

Virtue-ethics as a device for narratives in Social Work The possibility of empowerment by moralising

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Abstract

Professional ethics usually concentrates on the dilemmas of the professional. But social workers in their practice have also to deal with the moral or existential aspects of the needs or the situation of their clients. Moral interventions can take place at different levels with different goals and expectations depending on the aspirations and abilities of the clients. Counselling, coaching and education, but also straightforward sanctions and social control belong to the repertoire of the social worker. These aspects are not always fully considered from a theoretical or methodological point-of-view. When it comes to moral counselling the social worker may rely for theoretical elaboration upon recent developments in practical philosophy, such as the growing interest in the philosophy of the art of life and virtue ethics. This fits in with the dialogic and narrative approach in social work. Virtue ethics on the basis of the four cardinal virtues and the four care virtues can serve as a structure for the narratives of the client and as such provide the social worker with a promising tool for feedback. Students can adopt this approach in appreciative inquiry.

Résumé

L'éthique professionnelle en général se limite aux dilemmes du professionnel. Mais les travailleurs sociaux dans leur pratique se voient confrontés aussi avec les aspects moraux et existentiels des besoins et de la situation de leurs clients. Leurs interventions morales s'interposent à des niveaux différents avec des buts et des attentes différents, dépendent des aspirations et des capacités des clients. La consultation, l'entraînement et l'éducation, mais aussi des sanctions directes et le contrôle social font partie du répertoire du travailleur social. Ces aspects ne sont pas toujours réfléchis tout à fait à partir d'une perspective théorique ou méthodologique. Aujourd'hui pour la consultation morale l'assistante sociale peut faire appel aux développements récents dans la philosophie pratique, notamment l'intérêt croissant pour la philosophie du savoir vivre et l'éthique des vertus. Ça correspond à l'approche dialogique et narrative dans le travail social. L'éthique des vertus, fondée sur les quatre vertus cardinales et les quatre vertus de la relation d'aide peut servir comme une structure narrative pour l'histoire du client et remettre au travailleur social un instrument prometteur pour donner feedback au client. Les étudiants peuvent s'exercer à cette approche par *appreciative inquiry*.

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Introduction

People who apply for help to social work have usually developed their own strategies for coping with problems and demands. In general a social worker will take these as a starting point for the helping process. In a way this is the first step towards taking the life story of the client as the point of departure for counselling. There has been a tendency in social work in the Netherlands, going back to the seventies of the last century, to make the life story the starting point of the helping process both theoretically and systematically. Earlier (Van den Bersselaar 2004) I suggested that, after a long period of confusion about the moral function of social work in relation to the client and to society, it could be useful to look at actual developments in practical philosophy to find new descriptions and perspectives for this function. In particular I proposed taking eudemonistic or virtue ethics as a structuring principle for the telling of life stories. In this article I shall work out this idea further and formulate some suggestions for the ethical training of beginning social workers in professional universities.

The proposal to take virtue ethics as a structuring principle for narratives might fill a gap in the theory of social work which has been elaborated in the Netherlands on the basis of the theory of communicative action by Habermas (Habermas 1981, Van der Laan 1990). The basic principle of the theory of communicative action as well as the basic principle of social work is the dialogue or the discourse. The main distinctive features of the dialogue are symmetry between the participants and absence of power. According to Habermas however dialogue is only possible in the domain of objective facts ("What is true?") and in the domain of social norms ("What is just?"). It is thought impossible in the subjective domain ("Am I, is she authentic?") because I cannot prove 'I am authentic' in the conversation itself, but only in actions. According to Habermas in a conversation I can only reflect on my authenticity under supervision of a therapeutic expert, which means that the communication does not have a symmetric and power-free character like in a dialogue. It has been noticed repeatedly that this is an inconsistency in the otherwise fundamentally dialogic device of the theory of communicative action, but, apart from the proposal for a discourse on identity by Kunneman (Kunneman 1986), no convincing attempts have been made to fill this gap. That is what virtue ethics might do and that is why virtue ethics might also play a role in social work as a dialogic method. Of course the use of virtue ethics is only part of the job. Social work always has to do with at least three aspects of the stories of client: the objective or factual aspect, the social or normative aspect and the subjective aspect. The following tables give a clear view of this connection.

Aspects of problems in social work

	Objective/factual aspects	Social/normative aspects	Subjective/personal aspects
Life world	Cultural integration, Income, housing etc.	Social integration, family, school, etc., values, norms	<i>Moral attitude, lived experience</i> Assimilation
System	Systems integration, labour, class	Social integration Social control, discipline,	Adaptation

It is the reflection on attitude and the lived experience of the client in the third column that has been excluded by Habermas from symmetric communication and situated in asymmetric, therapeutic settings. Moreover, this reflection has not been seen as moral or existential reflection. It is my suggestion that it can take the form of dialogic moral/existential reflection at least for a part, if by moral reflection we understand the reflection on the good life as in virtue ethics.

As can be seen in the table above there are different levels of moral intervention: the level of social integration, the level of social control, the level of moral attitude and the level of adaptation. In this article I will elaborate further on the level of moral attitude. It may be however that moral attitude turns out to be the frame of reference to the other approaches.

The narrative approach

According to Nijk (1978) the interest in the life story of the client is founded in a hermeneutic approach to social work. The basis of the helping or pedagogic intervention is always the client's story. This *narrative* gives sense to the things we do. Narratives are originally told about us, by our parents and other people in our neighbourhood, and only later do they become our own story. When the narratives with which we have grown up have become implausible, because they are more and more incongruent with newly encountered visions of life, we speak of a stagnating story. In that case people can go to a social worker for help. The helping instrument of the social worker is the conversation, more specifically the dialogue with the client, on the basis of a symmetric relationship. The aim of the conversation is to restore the narrative stream and through that the client's ability to act.

In the vision of Nijk and his followers the word of the client is the touchstone for the interpretations of the conversation. The helping relationship is essentially a hermeneutic one. Kunneman retakes and redrafts this idea in his notion of *normative professionalism* (Kunneman 1996). In a post-modern world the professional and the client do not share a common view of life in advance. They have more or less answered their own questions of life in a *personal existential ethics*, that takes the form of a narrative. In the helping process the existential ethics of the client and the professional come together without one of them being the expert. That is the aspect of normative professionalism in social work. Like the hermeneutic relationship normative professionalism is based on the symmetry between professional and client and on the narrative of the client. The counterpart of normative professionalism is technical professionalism. *Technical professionalism* is based on the instrumental, methodological expertise of the professional, for example the systems-theoretical viewpoint on human relationships. Technical expertise is essentially asymmetric: it is what the professional has and the client lacks. Kunneman nevertheless stresses that normative professionalism includes technical professionalism, as long as the limits, the limitations and the risks of this expertise can be the subject of normative reflection and legitimisation to the client, at least afterwards.

My hypothesis is that virtue ethics offers a structure for the telling or the interpretation of a life story both to the social worker and to the client. And that this makes sense because virtue ethics, especially in the form of a combination of the cardinal virtues and the care virtues, which will be explained later in this article, can be considered as a form of empowerment. It is the task of the social worker to analyse, together with the client, the client's situation in the three respects summed up above: the objective, the social/normative and the subjective. Where possible and desirable she will also give adequate feedback to encourage the client to include the moral and existential aspects of her situation in her story, in order to attune the helping process as much as possible to the client's position. Here virtue ethics can provide the social worker with clear concepts and a narrative structure for feedback. In the next sections I will consider in what way virtue ethics can fulfil this task.

Virtue ethics

Aristotle, our most important spokesman on virtue ethics, argued that morals have to do with the actualisation of human potential. People are not born as ready-made pieces of work, but as unfinished raw material with an open destination. Aristotle thought about this destination as an *entelecheia*, meaning that the substance and the destination of things, including man, lies in the things themselves, although in the beginning it is only a potential, waiting to be actualised. The general destination of man is thought to be the *good*. The actualisation of the good leads to *eudaimonia*, happiness. But apparently we cannot actualise ourselves as good and happy as such. Human potentiality should be seen as plural. People have different possibilities dependent on different situations, tasks and relationships. I am a son, a lover, a father, a teacher, a writer, a citizen and so on. I can ask myself what it is to be a good son, lover, father, teacher, writer and citizen and then try to actualise what in many respects I am only potentially. And that will in the end add to my happiness.

Although the concept of *entelecheia* has an essentialist flavour, we need not take over this connotation. We can also conceive of it in a constructivistic sense, meaning both that it is a construction and that as a construction it goes beyond the scope of the individual. But that does not mean that it cannot be used as a tool for reflection. So what people are potentially they are not yet actually. To become actually what they are potentially they have to define their own destination and undertake something to complete it. This idea can be considered as the beginning of a life story, a story of the good life for a specific person. The actualisation of the general of potentialities does not happen by itself. The path of life is full of pitfalls and not every actualisation of potentialities leads to happiness. Sticking to the actualisation of just potentials requires a stable attitude to life. That is what virtue is. Virtue means willpower as well as the orientation of the will towards the moral good or the good life.

In particular four special virtues help people to choose and reach their goals on the path of life:

- *Prudence*; this is the practical insight that is needed to choose the right destinations in life.
- *Courage and perseverance*; these are needed to stick to a chosen destination under all kinds of circumstances and to withstand adversity and opposition.
- *Moderation or self-restraint* is needed not to be carried away by passions or let the passions go their own way.
- *Justice* is needed to prevent one's own destination in life being achieved at the expense of others.

These are called the *cardinal* virtues. The cardinal virtues are essentially an inner or *ego*-directed type of ethics, concerned with the realisation of one's own happiness and the 'taming' of extreme passions. They are considered to be directed towards the welfare of the community as well, however only after the individual has achieved excellence in virtue, as Aristotle's magnanimous man. To be sure, Aristotle did not differentiate sharply between the personal and the public, but in our time we do.

There is another type of virtues, originating in, or at least revived by women's studies (Gilligan, Tronto), which is essentially concerned with the *other*. These are the *care* virtues, again four in number:

- *Attentiveness*; this is the capacity for attention that is crucial to genuine human interaction. It is the capacity to suspend one's own goals, ambitions and concerns to be able to show interest and to be attentive to others.
- **Responsibility has to do for example with the care of parents for their children, but also with the giving of care where we recognise the need for caring and there is no other way the need will be met.**
- *Competence* is the complex ability needed to guarantee that the intended care and the acceptance of the responsibility for it will lead to the provision of the needed care

- *Responsiveness* means that we can deal with our own vulnerability and inequality in receiving care and, inversely, that we can handle the vulnerability and inequality of the other with respect if giving care.

Although the care virtues have only recently been (re)discovered by women's studies as virtues especially displayed by women (see Tronto), they should nevertheless be considered as general human virtues. While the cardinal virtues are directed towards justice, the care virtues are directed towards responsibility.

The original meaning of *arete*, the Greek word for virtue, is *excellence*. Although it does not only have a moral connotation, I am interested here chiefly in moral excellence. These different connotations cannot always be split up too easily however. A sportsman for example needs talent and training to reach excellence, but, in order to develop his talents, he also needs moral qualities like ambition, perseverance and moderation in lifestyle. An excellent sportsman person therefore can be a model to a pupil in moral virtuousness. Unlike the special abilities of an excellent sportsman or musician, moral qualities are not personal talents that some people have and others do not. They are qualities that everybody needs to acquire and develop by identification with role models and by exercise. Exercise moreover needs not be training in the classroom or in other special environments: exercise consists of continuous practising in everyday situations. To become virtuous is learning by doing. So, not everybody should strive to become an excellent sportsman or musician, because only some people have the required talent and ambition, but that doesn't mean that you cannot acquire the moral qualities to become an excellent father or teacher or social worker.

Of course you first have to find out what it is to be a good father, teacher or social worker. This asks for a good deal of learning and reflection: learning, in order to make the right use of practical understanding and reason in discovering reasonable and meaningful goals in life; reflection, in order to find out and to deal with the impediments you may find on your way.

There is one kind of impediment that is of special interest to virtue ethics as a narrative device: the encounter with fear, frustration and other emotions. In general virtues like courage and moderation are attitudes that deal with danger and fear, and with distracting passions like concupiscence, appetite and greediness. They are expected to keep people on the right track. Virtue here, as always, is the just middle. One should not run away from danger out of fear just like that, because that would testify to cowardice. But one should also not rule out fear and run into the danger without a clear view of the gains and the risks, because that would testify to foolish recklessness. However, from the viewpoint of virtue ethics as a narrative device, the relation to the virtue of justice is not immediately obvious here. A case from social work might be illuminating on this point.

Virtues and vices in the client's story

I recently had a conversation with a colleague about some parents who were distressed because of the court custody case of their son. What was puzzling about this case was that the parents only felt sorry for themselves and not for their son. It seemed as if they hardly thought at all about the impact of the situation on their son. At first sight this appeared to be one of the reasons why their communication with their son got stuck and court custody was imposed. But to look at it only as a problem of communication seemed to be a little bit short-sighted. The question we asked ourselves was: does the problem have anything to do with the morality of the parents? It was clear to us that if it does, you cannot define it in terms of lack of norms or exceeding of norms, because you cannot prescribe to people what emotions they should display. We therefore asked ourselves to what extent ethics could be helpful.

One answer to this question is to see emotions as disturbances of the soul caused by false cognitions, as in Epicurean ethics. If the parents could let go of the idea that their

happiness is dependent on their son being at home, their distress would disappear. But the question we had to find an answer to was not: can you get rid of your emotions, but: can you speak of right emotions that do *justice* to the persons involved? In this respect the Aristotelian idea of the just middle is more promising. While the Epicurean approach in the end leads to *apatheia*, the freedom of emotions, the search for the just middle recognises the importance of emotions in human relationships. Children need to know what their parents feel for them to develop attachment, trust and self-confidence. To show no feelings at all as a parent is to do them injustice. But what about the feelings of the parents in our example? Are these the emotions that the son has a (moral) right to or even has an interest in? Or should we rather take here the Epicurean standpoint? What are emotions exactly?

Nussbaum defines emotions as taxations or value judgements attributing great relevance for our well being to things and persons we cannot control ourselves (Nussbaum 2001). So emotions have two sides: they point to the relevance of the person (or the situation) who is the cause of the emotion, but also to the ties of that person with the person who has the emotion. Emotions suppose the real importance of their object, but they also express the involvement of the subject, because the object is part of her purposes. That is why we can be torn by emotions. So the emotions of the parents in our case are not improper, in any case not improper as a whole. They testify to the relevance of the son to them. But the fact that the parents display only their own distress suggests that having a son is more an exalted idea to them than real involvement in him as a person. Or maybe it suggests that they are mourning as if they have lost their son, which is only partially true.

Whatever their thoughts may be, they show another aspect of emotions, namely a cognitive one. Although there is no consensus about cognition being a distinctive feature of emotions, this idea has been well known from the time of Stoicism up to the present time, for example in rational emotive therapy (RET). Recently it has again been strongly defended in a neo-stoic format by Nussbaum (2001). If emotions, whether explicit or not, are cognitive judgements, they can also be true or false in this respect. And if they are false they can, after being made explicit, be reconsidered and restated. One might expect as a consequence that the connected emotions will also change or disappear. However, the falsehood of emotions can also be connected with an image of the self, for example a high or low self esteem. In that case it is tied up with identity. Reflection alone on the emotions as judgements then will not suffice to gain the desired attitude. A working through of the emotions, to find and negate the inadequate pictures of the self and, in general, of the identity that lies behind it may be needed in order to restore self esteem. In the worst case scenario, often at hand in situations of guardianship, emotions are aggressive and, whether or not behavioural, therapy might be indicated before anything like moral reflection would be possible. At this point questions also arise about the motivation of the client: does he want to reconsider his emotions? And: can he?

Virtues and the will

We have to ask ourselves first also about the nature of the relation between virtues and *will*. In antique virtue ethics no sharp distinction is made between knowledge and will. To know the good is to want the good. Doing bad things is the consequence of a lack of knowledge. But since Augustine, thinking about will has fundamentally changed. Free will enables us not only to choose ourselves what to do, but also to choose against what we know we should do and even against our own interests and desires. Doing bad is not always a matter of being mistaken in knowledge, it can also be weakness of the will and, on an even larger scale, it is deliberate choice. In Christian ethics therefore being virtuous becomes being *of good will*. But good will is a gift from God in the form of *grace*. That is why in Christian ethics belief, hope and love are also cardinal virtues: the good will cannot be enforced, but whoever believes, hopes and loves may trust or in fact trusts

that God will give her grace and good will. In a secular world however there is no God coming out of the machine. That gives rise to serious problems and inconvenient solutions. In a secular world the possible origins for bad choices have in fact been multiplied. Not only lack of knowledge or weakness of will, but also bad, or, in any case, unreasonable will can be the cause of bad choices. In addition, we have to reckon with social or economic deprivation as bad conditions for developing good judgement. And, finally, some people are not gifted with the mental ability to make deliberate choices.

As long as the choice concerns ourselves there is no big problem here, because it is up to us what we make of our life. But what if others are involved? The reasons behind guardianship are often extreme situations of neglect or mistreatment of children by alcohol or drug addicted parents, aggressive fathers, single mothers without income, or single parents with varying relationships. In the Netherlands every year up to fifty children die from neglect or mistreatment, even though they are under the supervision of several professionals. To prevent these situations you can't expect much from moral reflection. As far as moral intervention is still needed here, it will consist of sanctions. Also in less extreme situations where there is already the threat of violence direct intervention by placement into care is indicated. The complaint is that professionals often wait too long and have too much consideration for the rights and the autonomy and the good intentions of the parents, so that irreparable damage may have been done. In recent discussions there has been a plea for preventative interventions at a much earlier stage, for example starting already with information and training for new parents at a health centre. Where moral reflection, in the sense developed here, can hardly be curative in cases of violence, it could be one of the points of reference for such prevention.

Suppose the parents in our case are susceptible to reflection, what could be expected? They might be stimulated by the social worker to reflect on their emotions to try and find out what is really worrying them. This might trigger questions about their own possible helplessness, but also questions like: *What is it to have a son? Do we love our children? Or, what is it to love your children?*, and in the end even questions like: *What is a good life for us?* I can only conjecture here on what may be the outcome of such reflection, but I guess that one outcome will be that the son comes into the picture and that this might create room for new emotions that do justice to his situation. If that is the first effect of this reflection, another outcome might also be the result: a clearer view of their position as care givers, here of course in terms of the *care virtues*. Up till now they have been too occupied with their own worries, so that they cannot be attentive to the worries of their son. For *attentiveness* presupposes the capacity to suspend one's own concerns. In that case they have to learn to separate their own concerns from the needs of their son. But surely they feel *responsible* for their son and part of their worries may derive from the fact that they are not able to answer to their own idea of responsibility. So thinking about what it is to be responsible might help them to clear up this idea and gain or regain attentiveness. This may in turn lead to reflection on the *competencies* needed as a parent to bear responsibility. This reflection may show that they are in fact dedicated and competent parents but lack confidence that they really are. Or it may show that they are incompetent due to some inadequate ideas about regulating children. Or it may appear that they are as competent as might be expected, but need some special support because of the unusual and hard to handle temperament of their child. These and similar reflections might in the end also enlarge their *responsiveness* towards their child. What moral abilities does the social worker need to provide the client with such feedback and how does she acquire these abilities?

Developing moral competence in social work

Using virtue ethics as a device for the narrative of the client does not mean of course that the social worker should let the client tell her story along the line of the sequence of

virtues as represented here. The proposed device is a system of everyday concepts that can serve to enlarge the vocabulary of the social worker. As such it can be used to further the self-reflection of the client by giving adequate feedback. I suppose social workers already use a lot of the interventions suggested here by virtue ethics. A lot of these interventions are already integrated into regular methods of social work. However, in general these concepts are not used in a moral sense. At a time where there is a lot of talk about morality, but where morality is mainly defined in terms of norms and values, and rights and duties, it is worth recalling a kind of morality that has to do with identity, character and attitude. Norms have primarily to do with the social aspects of morality while virtues have to do with personal autonomy. In addition it should be remembered that the virtue ethics approach is only one form of moral practice in social work. It could be considered as *moral or existential counselling*. There are other forms of moral intervention that have to do with the education of children and youngsters. Here we have to reckon with their stage of moral development and consequently with the attunement to the specific moral competencies of children and youngsters. I prefer to call these forms of intervention *moral coaching* and *moral education*. Other types of moral intervention are: *moral discipline*, *socio-moral control* and, old fashioned, but anew on the shelf: *civillising labour* (Van den Brink 2004).

To be able to support the client in her moral and existential search for meaning along the lines of virtue ethics it can be helpful if the social worker has some experience in applying this approach to her own narrative. In the education of social workers this can be prepared by the writing of life stories on the basis of virtue ethics. To become familiar with the principle students should not start with troubling experiences. I would suggest following the example of appreciative inquiry. *Appreciative inquiry* takes people's positive experiences as a starting point for reflection. In appreciative inquiry students are encouraged to retell a successful experience in such a way that the sources of success become visible so that they can be reactivated on new occasions. The advantage of this approach, besides the inspiration it claims to produce, is that it gives insight into the whole of a process including the obstructions and the way these were conquered.

As mentioned before, the narrative approach does not imply the telling of the whole story of life. Life stories can be and usually are simply episodes. For the same reason it is not always necessary to integrate the cardinal and the care virtues in the narrative structure of one episode. For the purpose of practice it is even recommendable to split them up. Both parts then have their own coherence. The way the cardinal virtues deliver the outline of an episode is roughly as follows: first the chosen destination in the situation of the narrative is described, and what was prudent about it in the light of a meaningful life. Next follows a description of the steps in the actualisation of this destination in the relevant adherent situations and, if relevant, the people involved. At this stage the impediments are also dealt with and the way they were conquered. The impediments may have been of different sorts, such as obstructions, dangers and fears, but also deprivations, passions and concurrent temptations. Here the story tells of conflict, self-control (or moderation) and perseverance (or courage). Finally the way justice has been done to those who were involved is considered. For the care virtues a similar coherence is effective. Here the student has to choose an episode that shows her attentiveness, her taking responsibility and how she developed competence. Of special interest here is her responsiveness to the needs of the persons involved, because it may have been especially difficult to find the just middle on this point.

Epilogue

To conclude I will briefly consider a possible objection to my proposal. It could be that virtue ethics is not appropriate anymore within a post-modern world, which calls for a personal existential ethics. Kunneman develops the concept of a *personal existential ethics* as a consequence of a complex theory of individuation in a post-modern

environment. Postmodernism can be characterised in brief by contingency, relativity and absence of centre. In the post-modern condition the relationship between reason, the passions and bodily sensibility in the individual has become horizontal, non-hierarchical. The individual is furthermore an intersection of different interfering influences, for example of speech, of corporeality and of the political-economic system. All these different aspects can count as resources for the individual to draw upon for the realisation of relations with other people. So individuation in the end has become a complex, but also creative reflexive process. It is in addition an ongoing process during lifetime. Kunneman calls the content of this process the development of a *personal existential ethics* (Kunneman 1996). To this objection I would say that virtue ethics as represented here has a relatively open structure that offers a good framework for the reflection that is needed to develop a personal existential ethics. It has no essentialist pretension, it can easily be understood in a constructivistic way and it surely does not claim exclusivity. It can simply be used as a tool for reflection. Its history shows it is an important one. Without such tools a personal existential ethics can easily become just an empty cover.

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