Ethics in Social Work: Bridging Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This comprehensive exploration delves into the intricate relationship between ethics and social work, emphasizing the practical application of ethical principles grounded in Respect, Justice, and Service. It analyzes major ethical theories—Virtue, Deontological, and Teleological—clarifying their implications for social work practice. The study positions social work as a vital force in disseminating moral concepts, fostering individual moral development, and contributing to a moral society. It traces the evolving landscape of social work values, acknowledging historical shifts influenced by feminist and antiracist movements. Examining ethics, gender, and social work, it explores Carol Gilligan's ethics of care and emphasizes translating philosophical concepts into practical applications in addressing societal issues.

Introduction

Humanity in individuals is intricately linked with their morality, setting them apart from other beings. The deeper one delves into morality, the more one embraces their inherent humanity. Therefore, individuals need to possess a profound comprehension of moral values and actively incorporate them into their lives. Ethics, often referred to as the science of morality, is tasked with extending its influence across the collective consciousness of the general public, aiming to elevate individuals to the status of true human beings.[1]

The study of morals or ethics is most valuable when it equips individuals to apply ethical principles to the myriad issues encountered in everyday life. If the realm of moral science remains confined to the academic pursuits of philosophers without extending its influence to the general public, the true essence of ethics risks being sidelined. The real objective of ethical studies lies in its practical application, empowering the ordinary person to navigate ethical dilemmas and make morally informed decisions. For ethics to fulfil its purpose, it must transcend the ivory towers of philosophy and permeate the fabric of society. This requires an intentional effort to make ethical principles accessible, relatable, and applicable to the diverse challenges faced by individuals in their personal and professional spheres. Only when ethics becomes a guiding force in the lives of the general public can it contribute meaningfully to the betterment of society, shaping a collective ethos grounded in moral values.

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[1] David Hume, 'Enquiry concerning Human Understanding', Sec. 1 in Leonard Hunt, 'Social Work and Ideology', Philosophy in Social Work, ed. Noel Timms and David Watson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 7-8.

The term *'ethics'* is being used in different senses, but perhaps the most important distinction to make is between ethics as synonymous with moral philosophy and ethics as moral norms or standards. Some moral philosophers like Warnock use the term in the first sense to describe a branch of philosophy concerned with the study of 'morality, moral problems and moral judgements'[2] The second usage of the term 'ethics' implies to the norms or standards of behaviour people follow with reference to good or bad, right or wrong, and virtue or vice.

The term *'implications'*, in general, is used synonymous with words like significance, association, involvement, connotation, and so on.[3] 'Ethical Implications in Social Work' is, therefore, used to convey the spirit of mutual influence so as to make the study beneficial to both disciplines of Philosophy and Social Work.

The term 'Social Work' is closely linked to both the practical aspects of social work as a profession and the broader discipline of Social Work. Consequently, the title highlights the interconnection between 'Ethics' and 'Social Work.' The objective of this study is to investigate the potential relationship in the empirical field, seeking to understand how ethics and social work are intertwined in real-world applications

Social Work and social work

The distinction between 'Social Work' with initial capitals and 'social work' in lowercase holds significant meaning in the realm of social services. When 'Social Work' is denoted with initial capitals, it specifically refers to the broader academic discipline encompassing theories, research, and overarching frameworks that guide the profession. On the other hand, 'social work' written in lowercase signifies the practical application of these principles in real-life settings. It represents the hands-on, day-to-day activities carried out by professionals within the field to address the diverse needs of individuals, families, and communities. This nuanced difference captures the relationship between the theoretical foundations provided by the 'Social Work' discipline and the tangible impact realized through 'social work' in practice.

Social Work Ethics and ethics in social work

The distinction between 'Social Work Ethics' and 'ethics in social work' encapsulates the nuanced dimensions of ethical considerations within the realm of social services. When we refer to 'Social Work Ethics,' we are specifically alluding to the set of professional ethical standards that guide social workers in their practice. These standards are rule-based and provide a structured framework for ethical decision-making within the field. On the other hand, 'ethics in social work' delves into the integration of more abstract ethical principles into the daily practice of social work. In essence, while 'Social Work Ethics' revolves around specific rules for professional conduct, 'ethics in social work' emphasizes a value-based approach, intertwining moral notions with the practical aspects of social work. To put it succinctly, 'ethics in social work' can be thought of as the infusion of ethical values into the fabric of social work practice, enriching the profession with a deeper, more nuanced ethical orientation.

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[2] M. Warnock, An Intelligent Person's Guide to Ethics (London: Duckworth, 1998) 7.
[3] See Thesaurus.com (Lexico Publishing Group, LLC) 5th Sept. 2004 .

Ethics and ethics

The distinction between 'Ethics' with an initial capital, as a branch of Philosophy, and 'ethics' in lowercase, lies in their respective connotations. When 'Ethics' is employed with an initial capital, it signifies the academic discipline within Philosophy that delves into the systematic study of moral principles, values, and conduct. On the other hand, 'ethics' in lowercase is a more qualitative term, encompassing a broader range of concepts such as values, principles, and rules. While not strictly synonymous, 'ethics' in this context is utilized to capture the qualitative aspects of moral considerations, offering a lens through which values and principles can be examined and evaluated.

Theories and concepts

Ethics, the science of morality, is one of the six main divisions of Philosophy, the others being Logic, Epistemology, Metaphysics, Political Philosophy, and Aesthetics. Ethics is about finding ways of answering questions like:

. Is there a basis for deciding whether an act is right?

• How can we prove or disprove that there is a basis?

• What kinds of things are most worth attaining - what is the good life?

 • Why are there differences as to how the good life is defined?

Defining the essence of ethics proves to be a challenging task, marked by varying interpretations among the general populace. Individuals often grapple with grasping the true spirit of ethics, with some associating it closely with their emotions. However, this emotional connection tends to diverge from the ethical compass. Additionally, there is a tendency for some to link ethics exclusively with religion. While many religions uphold lofty ethical standards, it is essential to recognize that moral principles extend beyond religious confines. Ethics, by its nature, transcends the boundaries of religious affiliations and cannot be limited solely to those who adhere to specific religious beliefs.'Being ethical' is also not the same as following the law. Even laws, like feelings, can deviate from what is ethical. Some may identify ethics with 'what is acceptable to the society'. This is also wrong because even an entire society can become ethically corrupt, for which there are many contemporary examples. And also, what is ethical to a particular society need not be ethical, or maybe even anti-ethical, to a different society. Livia Iacovino rightly observes: "Thus ethics are not just how we 'feel' about something; it is a reasoned process. It may become habitual or intuitive once we have a set of values to apply consistently."[4]

Ethics is two things according to Hinckfuss. First, ethics refers to 'well-based standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do and what ought not to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues'[5]

Archie 1. Bahm explains the concerns of Ethics as what ought to do and what ought not to do so as to achieve what is good and to avoid what is evil. He says: "Ethics pertains to what is good and how to get it, and what is bad and how to avoid it, or to oughtness, i.e., what ought to be done to achieve what is good and what ought not be done to avoid what is evil, both actual

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[4] Livia Iacovino, 'Ethical principles and information professionals: theory, practice and education', Australian Academic & Research Libraries, 2002: 1.

[5] Ian Hinckfuss, 2ih July 2000, The Moral Society - Its Structure and Effects, 18th Feb. 2002 .

and potential.,,[6] The above versions of Sinha and Bahm point directly towards the Highest Good and how to get it. The moral principles are primarily concerned with directing man towards good qualities and good actions, though the definition of 'good' varies among persons. Ethics, functioning as the study of morality, aids individuals in comprehending and distinguishing between concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, as well as virtues and vices. Ultimately, this understanding guides individuals to make optimal choices by discerning the most appropriate moral course of action in any given situation.

By its inherent nature, Ethics falls into the category of a normative science, primarily concerned with prescribing "ought" or "should" rather than describing "what" or "how." It encourages individuals to adhere to existing state laws and uphold elevated moral standards in personal and societal contexts. Unlike law, which is objective, morality is subjective, influenced by the individual. Ethics, as a discipline, blends elements of both law and morality, placing a significant emphasis on the concept of "oughtness."

In the realm of social work, especially in therapeutic settings, the notion of "oughtness" is perceived subjectively through the client's perspectives rather than as a matter of public domain. From the therapist's standpoint, this "oughtness" is interpreted through the professional do's and don'ts. In social work, the subjective aspect takes precedence over considering the broader implications of the abstract notion. Notably, the normative ethical question of 'why be moral' often remains unaddressed in social work, with the primary focus being 'how to be moral' in professional practice. In contemplating a collaborative approach between social work and philosophy, it becomes crucial for social work to give due attention to the normative ethical question, thereby enriching its perspective on the ethical dimensions of its practice.

The term "value" is another key concept often associated with morals and ethics. While ethics and values are frequently used interchangeably, they are not synonymous.

 "Ethics is concerned with how a moral person should behave, whereas values are the inner judgments that determine how a person actually behaves. Values concern ethics when they pertain to beliefs about what is right and wrong. Most values, however, have nothing to do with ethics. For example, the desire for health and wealth are values, but not ethical values.[7]

The term value derives from the Latin Valere, meaning 'to be strong, to prevail, or to be of worth'.[8] Values possess various significant attributes and serve essential functions. They are broad, emotionally charged concepts representing what is deemed desirable. Originating from historical experiences, values are shared by populations or specific groups within them. Additionally, values play a crucial role in organizing and structuring patterns of behavior.

In social work, values have been important in several key respects, with regard to: 1. the nature of social work's mission 2. the relationships that social workers have with clients, colleagues, and members of the broader society 3. the methods of intervention that social workers use in their work and 4. the resolution of ethical dilemmas in practice[9] The value base of social work

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[6] Archie 1. Bahm, Why Be Moral? (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. 1980) 4.

[7] 'What is Ethics?' 2002, Josephson Institute, lih March 2003

[8] 5 Roland Meinert, 'Values in Social Work Called Dysfunctional Myth', Journal of Social Welfare 6(3), 1980: 5.

[9] Frederic G. Reamer, Social Work Values and Ethics, Op cit., 11.

stems from its philosophical concept that gives paramount importance to man 'by the very fact that he is a man'.[10]

The client-centered approach in social work primarily focuses on the well-being of clients, emphasizing aspects such as health and wealth, which, strictly speaking, are not ethical values. While the abstract concept of ethics guides individuals to act in alignment with societal norms for the benefit of the entire community, the micro-level perspective in social work, despite its dedication to human welfare, predominantly follows a client-centered approach in practice. Consequently, the value system in social work leans toward the idea that the goodness of individuals contributes to a good society, overlooking the transformative role social workers can play in shaping society to influence individuals into becoming better citizens. Acknowledging the vast and logical impact of a macro approach, it becomes apparent that expecting a micro approach alone to yield macro effects may fall short of achieving comprehensive societal transformation.

Major Theories of Ethics

Normative ethical theories can be broadly categorized into three main groups: Virtue Theory, Deontological Theory, and Teleological (Consequential) Theory. While Virtue Theory poses a subjective question about the kind of person one should be, Deontological and Teleological theories center around the question of "what should I do?" These latter two fall under the umbrella of action-based theories, as they primarily concern themselves with the actions individuals undertake.

In action-based theories, Teleological Theory evaluates actions based on their consequences, focusing on the outcomes they produce. On the other hand, Deontological Theory assesses actions by examining whether they align with a predefined set of duties or moral principles.

Within Virtue Theory, some philosophers contend that morality is rooted in adhering to explicitly outlined rules of conduct, such as 'do not kill' or 'do not steal.' In contrast to this, both Teleological and Deontological theories are categorized as action-based moral theories because they concentrate exclusively on the actions undertaken by individuals. These theories revolve around the inquiry of 'which action should I choose?' However, Virtue theorists place less emphasis on memorizing specific rules and instead underscore the significance of cultivating positive character traits, such as benevolence.

According to virtue theory, the basic judgments in ethics are judgments about character. Hursthouse, another commentator on moral philosophy, states that an action is right 'if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances'.[11] A virtue is fundamentally a character trait that is deemed essential for the flourishing and well-lived life of a human being. These virtues encompass a range of positive dispositions that contribute to personal and societal well-being. Among the virtues highly regarded are courage, which enables individuals to confront challenges with resilience and bravery; integrity, representing a commitment to moral principles and consistency in one's actions; honesty, embodying transparency and truthfulness in communication; loyalty, fostering steadfast allegiance and devotion to individuals, causes,

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[10] 9 S.K. Khinduka, ed., Social Work in India (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal Pvt. Ltd., 1962) 23.
[11] R. Hursthouse, 'Virtue Theory and Abortion', in D. Statman, ed., Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997) 229.

or values; wisdom, involving discernment and sound judgment in navigating life's complexities; and kindness, reflecting a compassionate and benevolent demeanor towards others. These virtues collectively form a moral framework that goes beyond mere rule-following, emphasizing the cultivation of character traits that lead to a fulfilling and meaningful existence. In essence, virtues provide a guiding compass for individuals to lead lives marked by ethical conduct, personal growth, and positive contributions to the broader social fabric.

Plato underscores four cardinal virtues that he deems crucial for moral excellence: wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. These virtues, considered foundational, serve as guiding principles for ethical living. In the realm of virtue theory, there is an equal emphasis on steering clear of detrimental character traits or vices, including cowardice, insensibility, injustice, and vanity. The responsibility of instilling moral education lies with adults, and it is advocated that this process should commence at a younger age. The rationale behind early initiation is rooted in the belief that virtuous character traits are most effectively nurtured and developed during one's formative years.

Aristotle conceptualizes virtues as positive habits that we cultivate, influencing the regulation of our emotions. In his renowned work, "Nicomachean Ethics," Aristotle suggests that most virtues find a balanced middle ground between more extreme character traits. For instance, a deficiency in courage may lead to the development of the vice of cowardice. Aristotle posits that when individuals acquire these virtuous habits of character, they gain better control over their emotions and reasoning abilities. According to him, virtue is a purposeful disposition that resides in a middle position, guided by the right reason and determined by what a virtuous individual would consider appropriate.[12]

Virtue, being a character trait, is a stable and enduring disposition once developed. It remains consistent, reliable, and persistent over time. Acts of virtue are performed consciously and are chosen for their inherent value. This intentional selection for the sake of virtue aids individuals in making morally sound decisions, especially in challenging situations where choices must be made..

Medieval theologians enriched Greek virtue theories by introducing three Christian virtues known as theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. The appeal of virtue ethics stems from its emphasis on the pivotal role of motives in addressing moral dilemmas. Acting virtuously involves being motivated by specific virtues. In essence, virtue theories assert that cultivating the desired personal character will inherently guide individuals toward making morally sound decisions, underscoring the importance of correct motivations in the moral landscape.

The central question of virtue ethics, according to Robert Louden, is not 'What ought I to do?' but rather 'What sort of person ought I to be?[13] According to Robert Louden, virtue ethics centers not on the question of 'What should I do?' but on 'What kind of person should I strive to become?' Once the objective grounded in virtue is established, it serves as the motivation for ethical actions.

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[12] 'Character and Virtue' Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 8th February 2003
[13] Robert Louden, 'On Some Vices of Virtue Ethics', in American Philosophical Quarterly, 21, reprinted in R. Crisp and M. Slote, eds., Virtue Ethics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 205.

Determining how to define this virtue-based objective poses a significant challenge in philosophy, given the absence of specific methods or tools for imparting ethical values to the general public. This is an area where social work could play a leading role, provided social workers are equipped with a conceptual understanding of abstract notions.

Deontological Theories The Word Deontology comes from the Greek root deontos, which means 'of the obligatory'. Deontological theories base morality on specific, foundational principles of obligation. Emphasis is given on obligation without considering the consequences of our actions. Hence, these theories are also called non consequentialist theories.

A virtue-based motivation alone is never a justification for an action and cannot be used as a basis for describing an action as morally correct. Duties and obligations must be determined objectively and absolutely, not subjectively. In Deontological theory, moral principles are entirely independent of the consequences that may ensue from adhering to those principles. For instance, if there is a moral obligation not to lie, then lying is deemed inherently wrong, irrespective of any positive outcomes it might yield. This theory potentially clashes with the client-centered social work approach, especially concerning the social work principle of self-determinism, where the social worker adopts a supportive stance aligned with the client's preferences. In contrast, a deontologist might argue that telling the truth is intrinsically right, asserting that social workers should refrain from lying to clients, even if it seems that falsehoods might have morally beneficial consequences for the clients.

Consequentialist (Teleological) Theories The term "Teleology" originates from the Greek root "teleios," denoting brought to its purpose or end. Essentially, Teleology is considered the 'Science of ends.' According to Teleological theorists, the moral worth of conduct is exclusively determined through a cost-benefit analysis of the action's outcomes. In simpler terms, an action is deemed morally right if its consequences are more favorable than unfavorable. The morality of an action is contingent upon the goodness of its consequences. The process involves evaluating both the positive and negative outcomes of an action and then determining whether the overall positive consequences outweigh the negative ones. If the positive consequences prevail, the action is considered morally appropriate; if the negative consequences outweigh the positive, the action is deemed morally inappropriate. In this perspective, the ultimate determinant of morality is the ultimate result of the action. Smart terms ethical decision-making without considering consequences as 'rule worship. The end result of the action is the sole determining factor of its morality. Making ethical decisions without weighing the consequences, according to Smart, is referred to as 'rule worship'[14]

Consequentialist theories gained prominence in the 18th century as philosophers sought a straightforward method to morally evaluate actions by relying on observable outcomes rather than relying on instinctive feelings or extensive lists of debatable duties. The allure of consequentialism lies in its capacity to draw attention to the publicly observable consequences of an action. Many specific formulations of consequentialism offer more precise guidelines than the broad principle mentioned earlier. Notably, various consequentialist theories delineate which consequences for specific groups of people are deemed relevant. Consequentialism can be categorized into three subdivisions:

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[14] J.J.C. Smart, Op cit., 195-203.

Ethical Egoism: an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favourable than unfavourable only to the agent performing the action. Ethical Egoism is a normative ethical theory asserting that individuals ought to act in their self-interest, maximizing their own well-being. Proponents of Ethical Egoism, such as Ayn Rand and Max Stirner, argue that individuals are inherently motivated by self-interest and that pursuing one's own happiness and satisfaction is the ultimate moral goal. They contend that acting altruistically or for the benefit of others ultimately serves the individual's self-interest, as it can lead to personal fulfillment or reciprocal benefits. Critics, however, argue that Ethical Egoism overlooks the moral importance of considering the well-being of others and may lead to a disregard for social cooperation and moral duties.

Ethical Altruism: an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone except the agent. Ethical Altruism is a normative ethical theory that advocates acting in the best interest of others, placing their welfare above one's own. Proponents of Ethical Altruism, such as Peter Singer and Auguste Comte, argue that moral actions should prioritize the well-being of others and promote the greatest good for the greatest number. This perspective emphasizes selflessness and the moral duty to alleviate the suffering of others. Utilitarianism, a consequentialist theory often associated with Ethical Altruism, posits that actions are morally right if they contribute to the overall happiness or well-being of all affected individuals. Critics of Ethical Altruism, however, raise concerns about the practicality of consistently prioritizing others over oneself, as well as the potential for exploitation or neglect of one's own needs.

Utilitarianism: an action is morally right if the consequences of that action are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory founded on the principle of maximizing overall happiness or well-being. Developed by philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, Utilitarianism posits that the morality of an action is determined by its ability to produce the greatest amount of happiness or pleasure for the greatest number of people. Bentham introduced the idea of calculating pleasure and pain quantitatively, suggesting that the moral worth of an action should be assessed based on the net balance of happiness it generates. Mill expanded on this by introducing qualitative distinctions, asserting that higher intellectual pleasures should be considered more valuable than mere sensory pleasures. Utilitarianism aims to guide ethical decision-making by prioritizing actions that lead to the greatest overall happiness. Critics argue that it may neglect individual rights and lead to the justification of morally questionable actions in pursuit of the greater good.

Utilitarianism, the most well-known form of consequentialism, defines morality by seeking to maximize the net expectable utility for all parties impacted by a decision or action. Pioneered by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, this ethical theory posits that morally right actions are those that result in the greatest balance of good over evil. Utilitarian analysis involves three key steps: first, identifying the available courses of action; second, evaluating the effects on those affected, considering benefits and harms; and third, selecting the action that yields the greatest benefits and the least harm. In essence, the ethical course of action, according to Utilitarianism, is one that maximizes overall well-being for the greatest number of individuals.

The contemporary version of utilitarian theory is primarily linked to the British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who refined the theory from its original hedonistic form proposed by his mentor Jeremy Bentham. Mill succinctly articulates the fundamental principle of utilitarianism

as 'Actions are right to the degree that they tend to promote the greatest good for the greatest number.' In a social work context, it is advisable for the practitioner to adopt a proactive utilitarian approach rather than employing a client-centered, microscopic perspective..

Therefore, the question of 'why should I be moral' is deemed unnecessary. It is more constructive to shift the focus towards 'how can I be moral' and, in addition, 'how can I contribute to the creation of a moral society.' The endeavor to establish a moral society is as crucial as individual moral development. The dissemination of moral concepts and values throughout society is imperative, and this task can be effectively undertaken with the assistance of an empirical science such as Social Work.

Ethics and Philosophy of Social Work

Philosophy, being a conceptual science, encounters challenges in its accessibility to the broader population. However, its significance diminishes when it remains confined to theoretical discussions without practical application by the common person. In contrast, social work, characterized by its independent and pragmatic nature, is not geared towards promoting philosophy as an academic discipline. Instead, its primary focus lies in providing tangible individual and community support to enhance overall well-being. While both social work and philosophy share a central objective of advancing human welfare, contemporary social work practitioners often neglect the internal well-being of individuals— a significant aspect that philosophy emphasizes. Consequently, there appears to be a gap in addressing the holistic welfare concerns within the realm of modern social work practices.

Values in social work

In social work, values are intricately tied to the ethical depth of the practitioner's relationship with the client. The evidence-based approach in social work seeks externally validated outcomes, emphasizing the importance of the value-based dynamic between the worker and the client. The achievements of social work are perceived as moral goods attained within the framework of the social worker-client relationship. In the 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis on social work values shifted towards prioritizing the rights and interests of individual users. This shift was prompted by reported instances of abuse and unethical practices by workers during that period. The prevalent notions of individualism and freedom, rooted in Western capital ideology, dominated the social work literature of that era. The surge of literature promoting 'radical social work' in the 1970s stemmed from a growing realization that attributing social problems solely to individual levels amounted to 'blaming the victims' for systemic inequalities. This acknowledgment prompted social workers to reassess their roles, recognizing the need to raise awareness, foster collective action for social change, and collaborate with working-class and trade union organizations.

The feminist and antiracist movements of the 1980s played a pivotal role in expanding the understanding of oppression, influencing the evolution of social work values. For radical social workers, the micro-level focus on the worker-client relationship gave way to a broader ethical awareness at the macro level. This shift emphasized individual freedom as an integral part of values such as respect, justice, and service, aligning with the principles of virtue ethics. The envisioned role of the social worker, reminiscent of the Platonic philosopher as both a guide and a ruler, encompasses aspects of social control and education.

This perspective underscores the active involvement of social workers in dynamics related to social control and awareness-building, highlighting the values of respect and social justice. This integrated approach reflects a synthesis of social work and philosophy, aligning with Socialist-Collectivist views within the field of social work.

Ethics of care and Justice

The quality of caring implies emotional responsiveness which is more associated with feminine characteristics. Ethics of care, which is the recent development of virtue ethics, owe much to the empirical work of the psychologist Carol Gilligan.[15] The concept of caring is closely linked to emotional responsiveness, a trait often associated with feminine characteristics. The emerging ethical framework known as the ethics of care, an extension of virtue ethics, draws heavily from the empirical research of psychologist Carol Gilligan. Gilligan's work has revealed fundamental differences in the moral approaches adopted by men and women. However, due to the historical dominance of men in discussions on moral theory, women's perspectives are frequently overlooked and unfairly deemed less sophisticated and developed.

 In Gilligan's account, moral development has three stages:
1. a person cares only about and for himself or herself;
2. he or she recognizes a responsibility to care for others;
3. he or she accepts the principle of care as a universal ethical criterion and acknowledges that that requires sensitivity to the different needs of individuals in different situations.

Gilligan outlines a three-stage moral development process. The initial stage is characterized by a self-centred orientation, followed by a progression to a belief in conventional morality, and ultimately reaching a post-conventional stage. In the first phase, female children typically start with a selfish outlook, learning over time to care for others and deeming selfishness as morally wrong. In the second, conventional stage, women often feel it is improper to act in their own interests and prioritize the well-being of others, equating self-concern with selfishness. The third, post-conventional stage represents an understanding that neglecting one's own interests is as ethically wrong as disregarding the interests of others. Women often arrive at this realization through their emphasis on forming connections with others, recognizing that harm to either party in a relationship undermines the connection. The male approach to morality is that individuals have certain basic rights, and that one has to respect the rights of others. So, morality imposes restrictions on what you can do. The female approach to morality is that people have responsibilities towards others. Gilligan summarizes this by saying that male morality has a 'justice orientation', and that female morality has a 'responsibility orientation'.

Gilligan distinguishes between the 'ethic of care' and what she terms the 'ethic of justice.' The ethic of justice encompasses principle-based ethical frameworks such as Kantian and utilitarian moralities. It revolves around individualized rights and duties, giving prominence to abstract moral principles, impartiality, and rationality. Gilligan contends that this system of morality is heavily male-oriented and fails to acknowledge alternative ethical approaches commonly embraced by women.

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[15] For a comprehensive picture ofthe ethic of care see Carol Gilligan, In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

While Gilligan herself is somewhat ambiguous about labeling the ethic of care as inherently 'female' or 'feminine,' scholars like Noddings within this tradition explicitly endorse such categorizations. Gilligan herself is ambiguous about the extent to which an ethic of care should be regarded as a 'female' or 'feminine' ethics, although others in this tradition, like Nodding's, explicitly adopt this kind of view.[16]

The core principle underpinning all social work is the act of caring for others. Specifically, casework is defined by its direct focus on the individual's well-being. The professional relationship between the worker and the client in casework, while inherently professional, is primarily rooted in a sense of care and concern. Noddings articulates that caring entails "feeling with" the other, a concept she deliberately differentiates from empathy within the context of casework.

Though the general tendency is to attribute care to feminine quality many feminists have argued that it is dangerous and misleading to do so as it may tend to reinforce the essentialist views of women as merely carers and leave unquestioned whether the caring role itself can have a 'negative and damaging effect on carers'.[17]

Ethics of justice points to the need of emancipation through empowering the victims of injustice. Adams argues that empowerment could be the 'central emerging feature of social work'[18] Cruikshank opines that empowerment is 'almost mandatory in the mission statements of social welfare agencies'[19] According to Baistow justice is 'the heart of health/welfare professional legitimacy' .[20]

Empowerment, as many commentators emphasise, is a process of helping people gain control over their own lives. Adams defames it as: "the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their goals."[21]

This is a clear reference to the social work methods of casework, group work and community organisation. Individualistic notions of empowerment are aimed at developing the capacities of individual people. According to Langan empowerment implies: "an individualistic conception of power which by reducing social relations to the interpersonal level obscures the real power relations in society.[22]

Three fundamental values hold significance in social work with roots in philosophical considerations: Respect, Justice, and Service. Justice, extensively deliberated upon by philosophers throughout history, has gained renewed attention in the post-modern era, particularly in the face of prevailing issues such as racism and economic discrimination. The value of service primarily derives from virtue theory and has been expounded upon by various philosophers, including the three mentioned, as well as others from diverse periods.

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[16] N. Noddings, Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

[17] S. Okin, 'Gender Inequality and Cultural Differences', Political Theory, 22, 1994: 5-24.

[18] R. Adams, Social Work and Empowerment (London: Macmillan, 1996) 2.

[19] B. Cruikshank, 'Revolutions within: Self Government and Self Esteem', Economy and Self Society, 22 (3), 1993: 333.

[20] K. Baistow, 'Liberation and Regulation: some Paradoxes of Empowerment', Critical Social Policy, 14 (3), 1994/95: 40.

[21] R. Adams, Op cit., 5.

[22] M. Langan, 'Radical Social Work', in R. Adams, 1. Dominelli and M. Payne, eds., Social Work: Themes, Issues and Critical Debates (London: Macmillan, 1998) 214.

The contemporary focus lies in translating these philosophical concepts - respect, justice, and service - into practical modalities within the realm of social work.

CONCLUSION

The question of 'why be moral' takes a back seat to the practical exploration of 'how to be moral' and contribute to a moral society. Social work, with its empirical approach, emerges as a key player in disseminating moral concepts and values, enriching both individual moral development and societal transformation.

The interconnection of ethics, philosophy, and social work weaves a complex tapestry of perspectives, values, and theories that significantly contribute to the understanding and application of human welfare. The ethical foundations of social work are deeply entrenched in philosophical considerations, showcasing a dynamic interplay between theoretical frameworks and real-world applications.

Philosophy, as a conceptual science, lays the groundwork for comprehending morality, virtue, and fundamental questions about human existence. Its true significance, however, becomes apparent when these theoretical discussions are practically applied in everyday life. This integration is particularly crucial in social work, where the emphasis lies on providing tangible support and enhancing overall well-being.

Values serve as the cornerstone in social work, shaping the ethical depth of relationships between practitioners and clients. The evolution of social work values, influenced by societal shifts, reflects a dedication to individual rights, justice, and a broader ethical awareness. The integration of the ethics of care, emphasizing emotional responsiveness and connectedness, introduces a nuanced dimension to social work values, challenging traditional male-oriented ethical frameworks.

Ethical theories, whether grounded in virtues, deontology, or consequentialism, provide diverse lenses for social work practitioners to navigate complex ethical dilemmas. The emphasis on empowerment in social work aligns with a broader ethical framework, underscoring justice and the imperative to address systemic inequalities.

In conclusion, the synergy between ethics, philosophy, and social work is crucial for fostering a holistic approach to human welfare. Closing the gap between theoretical discussions and practical applications, recognizing diverse ethical perspectives, and embracing values that champion justice and care are pivotal steps in creating a moral society. As social work continues to evolve, drawing insights from philosophy and ethical considerations will be essential in addressing the ever-changing challenges of human well-being.

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