Horse and carriage: Why Habermas's discourse ethics gives virtue a *praxis* in social work

Abstract

In this paper we suggest an alternative approach to ethics in social work: virtue ethics. We argue that Habermas's theory of communicative action and discourse ethics needs to be supplemented with virtue ethics to provide an account useful to social work. In these times, sensitivity to others is needed for social work to succeed as a profession interested in combating the complacency, self interest and lack of compassion evident in cutbacks to social welfare programs and the resultant concerns with outcomes and efficiencies that have all but obliterated care and compassion. We see in Habermas a furthering of Aristotelian and Thomist philosophy, most importantly with respect to his focus on emancipatory knowing – the critically reflective knower who knows self as the person doing the knowing. Habermas's distinction between values (objective), ethics (social) and morals (subjective) makes the province of emancipatory knowing (his epistemological theory) consistent with his moral theory – morality is personal.

Keywords: Virtue ethics; Habermas; Communicative action; Discourse ethics

'The academic context of virtue ethics in its modern incarnation has largely been in opposition to the two kinds of moral theory that have dominated moral philosophy [and social work thinking on ethics] in recent times. These

1

are consequentialism and Kantianism [the tradition with which Habermas is usually associated]' (Swanton, 2003, p. 1). However, like Swanton (2003), we believe the moral climate is changing and the dominant neo-Aristotelian species of virtue ethics where right action is action that would be chosen by a virtuous agent in the interests of human flourishing – the eudaimonistic conception of virtue ethics – is changing towards more pluralistic conceptions of virtue ethics. According to Swanton (2003), this change 'has satisfied a desire for a relatively tidy and assimilable contrast with consequentialism and Kantianism' (p. 1) We believe that Habermas's theory adds to this evolving pluralistic conception of virtue ethics and so we argue against those who criticise him for having a narrow focus on morality: 'on what is right to do rather than what is right to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life' (Taylor, in Varela, 1999, p. 3). The latter is what we think virtue ethics is about and we want to argue for Habermas as professing an engaged ethics even though he extols a reasoned normative approach.

There are others who share our sentiments that virtue ethics best approximates the kind of ethical know-how needed in social work (McBeath & Webb, 2002). Social work is primarily concerned with responding to immediate situations and with helping people to cope with problems in everyday living. Thus, it demands an immediacy of responding which is not well served by its dominant – deliberate, analytical, critical reflective,

principle based, decisionist – approach to ethics. In other words, we need an approach to ethics which is an extension of our normal way of being in the world, one that fits our normal socialization criteria and routine assumptions and beliefs, especially about how to be with and for others. Most of the time, we have what neurobiologist Francisco Varela (1999) calls a 'readiness-for-action'. We respond spontaneously and do not ordinarily engage in the type of deliberative moral reasoning and weighing up of fixed principles or duties and obligations (deontology) or the calculative maximising of benefits (utilitarianism). Usually, we only engage in such thinking after the act or when we are forced to pause, stand back and reflect before we act. While we might need rules at the level of everyday practice – routine, habit and so on – other important human phenomena, such as creativity, imagination and art do not adhere to prescription. We propose that Habermas would be the first to acknowledge this.

From his phenomenological perspective, Varela (1999) suggests that being ethical is the same as being human. In other words, we cannot be-in-the-world-with-others if we do not learn to behave ethically and, conversely, being-in-the-world-with-others teaches us to be ethical: it is because we are relational – social – beings that we are also ethical beings. His ethical know-how constitutes a virtue ethics approach where the virtues – those things that reinforce our positive qualities – guide us in practical action for the good. These include acts of giving, humility, care, forgiveness, acceptance, and so

on. These virtues amount to the values of social work. For Varela, ethical know-how is our ordinary way of responding; we do not ordinarily weigh up rules and principles, the stuff of duty or consequence-based moralities, either deontological or utilitarian ones.

In our prior work, we have indicated that virtue ethics involves proportionism, offering a middle ground between deontology and utilitarianism – both deliberative approaches – and intuition and spontaneity – our ordinary way of responding or the 'gut feel' approach (Lovat & Gray, 2007). Everyday actions, like being helpful and respectful towards others, 'do not spring from judgment and reasoning [deliberate, willed action], but from *immediate coping* with what is confronting us' (Varela, 1999, p. 5):

> We can only say we do such things because the situation brought forth the actions from us. And yet these are true ethical actions; in fact, in our daily, normal life they represent the most common kind of ethical behaviour (p. 5).

Virtue ethics springs from spontaneous coping – from ethical know-how – and practical reasoning. We see Habermas's *praxis* as an extension of the Aristotelian and Thomistic traditions where *phronesis* and *synderesis*, respectively, discern the kind of practical reasoning needed for ethical action. We believe that Habermas's communicative action and discourse ethics offers an intersubjective, relational process through which we might, through the

notion of *praxis,* engage in practical action for the common good. We see Habermas as a keen observer of, and commentator on modern life, not least about human intersubjective relations and communication, and our practical attempts to deal with the intractable moral conflicts and ethical problems that confront us in an increasingly pluralistic and uncertain world. Habermas's communicative action and discourse ethics equips us with the necessary conditions for our ethical deliberations. They represent his attempt to overcome the limitations, as he saw them, of Kant's monological ethics. His understanding of ethics situated in the social domain and morality at the personal level aligns with the emancipatory knowing of his epistemological theory. Most importantly, Habermas (1972) saw the need for different types of knowledge depending on our human cognitive interests, wherein his notion of emancipatory knowing was pivotal because it ties knowing to a search for truth. It places the onus for discerning truth squarely back on individuals making rational judgements about what they choose to believe is true.

Although Habermas does not refer directly to the notion of virtue, his ideas are consistent with the evolving theory of virtue ethics which highlights 'the integrative function of virtue in the good life: [and focuses] on virtue as a property of human beings in which their "inner" lives are in order, and in harmony with and expressed by, their "outer" actions' (Swanton, 2003, p. 67). This is how we understand Habermas's 'emancipatory knowing', namely as a deeply personal reflective knowing in which only the individual can know

whether his or her actions match his or her intentions. The aim of self reflective knowing is to 'know oneself' and, consequently, inevitably to own one's beliefs and values. Indeed, implicit in Habermas's emancipatory knowing is the normative notion of praxis whereby the self reflective knower takes a step beyond mere self knowledge and tolerance of others' beliefs and values to take a stand both for justice and oneself because one's new found self, one's own integrity, is at stake. This is a concept about personal commitment, reliability and trustworthiness that spills over into practical action that makes a difference, or what Habermas describes as *praxis.* The suggestion is that self aware individuals are impelled to act in accordance with their moral beliefs and values. The aim is congruence between values, beliefs and actions and, once achieved, it is this which liberates or emancipates; it is the realisation of this truth that sets the individual free because it is this deeply personal sense of knowing that offers insight into the most profound needs to be found in any given situation. Habermas's thought, therefore, provides social work with a conceptual frame for the coalescing of ethical practice and professional values. Through his interlocking theories of knowing being tied to cognitive human interests, communicative action and discourse ethics, Habermas removes the artificial division between knowing and values, and between theory and practice since all knowing has an ethical component and is related in some way to human action, whether technical, communicative or reflective. This means that there is a values component in all learning because knowing cannot be values neutral and, therefore, any

learning entails an encounter with values related to a knowledge domain. The self reflective element in knowing, so important in Habermas's theory – and in social work discourse, is the means by which implicit values of any knowledge domain become explicit to the knower.

The achievement of congruence or harmony between our outer and inner lives is, for Habermas, a moral matter. For Habermas, morality is deeply personal. He neither provides moral prescriptions nor guarantees that living a moral life is easy or that it necessarily brings happiness. Herein, his view accords with Swanton's deviation from a neo-Aristotelian reading of virtue ethics in which 'a theory of human flourishing … plays the role of justifying claims about virtue' (p. 9). For Swanton, it should be the other way round such that 'we understand flourishing via an account of the virtues' (p. 9). For Habermas, it is more a matter of self reflective individuals working things out for themselves in communication with others and having the courage of their convictions which, ironically, can sometimes have the opposite effect, that is, making us uncomfortable and perhaps even unhappy for a time. For him, the individual draws comfort from knowing that he or she has acted in accordance with his or her values. As Swanton (2003) notes, 'Just as healthy living does not guarantee health, so being virtuous does not guarantee happiness' (p. 78). More importantly for Habermas's phenomenological leanings, is a sense of meaning such that individuals are motivated to act virtuously to make theirs and others' lives meaningful.

As to Taylor's criticism of Habermas for following in the Kantian tradition, or for focusing 'on what is right to do rather than what is right to be, on defining the content of obligation rather than the nature of the good life', Swanton (2003) echoes Habermas's contention that ethics has to do with getting it right. Rightful action is when one exercises the virtues in practice and when these virtues are achieving their practical aims. However, Swanton (2003) does not mean by 'getting it right' that something is 'done for good reason' for 'what is reasonable might not be right'. Practitioners work within constraints and they make mistakes. Her target-centred virtues imply a commitment to 'virtues which allow for improvement' (p. 253). Like Habermas, she suggests 'a dialogical method for constructing solutions … so problems can be identified and addressed' in a way which allows for 'a variety of "voices", or perspectives, [thus] we need [the] virtues of dialogue'.

At the heart of Habermas's self reflective knowing is the understanding that individuals, even ones with well-developed reasoning skills and abilities, are prone to self deception, personal bias and distortion of the facts. Given these individual limitations, and the social context in which most problems occur, Habermas believes that the best solutions are reached through communicative reasoning. Most interpersonal and social problems are ill defined, lack clear solutions and can be viewed from a multiplicity of perspectives, where lack of clarity about the facts pertains. Their resolution requires a communicative

process in which wisdom, experience, practical reasoning, and localised expertise is needed. Importantly, none of these is necessarily generalisable to other situations or practices; they are context specific. Thus, Habermas is not interested in providing – nor does he believe that it is possible to provide – prescriptions for specific situations. He is more interested in sketching, in some detail, the *processes* and *conditions* – or procedural requirements - for open, intersubjective communication to take place. This requires an openness to others, a receptivity to new ideas, an ability to communicate, and a willingness to listen and participate, all of which Swanton (2003) describes as 'dialogical virtues'. As Swanton says, Habermas puts forward 'an ideal which enables us to evaluate critically the institutional and interpersonal conditions under which what is right is currently determined, not a specification of how such judgements should be reached in concrete circumstances' (p. 263). The discussion on 'dialogical virtues' which follows supports Mattias Iser's claims that Habermas's theory needs the notion of virtue for dialogue and communicative action to take place.

Swanton (2003) groups what she calls 'virtues of practice' (p. 260) - which she describes as 'a dynamic process of feedback, learning, and modification' (p. 265) thus 'dialogical virtues' - into three categories. The first she calls 'virtues of focus':

An attempt to solve a problem requires that participants have the disposition and ability to establish and maintain a shared focus [which] … suggests the nature of the information likely to be relevant, motivates the involvement of the parties, and provides a context for … disclosure, testing and facilitation … the virtues of focus require not just acumen, discipline, sensitivity, and wisdom, but also may require courage and persistence … to overcome the numerous obstacles to an adequate and shared understanding (p. 260).

The second group of virtues – the imaginative and analytic virtues – include insight and depth of understanding, creativity, and commitment to valid information – or, as Habermas emphasises, the ability to argue for one's own or to entertain the validity claims of all who are engaged in the dialogue. Regarding commitment to correct information, Swanton (2003) names:

… dispositions to disclose one's own perspective, interests and beliefs [so as to facilitate their testing], to gather data and acknowledge facts, to publicly test claims made during the process of problem resolution, to acknowledge expertise and to trust that expertise, to recognize when trust is misplaced, and to change one's beliefs on the strength of evidence and publicly acknowledged mistakes (p. 262).

Swanton's (2003) third broad group are more specifically 'dialogical virtues' such as facilitation: 'It is not sufficient … to articulate one's own views. One must do so in a way that encourages others to do so in return [that is to say] … non-dogmatically' (p. 264). To the extent that dialogical ethics broadly requires that 'it is a moral requirement that, in standard sorts of situations, decisions are made collectively' (p. 267), then Swanton has no objection to her virtue ethics been seen as a form of dialogical ethics. However, important for her are the constraints in practice and the integration of these constraints into the context of deliberations. Thus she sets out to dismiss several objections to dialogical ethics (which she calls dialogic ethics and Habermas calls discourse ethics) and to give her version of them a realistic feel: dialogue cannot go on interminably and the need to end it is subject to the constraints of termination; in some cases, one cannot revisit the decision made and one is constrained to accept the outcomes of a dialogue; there is no guarantee that a decision reached dialogically will necessarily be a good one – the fact that everyone agrees might just mean that a group of like-minded people are all equally deluded or seduced by what is before them; and people tend to succumb too easily to pressures to conform. Swanton (2003) sees objections like these as confirmation of the need for virtues which 'guard against the hazards of collective unreason such as uncritical democratization and equalization of influence, laziness, failure to test, impoverishment of imagination, or conformity pressures through compromise mentality' (p. 269).

Thus, Habermas provides the grounds for a discourse ethics in which an individual making judgements about what to believe is thrown into a process wherein he or she is obliged to listen to the views of others and to subject moral arguments to the rules of logic. The aim of this exercise is to remove bias and distortion and thereby reach consensus when the moral issue in question impacts on the lives of several participants in a discourse. When this discourse takes place within relationships with clients in social work, we place a great deal of emphasis on the social worker's 'use of self' and 'ability to make sound judgements'. Thus, we imply that, in *addition* to communication and relationship building skills, the social worker needs to develop practical, rational and deliberative skills along with certain personal qualities, including perceptual abilities, discernment, prudence, wisdom, reflexivity, and so on, which are linked to the ability to make sound judgements aimed at practical action for the good of the client. Importantly, however, we also imply that the worker needs a moral disposition and *wants* to work for the good of the client. This moral disposition and these qualities are what go to make up the 'virtuous character' of the social worker and they are developed through experience and practice. The professional requirement that the social worker has a moral disposition to act rightly and to do the best by the client makes social work predominantly a practical-moral activity rather than a mere rational-technical endeavour. Social workers cannot make sound judgements without developing their capacity to think through the conundrum of interacting factors which impinge, at any one time, on a

particular case. No matter how sound the rules, how specific the code and how concrete the procedures, their application always requires professional judgement in particular cases. Such particularism is characteristic of virtue ethics.

Thus, in our prior work, we argued that Habermas's ethical theory constitutes a virtual virtue ethics when his emancipatory knowing is conjoined with his procedural discourse ethics. The result is a more complete theory in which individuals searching for truth are involved in a social intersubjective and communicative process through which they discern the best course of action. It is also in such interactive processes that truthfulness is demonstrated. Habermas (1990) says that a ' … person can convince someone that he means what he says only through his actions, not by giving reasons' (p. 59). In social work, such 'genuineness' is established within the context of the client-worker relationship. While listening deeply and empathically to the client's story, the worker develops understanding of the client's situation so as to make judgements about the best practical action by which to relieve the client's distress.

Compassion: Adding Value to the Iser Critique

In this paper, we want to exploit Habermas's moral theory once more, to show why a moral disposition and virtuous attitude is important and why

virtue ethics is needed to balance deontological, consequentialist and utilitarian approaches which tend to dominate in social work. We have found an ally in this task in Iser (2003) whose work also concerns the contribution of Habermasian theory to ethics and morality. He believes that Habermas's theory requires the notion of virtue to complete it. He argues that Habermas's ethical theory 'crucially depends on the *virtuous attitude* of participants in discourse—be it in the realm of democracy and law or that of morality' (p. 1 emphasis added). Enlarging on this statement, Iser (2003) says:

> … the norms of discourse ... have to be complemented by the sensitive perception on the side of the recipients. Only when the claims are understood in their full significance for the speaker does the discourse live up to the ideal which is already anticipated in every speech act. This presuppositional analysis shows secondly that *it is mainly the virtuous attitude that is morally relevant* and not those capacities for acting morally that the agent already possesses. However, the virtuous attitude genuinely entails the obligation to strive to perfect all those capacities that enable us to sensitively understand the other's claim (p. 1 emphasis added).

What exactly is Iser saying that is important for our argument? Essentially, he is alluding to the rules and procedures of discourse to guarantee a process of rational argumentation in which everyone's opinions are heard. In social

work terminology, this is a process in which all participants have listened attentively, in an open and non-judgemental way, allowing everyone's voice to be heard within a free and open discussion to agree, first on the norms or expectations involved, and then to engage in further discussion within these norms aimed at developing agreement on what is to happen next, that is, on what practical action will ensue from the discussion. Habermas (1987) has great faith in well-reasoned argument allied with good communication skills. These are the pivotal components of his theory of communicative action and discourse ethics, the latter being a particular kind of communication in which subjects participate equally in a discourse in order to resolve moral conflicts.

What Iser wants to add to the above is the importance of focusing on the sensitivity of the listener to the speaker's arguments, in other words, to where the speaker is 'coming from', so to speak, and a desire or the motivation to take the speaker's point of view seriously. One cannot be sensitive to another's plight even if one listens attentively and with empathy, unless one has a *virtuous attitude*. Put another way, it is one's virtuous attitude that causes one to be sensitive to others' needs, and not logic and rational argument alone. One can argue one's point of view strenuously, but if the listener does not care about or have some feeling for the person putting forward the view, the listener will not be responsive. People can know intellectually what is required but not have any motivation to assist and

might even want to do harm. Consider the wife pleading not to be beaten by her husband or the victim pleading with the criminal not to kill his child.

What we are saying is that in social work, and in morality generally, ethics demands an intention to assist, a desire to be of service to others. The disposition or motivation to do what is required in order to achieve the best (moral) outcome for the client - so important in virtue ethics - is essential to professional ethics. We want, therefore, to extend Iser's argument by proposing that it is the feeling of compassion that is the value-added component, that it is compassion that gives one the required sensitivity or *virtuous attitude* for moral action. Furthermore, society has to inculcate compassion in its citizens in order to ensure that they will be disposed favourably to those in need, that is to say that they will want to be kind and considerate towards others (Nussbaum, 2001). Even though we might have the laws and procedures which Habermas regards as essential to ensure a just system wherein people have rights, without compassion there is no guarantee that these laws and procedures will function in a humane way (Taylor & White, 2006). Social work's strong values orient the profession towards a contribution to human flourishing.

Habermas and virtue ethics

Most commentators would agree with Iser (2003) that Habermas's discourse ethics seems inadequate to the task of accounting for the ethical significance of *virtue* because, by emphasizing intersubjective *procedures*, it plays down the importance of the moral disposition and individual qualities which are usually associated with the virtuous character. Habermas argues that, through 'intersubjective' engagement, we are able to develop 'undistorted insight', a facility that is accessible to ordinary human beings:

> … every subject with competence to speak is allowed to take part in discourse', 'everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatsoever', and 'everyone is allowed to express his or her attitudes, desires and needs' (Habermas, 1990, p. 89).

According to Iser (2003), however, there is a conception of deontological virtue which is not only compatible with but also indispensable to Habermas's theory. He suggests the following of Habermas:

> (He) attempts to externalize virtue as much as possible into procedures, (and so) discourse ethics has to presuppose that the participants possess a genuinely virtuous attitude. In practical discourses the willingness to reach a solution acceptable to all implies that one does as much as one can to sensitively understand the

(validity) claims of the other. An intersubjectively transformed 'good will' is thus shown to entail a quasi-transcendental duty of virtue (p. 1).

The presuppositional analysis also reveals that this 'wide sense of duty' primarily demands that one pursues the cultivation of the needed emotional patterns *as much as one can*. Iser's reading stresses the *intentional* dimension of virtue and implies a high regard for those who have already managed to achieve the goal of a virtuous character. Thus, Iser wants to locate morality in the good intentions of individuals which are tied inextricably to virtuous character. For Iser, it is a *sensitivity to others* that is demanded by Habermas's discourse ethics.

In Kant's monological ethics, the individual discerns for himself what is demanded of the situation but, for Habermas, in such a system there is no guarantee that individuals will, by working things out for themselves, necessarily be motivated to act morally towards others. People can rationalize why someone else's suffering does not concern them and can delude themselves that they are doing enough for others by taking care of their family and friends. As Nussbaum (2001) points out, however, the development of compassion is not an individual matter. Society must engender a moral fibre that can be woven into the fabric of a caring society. Caring for others does not happen automatically as part of human nature, nor are people necessarily naturally just and fair. Most people are motivated by

self interest and, if left to their own devices, do not necessarily do the right thing by others.

The welfare system itself is a case that illustrates the truth of the above proposition. When it was strongly grounded in moral intentions, there was a sense that society must care for its citizens, especially the sick and disabled. As the welfare ethos changed to one of managerial efficiency, however, this compassionate view has been replaced by a dependency discourse such that society is becoming more and more intolerant of people who do not try to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This is why Habermas is adamant that society must have institutions and procedures in place to see that justice is done, including to make sure that the weak and disabled are cared for. This will not occur, however, says Nussbaum (2001), if people do not realize the importance of compassion, if people are not taught to care about others. Our argument is that social work as a profession has a role to play in holding this mirror of humanistic concern to participants engaged in managerial political and economic discourse on welfare as broadly conceived, as concerning the social conditions necessary for human flourishing. We believe that Habermas's procedural approach bolsters Nussbaum's humanistic concerns (and social work's also).

Like Iser, we would argue that Habermas's procedural approach requires some quality other than reason alone. The quality is an emotional capacity –

sensitivity and compassion – which makes us responsive to others'

vulnerability and elicits some guarantee of mutual consideration:

> This considerateness has the twofold objective of defending the
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> integrity of the individual and of preserving the vital fabric of ties of
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> mutual recognition through which individuals reciprocally stabilize
>
> their fragile identities (Habermas, 1990, p. 200).

This feat cannot be accomplished alone. Thus, while emphasizing the

'inviolability of individuals' and the importance of 'equal respect', moralities

'must also protect the web of intersubjective relations of mutual recognition

by which these individuals survive as members of a community' (Habermas,

1990, p. 200).

Herein lies another thread of virtue ethics in Habermasian thought for, as

MacIntyre (1981) noted, the way in which virtues contribute to human

flourishing must be worked out in a particular community or tradition,

whether that be the professional tradition of social work or of western

democratic societies more broadly. Implicitly, sensitivity to or compassion for

others is linked to virtuous character and *social* means. Habermas (1990) calls

for a 'communicative process' that is to say '… practical discourse (which)

transforms ... *individual, privately enacted* role taking into a *public* affair,

practiced intersubjectively by all involved' (p. 198 emphasis in the original) in

a 'cooperative search for truth' (p. 198). 'Argumentation insures that all concerned in principle take part, freely and equally … where nothing coerces anyone except the force of the better argument' (Habermas, 1990, p. 198). This is why Habermas's discourse ethics is sometimes referred to as 'argumentation ethics'.

According to Iser, however, the above position presupposes that we have to approach others with a 'virtuous attitude'. More than this, we want to argue that it is not sufficient for virtue to inhere in moral agents or for the intentions of moral agents to determine whether or not an act is moral. We want to argue that moral action is implicit in the 'work' of social work. It is not up to individual social workers to pick and choose to behave ethically because the very 'work' of social work is constituted by compassionate acts or helping activities directed at relieving the plight of others' suffering and at enhancing human flourishing through a focus on their capabilities. As Habermas (1990) notes, we must protect the web of social relations that sustain our moral intuitions which ' … instruct us on how best to behave in situations where it is in our power to counteract the extreme vulnerability of others by being thoughtful and considerate' (Habermas, 1990, p. 199).

Habermas's Ethical Theory: A Fortified Virtue Ethics

As we have shown previously, Habermas presents us with an ethical theory aimed at *proportionism* in that his main concern is to balance universals or absolutes with the practicalities of particular situations (Lovat, 2003, 2004; Lovat & Gray, 2007). This continues an ethical tradition which began with Aristotle's (1985) concern with balancing the demand to attend to absolutes with the need to trust our sense perceptions. Aristotle held that the way in which absolutes were applied in particular situations needed to take account of ideals as well as to address realities. Aquinas (1936) continued in the Aristotelian tradition, giving Habermas a central thesis for his theory of communicative action and discourse ethics that *by using our reason we could discover truth*; Aquinas's desire to seek truth '… is regarded as the most profound inborn disposition of practical intelligence' (Lovat, 2003, p. 3) and his notion of *synderesis* requires the blending of our knowledge of absolutes with practical judgement.

In this vein, Habermas continues in the Enlightenment belief in the power of reason and rational discussion. He picks up the search for a universal rational foundation for ethics, wanting to posit certain related principles as givens. Thus evolves his belief in the universal power of reason, the grounds for his communicative rationality and his discourse ethics. For him, these givens have *prima facie* status, that is, they have a face validity which is tested when we are confronted with particular moral judgements or ethical dilemmas. For Habermas:

… pragmatism and hermeneutics have joined forces ... attributing epistemic authority to the community of those who cooperate and speak with one another. Everyday communication makes possible a kind of understanding that is based on claims to validity and thus furnishes the only real alternative to exerting influence on one another in more or less coercive ways (Habermas, 1990, p. 19).

Habermas (1990) defines 'validity' as consensus without force: 'The validity claims that we raise in conversation—that is, when we say something with conviction' (p. 19) establishes the justification for our beliefs and actions. It is not philosophy that is '… the guardian of rationality' (p. 20) but our everyday communicative processes. In the same vein, Habermas tries to contend with our sometimes unquestioned faith in science and our need to balance empirical facts with the judgements we need to make in particular situations based on our understanding: '… truth is attained only through the skilled and prudent practice of understanding' (in Flyvberg, 2001, p. 21).

Importantly, understanding requires *participation* and Habermas situates morality in our *intersubjectivity*. He believes that Kant failed in his goal to find a universal foundation for ethics because of his monological focus on a subject-centred rationality. Habermas believes that his notion of intersubjectivity can overcome the problems inherent in Kant. Our

intersubjectivity derives from our social nature and the central role of communication. Habermas unfailingly believes that through talking with one another, in time, we can, through the application of *rational argumentation,* overcome bias and prejudice. Essentially, he believes that objectivity is possible; that through communicative rationality we can cooperate with one another, reach consensus and discover truth. Indeed, he believes that we are motivated to communicate because we are seeking the truth and, conversely, that truth can only be reached through communication. Thus, the notion of discourse is central to Habermas's ethical, political and epistemological theories.

The Incompleteness of Reason in Virtue Ethics

We have to understand Habermas's intentions in his concept of communicative rationality: He is trying to overcome the dangers of positivism and capitalism and wants us to see that the creation of just social conditions necessary for human flourishing, the Aristotelian thread in his thinking, requires human interdependence and the need for cooperative, mutually reinforcing projects. For Habermas, modernism is an unfinished project and there are better ways in which to use its concepts and insights than simply to dismiss them outright as postmodernists tend to do, or to take them in a radically individualistic direction as theorists of reflexive modernity have done (Giddens, 1991). Habermas's work offers the *procedures* we need to place

considerateness, compassion, care, and responsibility back onto the social agenda in this age of economic rationalism. These vital features of a true ethics have largely been replaced with notions of mutual obligation and responsibility, where each of us is responsible for ourselves rather than reliant on social services. Issues of justice and rights have not solved this problem for all this has done is vary the rights we are said to have and tie access to them to notions of obligation and – individual and social – responsibility. Habermas (1996) wants to build in the notion of a strong civil society and procedural justice which prevent inhumane actions and practices from becoming commonly accepted.

There are several essential elements to Habermas's (1990) epistemology and discourse ethics which are inter-related. His epistemology, which centres heavily on how we come to know and especially how we come to know ourselves, leads to an approach to ethics that is heavily about knowing, in this case knowing about values. In turn, this nexus is pivotal to Habermas's conception of 'communicative action'. For Habermas, the starting point of the social sciences is the question of what constitutes the elementary building blocks that explain social life. In order to address this question, he turns to a comprehensive theory to explain those intersubjective relationships that lie at the heart of our social world. Thus, he offers a set of interlocking theories about how we ought to live in the world in such a way that we promote human flourishing. Tied to this are notions of how society ought to be

ordered (normative); and how social life is constituted in relation to the way people behave or act (descriptive). This relationship between the real (what is) and what ought to be is a philosophical question that has occupied moral philosophers down the ages. In addressing these questions, Habermas relies on the Aristotelian tradition and, in particular, the notion of *phronesis* (also taken up heavily by Aquinas) in order to ground the answer in practical reasoning. To do this, he distinguishes between objective knowledge, or the realm of facts and empirical knowledge, and subjective or emancipatory knowledge known only to the knower. In this respect, Habermas can rightly be claimed as a modern architect of virtue ethics and, quite likely, as providing one of its most fortified contemporary interpretations of such an approach to ethics. The importance of this fortified interpretation of virtue ethics for social work cannot be overstated.

Virtue Ethics in Social Work

Several writers have attempted to revive interest in the concept of virtue in social work (Banks, 1995, 2001; Houston, 2003; Hugman, 2005; Lovat & Gray, 2007; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Rhodes, 1986; Webb, 2006). In so doing, they see virtue ethics as complementary to, perhaps even an alternative to deontological and utilitarian approaches. Importantly, virtue ethics does not prescribe how to act, but how to *deliberate* which is crucial to good 'judgement' – to our evaluations of things. We would argue that the notion of

virtue – and good judgement – is needed to make the technology of decision making so dominant in social work's approach to ethics, more than a mere technical-rational process. Judgements are always evaluative; decisions are not necessarily so and especially not when they involve manualized and proceduralized 'technologies of care' (Webb, 2006).

To counteract the dominance of technological rationality, short term-ism, actuarial crisis work, and defensive risk-based practice, all of which ' … threaten to erode the possibility of constructing meaningful ethical relationships' (p. 232) with clients, Webb (2006) argues for a 'practice of value' in which virtue ethics plays a key role in guiding social workers through these contemporary challenges. He calls for a renewed ethical practice based on the '… longstanding European tradition of humanism with its various considerations of shared moral understanding, the cultivation of the self, mutual reciprocity, social virtues, and the common good' (p. 233). Importantly, risk-saturated 'technologies of care' have to be confronted with a 'practice of value', with actions in which virtue ethics are writ large as the 'hermeneutical social worker', engaged in practical-moral actions, discerns the right thing to do, with the right moral attitude and intentions, in the interests of good practice (Gray & McDonald, 2006).

Habermas believes that cognitive heuristics are hardwired for us, so that we do not always have to think anew about the context of our decisions.

Following Aristotelian and Thomistic thinking, Habermas's 'practical action' privileges ethics as practice, or *praxis,* defined as practical action for the good (Lovat & Gray, 2007). This resonates well with social work training courses which focus almost exclusively on *practice* skills, such as listening and communication, both of which are important to communicative engagement and dialogue, or 'communicative action', to use Habermas's (1987) term. Virtue ethics, however, emphasizes 'ethics as deliberation' and its real – hermeneutical – art inheres in training in *deliberative* skills, in training social workers to develop understanding through communication or dialogue within the context of the client-worker relationship (Rhodes, 1986). Through communication and intersubjective interaction, that is to say through communicative action in which all participants are freely involved, they are able to make good judgements, that is, humane, moral judgements rather than just technical or rational ethical decisions (Taylor & White, 2006) based on rules, procedures, codes, or manuals.

Like Kant, Habermas believes in the importance of universal principles and holds that argument based on good reason can determine truth but that this is also dependent on people in real life particular situations setting the parameters – agreeing on the norms – for the issues to be discussed and debated or for making moral judgements about the particular dilemmas they are facing. To this extent, his ethical theory is somewhat akin to social work's quest to find universal values and standards shared across widely divergent

contexts while, at the same time, paying attention to the exigencies of particular local cultural contexts.

Habermas's discourse ethics offers processes wherein virtues, as 'generalizable capacities of self' (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1026), are developed through social interaction or intersubjective processes that require practical reasoning so as to discern the right thing to do in any given situation. In social work, crucial to these interactive processes, is the social worker's ability to make 'sound judgements' in complex and uncertain situations. In his discourse ethics, Habermas provides us with the grounds for rational deliberation and ways to avoid distortion and bias so as to have accurate perceptions, and exercise flexible, skilled and wise judgement. The value-added nature of 'virtue ethics' combined with this is that it makes judgement, experience, understanding, reflection, and intention virtuous characteristics of the hermeneutical social worker acts ' … within a reflexive-interpretive process of self and *other*' (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1016, emphasis added) in the here and now. There is immediacy in the worker's response and she must be a virtuoso in knowing the right thing to do in the moment.

Ultimately, ethics is '… closer to wisdom than to reason, closer to understanding what is good than to correctly adjudicating particular situations' (Varela, 1999, p. 3). Thus says Varela (1999), and we agree with

him, ' … the focus has moved ... to a much sharper debate between those who demand a detached, critical morality based on prescriptive principles and those who pursue an active and engaged ethics based on a tradition that identifies the good' (p. 3). In short, we see this as a shift from deontological to virtue ethics in which the '… wise (or virtuous) person is *one who knows what is good and spontaneously does it*' (Varela, 1999, p. 4). Rather than focus our attention on assessing whether a situation or our response to it was ethical or not, or on whether we made the right judgment – a critically reflective approach – virtue ethics requires that we critically examine the '… immediacy of perception and action' (Varela, 1999, p. 4) which leads to ethical behaviour. As Varela (1999) notes:

> This approach stands in stark contrast to the usual way of investigating ethical behavior, which begins by analyzing the intentional content of an act and ends by evaluating the rationality of particular moral judgments (p. 4).

Virtue ethics encourages the professions, such as social work, to revisit their core values and the 'good' that they offer society. They require that social work clearly articulates the myriad ways in which it contributes to human flourishing. As Blackburn (2002) noted, to articulate the special skills it has to offer the broader community 'which are life-enhancing in a special way' (p. 8). It might help social work rediscover its 'soul' (Freidson, 2001) and give it

another means of engagement: Social work can take its rightful position, as should all the professions, of being a moral compass of social justice in particular societies. Collectively, the professions – law, medicine, teaching, psychiatry, social work, and so on – are an index of the extent to which society contributes resources to, and supports human flourishing through its major social institutions. In this way, they can reclaim their moral authority as well as their legitimacy in society.

Virtue ethics has a broad focus on the nature of professional engagement and downplays individual decision making as the sole focus of ethical practice. It recognises the limitations of a narrow focus on professional accountability and also the limitations of ethical codes which, while they might be good for novices (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986), cannot engender moral sensitivity within the professional person in the way that virtue ethics can. This moral sensitivity is seen in habitual action in pursuit of the good, in action that results from a moral disposition, virtuous attitude and the particular characteristics of a good social worker that have already been outlined. The good social worker is able to tune into a client's situation so as to respond in the right way through moral sensitivity rather than merely as a novice following moral rules, principles or codes. As already noted, the virtuous professional does the right thing naturally, like a virtuoso (Statman, 1997; Varela, 1999) and, cognisant of the role both reason and emotion play in our relationships with others, Goleman (2006) would add with 'social

intelligence'. Importantly, Goleman (2006) provides empirical grounding for Habermas's unstinting faith that, through our intersubjective relations, we can reach consensus. He presents contemporary neuroscientific evidence that we are hardwired to seek harmony in our social relationships.

Why should social workers pay attention to Habermas or virtue ethics?

Arête – the Greek word for virtue – has nothing to do with reason, dry ethics or a moralistic attitude. As we have shown, virtue ethics places emphasis upon the qualities of the worker and the creation of conditions for good practice rather than on duties, obligations, rules, and prescriptions. It provides appropriate underpinnings for the kind of moral agency best suited to social work (McBeath & Webb, 2002). A growing number of writers see virtue ethics as offering a way forward for social work caught, as it is, in a utilitarian, decisionist mode of ethical reasoning. Collectively, they paint a picture of virtue ethics as better suited to professions caught within the vortex of neoliberal managerialism which constantly undermines professional values and judgment. Virtue ethics enables us to discern what it is to be moral in a world subject to frequent revision; it cultivates a 'way of living', the search for 'a good life' in plural social domains. It provides a midway between rule or duty bound, deontological codes and audits of ethics, on the one hand, and overly empirical, teleological pragmatism, on the other hand (Gray & Lovat, 2006). It makes qualities of character foundational. Practising good conduct in

regard to others does not result from adherence to externally imposed procedures and rules of behaviour. It flows from the social worker's clarity of perception, discernment, prudence, wisdom, understanding, and so on, all of which are linked to the worker's practical reasoning ability and actions for the good of the client which flows from a sensitivity and compassion towards others, not from professional, ethical and organisational imperatives. Neither calculative nor scientific reasoning, nor efficient procedures and regulations, can remove the uncertainty of ethical deliberation and its dependence on the skilled and wise judgement of the social worker in the moment. Thus, virtue ethics has a broad focus on the nature of professional engagement and downplays individual decision making as the sole focus of ethical practice. It encourages the social work profession to revisit its core values and to specify the 'good' that it offers society.

What then of Habermas's contribution? Houston (2003) is one of the few social work writers who refers to Habermasian theory in his discussion of virtue noting that it is through communicative action that the virtuous character is formed. Habermas reframes virtue 'as an interactional and dialogical (rather than a monological) property' (p. 821). For Houston, virtue emerges from regulated deliberations, which should be inclusive, open, empathic and impartial, being institutionalized within routines of social work practice. Lloyd (2006) believes that the perspectives of service users would be an essential aspect of such deliberations.

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined virtue ethics in social work, drawing on the work of Habermas. We see some urgency in finding an alternative approach to ethics to balance, technological, rule-bound, deontological frameworks, such as codes of ethics and ethics audits (Reamer, 2001) on the one hand, and consequentialist – utilitarian – approaches, on the other. We see both as tending towards stultification and obstruction of the practical action appropriate to professional goals aimed at helping and caring for others unconditionally. We propose that virtue ethics – in the Aristotelian, Thomistic and Habermasian traditions where *phronesis, synderesis* and *praxis*, respectively, discern ethical action as practical action for good – offers the proportionist stance that social work requires in order to deal with the intractable moral conflicts and ethical problems that confront us in an increasingly pluralistic and uncertain world.

Hence, we observe a sea change taking place in social work ethics, if only at a scholarly level, that is receptive to fashioning alternative approaches to deontological and consequentialist—utilitarian—ethics even though, at the level of practice, social work ethics is likely to remain blindly utilitarian in maximising the best interests of all involved and minimising harm. We are hopeful that our reading of Habermas will contribute to proportionism in

social work wherein the rational-technical aspects of our practice will be balanced by the practical-moral nature of our work. The 'work' of social work is in helping others. This requires a compassionate attitude in the increasingly harsh procedural and managerial environments in which social workers work where professional judgement is often eclipsed by decisionism and rigid 'technologies of care'. Social work must be society's conscience and, to do this, it must attend constantly to questions about what is good, right and just. Good practice rests not only on the virtuous character of the social worker but also on providing contexts for human flourishing. In their everyday interactions with clients, social workers can spread compassion, care and justice. It is in such ideal role-taking that virtue ethics finds expression and adds quality to the 'work' of social workers. We agree with Blackburn (2002) that 'no single ethical approach can claim to offer answers to all the questions arising on professional practice or to be immune from problems and criticism' (p. 11), and that 'talking virtue, with its focus on character, disposition, and human flourishing greatly enriches and amplifies the professional ethics conversation' (p. 11). The particular contribution of this paper is in drawing on the fortified epistemological underpinnings to virtue ethics that a Habermasian analysis allows.

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