) provide some demographic data as to who does and who does not apply for social work. Open access policies and a wider inclusion agenda have allowed social work courses to reach out to the prior disadvantaged and to those with suppressed talents, so that we may speak of an admirably motivated institution. One version of this sees social work training as an educational melting pot which will yield up a graduand as an 'alloyed good'. Personal experience of types of discriminations will indeed be formative of the individual and the articulation of these in safe learning environments educational to all, but this does not mean admission tutors should not discerningly appraise a candidate's grasp of her own oppression.

Increasingly these days, people with deeply held religious beliefs see in social work again a natural felicitous opportunity to engage with their particular versions of spirituality. A renewed interest in religious and spiritual perspectives and a more confident social work pedagogy are beginning to explore this (Bowpitt, 1998; Henery, 2003; Gilligan and Furness, 2006; Holloway, 2007; Zahl *et al.*, 2007; Gray, 2008; Moss, 2008; Whiting, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Humphrey, 2008; Galloway *et al.*, 2008; Crabtree, 2008; Crabtree *et al.*, 2008; Gilligan, 2010). Religiously inspired students may reconnect with our evangelical roots, reaching out to their own spiritual under-served communities. However, they may also ignite some dormant tensions regarding the clash of liberal and fundamental attitudes, for example, the intrusion once again of overt homophobia and patriarchy.

My pluralist account of VE motivational theory will recognise the fact that some individuals will always make better salespersons than social workers, just as some people will also make better nurses or teachers. One important question is whether in order to do it 'well', recruitment and selection should be a trained specialist's task and not just an annual inconvenience spread around the more or less willingly co-opted. On my VE account, recruitment and selection into the profession must be a well-informed (even supersharp) moral decision about who might eventually make a morally active practitioner, not an exercise in filling places or meeting course quotas. The recruitment season is usually driven by a default process, eliminating the clearly unworthy but also having in mind intake figures. My account foregrounds a suitability debate about acceptable versus unacceptable difference, VE readiness to undertake training, and it invites re-examination of the melting pot strategy.

As Ryan *et al.* (1995) and Clark (1995) pointed out many years ago, the actual professional socialisation and formation of social work identity have been thinly scrutinised and this lack continues today. The longitudinal study by Ryan *et al.* at least provides some empirical support for the Dreyfus model of learning (Chapter 5). Most of this type of research has concentrated on homogeneous groups at a particular time and place rather than documenting change over a prolonged period. Manktelow and Lewis's (2005) study of the personality attributes of applicants for social work training show how selected candidates scored higher on measurements of personal non-judgmental openness compared to others. Gibbons *et al.* (2007) explore how psychometric testing of the personal qualities of students prior to their first field placement suggests that those who were moderately empathetic, moderately libertarian and not narcissistic performed better than those who were extremely judgmental in their moral orientation. Post-qualification, McAuliffe's (2005) study of social workers details the short and long-term personal impacts on them (emotionally, behaviourally and physiologically) of dealing with ethical dilemmas.

### **The curriculum**

In today's climate, the evidence-based practice movement and vernacular positivism, which the profession is encouraged to embrace, pursue research derived interventions which sometimes owe as much to state moral posturing as to cost-effectiveness. This

raises the question of what it is that institutions are teaching, not to mention researching. The idea of social work training as little more than rote learning of today's policy, backed up by the Code of Practice and sanctified by clients' and carers' cautionary tales from the field, is a parody to make the point. The fugitive's curriculum must foreground learning to critically accommodate, rather than to just accept, the world of work and its bureau regulation. At the very least, this will depend on how, and the extent to which, educational establishments teach values, and formatively and summatively assess them. On my VE account, this is not best done through crude national occupational standards, subject benchmarks, tick boxes and the cataloguing of performance indicators.

In Chapter 1, I described the press of orthodox moral theory and the way critical decision-making is usually taught. What is learnt is one matter; how then practised is another matter. As to congruency with a VE position, McAuliffe's (1999) 'clutching at codes' is an insightful account. In their compilation of different teaching methods and ways for students to reflect generally on values, Banks and Nohr (2003) consider the virtue ethical character dimension alongside the other standard approaches to moral theory. In contrast to the textbook case typically served up to students, Banks and Williams (2005) explore practitioners' own accounts of real dilemmas including the qualitative effect of character. Osmo and Landau (2006) seek to extrapolate the actual role of different moral theories from social workers' decision-making accounts. Gray and Gibbons (2007) suggest that there are often no right answers, only choices. McAuliffe and Chenoweth (2008), Harrington and Dolgoff (2008) and McAuliffe (2010) provide an overview of the literature on models of moral decision-making. Gray (2009) shows how the models depend on moral sources and the view of the world being propagated.

Drawing a distinction between basic biological needs and ones based on psychological or social needs, Borrmann's (2010: 59) critical realistic model of moral decision-making lends itself to the 'golden rule . . . . that there are dilemmas that cannot be solved so much as managed'. A small number of academic pedagogues, for example, Morelock (1997), Bowles *et al.* (2006), Clifford and Burke (2009) and Pullen-Sansfacon (2009) are now incorporating virtue ethics in their direct teaching of moral theory to students, some expressly using a pedagogy associated with Socratic dialogue. Banks and



Gallagher (2009) outline a diverse range of virtue ethical teaching strategies for both professional education and practice.

A number of other educationalists, for example, Heron (2005) and her account of anti-racist reflexivity, and Burman (2005) for emotional literacy, offer up various critical accounts of professional formation which can be adapted for VE purposes. However, learning how to help clients and carers develop their own life-resilient and life-enhancing virtues has barely infiltrated training. Van den Bersselaar (2004) suggests how structured virtue narratives by clients about their lives can be adopted by students in appreciative inquiry. Clark (2006) reminds us that social workers have always been concerned about client moral character, not just our own. As Clark (2006: 82) says, in situations of high personal significance for the client, the social worker is not only a conduit of practical assistance but also a personality who, by lived example and expressed values, conveys and models approved ways of living, 'even if she does not deliberately set out to do so'. My VE suggests that we ought to and therefore we also ought to learn all the better how to.

The main purpose of classroom teaching is to prepare the student for work-based experience and assessment of live performance. This raises the issue of vicious service delivery institutions and exposure to them. VE highlights the pivotal role of work-based practice educators or practice teachers as mentors and assessors, posing questions as to who they should be, what they should do and how they should do it. My discussion of standard learning theory, tacit knowledge formation and the situationist challenge (Chapters 5 and 6) is relevant here. It draws attention to the insufficiency, limited range and variable quality of work placements and learning opportunities. Forcing a student to copy the poor practices of an agency, being assessed by an equally poor work-based supervisor, and perhaps being surrounded by a demoralised team, are bad enough; knowingly putting students into such situations is a worse offence.

The chronic resource debates and the pragmatism arguments are familiar enough to anyone involved in social work education and training. A VE framework invites a supersharp moral perspective regarding the functions of a moral educator within the world of work, and what a minimal VE duty of care towards the student might mean. Hurka's account of higher-level V-clauses (Chapter 4) suggests that practice teaching

excellence (the nuanced knowledge and skills of role modelling, teaching, enabling, mentoring and assessing) will make high demands on any individual in terms of ability and commitment. A practicum with more or less willing but unskilled, unsupported practice educators offering inappropriate learning opportunities is surely a vice wrapped up as expediency. The view that a virtuous student will survive, if not thrive, is a little too sanguine.

Just how even a specialist teacher-practitioner might nurture the moral novitiate/sophomore through to moral licentiate status, as opposed to merely meeting occupational standards and following agency procedures through to registration, is a moot point. This is a VE discussion barely begun - a discussion that is presently fixated on the practice educator as efficient technocrat. The (voluntary) Code of Practice for Practice Teachers (NOPT, 2004) lists 63 expectations of must do's including such banalities as the need to record supervision with students and agree the record (3.6). It contains a routine anti-oppressive opening statement, including the obligation to 'encourage students to recognise and work towards minimising the effects of structural inequality and injustice'. There is nothing wrong with any of this: it is just that such guidance ends where VE practice education should begin.

Issues about placement range, level and type sharpen the moral question about at which point a social worker in training should specialise in, and be assessed against, one or other client group. Having an Eriksson-like overview of life from birth to death and an awareness of the extra vulnerabilities of putative clients at transitional stages are key to morally active practice (Chapter 7). At the same time, the Slote-Hursthouse-Swanton-Hurka VE analysis (Chapter 4) suggests that very few of us can ever become a moral expert along both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of practice. The issues of the generically qualified social worker and the transition point to specialist require re-examination in light of my VE framework.

Most of us have a natural specialist disposition towards, and more of a rapport with, one client group or the other, making us recursively keener in Hurka's sense to learn more about their travails and the causes of them. Specific client need and recognition of human uniqueness require a capacity to fine tune the aim and home in on a precise target. The idea that a qualifying student can commence a first post in childcare without

appropriate prior placement experience and associated specialist knowledge is to invite yet another high profile tragedy. Retention strategies involving creation of a sustainable career pathway which enables and encourages novices to become advanced practitioners are essential (Healy *et al.* 2009). Any VE moral supersharpeness we acquire comes from a dedicated immersion in the particularities of practice. The proposed post-qualification, pre-licence year of protected but assessed practice in one's chosen specialism is fully in accord with VE sentiment and reasoning, assuming it will be a virtuous employing institution offering the internship.

### **Interprofessional education**

A VE referenced generic/specialist debate invites interrogation of the current curriculum requirement for interprofessional learning. It is routinely argued that shared learning automatically makes for something akin to what might be called a vicarious fusion of professional horizons. However, if social work is at core a specific sort of ethical endeavour, with its own distinctive aim and target, there is no simple equation which makes the mere fact of interaction with other professional care students and their own as yet unformed and uninformed identities mutually beneficial.

VE learning is about overcoming moral confusion as to who we once were, who we are now, and who we should become, while we travel towards an identity-conferring stability standard. On my VE account, we share other-regarding virtues with other professions but their role-specific configuration means that finding the differences among the similarities and the similarities among the differences is no easy exercise in pedagogy. It can end up as a counterproductive othering process. Properly managed mixed student action learning sets are a VE compatible way forward in constructing shared common ethical space, so long as domain differences and hence unique identity are respected.

The actual impact of interprofessional education on knowledge formation and attitudinal change is debatable. While a natural concomitant of the joint health and care approach to virtue as exemplified by the Banks and Gallagher (2009) publication, there has been little systematic analysis of the impact of interprofessional and interdisciplinary working on 'moral order' in social work. Sharland and Taylor's (2008)

systematic research of the literature invites questions about what is actually meant by interprofessional learning and its efficacy.

The changing roles of social workers, their physical relocation and the fragmentation of service delivery modes have urged a reconsideration of mandated boundaries, forcing the profession to recast its distinctive ethical territory. Spafford *et al.* (2007) highlight how oral transmission, transformation and encodement of client information in multidisciplinary settings impact on notions of acceptable uncertainty and risk, and on supervision, mentoring and attitudinal shifts. The directives on interprofessional working are as likely to obfuscate role boundaries and responsibilities as to helpfully delineate them. Interprofessional working can make for an abyss in which no individual takes personal responsibility, the joint process itself offering up the illusion of moral activity.

Each publically dissected tragedy of social work failure batters our self-confidence further. We no longer confidently tread where others fear, and our failures haunt us. I introduced the phenomenon of the bystander effect in Chapter 3: all too often, official inquiries routinely find multidisciplinary working with its lack of meaningful interprofessional co-operation to be the fault. Mindful of my cosy moral party illusion, just how the virtuous doctor, schoolteacher, police officer, nurse and social worker are to communicate and work together successfully requires much deeper consideration. Maybe the other professions should first of all lay claim to their own distinctive set of specialist virtue modules, as I have attempted to do for social work.

### **The user and carer movement**

Nowadays, as a practical manifestation of the fusion of horizons (Chapter 10), current or former clients and carers are, through regulation, routinely involved in recruitment and selection of students, teaching, assessment, design, delivery and quality assurance of courses. They form a welcome, if unsettling, additional community within social work courses. The reconstruction of social realities by clients and carers themselves - alternative voices that retell stories in terms of lived experience and resistance to hegemonic discourse, values and power - impacts powerfully not only on social work students but also on course teaching staff and their own identities as educationalists.

The gradual shift from notions of passive clienthood and dependency to active participation and empowerment are redefining professional relationships and these are entering the classroom.

I noted in my critical analytical study that the response to this needs to be more than what Parton and O'Byrne (2000) describe as curiosity and respectful puzzlement. The response demands an occupational role re-examination, whether this be as student, practitioner or educationalist (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1995; Sousa and Eusebio, 2007; Glasby and Beresford, 2007). An alternative partnership concept has now entered the fray, redefining the terms and conditions for equal and meaningful engagement, and exposing the ambiguity of words like 'consultant'. People who receive or are subject to services query who authors and who delivers the institutional text, and who deconstructs it. They query the field positions which may be taken in relation to them directly and indirectly through the text.

Having been responsible for setting up, training, developing and supporting a national group of clients and carers to approve and inspect social work courses, I speak from experience. Many are not willing to enter formal arenas with social workers and educationalists, let alone regulators, where the engagement replicates, writ small, practices of domination writ large. We therefore tussle over the contract and the ethical space that conjoins us, uncertain whether to share power or to wholly relinquish it. We wrestle with the radical shift of client as passive welfare recipient to active commissioner, co-producer, scriptwriter and designer of services (Ferguson, 2007). The 'user movement' calls into question dog-eared precepts about being a professional social worker and hence also what it is to be a virtuous student and a virtuous lecturer.

We assume that clients and carers have an intuitive feel for what makes a good social worker, or more exactly a bad one, and that this particular tacit moral knowledge can be transmitted into the classroom. A capacity to zone in on innate empathy, honesty, reliability, trustworthiness and integrity - those relational properties or their lack - is often cited, but does invite further questions as to how an educational institution facilitates expression of client and carer knowledge. Moreover, while naive realistic positions assume so, the experience of being or having been cared for or controlled are not sufficient conditions for an enterprising and productive partnership. Certainly,

clients and carers may demonstrate courage, fortitude and perseverance in the pursuit of social justice; righteously indignant survivors of mental health and residential care institutions often advocate for others. In these cases, the voice of experience is a moral voice albeit a far from homogeneous one. The partnership forum is often a fraught one (Yeung and Box, 2008). While clients and carers can role model virtue, they can also be racist, sexist and homophobic, build hierarchies of disabilities, and promulgate classed and gendered constructions of reality, just like any one else.

The user movement embraces a wide range of political stances. In their own dispute about the construction of normalcy, ordinariness and vulnerability, some - coalitions of 'unruly' clients and carers - reject a consumerist/managerialist model of participation, intended to simply make delivery more efficiently targeted and which accepts the neo-liberal and neo-conservative agenda on its own terms. They argue for a citizenship/humanistic model to effect what it is to flourish holistically, one which seeks to redefine need and share ethical space in terms of social solidarities (Beresford and Croft, 2003). In doing so, they begin also to redefine professional boundaries and responsibilities in ways that question whether a crude consumerist model can really accommodate definition of need (Cowden and Singh, 2007).

The alternative VE anti-market moral language I employ - rescue, gift and exchange relationship - will not sit comfortably with many. Healy's (2002) in-depth interviews of social work managers highlight the tensions between social justice principles, which once brought people into the profession, and the emerging contexts of social welfare management. The thrust of my thesis is to look askance on a curriculum that is set down by the political establishment and which would have students simply genuflect to the hegemony. All this gets played out in any discussion with clients and carers. Questions arise about whose voice of experience, what sort of moral expertise is being foregrounded, who can claim to speak for whom, and why and how connections between personal experience and the bigger picture are made.

Clients and carers who have experienced the sharp, statutory control end of social work (exempting perhaps the field of mental health) are the least likely to come forward. Dominelli (2002) speaks of an exclusionary othering dyadic process that persists in social work. That can be as true between clients and carers. Formal partnerships can

easily become another them-us version of that moral party of the few. No doubt, those who are hard to reach would take the dialogue regarding moral certainty in hitherto unexplored directions. Engaging in virtue and vice talk with clients and carers requires more than co-option of the amicable by the wary. Even discourse location and territory need to be deconstructed. Warren (2007) offers some practical strategies. A brave course team might step out to set up a partnership forum in a children's home, a nursing home or day centre. I suggest that the old virtues of the settlement movement, reaching out to and working alongside the dispossessed in their own localities, are due for re-examination.

### **My professional research journey**

It is appropriate to conclude any professional thesis with some final personal thoughts. My motivation for researching into virtue ethics is made clear in the Introduction. I have endeavoured to conceptualise and propose a framework of value which bridges moral philosophy, social work history, social science, theory and practice in order to make sense of our crisis of identity and confidence. In retrospect, having struggled to manage the range of material I wished to include, even within the extended words granted, I could have concentrated on just one aspect, say the vice of bystanding. This would have made for an easier journey but, until I incorporated the idea of bystanding into my thinking and researched the social psychology, that opportunity did not exist. It is but one theoretical theme that awaits to be explored empirically in relation to social work failure.

I discarded adapting an idea of an Hegelian master-slave dialectic, freedom and self-determination, based on my last academic study of philosophy (Webster, 1976), as being overly esoteric and one step too far for my present ambition. That also awaits. I dallied with classic game theory to describe how social work moral judgments might be made in situations of uncertainty and also considered distribution of goods theories associated with Rawls (2001: 170-188) and Nozick (2001: 189-207). I have enjoyed several other eureka moments, mostly false. I did not have much of a preconceived idea of what to focus on within the VE paradigm at the commencement of my inquiry other than a feeling that my original critical analytical survey of the theory was very much a beginning effort and at the time the social work literature was inadequate. I realised

that only a deeper and broader theoretical inquiry could begin to find better conceptual answers to those problems of practice which motivated me to inquire in the first place.

My VE framework emerged from a cacophony of ideas which I went about filtering and seeking to corroborate by further theoretical exploration and appeal to any empirical data. Undertaking a truly systematic review of virtue ethics is nigh on impossible, if only because, as I indicated in my Introduction, the subject matter is vast (over two millennia of western philosophy to start with). The paradigmatic wars also require a study of relevant psychology and sociology and everything moral pedagogical in between. This brings me on to another conundrum.

Getting the balance right between a dissertation on moral philosophy and one on social work has not been straightforward. I am prone to writing dense text. As I have developed my ideas, I have at least tried to road test some aspects of them with a social work audience of practitioners, students, clients and carers (Webster, 2008, 2009, 2010), including an open forum debate (Wright and Webster, 2008). I am grateful for feedback regarding content, presentation and accessibility. Using my VE model on myself, I have endeavoured to manage the difference between passion for my interest and being angry about my world.

Knowing when to stop reading and discussing has also been difficult. A number of tangential publications have emerged, especially in the last two years while I have been delayed in concluding my own work, making me pause and reflect on my own pattern of commitments and reasoning and then wanting to modify my own analysis. Ferguson's (2008, 2010) 'mobile practices' themes and the Banks and Gallagher (2009) publication on virtues appeared during my own formative drafts, covering some of the material I was preparing. Webb (2010b) has just published another cogent social work argument for social justice based on moral categories of redistribution and recognition. I feel part of a discourse community with my own modest contribution. Even if somebody else proposes something similar, it will be said in a different way and for not quite the same reasons.

I have brought to this submission my own professional life experience. That includes the case of the runaway young person who, through the good offices of the local



community leader, I persuaded all concerned to put into the care of a sympathetic uncle and aunt. In my very last case as a practitioner, having placed seven children into care for their own safety, I was put under police protection because the father threatened to shoot me. My ideas of righteous indignation and just generosity, including the fear factor, can be traced to such experiences.

My critique of social work code and regulation stems from my direct hands-on management of the GSCC's national quality assurance of social work courses and my disillusionment with a regime that I have come to believe is part of the problem. I now share that I had to give reassurance to a worried employer that my thesis ideas could not be used as a defence in misconduct hearings. But for the fortunate misfortune of an accident leading to early retirement, I would finally have had to consider my role and function within the organisation, which was becoming increasingly untenable. I now speak as a fugitive myself, a social worker rather than a regulator. What I have learnt from becoming a researcher has been instrumental in that emerging position. For this thesis, I began by trying to recall all that I had forgotten as a postgraduate student of moral and political philosophy thirty-five years ago. The Sussex course has given me the words to explore and understand my philosophical discontent with my profession. Finding the appropriate field position has been difficult: a theoretical literature-based approach has made the research task easier to broker.

As a profession immersed in the realities of clients and carers, social work brings to the fore the postmodernist crisis in representation. I could have chosen to examine and project VE through the more explicit lens of one or two critical theorists from the outset. I eventually removed several connecting passages relating to Foucault, Levinas and Derrida, traces of whom alongside Deleuze, Badiou and Bourdieu are found throughout my text. While Bauman, Bhaskar and Gadamer are more obviously present, my cryptic allusions invite accusations regarding my own eclecticism - as might my amalgam of VE theorists. My defence would be that while avoidance of theoretical over-simplification is necessary, a practice of value is far too complex to be explained (away) by adherence to one theorist.

Smilansky (2007: 1) quotes Bertrand Russell who claimed that the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end up with

something so paradoxical that no one will believe it. In that vein, I began this dissertation by criticising our simplistic and piecemeal approach to value discourse, making an association with social work failure. Sending thousands of children of the working class poor to Australia to rescue them from the cycle of deprivation was for many decades of the 20th century the conventional best practice wisdom. Only now is that episode being reassessed as part of the aftermath of regret. Today's practices will be subject to the same retrospective scrutiny and some, at least, will be found wanting. Today's certainty may be tomorrow's error and today's error may be tomorrow's certainty. This is the only claim to moral knowledge that can be uttered with enduring confidence.

No theoretical framework will prevent social work failure. What is dispiriting is the failure to learn - the deadening past repeating itself in the present. However, if we care about who we think we are, a VE framework does at least provide the wherewithal to criticise those realities, acknowledge the ever-present prospect of failure and learn little-by-little. Swanton (Chapter 8) alerts us to the danger of the separation of role-contoured virtue from its prototypical source. The imperceptible continental drift of our language has made for a backwash of disvalue. The Foucauldian idea of an 'ethics of self', a 'rapport a soi', the kind of relationship one ought to have with oneself, requires a language of discourse that is once again truthful to that tradition. Restoration of lost identity is a project only for those to whom it matters. Any such project must be nomadic, mobile and emergent, not static, sedentary, striated, and submissive or asphyxiated (Webb, 2008). Much depends on the mobilisation of words we would use to describe how we want to live within our sacred ethical space. I have proposed a non self-effacing standard of righteous indignation, just generosity and value-exchange by which we can begin again to measure our worth and hence identity in our own terms. It makes for a peculiar kind of humanistic faith. Social work is a matter of conscience. Paraphrasing Louden (2001: 235), if the essential social worker's question is 'what sort of person ought I and can I *be*?' rather than 'what ought I and can I *do*?' then sophisticated practice will always immerse itself in, and derive its meaning from, the paradox of social work itself.

The morally active practitioner is a casuist in the original sense of the term, one who is skilled in resolving matters of conscience, deciding how far in a given case an action

can be justified, discovering and classifying the exceptions according to the norms laid down by society. As in the modern disparaging sense of casuist, a VE morally active practitioner will also invite accusations of sophistry, inevitably so, given that the social worker's moral impulse is derived from her inner traits, motives, and dispositions and those are 'of the greatest moral importance' (Louden, 1998: 491). The lost language of virtue and vice is a deeply rich, honourable way of speaking about human suffering and its alleviation and therefore resonates with social work's deep, rich and honourable tradition. To know ourselves again we must choose to speak of the virtuous social worker and of the viciousness of the world which is the source of all social work value. Little-by-little, out of our reclaimed laudatory language might eventually emerge some no small victory.

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## Appendix

### Classification of Character Strengths

(From Peterson & Seligman, 2004: 29-30, with permission to reproduce from OUP)

#### 1. **Wisdom and knowledge** - cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge.

- Creativity [originality, ingenuity]: Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualise and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
- Curiosity [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]: Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
- Open-mindedness [judgment, critical thinking]: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
- Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; obviously related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
- Perspective [wisdom]: Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people

#### 2. **Courage** - emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal

- Bravery [valour]: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
- Persistence [perseverance, industriousness]: Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; "getting it out the door"; taking pleasure in completing tasks
- Integrity [authenticity, honesty]: Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretence; taking responsibility for one's feelings and actions
- Vitality [zest, enthusiasm, vigour, energy]: Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or half-heartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

### 3. **Humanity** - interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others

- Love: Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people
- Kindness [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, "niceness"]: Doing favours and good deeds for others; helping them; taking care of them
- Social intelligence [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]: Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick

### 4. **Justice** - civic strengths that underlie healthy community life

- Citizenship [social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork]: Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share
- Fairness: Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
- Leadership: Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the same time maintain good relations within the group; organising group activities and seeing that they happen

### 5. **Temperance** - strengths that protect against excess

- Forgiveness and mercy: Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
- Humility / Modesty: Letting one's accomplishments speak for themselves; not seeking the spotlight; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
- Prudence: Being careful about one's choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
- Self-regulation [self control]: Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one's appetite and emotions

### 6. **Transcendence** - strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning

- Appreciation of beauty and excellence [awe, wonder, elevation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience

- Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
- Hope [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]: Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
- Humour [playfulness]: Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
- Spirituality [religiousness, faith, purpose]: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort