Creating "contemplative indecisiveness": A model for facilitating the development of practical wisdom in social workers

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"Meticulous Thoughtfulness": Cultivating Practical Wisdom in Social Work[1]

A. General introduction to our discussion

Our aim in this article is to provide a fuller understanding of what practical wisdom consists of in a specific context, that of social work. We do so through presenting a model for decision-making.[2] We believe that such a model can enrich the practice of social work and also enrich the understanding of neo-Aristotelian ethical theory in a practical context.

Social work covers a wide array of kinds of work, from private practice akin to psychoanalysis, to short-term behavior modification and probation oversight. Our focus will be on the kind of work most common in the field: case work, usually undertaken for the state or large agencies, to help underserved populations. Social workers in this kind of work face multiple ethical challenges: they are to help the underserved, often without adequate time or resources, with sometimes conflicting mandates from their agency and profession, and in situations where even the ethical standards of the profession itself may involve conflicting obligations. Acting ethically is not a simple matter.

The training that social workers typically receive focuses, not on ethics, but on policy issues, child development, psychological and social theory, history of the profession, and different practice areas. Social workers must also work under supervision in the field in order to gain experience. All of this is valuable and necessary, but with little explicit focus on ethics. To the extent that ethics receives attention, it is generally either in some rather vague and general way ("social workers act ethically—they want what is good for the client") or because of liability concerns. Thus, confidentiality and informed consent receive some attention; ethics as a systematic, critical, reflective practice, however, is not woven into the understanding of every case and it is sometimes even seen as unconnected to the way the person develops as a professional. It is as if it is assumed that when social workers have the appropriate skills and the requisite social and psychological knowledge, they will then act ethically. For example, if social workers learn how to interview skillfully, they will automatically act honestly, with respect and empathy for clients. We do not think that this is the case. In addition, because of a heavy emphasis within institutions on specific results, such as closing cases and making the work economical, virtue concepts within social work such as empathy, care, and respect may only be valued if and when they contribute to the desired result, not valued in themselves.

We believe that more explicit attention to ethics, including a more explicit concern for how social work is done (e.g. empathetic, with care, respect and justice) and

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[1] The title was inspired by Justin Oakley's keynote "Creating Policy Environments for Practical Wisdom and Role Virtues in Medical Practice" delivered at the interdisciplinary conference "Character and Virtue in the Professions" at the University of Birmingham, June 2-4, 2016. Oakley refers to "meticulousness" which should be involved in developing deliberative strategies.

[2] The model builds on Rhodes 1986.

thus how each agent is disposed to act, is necessary for good social work practice. Our model can be helpful to social workers in thinking about the complex ethical conflicts they face. Without some such process, social workers can lose sight of their goals as social workers or underplay key ethical dimensions of cases and/or even misapprehend their role. Our model moves the focus of social work from a sociological/ psychological, legal and social management perspective focused on results to an ethical perspective focused on overall goals of practice, which are ethical in nature, and the virtues that are integral to achieving these goals. Process and outcome are deeply interconnected in the virtue outlook that underlies the model. Virtues such as empathy, honesty, justice, and care, far from being valued only for their results, are themselves part of flourishing for individuals and the society. We do not dispute the value of psychological, sociological and historical understanding for social work. However, we put practical wisdom at the center, informed by other sorts of knowledge. The questions in our model can help shift the focus to the virtues and ethical goals themselves.

These goals include helping clients to flourish through protecting human rights, enabling justice, and improving client circumstances, with emphasis on the most vulnerable in society, a key goal of social work practice from its beginnings.[3] In working towards social work goals, social workers must act virtuously, that is with the sort of compassion, just generosity, honesty, courage, kindness, and caring essential to good practice. These are virtues necessary to establishing ethical relationships with clients—and they are needed to establish trusting relationships between social worker and clients.

Social workers may disagree about the interpretation of social work goals. Some indeed seem satisfied simply to meet legal guidelines and otherwise give lip service to the Code of Ethics, in which case social workers fail to meet the core role demands. We acknowledge, however, that social work is as a matter of fact constrained by numerous legal, economic and socio-cultural forces. In other words, the ideal of social work is very hard to realize. The ethical perspective, however, is important precisely because these constraints are at work, making it hard for social workers not to compromise their own role. It is important to unveil these constraints and initiate a reflection process about how social workers should respond to them. For instance, legal guidelines can themselves be unethical. The social work profession, framed by its Codes of Ethics, provides an ethical perspective that should engage social workers in a discussion that moves beyond the legal framework to serious consideration of how to meet the ethical ideals.

In addition, even when social workers are promoting social work goals and have developed the requisite virtues to some extent, they will face ethical conflicts that the individual virtues and goals alone cannot resolve. A worker may face a situation in which she has to decide whether or not to remove a child from a home, due to drug use on the part of the parents. She must have empathy for the parents, who are struggling with many problems, and for the child who is both scared of leaving and of staying with her parents.

[3] IFSW 2014.

She is mandated to protect the child and to assure parental rights. Her agency is pressuring her to remove the child. What is the just and caring course of action? Consider a second situation. A social worker has been advising a female client who has poor self-esteem and is abused by her husband. The client goes to shelters, only to return to her husband. The agency wants the worker to close the case, because there are more pressing cases. How does she remain empathic, just and caring and still meet the mandates of her agency? Without a focus on ethics, social workers may make decisions that they deeply regret, because they don't fully understand the ethical dimensions of the case—the values at stake for the profession and for the worker and client. Even in cases where any decision will result in harm, what is sometimes called the "moral pain" of the work, social workers will be better prepared to determine the least harmful outcome, if they have carefully reflected on the ethical goals at stake and the different ways one might respond.[4] However, in some cases, fully grasping the ethical dimensions will neither help to resolve a case nor help to determine the least harmful outcome. Sometimes cases can be tragic and grasping the ethical dimensions of the case fully will lead the social worker to recognize the full tragedy. In such cases the seriousness and gravity of what this profession confronts becomes evident.[5]

It is in all these kinds of situations that we believe our model of decision-making can be helpful. It can enable social workers to form a habit of careful reflection and critical exchange with colleagues, to specify the factors involved in good practical reasoning and to slow down the decision-making process so as to keep ethical goals and virtues firmly in sight. We will particularly emphasize the importance of developing a kind of "meticulous thoughtfulness" essential to practical wisdom.

Underlying our model is an Aristotelian understanding of ethics, with practical wisdom as the central virtue. We believe an Aristotelian framework lends itself well to social work for several reasons. Within such an account, the aim of actions is eudaimonia, happiness, or in less misleading terms today, human flourishing.[6] The human rights and caring that form the basis of social work practice can be viewed as essential preconditions of human flourishing. Social workers aim to promote the flourishing of their clients through working to actualize their rights. And as in virtue ethics, social workers are not just concerned with the end, flourishing, but also with the manner in which it is achieved. Social work ethics mandates that social workers act towards clients with respect, empathy, honesty, courage, caring. To do so requires that one act for the right ends, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons. This is the core of social work practice, as it is of virtue theory.

Practical wisdom, then, is a kind of excellence of character, focused on knowledge and deliberation, but whose outcome is action, not theoretical knowledge.

[4] Marin 1981; Weinberg 2009.
[5] Carr 2009.
[6] "Happiness" is so often equated with an emotion, rather than with the complex disposition that Aristotle delineates, that the term "human flourishing" seems preferable (Annas 2011).

Theoretical knowledge, however, plays an important role in developing practical wisdom, because cultivating the virtues and developing practical wisdom require an idea of the broader background goals. In social work this includes an understanding of the core purpose of the profession and an idea of eudaimonia, a "blueprint of the good life".[7]

We begin to develop virtues as small children in our families and communities. As Annas points out in her account of virtue ethics (from which we borrow heavily)[8], we develop virtues over time, much as we develop other skills such as wood working. It is an ongoing process of improvement, based on observing and imitating others and guidance from those who are proficient. We make mistakes and corrections as we learn. We need experience and reasoning in order to develop a virtue, and most if not all of us develop them imperfectly. We spend our lives refining and shaping our virtues. This model of virtues fits well with social work. Social workers must learn what it is to be honest, compassionate and caring in the difficult situations they encounter. In addition to situations in which they may have to assess child abuse, they may have to help clients come to terms with mental illness or a death in their family. How to respond in the right way, with the right emotion and for the right reasons requires experience and practice; that is, it requires empathy, justice and caring.

If we are to understand social work ethics in terms of central virtues, we must examine further what virtues to include and how we justify our selection. We do not believe that there is a way outside all philosophical positions from which to evaluate a particular virtue theory. In addition, virtues have to be situated within a particular culture and time. Their relevance stems from the general context in which they are embedded, and our interest is in the Western liberal democracies in which social work is practiced. For the purposes of this paper, we will not address the question of virtues' universality but will assume as central the virtues explicit and implicit in the International Federation of Social Workers Statement of Ethical Principles: justice, respect, empathy, honesty, caring, courage.[9] These virtues have been acknowledged as relevant to social workers globally and it is the task of social workers in different regions and countries to specify and interpret them in their sociocultural contexts. Additional virtues can always be considered in the context of social work goals. For example, hope was an important virtue in medieval Europe. In these difficult times, it might be interesting for social workers to consider whether this virtue should be part of what they cultivate.

Our adoption of a virtue ethics framework for the profession of social work may seem distorted, in that social workers are not focused on their own flourishing, but that of others in a specific professional context. We would argue, however, along with many others, that in any virtue ethics theory, the focus is not on one's own flourishing per se, but on what constitutes human flourishing, which is acting towards others with empathy,

[7] Russell 2009.
[8] Annas 2011.
[9] IFSW 2004.

generosity, courage, and so on. One's own flourishing and that of others are deeply intertwined. Human flourishing can only occur in community. We are dependent on others in a whole variety of ways at different times of our lives (childhood, old age, disability, work, family.) Even if a hermit can live virtuously, s/he will have been dependent on others early in life. Generally, human flourishing occurs in community and in pursuit of common goods of that particular community.[10]

This aspect of Aristotelian ethics is captured in part by the nature of the individual virtues. Honesty is a relationship of trust to others, generosity a trait that enables one to help others in the right way at the right time. The virtues of any individual are not distinct from the flourishing of others. Aristotle lived in a homogeneous society in which he was writing about free male citizens (and ignoring women and slaves), whereas we live in a multi-cultural society that requires a quite different understanding of flourishing. However, if we think of flourishing today as encompassing basic human rights and primary needs, with room for different kinds of life, this too requires community. And these basic rights and needs are what social workers hope to provide to their clients.

Even then, it is more complex than this suggests, however, because most of us live in several communities. Social workers function in the community at large but also have a professional community that informs their actions and their work community. They may face conflicts between the goals of the different communities. A social worker may feel a conflict between professional values and personal ones. For example, she may oppose abortion while her profession supports a woman's right to it. She may also face conflicts between professional and institutional values. A social worker's agency may be more focused on closing cases to save money than on providing the best care for a client. Agency mandates may leave little room for social workers to develop the sort of empathy and care needed to evaluate and help a client, while at the same time expecting social workers to act with said empathy and care. This indicates a clash (as it often does in real practice) between an ideal professional community (as exemplified by the IFSW) which is often rather abstract and distant from daily practice needs of the individual practitioner and the immediate presence of an institutional community in which often organizational concerns are predominant and where these are left un-reflected upon in terms of the ethical concerns of the profession which we think are so central to fully understand the profession. Character traits which seem very essential in one community (and which are viewed as commendable by others) are perhaps not valued in another. What character traits should be considered "virtues" must be examined in careful reflection. Virtues are not free-floating. Virtues which social workers ought to develop are ultimately connected to the fundamental (ideal) concerns of the profession and its idea of the good. Social work virtues confront the sometimes harsh practice realities. This doesn't make things easier for social workers of course, since virtuous social workers will be aware of how practice circumstances threaten to undermine good practice. But perhaps this is a starting

[10] MacIntyre1985; Hursthouse 1999; Annas 2011.

point to resist bad practice–again not each single individual by him- or herself, but by turning to the professional community. Virtues can thus be a burden in a sense and they will indicate where changes should be initiated (when social workers decide either to give up the job or aim for changed circumstances).[11] We consider virtues to carry great critical potential. Far from being "accommodating" they may instead be quite radical and upsetting, since they are connected to an idea of the good that may result in questioning existing conditions.

This brings us back to our central question: How does a social worker develop the sort of practical wisdom necessary to good practice and what does that practical wisdom consist of? We believe that our model, with its focus on reflection and virtues, can provide one tool for developing practical wisdom in social workers.

B. **Introducing the model**

The proposed model should be introduced at the very beginning of becoming a social worker to initiate a reflection process that starts by asking the right sorts of questions, i.e. those questions that capture what is essential about social work. We emphasize that this reflection process needs to be ongoing and cannot accomplish the intended goals by employing it once, for instance in a single course during education and training. Time and repeated practice are key factors, essential to the suggested reflections becoming habitual. This kind of habitual "meticulous thoughtfulness" is an essential aspect of practical wisdom in social work. It will at first put a stop to decision-making, while the social worker learns to grasp the depth and breadth of the profession.

The questions are many and they address a wide range of issues, some of which might at first seem not so obviously to apply to the profession (see below for examples). But from our understanding, they do. Social workers' moral responsibilities imply that the practice is very complex in nature, demanding a complex set of questions, covering a broad range of issues.

The model with its many questions might seem overwhelming. Thinking about and drawing the right conclusions from these questions, followed by engaging in actions in the right manner, characterizes a practically wise social worker. The practitioner who is not yet practically wise will miss some of what is essential, but s/he may be on the right path towards full practical wisdom. S/he will need to continue to practice it—i.e. asking questions; reflecting; discussing with colleagues what is essential about a case or situation—to fully grasp it. In this process she will become better with each step. We do not think that it is easy to become a practically wise social worker. It is a high ideal which is very difficult to reach. Presupposing that it is difficult to reach seems unavoidable in a profession like social work where so many issues are involved and where so much is at stake (for individuals and the broader community.)

[11] Tessman 2005; also Annas 2011 and her concept of "overwhelming circumstances".

Becoming practically wise requires understanding in three interdependent central areas, each of which is integrated into our Aristotelian model: theory, social work purpose, and virtues.

I. **Theory: Addressing theoretical background concerns:** ***this reflects the Aristotelian emphasis on theory which is necessary to acting virtuously.***

Of concern here are the theoretical foundations, for instance, central terminology and concepts/ theories used in ethical discussions in social work, e.g. ethics, care, help, autonomy, freedom, paternalism, social justice, rights, utility, virtues, flourishing, the good of the profession and a good human life. Social workers will be unable to examine adequately their goals in social work, which are ethical in nature, without some understanding of ethical theories, as well as an understanding of other theoretical foundations that make up social work expertise (this includes theories from sociology, psychology etc.). For example, autonomy, or self-determination, is a central social work goal. To probe its justifications requires understanding different theoretical approaches to it, such as social contract theory, utilitarianism and Kantianism, as well as teleological approaches. Such understanding provides grounding for the concept and enables us to compare different justifications for it. In this way we better understand what is at stake in acting on this social work goal.

II. **Social Work Purpose: Addressing values, principles, ethical conflicts in social work:** ***this reflects the Aristotelian teleological focus and the need for social workers to be clear about their purpose and its justifications.***

Reflections in this area can be self-reflective and reflective in exchange with the professional community (immediate colleagues and/ or broader professional community). All reflections circle around questions related to social work purpose, the fundamental principles and values and ethical conflicts related to the particular case. These include reflections about the social worker's attitude towards the client, with exploration of her possible biases and prejudices, socio-political assumptions, the client's perspective, professional goals. S/he will also need to think about her involvement/ embeddedness in different contexts, i.e. s/he is not an isolated individual who engages in reflections and decisions, but is immersed in different communities: e.g. the institution, the profession, the society. These different contexts all exert influence on the person and can be sources of support, exchange, burdens, obstacles, and criticism.

III. **Action: Addressing the habits (virtues) needed and formed through (guided) practical decision making**: ***this reflects the Aristotelian emphasis on learning to become virtuous by engaging in virtuous actions.***

In ethics education we aim for social workers to form habits (virtues) in light of the core goals of the profession. This requires (aside from the theoretical work described above) that social work students start to engage in decision making as social workers. At first, this is done within a more sheltered setting, i.e. in role plays, work with fictional cases provided by a teacher, work through case examples provided by students, dilemma cases, etc. Subsequently, working in this sheltered setting is extended to actual practice settings, e.g. short practice placements which very importantly involve in-depth reflections with the supervisor, a role model, the peer group and/or professional supervision sessions. The reflective activities we seek to stimulate in our model are initial exercises that are first steps towards reflective decision making which becomes increasingly more self-guided, as the person exhibits greater insight about the profession and is motivated to act for the right reasons in the right way.

This provides the general framework for the model and explicates its general logic. We will now exemplify how the model with its many parts can help the social worker to reflect on issues in order to develop the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, the virtue that guides the particular moral virtues which are of course needed in life overall but which also have a particular role in social work. We won't go through every single step of the model here.

Note to the reader (seminar participants): See the whole model on our handout. As you can see it is rather complex and as we stated before the different questions can help students to understand and act with practical wisdom on particular case problems. Not all of the questions that appear in the model are equally relevant in each case. Discerning what is most relevant in what case is also part of developing practical wisdom.

C. Case reflections

1. Introduction of the case[12]

Rita F, 20 years old, recently moved into an apartment of her own. She has spent most of her life in residential care and psychiatric wards and has been diagnosed with depression; she has in addition a learning disability and perhaps other psychiatric disorders. Her mother, her legal custodian, and another social worker from her childhood days have all advocated for her independent living. The goal is to stabilize her living independently and her mental condition, so that she doesn't have to go into a residential home. This is also Rita's wish. Currently, she has moved into her own apartment and is working at a newly acquired position for home economy. The social worker is assigned to give Rita support to

[12] The numbering is equivalent to the numbering in the model.

live independently. She has been visiting Rita for the past eight weeks and is worried by what she has observed. The apartment is dirty, with rubbish everywhere and dishes unwashed. Rita is not doing her laundry or cooking and appears to spend her money on cigarettes and alcohol. She has stopped taking her medications. Neighbors are upset and complaining. Rita does not want the help of the social worker but is willing to see her. The social worker is not sure what to do.

2. Understanding the main ethical dimensions

This step is crucial. Without an awareness and understanding of ethical issues, without ethical sensitivity, there is no ethical reflection. We find that it is difficult for many beginning social workers to even frame an issue in ethical terms in the first place. We perceive that social workers have difficulties in perceiving and raising ethical issues as opposed to technical-methodological issues or legal concerns. Especially for beginning learners, a first step might involve clarification of what ethics is about and what an ethical conflict is.[13] A lack of ethical sensitivity and a kind of ineptness in dealing with ethical issues can of course be related to the fact that ethics plays such a marginal role in social work education in most programs today. Thus, the need for theory manifests itself at this early stage in the model: it has to be clarified what ethics in social work refers to and why ethics has such a vital role in the profession. If social workers are not able to perceive and articulate ethical concerns, there is a danger that the issues will pass by unrecognized and remain unaddressed. Thus, social workers must be enabled to switch on their "ethics radar"—they need to understand what ethics is about, why it is so crucial in their profession and in what ways ethical issues are part of actual practice. Having a clear idea of the ethical goals of practice is an essential first step in developing practical wisdom.

In addition, however, in addressing a specific case such as Rita's, the social worker must take into account a variety of perspectives and pressures related to the specific issues and goals raised by the case. Let us consider Rita's situation.

4. Perspectives in the case

4.1 The social worker

The social worker has to reflect on what she thinks is the most adequate way of responding to this situation. To sort this out, the social worker needs to address the question of what the social work mandate is in this situation. In general, social workers need to gain clarity about their profession's values, as we suggested in the previous section, but they must also determine what goals are relevant in a particular case. It can help to engage in a discussion with colleagues who all face the question of their professional identity. Through discussion, the social worker may be able to articulate

[13] Banks & Gallagher (2009, pp.85-86) have noted this point and they refer to the phenomenon of "moral blindness" and the lack of a "finely tuned sense of moral perception".

more fully some of the important goals at stake: empowerment of Rita, safety of Rita, safety of the neighbors, mental health of Rita. In further questioning, the social worker will have the opportunity to articulate more fully what each of these goals entails and will also be able to probe the justifications for each of them.

The social worker must also reflect on the different pressures she faces in the case, pressures which could lead to compromising her role as an ethical social worker. For example, her institution might have a financial interest in working "successfully" with cases like Rita's. It helps them to establish themselves in the "social services market" and to secure similar cases in the future. There may be other pressures as well. Rita's employer may pressure the social worker to ensure that Rita goes to work regularly. The legal custodian may pressure the social worker to safeguard Rita's health and ensure that Rita manages to live independently.

The social worker will also need to examine in depth the central conflict manifest in this case, namely between client self-determination and client safety. This will require understanding the justifications for self-determination, including ways that limiting liberty can increase it in the long run, and the damage that undermining self-determination can also do in the long run. In this way, the social worker can develop a deeper understanding of the complexity of the goals and the role each plays in the case. Such understanding in turn can enable her to develop greater humility about her ability to make a good decision and enable her both to slow down her decision-making and be more wary of exerting power she has in the case. Both dispositions, slowing down decision-making and humility about one's power, seem essential to practical wisdom. By confronting these issues, the social worker can develop a critical perspective of what "ethical professional intervention" actually consists of.

She will also need to question whether her assessment presupposes a certain socio-cultural perspective about self-determination—go to work regularly, take care of one's apartment, be sensible in your life-style (don't drink when you take anti-depressants, get enough sleep, eat well). This is perhaps widely acknowledged as a self-determined life in that society. Without saying that Rita's behavior is in fact sensible, the point to be raised here is that self-determination receives a certain interpretation in the case by the various parties involved. That normative notion of self-determination can be reflected upon and questioned. Since self-determination is so central for the profession, this issue requires a thorough examination within the professional community (in the case, for instance with her colleagues). The social worker must question what version of "self-determination" should be adopted and why. The practically wise social worker needs to have an understanding of autonomy, its role in Rita's life and what this may mean for a social worker's decision-making in the case.

Some of the reflections the social worker needs to engage in to cultivate practical wisdom can be subsumed under "self-knowledge". The social worker must be aware of her biases, strengths, and limitations. In the case example her biases might stem from

issues in her adolescence, for example if the case brings up unpleasant memories that she wishes to forget. Her relationship to her mother might also bias the way she views the relationship between Rita and her mother, or she might have a strong bias about what a "well-managed" apartment should look like.

Self-knowledge will also include understanding of herself as a professional and as a person as a whole. We presume that there are no distinct "personalities", i.e. professional, personal (without thereby denying that there are role specific responsibilities) but that practical wisdom (with its integrative function) aims to join coherently the different aspects of a person's life, including the different roles a person may adopt. Negotiating the different roles and connected aims is by no means an easy task, nor is understanding oneself.

The social worker's reflections can reveal a discrepancy between how she ideally wants to act, exhibited in the attitude she shows towards Rita and how she feels in the situation: e.g. she wants to treat Rita as a self-determined being but her biases unduly influence her responses (perhaps because Rita makes her angry or because she is so afraid of what might happen to Rita if she does not intervene). Reflecting on this and engaging in exchanges with (more experienced) colleagues might help her to develop the sort of empathy and honesty that will enable her to be more open in assessing Rita's circumstances and thus to act with greater practical wisdom. Overall the question raised here is how much we are able to change our attitudes, even when we are aware of them. Our upbringing, talents and temperament will shape our responses and the extent to which we are able to develop practical wisdom.

Thinking about these different issues can help her to develop as an ethical professional who through understanding herself better is able to act with practical wisdom. As she becomes more perceptive of the different issues that are covertly at work in a case, these will influence her ethical outlook and actions to a lesser extent. Becoming more perceptive of her own limitations and prejudices seems an essential step for the social worker to develop practical wisdom in her work with the client.

4.2 The client

In order to cultivate practical wisdom, the social worker also has to consider the situation from the client's perspective. This is easier said than done and requires a certain disposition towards oneself as a professional (e.g. acknowledge that one is fallible and limited), which expresses the importance of humility as a virtue. It also requires a certain disposition towards the client (e.g. being caring, empathetic, respectful and trustworthy). These attitudes, to become dispositions, have to be genuine and expressed reliably. The mere pretense of being disposed in such ways won't work. In order to cultivate these dispositions requires a thorough understanding of one's own motivations and inner-make up (see previously "self-knowledge").

To start with, the social worker will need to carefully consider whether s/he actually knows what the client wants or whether s/he is just assuming. She will need to engage the client in a conversation about what the client wants and how s/he perceives her/ his own situation and needs. To be able to do so, the social worker needs to exhibit a disposition of real interest in Rita, of being willing to listen to what the client thinks and wants even if she, as a social worker, has a different idea of what is good for Rita. This can be quite difficult to achieve, especially when it seems "so clear" what is "good for the other person".

Considering the current case, the social worker might find out the following: Rita has been in institutions for most of her life, without the gradual process of learning to take responsibility in a family. She may well have chafed under the restrictions, and now at last she is on her own. She is also very young, still an adolescent who is apt to have trouble with impulse control and planning. Eight weeks is a very short time to figure out how to live on your own, even with help. Through considering Rita's point of view, the social worker can increase her sense of empathy for Rita, which in turn can enable her to reach out and help Rita in a respectful way that shows understanding. This step should not be minimized. With clients who are recalcitrant, unpleasant or threatening, it can be difficult to develop empathy for their point of view. Role plays and full discussion of how the world looks to Rita can help. Students can also be encouraged to find one likable quality in a client and build from that.

Rita may, for instance, implicitly or explicitly express the wish to be finally treated like an adult—someone who is entitled to make mistakes, to perhaps live in extremes and overdo things (go to parties, have a good time, be irresponsible etc.) if they wish. It is part of the freedom of being an adult.

Through the process of reflection the social worker may come to realize how important it is to Rita to live on her own. Though the social worker may disagree, through examining in depth Rita's viewpoint and the importance in social work of self-determination, the social worker may be able to slow down her decision making while she probes both the harms and benefits of paternalism.

Engaging in these reflections and in exchanges with the client might lead the social worker also to realize how constrained some individuals in society are just because they have been diagnosed with certain conditions and just because they are "clients" while other persons who have no such diagnosis are free to do as they please, even engage in self-damaging behavior. Therefore, the issue arises that there is perhaps a certain extent of "arbitrariness" involved here which is also connected to socio-cultural perceptions of what is "normal" and who is subject to professional treatment in a society and who isn't. Making (professional) judgments about another person's life is in fact an intrusive act, even if it is the social worker's job to be involved in Rita's life. But part of the social worker's role is to recognize the boundaries that may not be crossed to violate

another person's self-determination. A person's life demands respect and this implies a respect for personal boundaries also.

This sort of reflection may raise questions about social work's role in society and invite critical questions about the profession, questions that are also a part of cultivating practical wisdom.

5.-7. Differences in perspectives; options for action and decision-making; reviewing the decision

Thus far the social worker has worked on gaining a fuller understanding of the case through exploring the various questions suggested previously. In the course of this, the complexity of the case and the depth of the ethical issues have emerged. The question the social worker now has to confront is how to balance all the aspects that she has taken into account and come to a reasonable decision. In the process of seeking and making a decision, practical wisdom would among other things encompass the following:

After bringing to mind the possible different perspectives in the case and the demands the different parties in the case make of her, s/he needs to figure out which demands are legitimate and most important. In sorting through the demands, an important normative point of reference is the central purpose and values of her profession. The Code of Ethics includes a concern for empowering clients and enhancing their self-determination as well as working for a client's well-being. But it will not be clear to a beginning social worker what this means in practice, until the social worker has reflected on the questions in the model, as we have already suggested. Through the questions, the social worker can begin to develop the sort of empathy, caring, and sense of justice that will enable her to act towards Rita and her institution with practical wisdom. She will understand the value and limits of self-determination, the viewpoint of Rita, the importance of safety, and she will act with caution and humility, given the complexities of the case.

When trying to balance the different perspectives and interests the social worker will also have to find a sound way of communicating the reasons for her own perspective which may diverge from other perspectives and which may lead her to make decisions that are not favored by others. Accomplishing that in an ethical way is especially important in relation to the client. The practically wise social worker will convey her decision with honesty, caring and trustworthiness towards the client, dispositions enhanced by the reflections she has engaged in.

Another pressing consideration may be that the social worker thinks about her still fragile status in the team. To establish a career it may be counterproductive to thwart the agency's interests. However, if she engages in actions that she deems wrong, she will lose her integrity. She will need to reflect on whether a career is possible for her in that agency without creating serious damages to herself as a person. If for instance she repeatedly engages in actions that she is actually opposed to (inner conflict) and which

she considers wrong, she will be in a situation where it seems very hard for her to flourish as a person and she will damage her clients. These issues potentially carry grave consequences for clients and the social worker and a practically wise social worker must address them.

Exploring in depth the questions in our model will make clear to the social worker how complex the ethical conflict is. In turn this can result in the social worker considering various compromise actions, rather than an either-or decision of letting Rita continue as is or forcing her back into residential treatment. Rita herself may have ideas of how best to proceed, so that Rita can have autonomy but also meet more of her obligations.

By engaging in the previous reflections it may also be that new issues and different perspectives on the case will emerge. Perhaps due to bringing to light the complexity of the case, the social worker now feels unable to act and will need further advice from her colleagues. Or perhaps it becomes apparent that no perfect solution to the case is available but only decisions that are all burdened with serious disadvantages, leading to harm for someone. For instance, arguing for Rita to go back to residential care could of course ensure that she is cared for properly: that she will take her medication as prescribed, eat regularly and healthily, and so on. But that decision could also imply a serious blow to Rita's self-esteem and to her sense of self-efficacy. It could add to her sense that she is not able to accomplish those things in her life that are important to her and aggravate her sense of being different. It will require great sensitivity to work with Rita to address these critical and existential issues.

This concludes our presentation of some of the reflections a social worker might have to engage in to understand and act on a case ethically. The reflections will help to cultivate practical wisdom as an overarching virtue through developing the "meticulous thoughtfulness" we have described. Social workers will come to experience how virtues, such as honesty, empathy, justice, are an integral aspect of the kind of "meticulous thoughtfulness" that results in practical wisdom. By introducing this model to social work education we hope to provide a tool which students (and teachers) can use to think about what is central to the social work profession.

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