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# Virtue Ethics and Social Work: Being Lucky, Realistic, and not Doing ones Duty

Graham McBeath , Stephen A. Webb

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## Abstract

This article argues that in a complex socio-political world, social work ethics needs to recast the moral identity of the social worker in terms of

virtue ethics. We review virtue theory's Aristotelian foundations and criticisms of Kantian and utilitarian theory and show how they apply to social work. Subsequently we offer an account of a virtue-based social work that questions the validity of several models of practice currently fashionable. Virtue theory emphasizes the priority of the individual moral agent who has acquired virtues commensurate with the pursuit of a revisable conception of the good life—the wellbeing of all in a defined community. The virtues are the acquired inner qualities of humans—character—the possession of which, if applied in due measure, will typically contribute to the realization of the good life or 'eudaimonia'. The role of the virtuous social worker is shown to be one that necessitates appropriate application of intellectual and practical virtues such as justice, reflection, perception, judgement, bravery, prudence, liberality and temperance. This 'self-flourishing' worker, in bringing together the capacity for theoretical and practical action makes possible a hermeneutic or interpretive praxis best appraised in dialogue with fellow-practitioners and clients. With a social work remit increasingly routinized by accountability, quality control and risk management there is an emphasis on regulation and duties. This has produced a culture of following approved or typical processes resulting in defensive forms of social work wholly uncongenial to the development of human qualities likely to promote social workers' engagement in critique and revision of what counts as best practice. In sum, our core proposition is that social work practice and education, to fit an unpredictable, non-linear world, should develop means by which professionals nurture the virtues. This would reflexively enhance social work itself.

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