ARTICLES

Introducing a Virtue Perspective for Social Work and Helping

Jill C. Schreiber, Ruth E. Groenhout & Cheryl Brandsen

Virtue ethics provides a helpful framework for reconciling disparate traditions such as social work and Christianity. This article begins with a summary of traditional ethical theories that are organized around agents, actions, and consequences. Virtue ethics, an agent-centered theory, is then explained more thoroughly using Alasdair MacIntyre's concepts of practice, tradition, narrative, and the good life. The role of virtue ethics in the Christian tradition is explored in the third section. It concludes by considering how a virtue perspective provides resources for addressing issues relevant to religious faith and social work.

> *The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession's focus on individual wellbeing in a social context and the wellbeing of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living.*
>
> *Social workers promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.... Social workers are sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity and strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice. These activities may be in the form of direct practice, community organizing, supervision, consultation administration, advocacy, social and political action, policy development and implementation, education, and research and evaluation. Social workers seek to enhance the capacity of people to address their own needs. Social workers also seek to promote the responsiveness of*

Social Work & Christianity, Vol. 41, Nos. 2&3 (2014), 113-135
Journal of the North American Association of Christians in Social Work

> *organizations, communities, and other social institutions to individuals' needs and social problems.*
>
> *The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence.*

MANY READERS WILL RECOGNIZE THIS AS THE PREAMBLE TO THE *CODE of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers* (NASW, 2008). Along with the *Code's* corresponding principles and ethical standards, it provides a foundation for social work education and social work practice. So central, in fact, are these values and principles to the social work profession that accredited social work programs must ground themselves—their programs and their curricula—in them.

Questions remain, however, about how to develop social workers who, at their very center, claim the profession's values, principles, and ethical principles as integral to their identity. That is, how are practitioners formed who ***love*** justice, who ***care deeply*** about people and their flourishing, who ***settle for nothing less*** than doing their work competently, and whose ***core posture*** toward their work is one of doing it with integrity? Stated a bit differently, what character traits, or dispositions, or virtues ought to be nurtured in social work students and practitioners such that they can properly engage with and serve their clients and communities? Miroslav Volf (1996), to an audience larger than social workers, asks the question this way: How do we go about "fostering the kind of social agents capable of envisioning and creating just, truthful, and peaceful societies, and on shaping a cultural climate in which such agents will thrive?" (p. 21). These are the questions that shape this exploration of virtue and character in social work.

In recent years the notion of the virtues has offered help in thinking about connections between social work formation and practice. A virtue perspective offers a richer account of human life and well-being than some other ethical theories. It also seems to have more room for traditional religious beliefs, which is something that is evident in other articles in this collection. Virtue theory focuses on the question of what sort a person one ought to be, and for our purposes, what sort of person a social worker should be. Because of this focus, a virtue perspective puts squarely in the foreground questions about identity, about how things such as religious faith structure ethical interactions between people, and about whether social workers in a variety of specializations may need to become reflective about questions of character in addition to questions about basic rules of conduct. And because a virtue perspective raises a different set of ethical questions than those traditionally dealt with by principle-based or conse-

quentialist ethics, virtue is an important additional account of ethics for the social work practitioner.

Because many social workers might be unfamiliar with a virtue perspective, this introduction provides an essential starting point. We begin with a summary of ethical theories in general, something most social workers are familiar with, using a relatively standard distinction between agents, acts, and consequences. Virtue ethics is an agent-centered theory, and requires a more detailed account of the agent's context than do either act or consequence-based theory.

Because this account of virtue theory is derived from Alistair MacIntyre's account of the virtues, we turn next to MacIntrye, focusing specifically on the four concepts of practice, tradition, narrative, and the good life. Beginning with a few theoretical descriptions and categorizations provides a structure for the discussions that follow, as well as a shared language and a clearer understanding of the theoretical concepts that we rely on in interpreting various actions, principles, and policies.

All four of MacIntyre's concepts are complicated by the fact that we live in a pluralistic world, with widespread disagreement about what practices ought to look like, which traditions are good ones, and how human lives should be structured. These are clearly large questions about how we envision common decisions under conditions of wide disagreement. The third focus in this article will consider a very small slice of these large questions by focusing on the Christian tradition and the virtues.

We conclude by considering how a virtue perspective offers resources for addressing issues relevant to religious faith and social work, including how virtue ethics can provide tools to reconcile conflicts when these two traditions diverge.

A Brief Introduction to the Three Branches of Contemporary Ethical Theory: Agents, Actions, and Consequences

Although this collection is not primarily about resolving ethical dilemmas using virtue ethics, a brief look at a general map of contemporary ethical theory is useful to understanding what is unique about a virtue perspective. Looking at ethical theory first also provides a way into a virtue perspective by beginning with something generally familiar to most practitioners, i.e., principled and consequentialist ethical theories. Be patient, as this discussion might seem to be disconnected from the main questions of professional formation. Be patient also as the connection to professional ethics using a virtue approach is not as direct as connections to professional ethics using principled and consequentialist approaches. The latter two perspectives attempt to spell out guidelines for decision making explicitly, while virtue ethics focuses more on the qualities of the decision maker, an approach that is less direct and immediate when making difficult decisions.

Ethics deals with questions of right and wrong, with what should be done and what should not be done. In order to address questions of this sort, all ethical theories must address the three essential components of any ethical analysis: Agents, Actions, and Consequences. Agents, those who act in ethical (or unethical ways) are obviously central to any understanding of ethics. Actions, what agents do, are likewise central. Consequences, the results of those actions must be addressed as well. Contemporary ethics tends to divide into three camps based largely on which of these three the theory makes basic to its analysis. And it is worth noting that no theory can completely neglect any of the three—the question is not which are included, but which one is the primary unit of analysis, and which are considered secondary. For the most part, theories that focus on agents are virtue theories, theories that focus on acts are principle-based, and theories that focus on consequences are utilitarian or consequentialist.

Consequentialist Ethical Theories

Starting with the last component, then, we find that utilitarian and consequentialist ethical theories make the consequences of things like actions, rules, and social structures the fundamental unit of analysis; those that produce (on balance) good consequences are good; those that produce bad consequences are bad, and so on (Dolgoff, Harrington & Loewenberg, 2011; Reamer, 2013). For example, a consequentialist would argue that whether or not faith-based concepts such as sin should have a place in a counseling relationship depends on whether client outcomes are improved by using such language. Likewise questions about the relationship between religious faith and social work practice would be resolved largely by analysis of the results of various types of religious faith and particular practices. Consequentialist reasoning usually finds itself offering some version of a cost/benefit analysis to determine right and wrong.

Many people find this emphasis on results to be too limited, however. The consequentialist theory has no intrinsic way to evaluate what a "good" or "bad" consequence is. Questions of the relationship between religious faith and social work practice, they might argue, should not just be resolved by looking at costs and benefits. We need to be concerned about issues such as the basic autonomy of clients, or the professional's duty to respect professional boundaries. When we focus on these types of issues—autonomy, respect for professional boundaries, the rights of individuals, and the like—we are less likely to use consequentialist reasoning, and more likely to be using principle-based reasoning.

Principle-Based Ethical Theories

Principle-based ethical theories, which are sometimes called deontological or duty-based, focus on the nature of the action itself: what is it that someone is doing when they act in certain ways? From this analysis of action, these theorists derive principles of right or wrong action (Dolgoff, Harrington & Loewenberg, 2011; Reamer, 2013). Kantian thought, for example, whatever makes rational coherence the standard that actions must meet—when one makes an exception in one's own case to rules that one rationally expects others to obey, one is acting immorally. Traditional Natural Law thinking, on the other hand, holds that there are standards built into nature itself, and actions that contravene those standards are inherently wrong. When people argue that no matter what the consequences might be, certain types of actions or social structures are just wrong in themselves (e.g., using a professional client relationship to proselytize), they are usually operating from within a deontological framework.

Both the consequences of an action and the nature of an action itself are important ethical considerations. But if we restrict our focus to just these two issues, we may still be missing a vital part of ethical thought. It isn't enough, some might think, to respect the limits of a professional relationship; social workers also need to be the sorts of people who don't just respect boundaries because of professional codes. Social workers need to be the sorts of persons who are able to have deep compassion for their clients and are highly motivated to help clients' meet valued outcomes. Further, a large portion of what social workers do in their work involves helping clients figure out what sorts of people they should become in order to live good lives, and in order to have healthy relationships with those around them.

Virtue-Based Ethical Theories

Virtue ethics, our third type of theory, expresses these sorts of concerns. It focuses on the agent, on what kind of person he or she is, or should become. In virtue theory, actions and outcomes are interpreted in light of the character of the agent (Kallenberg, 1997; MacIntyre, 1984). The evaluation of character and an account of actions derived from character traits that are conducive to being a good social worker or to living an emotionally and socially healthy life forms the centerpiece of a virtue ethics approach.

Further, since character traits are the sorts of things that are developed by socially-constituted beings in the context of complex social structures, virtue ethics usually involves some analysis of the social structures and practices that develop and deepen (or prevent/diminish) certain types of character traits (MacIntyre, 1984). Contemporary cultural critics, for

example, who argue that excessive violence on TV shows produces people who are desensitized by or prone to violence themselves, are offering a version of a virtue ethics argument. Debates over the structure of delivery of care in social work likewise often center on issues of how social structures develop character. Do certain types of care foster dependency? Do other types of structures encourage the development of self-awareness and resilience? These considerations reflect virtue concerns.

Although all three of the ethical theories described above have been applied to social work, most social workers use either principle-based or consequence-based ethics (Osmo & Landau, 2006). These ethics fit well with the need for efficiency, avoidance of error, and risk management by describing social work in terms of procedures and outcomes (McBeath & Webb, 2002). However, virtue ethics is also a good fit for social work (Adams, 2009; Clark, 2006; Houston, 2003; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Osmo & Landau, 2006; Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010). Virtue ethics allows for the flexibility needed to make decisions in complex human interactions. It also fits social work because it looks at the trajectory of life and the critical impact of both contexts in which people live their lives and meanings that persons attach to their lives. Both context and meaning are significantly shaped by cultures and communities and require a theory that goes beyond a narrow focus on individual actions and behaviors.

Virtue ethics offers a rich conceptual understanding of competent and ethical social work practice. Virtue ethics also suggests that there is much more to professional practice than merely acquiring a critical mass of relevant knowledge, skills, and values and complying with a rigid set of rules or codes of conduct. From a virtue perspective it is clear that social workers need to have some sense of who they are as persons, and of how their choices and actions structure the nature of their whole lives. Virtue ethics does more than set "best practice" guidelines in order to limit risk or the damage of ethically-challenged social workers. McBeath and Webb (2002) put it this way: "Doing the right thing in social work is not a matter of applying a moral rule, it is not the work-as-activity that is morally right, but rather the worker-as agent expressed in the range of and subtlety of use, of the virtues" (p. 1026). Paying attention to virtue has the potential to enrich and deepen social work practice.

Like all ethical theories, any adequate virtue theory will, of course, need to account for the ethical nature of particular types of actions. This is usually done in terms of how performing, or failing to perform those actions, shapes character (e.g., telling many lies leads to becoming a fundamentally dishonest person). Virtue theory will also need to account for the place of consequences in an ethical theory.

Virtue ethicists traditionally address these issues of action and consequences, in part, through the concept of practical wisdom. It is important to

note that what virtue theorists call practical wisdom, or *phronesis*, is not the same thing as what is termed 'practice wisdom' in social work, though there are aspects of overlap. Practical wisdom is a general philosophical term for the virtue of seeing how to act well and wisely in complex and contingent circumstances; practice wisdom is the term generally used for the more specific attribute of seeing how best to practice social work (Powell, 2008).

Practical wisdom is a specific virtue (or character trait) that we see in some people who have the sort of wisdom necessary to make good choices in matters of concrete practice, to integrate the other virtues into a coherent whole, and generally exhibit good judgment in complex, under-determined circumstances (Zagzebski, 1996). This virtue is clearly lacking in someone who consistently makes bad decisions, regardless of how much we might assess that person as well-intentioned, and even virtuous in other ways (e.g., courageous or generous).

Experienced social workers know that some practitioners seem to have an innate sense of how to get things done well, while others, no matter how hard they try, rarely seem to have much success. The difference between the two isn't generally one of theoretical knowledge—both might have gone through very similar graduate programs, and have had similar practices. The difference has to do with a grasp of the subtleties of functioning in practical contexts. That is what is meant by practical wisdom.

Without practical wisdom, one cannot be fully virtuous, because ethics is not just about motives, as important as they are, nor just about theoretical concerns. Being a virtuous person requires the ability to live well, and help others live well, and this is a practical matter that must be evaluated in the context of everyday life. Practical wisdom is judged by seeing the outcomes of actions and decisions (that is, the consequences of actions) and evaluating whether or not an individual actually knows how to accomplish what a good moral agent ought to accomplish. It reflects an agent's motives, and it demonstrates that they have the sort of hands-on understanding that is required for good practice, not just an intellectual grasp of a subject matter.

The structure of action, agent, and consequences serves us well for seeing the differences among the various dominant ethical theories, but we will now leave it behind and focus more broadly on a virtue framework and its account of human life and morality. One of the most significant accounts of virtue theory in the contemporary world is offered by the philosopher Alastair MacIntyre (2007); the next section offers a brief introduction to his theoretical account and descriptions of the key concepts. His development of virtue ethics relies on four key concepts*: practices, traditions and narratives,* and the *good life*. By developing these concepts he provides an account of the virtues.

Contemporary Virtue Ethics: Alasdair MacIntyre

In *After Virtue*, a book that has played a key role in the revival of the virtue ethics tradition in recent decades, MacIntyre offers an account of how to describe and analyze the virtues. It is an account of the virtues that works with a series of nested concepts—virtues are defined in terms of practices, practices are defined in terms of traditions and narratives, and traditions and narratives are constructed within the context of the concept of a good human life. We'll follow that structure in our discussion.

Virtue

MacIntyre begins with Aristotle's notion of a virtue. A virtue is a character trait that is desirable to have. (Undesirable character traits are vices, and most virtue and vices come in sets of three, with a given virtue, say, courage, juxtaposed between two vices, rashness and cowardice.) Just which character traits are considered desirable, however, has changed over time and through different historical periods. There is no single list of 'the virtues' that all humans seem to think are good and worth developing. During Ancient Greek times, for example, humility was considered a vice, while during the Christian era it became a virtue (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 165).

There are, then, competing lists of the virtues, both across time and across cultures. For MacIntyre, this is problematic, although contemporary social work tends to see pluralistic lists of virtues as generally a positive feature (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Clark, 2006; Houston, 2003; McBeath & Webb, 2002). Houston (2003) suggests that the path to discerning virtues comes from dialogical exchanges between committed inquirers. Conversation partners include, but are not limited to, current scholars, historical traditions of communities, and people with diverse perspectives from within the current community. When we discuss which character traits comprise the virtues that social workers should embody and advocate, then, there are a number of voices that should join the conversation including practitioners, teachers, clients, and others affected by whatever decisions will be made. The articles in this collection explore virtues that some Christian social workers identify as important to their work. This list is not intended to be exhaustive for or exclusive to Christian social workers.

For our purposes at this point, we simply note that character traits (both virtues and vices) shape actions, making virtues of central relevance for social work analysis. Of course, the opposite is also true—our actions contribute to forming our character—because there is a circular cause and effect mechanism between character and action. Because of this relationship between character and action, virtues cannot be acquired without practicing particular actions over and over again. For example, if honesty

is a virtue, a person develops that virtue by consistently speaking and behaving in honest ways. We practice virtue like we practice piano. One does not become virtuous simply by an act of will; virtues are only acquired through extended practice.

The term 'practice,' however, has two different meanings in the context of virtue ethics. So far we have been using it in its everyday sense, to mean the simple repetition of an action. In virtue ethics, however, the term practice has a more technical meaning, used to describe particular culturally constructed systems of activity that have a history and a set of conventions for how they are conducted.

Practice

MacIntyre notes that we develop character traits (whether virtues or vices) in the context of practices defined in this more technical sense. His definition of practice has been very influential in social work theory as well as in other philosophical contexts because it captures so much of what makes something an important force for shaping character. The definition runs as follows:

> [A practice is] any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence, which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended. (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 187)

When we speak of practices in the rest of this essay, then, what we will be discussing is this more specific definition of a practice. Because this definition is dense with meaning, let's consider some of its key phrases.

Social work includes a number of different practices in MacIntyre's sense. One could debate whether it is better to analyze social work itself as a single practice, rather than the fields of specialization within social work as specific practices. Because the various specializations aim at quite different outcomes, however, it seems more in keeping with MacIntyre's analysis to see social work overall as a broad tradition (as discussed in the next section) and the various specific parts of social work as the practices that fit within that overarching tradition. If we look at the various sorts of social work specializations, such as direct practice with individual and families, or community development, or clinical work in a hospital setting, in each case we can see the ways that the specific field fits MacIntyre's definition of a practice.

1. Each of these specific types of specialization is *coherent and complex*. One cannot simply practice social work in the abstract. The complexities of the field are such that an experienced practitioner needs to have been trained to work in the area and needs to know the particular body of knowledge and set of skills the work requires. Individual counseling, for example, involves a complex set of concerns about interacting with clients over time and providing assistance without generating dependency. As each client brings a different set of issues, and lives within a different set of social circumstances, the complexity a social worker needs to deal with is enormous. But this complexity is balanced by an internal coherence of basic, agreed-upon values, goals, and strategies that endure over time. Counseling is a coherent activity because it aims at the development of life skills and improved capacity for flourishing in clients, giving that particular social work practice ongoing coherence and continuity.

2. Each area represents *a form of socially established co-operative human activity*. Effective social work practice is never conducted in isolation. Working in community development, for example, requires the active participation of and cooperation of other social work colleagues in the same field; human networks outside of social work that provide support, resources, and connections; and the social work profession at large that establishes ethics, regulatory bodies, human services organizations, etc. All of these various social structures function cooperatively to shape the way that community development works. Because of this, community development functions differently than other social work practices which are, in turn, shaped by a different set of socially established cooperative structures (e.g., the structure of contemporary health care delivery, in the case of social workers doing clinical work in a hospital setting.)

3. Each of these individual practices *has goods internal to the practice*. Like any practice, all of these various fields of social work will involve a mixture of internal and external goods or rewards. The external rewards such as money, stable employment, and health insurance are shared with almost all employment. Goods internal to social work might include such things as the internal satisfaction and fulfillment that comes from contributing to client or community flourishing, improved client functioning, or achievement of social justice in some area. These are the kinds of internal goods that make social work meaningful and worthwhile.

   Acquiring social work knowledge and skills depends to a large extent on the teaching and development/refinement of techniques

of social workers who came before us. This is why any practitioner, in addition to specializing, needs to learn how to perform his or her job in the field, with experienced practitioners. In the course of learning the job, one also learns what values structure the practice. To pick one example, a clinical social worker in a hospital setting will probably not find that developing long-term relationships with clients is a particularly central goal (or internal good) for his practice. A community organizer, on the other hand, is likely to find long-term relationships absolutely central for her work, and perhaps one of the most rewarding parts of her job. Conversely, a clinical social worker in a hospital setting may learn the satisfaction of working intimately with people in situations involving intense suffering, pain and sometimes death. But the community organizer will seldom experience this level of intense relationship.

4. The internal goods of these various practices, in turn, generate *standards of excellence, which are appropriate to and partially definitive of, that form of activity.* Standards of excellence for social work practices are determined and endorsed by the social work profession precisely because it is practitioners who know what counts as good practice. What counts as good community organizing, for instance, is determined largely by how community organization has been conducted in the past, and by the internal standards of excellence that have developed over the years as practitioners have discovered what works, what doesn't, and the best ways of doing things. For many practices, when outsiders ask why things are done this way (rather than another way), the quickest answer is because that's what works best. What works best can only be discovered by actually engaging in the practice, guided by education and practice standards that have emerged over time and informed by research.

5. Finally, each of the specializations we have considered offer examples of practices in which *human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended.* In each, as social work's understanding of effective practice grows, new approaches and strategies are developed. Individual counseling today is different in many respects from individual counseling thirty years ago because as practitioners have worked in the field, they have come to see that the picture of counseling, including its goals and purposes, that the original practitioners worked with needed modifying. For example, social work has a long history of focusing on problems and pathology. This way of working was premised on certain un-

> derstandings of clients being in need of "fixing." More recently, social work has developed and implemented robust models for working with clients from a strengths perspective. This is informed by a strong belief in client resiliency. Experienced practitioners are able to work within both frameworks and find the right balance of how best to understand human beings. Our knowledge of what good counseling looks like has been systematically extended by the work of practitioners in this field, actively engaging in practice, and also asking reflective questions about the desired outcomes of practice.

Practices, then, are historically and socially situated systems of human activity that aim at, and develop, particular goals and ends. When people engage in those practices, their character is shaped in particular ways, and they develop character traits (virtues) that in turn allow them to engage in those practices well; not only to function as a medical social worker or community organizer, but to be a really effective in this work. And the particular traits that each practice will inculcate in its practitioners will differ, depending on the practice. A community organizer, for example, may need to develop character traits of aggressiveness and confrontation that would be much less helpful in a counselor; a social worker in a health care setting will need skills of translating between technical medical jargon and everyday languages. Engaging over long periods of time in the particular practice shapes who one then becomes so that an effective practitioner will exhibit the virtues appropriate to that identity.

By defining the virtues as he does, MacIntyre grounds them concretely, so that they can be identified in a relatively objective way. At the same time, because they are always relative to particular practices, virtues can be historically and socially variable, and we can understand how one trait can be a virtue in one context and a vice in another (e.g., there would be virtues of a community organizer that would not be the virtues of a therapist). The combination of objectivity and situational relativity is a very powerful one.

Situating the virtues contextually in this way, however, sets up a potential problem for MacIntyre: if two or more practices dictate competing virtues, how can people choose among them in non-arbitrary ways? MacIntyre's solution to this is to add another layer to his analysis. Practices are not free-standing, he notes, but take their places in the context of a broader tradition that sets the context within which the practice makes sense. These traditions are embodied primarily in narrative structures, which are themselves embedded in a general sense of what a good human life must involve, but we will begin with the notion of tradition itself.

Tradition

Practices are developed in the context of broader traditions that shape our understanding of ourselves and our lives. Higher education, for example, is a tradition that has developed over centuries in order to provide a particular sort of intellectual and personal development. Obviously people could be (and have been) educated in other ways in other cultures and historical periods, but the world most of us live in is a world where education is provided at an advanced level by a particular set of practices structured by the tradition of Western higher education. Arguments that fill the news about the place of distance learning are arguments about whether one aspect of that tradition needs to change. The general profession of social work, as a category within which the various practices we have been discussing so far fit and find their meaning, is likewise a tradition.

Traditions structure the patterns of our thought in ways that shape us profoundly without our always being aware of it at any conscious level. Many social workers assume that social work just is part of how the world is—it is one among many types of structures in our world (education, social work, medicine, business), and is assumed to need no explanation or justification. But social work has changed profoundly over time and differs profoundly across nations at the present time. MacIntyre emphasizes that a tradition is generally neither stable nor conservative. Instead, he notes, "Its common life will be … constituted by a continuous argument as to what a university is and ought to be or what good farming is or what good medicine is. Traditions, when vital, embody continuities of conflict" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 222). Further, he notes, without conflict, a tradition is dying or already dead. If practitioners are working within a living tradition they will need to keep arguing about what their goals are, how they fit with the tradition's overarching purposes, and whether those purposes need to be redefined or adjusted. "A living tradition then is a historically extended, socially embodied argument, an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. 222).

We see this in the case of social work, which has a lengthy tradition of development, through which various individual practices have arisen. Think, for example, about the recent emergence of an emphasis on global social work, a field of practice not in the profession's imagination in its early years. Further, part of learning what social work is involves learning how social workers have disagreed about what social work should look like. Think for example about the perennial question of how best to care for the poor. Poor laws and poor farms, the Charity Organization Societies, and Settlement Houses stand as exemplars of the profession's grappling with the goals and purposes of social work related to individual change versus social reform. The on-going debate about the goals and purposes of social

work has shaped the contemporary nature of social work and social work education in profound ways; the future of social work, likewise, will be shaped by the questions and debates of the contemporary field.

Social work is itself a tradition, but it is certainly not the only tradition of which practitioners find themselves members. Social workers come from a wide variety of traditions, both religious (Jewish, Christian, Buddhist) and non-religious (they might belong to a variety of ethnic or cultural groups, and so on). Although some of these traditions share similar practices and even similar virtues with social work, these practices and virtues may be undergirded differently by these different traditions. For example, because both social work and the Christian tradition are independent (though connected) institutions, individuals who are members of both traditions will sometimes find that the virtues, practices, and attitudes standard in one context come into conflict with the other. Or it may be that basic assumptions about how to reason or what counts as a valid source of data or truth in one context will conflict with the other. All of these tensions generate challenges for the Christian social worker, as they do for social workers from other faith or cultural traditions.

How to address the challenges of simultaneous membership in diverse traditions will be addressed later. But before leaving the topic of tradition, one more issue needs to be addressed—the issue of how traditions function in our lives. For MacIntyre, traditions are carried along in human history largely through the medium of narrative, or story. Think, for example, of the Christian tradition. Although it is often codified into doctrine, the Bible is largely a repository of stories, and it is those stories, particularly the stories of Jesus's life and ministry, that have shaped the Christian tradition over the past centuries.

Narrative

Social work, like other traditions, is shaped by narratives, or stories, and it functions by offering (or sometimes criticizing) the narratives of its own and other traditions. Standard histories of social work, such as John Ehrenreich's *Altruistic Imagination* (1985), Specht and Courtney's *Unfaithful Angels* (1995), or Reisch and Andrews's *The Road Not Taken* (2002) provide a narrative structure that explains where social work practices began, how they developed, and what they have become today. Likewise the practices that embody the tradition of social work are passed on, in part, by case studies—stories that illustrate really good social work practices or, perhaps, stories that offer dreadful examples of social work practice gone horribly wrong, usually delivered with the implicit message that the hearer must ***never*** do likewise. Stories of this sort shape our understanding of our actions, and the meaning of those actions in the broader context of the various traditions of which we are a part. They shape us by providing a

context within which we understand what has happened to us and what this means for our lives.

When we think about our lives, we think about them in the terms of narratives or stories that are the collective property of our cultural milieu. Some of these are simplistic, and perhaps not well-suited to shaping our lives (Disney Princess, anyone?) while others seem to capture deep truths about how we understand our lives and identities. And which narrative structures we use to understand ourselves—whether the lone cowboy riding into town to do justice, or the Norman Rockwell socially-enmeshed citizen—will in turn structure which practices we see as good, which as neutral, which as harmful. If I 'tell my story' in terms of the standard Western, for example, I will think of as problematic practices that require emotional closeness and intimacy, while if I think of myself as a Disney princess, emotional closeness may be all I desire.

Every culture and historical setting has a number of narrative structures that are taken for granted in people's thinking. Many of these stories come to us from religious traditions, whether Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or Hindu. Others come from common cultural heritage; Americans could interpret events in terms of the Br'er Rabbit stories, for example, or tall tales like Paul Bunyan and John Henry. More commonly in the contemporary world we can recognize the narratives found in popular television shows and movies as providing the stories that make sense of our lives; the Twilight series, for example, has generated quite a bit of controversy over just what 'story' it offers young women developing their sexual identity.

The narrative structures that shape our lives usually function at a level well below consciousness. Unless we are asked specifically to explain actions or choices, in fact, we often don't recognize that what we are doing, and who we are becoming, is shaped by particular narrative structures. In one way or another, all stories portray certain lives as ones that are good lives for people to live, while other lives are bad ones. They have built-in value-systems that allow people to make judgments about how to live, what matters in life, and who they should love or hate. They offer a picture of what MacIntyre calls the good life for a human.

Good Life

The traditions and the narratives embedded in various traditions make sense only with some sense of what the goal of life is, or what constitutes a *good life*. We generally don't have a single simple picture of what a good life would involve, but all traditions have some general picture of what elements are essential for any life to be called a good one. Belonging to that tradition generally involves also adopting some (or all) of that picture of the good life as part of the story of one's own life. So, for example, a central part of the Christian narrative is the idea that humans are created by God to live in

harmonious relationship with God and with each other. Human lives that lack this central feature of a good life lack an essential element of what all humans need to truly flourish. The social work tradition shares with Christianity the notion that humans are essentially relational beings, but social work does not require the particular relationship with God that Christianity does.

Given this complex structure, it is possible to see how MacIntyre thinks all of these various pieces fit together. A (somewhat vague) picture of the central parts of the good life is embodied in a tradition in the form of various stories and narratives. The tradition is built out of a whole range of concrete practices, and the virtues are the character traits that allow people to function well as people who are shaped by, and pursuing, that particular vision of the good life. Social work, for example, considers the creation of a healthy, functioning community to be an essential part of any good human life. The practices of social work are designed to generate specific types of good things that are essential pieces of that healthy community, and the character of social workers is then, in turn, shaped by those practices.

MacIntyre's concept of the good life is probably the most controversial part of his account of virtue ethics for a social work context. While each of us may be comfortable with the notion that we became the professionals we are in part because of a particular picture of the good life, the idea that there is a single, over-arching account of *the* good life contained within the social work tradition is enormously controversial, and would be rejected by many leading scholars.

To pick but one example, Clark (2006) claims that social workers should do no more than set standards for the *adequate* life that represent a "thin account of human well-being" (p. 76). He does not think that "it is the role of the organs of the state to shape the broad aspirations to ways of life; [instead] the job of social services is limited to preventing gross impoverishment, infringements of basic human rights and the flouting of fairly minimal standards of decency and public order" (Clark, 2006, p. 75). This is a standard picture of how social work should function. For example, many social workers would argue that it would be inappropriate for a child welfare worker to hold a specific standard of a good life when working with a dysfunctional family. Her or his job should be limited to determining minimum standards of parenting that must be met to avoid the removal of a child from the family. Social workers with this view can legitimately set standards for an adequate, or a minimally decent life, but would over-step their authority if they tried to tell clients what a good life consists of. Clients themselves often have actual and specific values for the good life that need to be respected, and protecting their individual right to self-determination is incompatible with any single account of the good life.

At the same time that social workers are expected to respect client self-determination, however, they are also mandated "to promote human

and community well-being" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008). This central tenet of social work suggests that there are standards for the good life implicit in the tradition of social work. One of the things that make social work a complicated practice, however, is the fact that part of what social work means by human well-being is precisely the ability of individuals to be self-determining and to function autonomously, a conception which interestingly enough reflects a Western liberal democratic tradition not shared around the world. Human well-being cannot be imposed in a top-down manner if it inherently involves self-determination. But when we examine the various barriers to self-determination that social work regularly combats, it is clear that even self-determination is defined within the context of a general account of the good life for humans. Substance abuse, for example, is generally considered to be a barrier to self-determination, not an expression of self-determination.

So while Clark is correct in noting that social workers probably function best when they operate within 'thin' conceptions of what the lower limits of acceptable life choices are, this is not because that is all that social workers hope for their clients to achieve. It is simply that achieving a higher standard of a truly good life is something the individual must do for him- or herself past a certain point, and others can only provide the context within which such a life is possible. But that hardly entails that social work has nothing more than a thin picture of the good for human lives; social workers may have a very robust picture of the good human life, including healthy interpersonal relationships, fulfilling work, and a safe, thriving communities. This is consistent with MacIntyre's belief that conceptions of the good life come from communities, traditions, and culture rather than from some universal understanding of what is good.

Fitting the Pieces Together

In summary, then, MacIntyre (1984, 2007) claims that the virtues are character traits that are essential for engaging in practices. Practices only make sense within the context of particular traditions and the stories embedded in those traditions. Finally, traditions are held together by a picture of what the good human life must look like. Aggressiveness and a willingness to engage in physical combat are not virtues in most contexts, for example, but if one is engaged in the practice of high school football in the U.S., running as fast as you can into somebody, head first, makes sense. And high school football is embedded in the tradition of smaller towns in the U.S. telling their stories of traditional identity in part by recounting the wins and losses of the local team. The good life assumed in these stories is one that bears a striking resemblance to warrior myths in other cultures and times.

This, then, is the basic structure of virtue ethics: we identify virtues by their location in specific practices. Practices are evaluated by their relevance to the story of a life, and a life is evaluated in terms of how it fits into particular cultural and traditional narrative structures. These structures themselves contain, implicitly or explicitly, embedded assumptions about what the true good for humans is. We can identify these assumptions, and we can compare them across cultural or historical differences, but we cannot make absolute claims about which is the best account of the good for humans by purely theoretical means. MacIntyre (1984, 2007) thinks the only test of the truth of a story's claims about the good life for humans is to see how that story plays out over centuries in the lives of whole cultural groups. Over time a story's capacity to accommodate changing historical circumstances, its capacity to structure human lives in ways that make them rich and flourishing, and its ability to continue to be relevant to new generations all reflect on its adequacy as an account of the good life.

With this in mind, what does virtue ethics have to say about professional helping in a pluralistic society, structured by a wide diversity of traditions and practices? For example, the narratives of particular religious communities and the narratives of secular society might not always coincide, generating conflicts for social workers with regard to the social work practice, virtues, and visions of the good life that flow out of these different narratives.

In order to consider these issues, one religious tradition, Christianity, will be considered alongside of social work as an example of how a person of faith could integrate multiple traditions. In order to do this, we will first provide a brief summary of the role of virtue ethics in the Christian tradition.

Virtue Ethics in the Christian Tradition

Virtue ethics offers Christian theorists ways of thinking about how lives are formed (or ought to be formed) within the context of a religious tradition and in the light of the stories of Scripture. The emphasis on analyzing and developing character traits fits well with the Christian recognition that we are called to become certain types of people. In this section, we discuss the thought of one particularly influential Christian thinker, Stanley Hauerwas, a theologian whose work reflects almost every feature of MacIntyre's theoretical structure (Berkman & Cartwright, 2001).

Hauerwas speaks from within and primarily to other members of the Christian community—he can thus assume that what structures and gives meaning to their lives and thoughts are the stories of Scripture as handed down through the years in the community of the church. His work is thus framed by the Christian *tradition*, and more specifically by the way that tradition is embodied in the practices of the church community. Hauerwas

tends to use the language of community more than the language of tradition; for our purposes we will treat the two terms as largely the same (Berkman & Cartwright, 2001).

The Christian community has developed *practices* over the centuries that embody that tradition in specific actions. The practices of reading scripture, communal worship, and prayer, for example, are found in almost all Christian communities. It is easy to take these for granted, but these practices have been central for shaping the lives of believers over the years precisely because, as MacIntyre has argued, specific Christian practices can inculcate virtues that are essential for living the Christian life well.

Many contemporary theorists, for example, note the ways that liturgy—the regular practice of a form of worship—can provide structure for our actions in ways that are rarely conscious (Smith, 2009). Think of the most basic components of sacramental worship, for example. Communion and baptism both turn ordinary acts (eating, washing) into sacred ones and locate both in the context of a church community. While it is certainly possible to take communion weekly without feeling any connection to the choices we make about hospitality and sharing food with others, the ritual enactment of a communal meal has the potential to make eating both sacred and communal in our everyday lives as well. From that perspective, it is easy to see generosity and hospitality as virtues we need to develop and express.

Additionally, all Christian communities are defined in one way or another by their connection to the stories of scripture, and their location within specific parts of that *narrative*. But these stories are not static: as people live out traditions, their own lives and responses to that tradition can act to modify it and bring new possibilities to light. In the context of American slavery, for example, African American appropriation of the Exodus narrative changed the way many Christians understand what it means to live as a member of the Body of Christ. Rather than emphasizing character traits of obedience and submission, this living out of a central Christian narrative emphasizes the struggle for liberation and justice for the oppressed, and courage in standing up to the powerful. In the context of this story, read and appropriated by this community, submission to earthly rulers is not automatically seen as a virtue.

The ultimate end of the Christian stories is eschatological in nature—they all look forward to a time when all things will be made right. (Think how different this is from Greek tragedies where characters live out the dreadful consequences of the gods' whims.) But they are also stories that offer a clear-eyed perspective on the ways that the world we currently inhabit is not perfect, but rather wracked with sin and suffering. The church community tries to live out the story of scripture in ways that are both faithful and innovative, and in so doing it develops particular practices that are central to that story.

Integrating Disparate Traditions: Living the Tensions

There are two categories of questions that can arise concerning tensions between traditions. One involves the tensions felt when one's own tradition is in conflict with that of someone else. For instance, social workers do not always see eye-to-eye on difficult issues such as gay marriage or abortion. Sometimes social workers and their clients do not see eye-to-eye on difficult questions. Such differences might spring from being grounded in a religious tradition versus grounded in a secular tradition, or it might spring from two different religious traditions, recognizing that religious traditions are not homogenous. The second category of conflict is not external, between people who hold different pictures of the good life, but internal, between the complex traditions to which one individual belongs. Social workers, for instance, who belong to religious traditions sometimes find their values challenged by a secular tradition of professional helping. Wanting to honor both, they are not entirely sure how to negotiate the conflict. A virtue perspective, with its commitment to and cultivation of certain virtues, helps prepare social workers for dealing with both internal and external conflicts.

MacIntyre (1984, 2007) suggests that when traditions come into conflict, it is not possible to resort to reason to decide which is right precisely because the conflicting traditions may hold to conflicting standards of rationality, as described previously. My own tradition is largely rational by its own standards, yours is rational by its standards, and there is no position of absolute neutrality from which we can make a non-biased judgment between the two. This dilemma, however, does not require us to give up dialogue across boundaries; in dialogue we may find that your tradition has productive ways to deal with difficulties that seem unresolvable within my own tradition. Over time, as MacIntyre sees it, one or another tradition may show itself more adept at resolving intellectual difficulties and tensions, not only within its own boundaries, but for its rival theories as well (MacIntyre, 1990). In such cases we often see the tradition with greater interpretive power gradually win out over its rival, not by showing it to be false, but simply by doing what traditions do, but doing it better than its rival.

How individuals deal with internal tensions between competing traditions that shape their individual identity is a different question. There is nothing new in the recognition that each of us lives out an identity that is not a monolithic whole, but rather a mosaic pieced together out of a number of identities that fit together more or less well, and that can generate difficult conflicts. Social work has become a secular tradition, though often practiced by people of faith. Further, the employment contexts within which social workers function can generate very different types of conflicts. For example, Christians working in faith-based settings and Christians working in secular settings have different opportunities for and limits to integrating their faith and work explicitly.

However, a virtue perspective itself can offer resources for conflict mediation. Both social work and virtue ethics share a common goal of articulating and working toward a good life. Even though those visions might compete, each would likely agree that certain behaviors (such as abuse or coercion) and conditions (addiction or poverty) are not compatible with living a flourishing life. In this case virtue ethics provides a shared language for finding what John Rawls calls an overlapping consensus (Rawls, 1999). Likewise the recognition that the development of certain character traits is essential for living healthy lives allows the language of the virtues to mediate between traditions.

A second source of mediation is the recognition of the importance of tradition for identity. Social work recognizes the centrality of cultural traditions for client identity. Social work also has a long tradition of emphasizing the need for practitioners to be self aware and reflective about their own traditions. The motivation for practitioners to be self-aware has often been framed in terms of being able to differentiate one's professional self from clients' efforts to be self-determining. But it is also possible to think of this in a more positive way, that is, a practitioner must be reflective about her or his own cultural identity in order to offer an honest self-presentation. Clearly this doesn't mean that professionals need to disclose their life-narrative to clients, but it does mean that the professional ought not pretend to be an anonymous cipher. It is possible for the social worker to be honest about who he or she is, while being respectful of client autonomy at the same time.

The place of narratives in a virtue perspective is another key feature that permits negotiations among divergent traditions. The stories we tell about our lives, the stories that we live out (even unreflectively), and the stories that situate our actions in meaningful contexts; all of these are essential for understanding ethics and living accordingly. Even in the context of multiple traditions, we can often create a relatively unified story of our lives and action, while the connections between the narratives of different traditions provide bridges for understanding and mutual dialogue. The technique of re-writing stories, of re-envisioning the over-arching structure of a situation so that we can move forward past seemingly intractable conflicts, is one that social workers are familiar with. So long as one is stuck with a particular narrative, change seems impossible. But when the narrative is re-written, so that a victim can become a survivor, then suddenly it becomes possible to see new possibilities and opportunities for growth.

This emphasis on narratives, of course, is intimately connected to good social work. Social workers are trained to understand life stories, to pay attention to the way that social groups understand themselves and their challenges, and to focus on a deep understanding of the structures of meaning that play such central roles in people's lives. Virtue ethics offers a perspective on ethical matters that social workers deal with every day that

makes that narrative structure both apparent and salient. So valuing narratives is one way that Christians can engage in the social work profession.

A socially embodied discussion of virtues is part of what is necessary for the living tradition of social work. Christians are called to participate in this discussion first by modeling virtuous behavior (both individually and collectively as the Church). Second, Christians in social work can use a virtue perspective as a shared concept to promote a dialectical relationship between Christian faith and the profession.

Conclusion

We have introduced both virtue ethics and MacIntyre's larger account of how virtues function in human morality. We have also begun to think about the intersections between virtue theory, Christian faith, and social work. Moving forward in this collection, we think these ideas will be useful to us as we address questions about the formation of social workers who possess certain habits or dispositions or virtues as part and parcel of their identity. ❖

References

Adams, P. (2009). Ethics with character: Virtues and the ethical social worker. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, 36*(3), 83-105.

Berkman, J. & Cartwright, M. (2001). *The Hauerwas reader.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Clark, C. (2006). Moral character in social work. *The British Journal of Social Work, 36*(1), 75-89.

Council on Social Work Education. (2008). *Educational policy and accreditation standards*. Retrieved April 20, 2010, from http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=13780

Dolgoff, R., Harrington, D. & Loewenberg, F. (9th Ed). (2011). *Ethical decisions for social work practice*. Belmont, CA: Cengage Learning.

Ehrenreich, J. (1985). *Altruistic imagination: A history of social work and social policy in the United States*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Houston, S. (2003). Establishing virtue in social work: A response to McBeath and Webb. *The British Journal of Social Work, 33*(6), 819-824.

Kallenberg, B. (1997). The master argument of MacIntyre's After Virtue. In N. Murphey, B. Kallenberg, and M. Nation (Eds.). *Virtues and practices in the Christian tradition: Christian ethics after MacIntyre*, pp. 7-29. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, A. (1990). *Three rival versions of moral enquiry: Encyclopedia, genealogy, and tradition*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre A. (1984). *After virtue* (2nd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

MacIntyre, A. (2007). *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.). Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

McBeath, G., & Webb, S. A. (2002). Virtue ethics and social work: Being lucky, realistic, and not doing one's duty. *The British Journal of Social Work, 32*(8), 1015-1036.

National Association of Social Workers [NASW]. (2008). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Washington, DC: Author.

Osmo, R., & Landau, R. (2006). The role of ethical theories in decision making by social workers. *Social Work Education, 25*(8), 863-876.

Powell, W. (2008). Sophia's window: Practice wisdom and selecting better paths. *Portularia* 8(2), 91-102.

Pullen-Sansfacon, A. (2010). Virtue ethics for social work: A new pedagogy for practical reasoning. *Social Work Education,* 29(4), 402-415.

Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice (Rev. ed.)* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Reamer, F (2013) *Social work values and ethics* (4th Ed). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2002). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*. New York: Routledge.

Smith, J. A. K. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom: Worship, worldview, and cultural formation.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.

Specht, H., & Courtney, M. E. (1995). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission.* New York: Free Press.

Volf, M. (1996). *Exclusion & embrace: A theological exploration of identity, otherness, and reconciliation.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press.

Zagzebski, L. T. (1996). *Virtues of the mind: An inquiry into the nature of virtue and the ethical foundations of knowledge* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Jill C. Schreiber, *MSW, Ph.D., Southern Illinois University at Edwardsville, Box 1450, Department of Social Work, SIUE, Edwardsville, IL 62026. Phone: (618) 650-5647. Email: jischre@siue.edu.*

Ruth E. Groenhout, *Ph.D., Calvin College, Philosophy Department, 352 Hiemenga Hall, 3201 Burton SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546. Phone: (616) 526-6412. Email: rgroenho@calvin.edu.*

Cheryl Brandsen, *MSW, Ph.D., Provost, Calvin College, Sociology and Social Work Department, 383B Spoelhof Center, 3201 Burton SE, Grand Rapids, MI 49546. Phone: 616-526-7322. Email: brac@calvin.edu.*

Keywords: virtue, social work, ethics, Christian, MacIntyre