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Engaging with the Crooked Timber of Humanity: Value Pluralism and Social Work

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Abstract

The field of social work ethics is changing. While more established positions, such as utilitarianism and deontology, continue to influence social work thinking and practice, emergent approaches are taking hold, leading to a radical examination of social work as an ethical discipline. To contribute to this unfolding debate, this article examines Isaiah Berlin's notion of value pluralism and its contribution to social work. The argument proceeds by summarising and categorising some of the traditional and emergent theories shaping social work according to metaphors of the 'head' (the justice-oriented, rational approaches) and the 'heart' (the grounded, particularistic and care-focused approaches). Berlin's value pluralism is then adopted to contend that social work needs to hold both 'head' and 'heart' ethics in a vital equilibrium to generate the ethics of the 'hand' (i.e. the practical response to contested areas of need) and the 'feet' (the commitment to change and well-being). These metaphors are then mapped on to a decision-making process and applied to the fraught area of adoption without parental consent.

Keywords: Value pluralism, social work ethics, ethical decision making

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Introduction

We live in a world that is increasing in complexity. Rich in information, image and artefact, this world is also characterised by contradiction,

tension, ambiguity and ambivalence. People's actions shape society but are, in turn, constrained by it. Societal forces producing consensus and conflict clash, influencing identities, everyday social interaction, institutional norms and the different types of resource that are available or unavailable to people. Ethical quandaries emerge with a particular resonance in this (late)-modern age. In response, proclamations for living the 'good life' struggle to maintain their relevance. People no longer have certainty and must grapple with competing ethical positions and moral viewpoints.

In this article, I argue that social work must try to maintain an openness to the discordant themes within ethical theory and moral philosophy. It must not succumb to parochialism by identifying with one univocal position, be it, for instance, deontology or utilitarianism (see below). Social life is complex and requires a wide lens that can refract light in different directions on contrasting subject matters. The idea of keeping countervailing ethical perspectives in social work in tension, which is at the heart of my argument, is amplified later in the article by drawing on the work of Isaiah Berlin (2003), one of the leading, libertarian thinkers of the twentieth century. Berlin's *value pluralism* suggests that there are no ultimate, universal, cross-cultural moral foundations that can be ranked in order of priority to determine how we should live. I suggest that Berlin's ideas on morality in day-to-day life can be extrapolated to the realm of ethical theory where clashing, incompatible and incommensurate ideas sometimes abound. Developing one's ethical awareness means being open to the full ramifications of this claim.

To construct and justify this argument, I set out, in the following section, a brief summary of some of the key ethical theories, both established and emergent, underpinning social work practice. There are a range of texts that cover these theories in much greater depth and precision than I accomplish here (see Banks, 2006; Reamer, 1982). The intention is merely to map out the territory, much as a cartographer might do when surveying the landscape, so that the first building block in the argument is erected. Once achieved, I then categorise these theories and perspectives according to Sevenhuijsen's (1998) metaphors of the 'head' (the rational approach to ethics), 'heart' (the emotional, intuitive response to ethics), 'hand' (the practical engagement with ethics) and 'feet' (the practice of walking the moral path in order to get things done). What is being suggested here is that 'head' and 'heart' approaches to ethics can be seen in the context of Berlin's notion of value pluralism. As such, even though they may collide, it is argued that the ethical inquirer must maintain an openness to their tenets, avoiding the all-too-easy tendency to privilege one set of ideas and negate the other. Such conceptual and emotional openness, as captured through Berlin's value pluralism, leads to the unfolding praxis of the 'head', 'heart', 'hand' and feet'.

This dynamic interplay between the metaphors is then transposed to a recognised process for ethical decision making in social work. The net

result is a conceptual framework that integrates the position of value pluralism with a step-by-step procedure for thinking through how one might choose a course of action in a potentially fraught circumstance where there might be disputed rights and needs or questions of liberty and self-determination.

A brief review of key ethical perspectives informing social work practice

Ethical theories offer a rich and expanding domain of ideas. It is beyond the scope of this article to present a comprehensive review of these theories and how they apply to ethical reasoning and decision making in social work. Instead, I carry out a brief review of what are considered to be some of the key theories and their basic themes. To start, let us consider a number of schools that are widely referenced in the social work literature, namely utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics and the ethics of care.

Utilitarianism

As a type of consequentialism (which views the moral worth of a deed in terms of its outcome), utilitarianism claims that moral action is action that maximises pleasure or satisfaction and minimises negative experience. Putting this another way, when faced with a moral dilemma, one must consider the range of options or alternative courses of action and select the one that results in the best after-effect for all concerned. The juxtaposition of what leads to pleasure and, by contrast, what leads to pain revels in what might be seen as a 'happiness sum': a rational, methodological calculus discerning the greatest happiness of the greatest number. This is a calculus that privileges consequences over motives, acts as opposed to agents.

Furrow (2005) views utilitarianism in a positive light. For him, it adds:

> ... more rigour and precision to our common sense approach to reasoning. In countless situations everyday we contemplate what the consequences of our actions will be, and we choose the action that will produce the best consequences. The utilitarian argues that simply by clarifying what counts as a best consequence and specifying the kinds of reason that will produce the best consequence we can systematize all of our moral reasoning (Furrow, 2005, p. 45).

Yet, other perspectives (see Harstell, 2006) have been more downcast about the applicability of this approach in social work, as it fails to define the nature of what is good in social life. Without this underpinning axiom, utilitarian thinking can endorse majoritarian perspectives that, in fact, breach time-honoured virtues and ways of behaving.

Deontology

Deontology (Kant, 1964) stresses the importance of sticking to moral rules. Translated to social work, this would take the form of professional codes or principles such as the importance of self-determination. These injunctions come from a sense of reason, duty and respect for others. It is acknowledged that rule-bound behaviour is not easy to accomplish or sustain. Being good is a struggle with egocentric interests. Unlike utilitarianism, it is motive that counts in deontology, not the consequences of one's acts. Spontaneous acts of charity, executed without a sense of motive and duty, are not perceived as truly moral acts in this framework. Kant put forward the following test of actions, based on reason, to assist the moral inquirer in her deliberations: 'What would happen if we universalised the action?' For example, in order to determine the legitimacy of stealing in society, the test requires that we consider its impact on human life if it were to be adopted as a widespread activity. Reason would indicate that the concept of rightful possession would be so scandalised and bankrupted that it would become meaningless. In these deliberations, the inquirer is exercising his autonomy to make rational, independent judgements and is expressing his inherent goodness and objective worth.

Kant, in his seminal work, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1964), promulgated the idea of a *categorical imperative*, as a means of capturing right motive and duty. The categorical imperative is a set of injunctions that are non-negotiable, unconditional and non-contingent, that apply regardless of context and are independent of whim. The golden rule of 'do unto others as you would expect them to do to you' is the most widely known version of the imperative. Closely linked to it is the directive to 'treat people as ends in their own right' and (as a corollary) 'never as a means to an end only'. Lastly, Kant proclaimed that we must show respect for others, allowing them to be self-determining subjects.

Such deontological foundations continue to exercise a significant influence in social work, as witnessed in the promulgation of codes of conduct and practice (Banks, 2008). It is also evidenced in the application of a rational approach to problem solving in social work where ethical quandaries are to the fore (Landau and Osmo, 2003). This approach has been attacked, however, by theorists who suggest that deontology does not recognise the ambiguous, messy and indeterminate nature of social life (Rossiter, 2006); others raise concerns that ethical codes are not always followed by social workers in real-life situations (Banks, 2008).

Both utilitarianism and deontology, in spite of their marked differences, draw on the need for objective moral reasons when it comes to a consideration of which course of action to choose. In being objective and rational, one is attempting to be impartial and unbiased. Human preference does not enter the moral equation; nor do arguments about the need for a

relativistic approach based on the vagaries of one's setting or culture. Reasons provide a stable reference regardless of these cultural differences, so that:

> ... out of that web, they try to identify a single feature that stands out as basic, that provides the key to unlocking the patterns of thought that must organize this bloomin', buzzin' confusion (to use a phrase made famous by William James) into something eminently reasonable (Furrow, 2005, p. 56).

Virtue ethics

Virtue ethics proceeds from the premise that moral decisions and actions emanate from a carefully cultivated moral character rather than arising from a rational consideration of the consequences of the act (as in utilitarianism) or from a rational contemplation of the rightness of the act, per se (as in deontology). Actions reflect inner substance and fibre, moral conviction and a visceral orientation and are to be judged accordingly. This stress on virtue is found in Platonic and Aristotlean notions of what is excellent (*arête*), what is practical and wise (*phronesis*) and what typifies human flourishing (*eudaimonia*).

The key virtues to cultivate are courage, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, wisdom and kindness. In attending to these virtues and enhancing their existential presence, one builds a virtuous identity. As such, the focus is on existential 'being' rather than 'doing'. Being is linked with emotions, with cognitions, wants and needs and perceptions. It is bound up within a complex array of different facets of character that work together to shape action. Working with the tensions between emotion and reason within oneself is driven by the strength of one's will.

These themes have been taken up by a number of social work ethicists (Clark, 2006; Lovat and Gray, 2008). Here, the question is 'what kind of social worker should I be?' rather than 'what should I do?'. Following rules blindly or blithely will not deepen moral understanding in social work, it is contended. According to McBeath and Webb (2002), the right moral disposition will only occur by persistently reflecting on one's day-to-day practice. For the virtue ethicist, circumspection lays the ground for right intentions, which, in turn, are more likely to lead to good outcomes for service users. However, for social workers in particular, there is an issue as to how virtue is to be defined in practice situations. For Houston (2003), this is best accomplished through moral communication and interaction.

The ethics of care

This ethical position attacks individualism and promotes normative decisions that take cognizance of human interdependence, vulnerability

and the social context surrounding a subject's needs and interests. Detached appraisal, without empathy and care, it is argued, can miss the nuances of grounded, concrete experience and the suffering of a person located within a specific place and time, a person facing complex power relations and forms of exclusion (Hugman, 2005).

Care is fundamental to experience, it is argued. It is not part of a character's disposition (as in virtue ethics). Rather, it is located in relationships with others instead of focusing on sterile rules, or principles. Thus, it is family-centred and views the private domain as the sphere where ethics and morals are cultivated. Furthermore, it tries to grasp another person's reality within intimate contexts such as family relationships: the person's inner experience of pain and other thoughts and emotions. From this, it means that we are also interested in the person's goals and aspirations. Such sensitivity breeds intimacy, engrossment, receptivity, relatedness and responsiveness; care is a heart-felt quality unlike the more abstract, masculine reason of deontology. In their attunement to others, carers value difference and particularity and normalise the experience of dependency and interdependency.

A number of social work commentators who have drawn on the ethics of care (Graham, 2007; Clifford, 2002; Orme, 2002) have also adopted feminist theories to buttress their arguments. Judith Butler's (1990) ideas on gender, and her avowed reluctance to truncate the array of potential gender identities and to problematise existing categorisation, has been welcomed by Featherstone and Green (2009) as being most relevant for the social work profession. For these thinkers, Butler's work enables social workers to ask important questions, particularly in relation to those who have been marginalised by the constraints of heteronormativity.

Towards value pluralism: ethics as part of the 'head', 'heart', 'hand' and 'feet'

I now attempt to take stock of the themes arising from this brief overview of established and emerging ethical theory in order to work towards a tentative position that can inform social work practice. To construct this position, let us return to the 'ethics of care' as articulated by Selma Sevenhuijsen. In her text, *Citizenship and the Ethics of Care* (1998), the author builds on Carol Gilligan's (1982) seminal work on the nature of care from a feminist perspective. Although acknowledging that the relationship between care and feminism can be fraught, she does not accept the critique (put forward by some feminists) that care necessarily reinforces misogynistic practices. Rather, a feminist view of care should lead to politicitised practices aimed at pressing institutional questions where women's voices have equal claim to those of men's. Moreover, in highlighting the limitations

of a rights-based, justice orientation, Sevenhuijsen attempts to translate values derived from the ethics of care—attentiveness, responsiveness and responsibility—into ideas about citizenship and politics. However, in doing so, she does not jettison the ethic of justice. Her major contribution lies in attempting to synthesise notions of care and justice. Thus, for Sevenhuijsen:

> Justice should be based on values such as reconciliation, reciprocity, diversity and responsibility, and on the willingness and ability of citizens to accept responsibility for each other's well-being (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p. 145).

According to Hugman (2005, p. 78), this means essentially that 'the meaning of care may be found in the promotion of justice, while the meaning of justice may be found in the promotion of care'.

Sevenhuijsen vividly captures the commitment to justice in a context of care through the enriching metaphors of 'head', 'heart', 'hand' and 'feet'. The unique synergy between these four categories coalesces around the values of relationship, care and human dignity and is synchronous with the essence of social work. But, more than that, these metaphors also provide an alternative way of capturing the central planks of social work as a holistic discipline concerned, too, with social well-being.

Drawing on Sevenhuijsen's metaphors, I conceive of the 'head' as comprising the cognitive, cerebral, rational, deductive and problem-solving dimensions of helping. In social work, they are evident in rational models of planning, decision making and problem solving, and approaches to practice incorporating critical thinking and reflection (see Gambrill, 1997). The 'heart' dimension, by way of contrast, embraces feeling, emotion, sentiment, intuition, the visceral response, empathy and helping as a form of 'art'. In social work, the 'heart' dimension is encapsulated, inter alia, in person-centred forms of empathetic understanding (Egan, 2007), and approaches that foster a sensitivity to the existential challenges facing people, such as needing to build coping skills in the face of loss. The 'hand', again rather differently, refers to the use of practical skills and methods to alleviate human suffering in the 'here-and-now'. It moves beyond caring about into practical acts of responsiveness and responsibility. In social work, the strengths-based model (Saleebey, 2002), task-centred approaches and cognitive–behavioural methods (Sheldon, 1995) exemplify the caring 'hand' in action in various guises. Lastly, the 'feet' metaphor connotes an attitude of mind in social work that is prepared to 'walk the extra mile' for service users. It is practice that is not satisfied with bureaucratic efficiency as an end, but instead pursues well-being and person-centred outcomes through dedicated, anti-oppressive practice that is flexible and gets things done.

These metaphors can be also be used to categorise the array of emergent and more established ethical theories highlighted in the first part of this

article (see Figure 1). Thus, 'head' ethics embrace the application of reason, autonomy, justice, duty, principle, universalism and critical reflection when confronting fraught situations that require a social work response. For Sevenhuijsen, the head dimension equates with an ethic of justice. Essentially, it reflects an attempt to abstract ethics from situational and particularistic contexts so that unbiased reason can be applied to quandaries requiring examination. As argued earlier, these dimensions appear to be more established in the social work literature where there are attempts to apply deontological and utilitarian theories to practice.

'Heart' ethics, by way of contrast, coalesce around emotion, relational connectedness, empathy, the pursuit of virtue and inductive 'know-how'. Coming from the 'heart', ethical responses reflect a spontaneity grounded in the 'here' and 'now'—an accurate tuning-in to the situation, rather than a more distanced, calculative and deliberative reaction. In the first part of the article, these dimensions were embedded within virtue ethics and the ethics of care. For Sevenhuijsen, the heart converges around a sense of attentiveness, responsiveness and responsibility for the other.

The response of the 'hand' is reflected in the practical ways of engaging people in need. Arising from a synergy of 'head' and 'heart', the 'hand' is expressed in outward expressions of care, support and compassion within real-life, situational contexts. According to Sevehuijsen, the hand is a form of practical action that transcends a limited, traditional justice orientation and an uncritical application of care. Inevitably, the hand entails a communicative response of some kind with those affected by the ethical issue. For Hugman (2005), an ethics of democratic dialogue, as articluated in Habermas's discourse ethics, is central to practices carried out by the caring professions. Dialogue that embraces understanding, agreement and consensus, and where power is held in check, meets the criteria for an

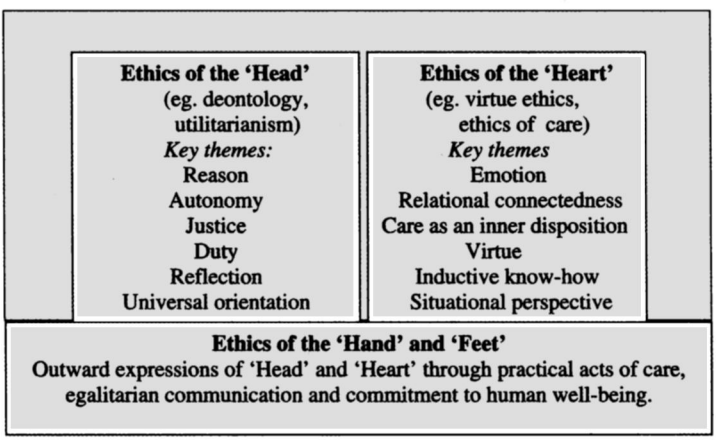

Figure 1 Ethical theory as seen through the metaphors of 'head', 'heart', 'hand' and 'feet'

'ideal speech situation'. In this context, the only legitimate force is the force of better communicative reason.

The 'feet' come as an accompaniment to the hand and represent a willingness to shift one's perspectives in order to promote human well-being. Again, in Sevenhuiijsen's perspective, the feet are the activist element of care that addresses a person's access to a range of resources: economic, cultural, educational and symbolic. The feet politicise the act of care. In this sense, the feet embrace a citizenship ethic with a gender analysis at its core.

However, in reviewing this categorisation, 'head' and 'heart' ethics appear to be polarised orientations. Reason and emotion, for example, do not often sit in a comfortable alignment. The same could be said for 'duty' and 'virtue' as ethical positions. Doing one's duty connotes an outward, consistent response that is rule-bound whereas a commitment to building virtue suggests an interior process of character refinement through introspection. More importantly, how does the 'hand' in social work respond when surveying these dichotomous dimensions? To answer this question, let us turn to the thinking of Isaiah Berlin (2003).

For Berlin, human values are essentially *incommensurable* and *incompatible*, particularly given a social world that is characterised by fluidity, change, diversity, social conflict and the multiplicity of cultural and ethnic viewpoints. Incommensurability, in Berlin's view, meant that there was often a dearth of common currency with which to make effective judgements between divergent value orientations. Incommensurability also indicated that there could not be one superseding, governing principle or metric acting as a *force majeure*, such as Kant's categorical imperative, covering all situations at all times. Berlin based his assertions on empirical grounds. According to his observations, human subjects were sometimes faced with tortuous choices between outcomes that were equally ultimate and where disparate claims often appeared to be equally absolute and laudable. In real life, many great truths of seemingly great merit present themselves as moral compasses. However, such 'great goods' often collide, argued Berlin (2003, p. 17). Take, for example, the tension between liberty and equality in political theory. Both are noble aspirations. However, to privilege liberty over equality would lead to cleavages in living standards. Similarly, to privilege equality over liberty would lead to a curtailment of freedom and the denial of expression.

For Berlin, even though such apparent ethical collisions cannot be avoided, they can be softened. They can be held in a creative tension. Out of this tension, contrasting claims can be counter-balanced. This entails a mindset of tolerant value pluralism in the face of uncertainty and one that strives for equilibrium, however tentative or unstable. Sitting or wrestling on the 'boundary' (Tillich, 1966) between several apparently divergent value perspectives that may appear, in their own right, to be meritorious, and perhaps fundamental, opened up creative possibilities. Moreover, it opened up the need for existential choice that Berlin saw as

the *sine qua non* of what it was to be ethical in today's multicultural society. Choice was a salutary act: it might entail compromise or it might entail loss. This notion resonates with Keats's idea of 'negative capability' (Scott, 2002)—that is, one's capacity to analyse contradictory thoughts and act on them without the tendency to reconcile their discordant elements or to place them into fixed, closed categories. In effect, we are enjoined by Keats to revel in uncertainty, mystery and doubt without succumbing to an irritable reaching after certitude through reasoned argument.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Berlin was opposed to what he termed 'moral monism' (Berlin, 2003, p. 14): the perspective that suggested that every ethical question had a single correct, indubitable answer or that the answer could be derived from one single moral position, be it virtue-led ethics or deontology, universalism or particularism. The multiplicity of life and its quandaries could in no way be sacrificed to claims for theoretical coherence. Attempting to dragoon moral inquiry into a narrow conceptual net could be a source of catastrophic action. Yet, Berlin, in promoting a kind of moral pluralism, distanced his stance from moral relativism. There were fundamental ethical principles that could *not* be sacrificed. Indeed, they might be found across various cultures (such as the principle of doing no harm to others). So, unlike the proponents of relativism, Berlin said that there had to be limits to difference, particularly when basic libertarian freedoms were threatened. In fact, he argued for a common human horizon replete with shared values. Relativism, for Berlin, negated understanding between actors and was self-contradictory from an epistemological point of view in that, if everything was relative, so was relativism itself.

Essentially, then, I am arguing from a Berlinian position. In doing so, I am extrapolating his ideas on value pluralism to the plurality of ethical theories. More specifically, I am saying that practitioners need to be open to the pluralistic ethics of both the 'head' and the 'heart', even though they may present countervailing arguments and colliding sentiments. Adherence to ethical monism will just not do. Justice, duty and reason need to be held in a creative equilibrium, where possible, with emotion, caring, intuition and aspirations towards virtue. The apparent collision of these divergent ethical positions needs to be softened and embraced in a creative tension, as both Berlin and Sevenhuijsen have argued. Moreover, this tension 'augments and enriches the ethical vocabulary of the caring professions without any one approach being seen as an absolute position' (Hugman, 2005, p. 166).

Moving towards the precarious, yet enlivened, boundary between the opposing perspectives of 'head' and 'heart' and remaining on this boundary, however existentially uncomfortable it feels, leads social work to its apogee, its highest ethical moment. Out of the equilibrium and balance of 'head' and 'heart' comes the 'hand'—the existential choice that the social worker implements, however tortuous it may be. The choice may, given

knowledge of the particular circumstances of the case, represent the best balance, the best equilibrium as compared to an alternative course of action. However, it may also be the case that equilibrium is not feasible and that a purposeful choice has to be made to follow a particular course of action. What is important here is that the *starting point* of this ethical inquiry maintained a pluralistic orientation that disavowed the notion that there was one universal set of principles by which human subjects ought to abide.

Pluralism and ethical process

How does this pluralistic stance fit within a wider approach to ethical decision making in social work? To answer this question and develop the argument further, let us consider how some thinkers approach ethical quandaries in social work. For these thinkers, what is important is a linear, ethical process of decision making (Reamer, 1982; Clifford and Burke, 2009). Although there are some differences in how these thinkers frame the process, a common, structural thread exists within them. I have set out these steps in Table 1. In addition, I have integrated the metaphors of 'heart', 'head', 'hand' and 'feet' within this process, showing how the ideas and concepts behind Berlin's notion of value pluralism clarify the presenting issues. The steps also offer social work practitioners a set of touchstones to help them process their inquiries systematically and analytically.

The process outlined in the table takes for granted that an objective set of steps is required in order to systematise thinking towards some kind of accepted resolution or response. Hence, it is important, first and foremost, that the inquirer cogitates on the nature of the problem (see (a)). What is important here is clarity and a capacity to identify the relevant issues. The ethical problem has to be stated clearly and defined lucidly, noting the consequences for all the stakeholders affected by it. Vagueness in this initial problem definition will only serve to muddle critical analysis further on in the analytical trail.

Second, once the problem has been defined, factual information related to it has to be gathered and checked (see (b)). For example, in child and family social work, an ethical quandary often has legal ramifications. Knowledge of the relevant legal statutes is therefore imperative. But, more than this, the social worker may also have to draw on relevant social policy and findings from research. Such information places the ethical quandary in an informational context, indicating duties and responsibilities and clarifying the meaning of certain behaviours. Thresholds of concern about child welfare are often illuminated by research on children's needs and expected developmental outcomes.

Following on from this second step, ethical theories can be applied (see (c)) to analyse the issues, drawing on particular conceptual devices such

Table 1 Value pluralism and the process of ethical decision making

Steps in the process
(a) Identify the ethical problem or quandary and review its key dimensions
(b) Gather factual information pertaining to the problem
(c) Adopt *the 'head' and 'heart' perspectives of value pluralism* to consider the ethical issues arising from the problem
(d) Identify potential courses of action to address the problem and their outcomes
(e) Choose the best course of action in the light of the preceding deliberations
(f) Implement the course of action from *the perspective of the 'hand' and 'feet'*
(g) Review and evaluate the course of action
(h) Respond, if necessary with further deliberations as outlined in the preceding stages, if required

as the categorical imperative, to make sense of the quandary and help define ways of framing potential responses to them. Thus, under the metaphors of 'head' and 'heart', the range of ethical theories outlined earlier provide percipient ideas for making sense of 'what ought to be done'. It is here that Berlin's insights on value pluralism and Sevenhuijsen's model of citizenship and the ethics of care take hold. This means grappling with conflicts and the collision of perspectives in ethical theories as described earlier. It is from this analysis that potential courses of action begin to unfold (see step (d)). Resource constraints impact on potential avenues, as do people's willingness to acknowledge a problem area and their capacity to change.

Choosing the preferred option, or the least detrimental alternative, and implementing it is shown in the fifth and sixth steps (see (e) and (f)). For Berlin, an essential plank of value pluralism is the need to make an uncomfortable choice between colliding ethics and values, acknowledging that there may be no single right answer. Individuals, in his estimation, have certain fixed traits but they also have some capacity to define their orientation. Choice is part of who we are and shapes the personality. It leads to action as well. Action, in this framework, is tantamount to the operationalisation of the 'hand' and 'feet' perspectives referred to earlier. Such perspectives cohere around Sevenhuijsen's promotion of democratic citizenship within care practices. This linear process then gives rise to the remaining two steps of evaluating the action (see (g)) and instigating a new process of deliberation (see (h)) if required.

Value pluralism and social work practice

Social workers are often caught between a 'rock and a hard place' when it comes to decision making in respect of vulnerable children and their parents. So, how can the notion of value pluralism help a practitioner navigate her way towards an informed decision that draws on both intuition and

analytical skills? An example from real-life practice is required in order to respond to this question.

The decision to place a child for adoption without parental consent undoubtedly gravitates towards the high end of ethically charged decision making. Severing biological attachments raises huge ethical quandaries for all concerned. For birth parents, adoption without consent will represent a draconian act that violates their human rights—particularly their right to family life and to privacy. The emotional implications and gravity of the associated loss are incommensurable compared to the impact of most other state-led interventions. For the young child, adoption severs a bond that is sacrosanct because of its biological connotations. Therefore, it may have huge implications for identity later on in life. Yet, it may be a justified action that engenders love, security and warm psychological attachment while safeguarding the child's welfare. For the social workers, evidence of risk, harm and possibilities for growth and change will all have to be gathered and analysed. Acting with compulsion and control, however benevolently rendered, sits uneasily with a professional orientation towards humanism and person-centred values. These are just some of the issues that might arise from the application of step (a) in the ethical process described above.

In step (b) of the process, the social worker gathers factual information from empirical and theoretical sources. Taking the former, it would be important to review research findings about the outcomes of different placement types. There are quite a few studies (Triseliotis *et al.*, 1997) that show how adoption is a more secure outcome for young children compared to foster-care. In terms of the latter, further insight into the needs of the child could be gleaned from attachment theory (Howe, 1995). Ideas about children's inner working models, defence mechanisms, attachment patterns and cognitive and emotional development that arise from the theory are useful for thinking about a specific child's needs. In addition to these sources, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be adopted as a guiding framework for 'head' and 'heart' responses to the child and the realisation of his capabilities.

The information extracted from the case also critically determines future action. Family history, themes of unresolved care and control needs, patterns of conditioned response as well as times of stability and 'good enough care' all have to be weighed and judged according to probability estimates of future harm, strengths, the danger of delay and the opportunity costs arising from alternative courses of action such as placing the child in foster-care or even attempting further rehabilitation with the birth parents.

In all of this, what counts is how information is acquired and processed. Oppressive assumptions can influence the way parents are categorised unfairly when information is being sought from them. Holland's (2004) research showed how a limited parental vocabulary could often be mistaken as a lack of motivation to change. More significantly, the child, even though

he is of tender years, is entitled to a 'voice' about his living arrangements and care needs. Excluding or minimising his perspective on the grounds of developmental immaturity denotes unfounded ageist assumptions about competence. Equally unfounded are the assumptions that preverbal children do not have views or that their views are unreliable or lack probity.

According to Winter (2011), social workers need to form meaningful relationships with young children on their caseloads to promote their right to be heard. Her stance here resonates with the theme of relational connectedness underpinning the ethics of care and the 'heart' metaphor. Adopting this value position, social workers need to be aware of the variety of barriers that impede meaningful relationships such as bureaucratic tasks, lack of trust, threats to self, ill-informed premises about the competence of young children and lack of available tools to communicate effectively. For Winter, the fostering of relationships is achieved through a set of age-appropriate stages, skills and methods. Having a beginning, rapport-building, middle and ending stage of the interview, and being conscious of power imbalances through the kinds of roles adopted, are central aspects of rights-based communication with young children.

The third step of applying ethical theories, from the perspective of value pluralism, casts a different light on the ethical quandaries. Under this step, the social worker must refrain from the temptation to view one ethical theory as containing the true reference point from which to analyse the case. Rather, the challenge is to acknowledge that veritable insights lie in many ethical perspectives, even though they may jar. Moreover, one should not privilege a particular perspective over another. So, the social worker might begin to consider critically the *consequences* of potential options for all of the parties affected by the potential decision in line with a utilitarian approach; she will also have to consider recognised duties, principles, codes of practice and established professional ethics, in line with a deontological stance. The various elements of the categorical imperative may have a particular purchase here. Thus, *universalising* the option of adoption for young children, where there are severe concerns about parenting, may present real difficulties for courts that are highly sensitive to breaches in human-rights protocols and actions that vitiate the sanctity of family life. The ethics of care, by way of contrast, might point to the family's needs as a whole. A professional adopting this perspective might look critically at his attribution of the cause of poor parenting; instead of seeing it in terms of inherent personality deficits within the birth mother, he may begin to widen the causative explanation to the socio-economic hardships impacting on her life. In doing so, the worker combines rights-based practice with care, bringing Sevenhuijsen's hand and heart together in a dynamic fusion.

The fourth step, of listing all of the potential options, and the fifth step, of choosing the best option, necessitates pooling the information together, analysing facts and feelings and insights from moral philosophy, to reach

a formulation on need, risk and the resources that will be required to meet the child's needs. This formulation acts as a benchmark to evaluate the significant harms and benefits arising from each of the options. Exercising choice is an inherent part of social work practice. It is also a fulcrum supporting the application of value pluralism to real-life concerns.

Enacting choice leads to the 'hand' and 'feet': the practical engagement with each of the family members, other professionals, members of the legal profession and the judiciary. In this context, the social worker should consider the need for responsiveness, stemming from the ethics of care, and action that is sensitive to people as 'ends' in their own right, stemming from deontology. The social worker should also communicate with significant others in the case in a manner that attempts to avert imbalances of power. How, specifically, was the attempt to obtain the parents' consent managed? What type of language was used? Moral pluralism begets open, democratic communication, as Hugman (2005) has suggested. In all of this, the 'hand' remains open to the insights arising from the 'head' and the 'heart': the rational approach to ethical quandaries and the affective, emotional responses to them. The social worker's committed attempt to reflect on and change her practice through the metaphor of the 'feet has moulded her professional character, in line with virtue ethics. It has politicised her understanding of the organisational approach to child protection in a manner that recognises an orientation to care and the salience of gender.

The remaining two steps of review and further reflection emphasise Berlin's commitment, within value pluralism, to a state of receptivity, generosity and scepticism. This warns us of the danger of certitude in ethical deliberation. There is considerable evidence (Munro, 2008) that we tend to privilege information that confirms our preformed premises and reject, ignore or forget information that conflicts with them. A positive report from an expert witness (appointed by the court) concerning the mother's capacity to change, even though it is a minority view, may need to be re-evaluated. However, it is self-evident that there are no right answers in cases like this, but only (perhaps) right choices. Happiness (for all) and goodness (for all) are often incompatible aspirations, according to Berlin. Such is reality.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have argued that there may be a tendency in social work to approach ethical theories in a manner that sees them as mutually exclusive; thus, inquirers may make choices based on a monistic notion that one perspective best accommodates to social reality. One may decide to follow the route of reasoned analysis, as in the deontological approach, for example, or to reject its intellectual aridity and pursue a more reflective, emotion-

centred form of inquiry. Against this backdrop, the internecine wars that have developed between ethicists, the polemic it is has engendered and the stasis that is has created have not helped the social work practitioner who needs to grapple with real-life dilemmas of huge import. A 'certain humility in these matters is very necessary', says Berlin (2003, p. 18). This is a humility that attempts to maintain an openness to the dualisms of the 'head' and 'heart' that holds conflicting and colliding ethical perspectives in creative tension so that the 'hand' of compassion and empathic communication is offered, even though it is a hand that is forged out of the 'crooked timber of humanity where no straight thing was ever made' (to adopt another metaphor from Berlin (2003, p. 19)). By this, he meant that we should guard against dogmatism and perfectionism in ethical inquiry.

In this *Sisyphean* struggle with the antimonies, vagaries and contradictions that lie in between the dualism of 'head' and 'heart', ethical deliberation must reach for a point of *creative tension* that values self-doubt and self-criticism. Moreover, it is a hermeneutic process that promotes the inquirer's reflexive awareness of herself and others as culturally conditioned subjects. A commitment to humility and a reverence for complexity and contradiction is the mindset that enables the ethical inquirer to make a tentative leap into the horizons of the 'other'.

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