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Limits of the Ethical Training of Social Workers (Altruism Issue in the Moral Space of Professional Ethics)

Abstract

The article is focused on the professional ethics of social work in the context of the philosophy of education. The authors analyse its educational pitfalls seen as a possible tension of personal ethics and professional ethics. Analysing the altruism issue (one of the essential values in social work) the authors reflect on the relationship of autonomy and heteronomy of will (e.g. regulated by institutional codes) in moral acting.

Keywords: *ethical education in social work, personal ethics, professional ethics, altruism, autonomy, heteronomy*

Introduction

The motive for writing of this text was the statement: "Professional ethics … is not a study of what makes a 'good' or successful person, but what makes a good professional. […] We think virtue ethics and the teleological method are so important for professional ethics because, to the extent that if professional ethics is about more than ordinary ethics it is about the practicalities of doing the job well" (Bowles et al. 2006, pp. 61–62). This statement suggested a possible difference between a 'good person' and a 'good professional'. Regarding that both – a 'good person' and a 'good professional' – can be understood as a certain result preceded by a process of education and training, it was decided to give some thought to possible relations of professional ethics of social work (including ethical training of future social workers) and selected issues of theoretical ethics reflected in the

educational process of specialist training. In our text social work is mentioned as a) theory, b) professional activity and c) training of future social workers.

In the Czech Republic the social work profession is regulated by the law (Act no. 108/2006 Coll., *On social services*). The same law also regulates the compulsory education and training of future social workers. An integral part of this education and training is the area of professional ethics. This underlines the importance of the ethical plane of social work.

Even though it is evident that ethical training of future social workers is related to the very core of social work, the question is still open: What kind should it be as it is influenced by the ambivalent character of social work as theory and practice? S. Banks pointed out the ambivalent character of social work and contradictions rooted in the arrangement of society (Banks, 2001, p. 16). Social work exists only as a result of public policy or public concern: "All social work, to count as such, is authorised and legitimated as a result of public and political processes … this remains true even in those regimes where the delivery of social work services is delegated to non-state organisations" (Clark, 2000, p. 4). In the opinion of Bettinger (2005), 'traditional social work' operates within a neoliberal and politically regulated framework. It is involved in, e.g., criminalisation and stigmatisation of addressees/users of social services. It advocates the transfer of structural factors onto clients' individual defaults. It (re)produces its own forms of exclusion. Clients are considered as primarily passive recipients of services. The opposite of 'traditional social work' is so-called 'critical social work', which emphasizes the critical analysis of social problems and promotes overall social transformation.

The theory of social work is not characterized by unity. Social work may be seen as a largely administrative activity, i.e. a future social worker is perceived primarily as a future officer and his training is focused on gaining of administrative competences. Other possible approach is a 'philanthropic concept,' based on highlighting the philanthropic nature of the social worker, his empathy for the poor and disadvantaged, i.e. formal education is not considered as important (Musil, 2008). We address the 'professional concept' of social work which, compared with the previous approaches, emphasizes the importance of training of social workers.

The ethical dimension of the profession is recognised in the Statement of Ethical Principles adopted by IASSW and IFSW: The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes in the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (http://ifsw.org/policies/statement-of-ethical-principles/).

Ethical training of future social workers has to consider various levels of tension that may be faced in practice. One of the levels of tension in social work can be formed by the prevailing all-society value context determining, e.g. the concept of justice that is normative and ideologically just. Social workers must be aware of the possible differences between (1) personal values and attitudes and (2) values of their profession and also (3) values of the institution they work for. They also have to consider a possible (4) difference of values and attitudes of clients they work with. Let us rephrase Hugman (2005), who writes of the need for a 'bilateral perspective'. In our opinion, it is the 'multi-lateral perspective' as an essential part of ethical competences of a social worker. "The notion of competences implies both – a positive attitude towards the development of character and critical assessment of the collective social systems, in which the person is situated, including the organisations in which they work. It thus requires a commitment to a professional approach to ethics that overlaps with but may be in some tension with personal ethics" (O'Hagan, 2007, p. 92).

The example of an analysis of the issue of altruism (regarded one of the fundamental values of social work) is to show possible difficulties of the simplified interpretation of professional ethics not respecting the critical reflection of the relationship between autonomy and heteronomy of ethical behaviour.

Ethical tensions of social work. Altruism within autonomous and heteronomous morality

At a general level, social work is a purposeful endeavour to improve the lives of people in society. Especially of those who need it most. Here, social work is necessarily grounded in the moral principle of altruism.[1] We are of the opinion that the core of social work as a professional activity is the rightful intention to institutionalize altruism in society. The general trend of the development of civilized society is a gradual surpassing of elementariness and chaos through activities that are regarded important in society and that acquire an organized or institutional character. The process of institutionalization also affects social work because the contemporary society cannot make do without it. Social work carried out within specialized institutions is more rational because it acquires a more systematic and efficient character due to its expert management and control. Above all, it is more just because the activity of social workers within an institution is grounded

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[1] This statement will be considered in the following text.

in explicitly set rules of the distribution of limited means intended to help the others. Nevertheless, it is true that the contemporary trend in social work is certain de-institutionalization, overcoming of one-sidedly conceived paternalism and implementation of subsidiarity.

Social institution is a normatively general aspect of social work. The basic characteristic of a social institution is its ethos, i.e. a complex of norms and values set in the institution shared by all the workers participating in the institution's activities. The ethos creates and structures the employees' behaviour, and thus it fulfils a number of particular functions in the institution, namely the simplification and legitimation ones. The ethos simplifies solutions of frequently complicated situations because the complex of norms clearly states what can be regarded as an adequate behaviour within the institution. Further, it reasons correctness of conduct. Moreover, by offering order ethos allows for the understanding of the meaning and sense of conduct (cf., Pratchett, 2000, pp. 111–112). The ethos of an institution is usually explicitly articulated in the corresponding ethical code.[2] It provides objective criteria enabling to impartially regulate individuals' activities from the perspective of the institutional complex, i.e. from the perspective of the contribution of individual activity to the institution and also from the perspective of harmony of partial conduct with the generally set rules. Beckett and Maynard even state: "Behaving 'professionally' in this sense is not just about skills, or competences, or conscientiousness, but something more specific. It is about (a) playing the role that you signed up to when you joined the profession, and (b) setting aside your own personal feeling where they conflict with that role (Beckett, & Maynard, 2005, p. 73).

In this context Pratchett points out a cardinal ethical problem. Institutionalization of ethical decision-making can be interpreted in principle as an immoral phenomenon because institutions offering an ethical framework for particular employees' conduct "exempt them from moral and ethical responsibility for their behaviour at the same time" (Pratchett, 2000, p. 123). The authors consider this problem as absolutely principal from the perspective of general morals and ethics.

Institutionalization of ethics, especially in the sense of sharing a common ethos, certainly provides an essential degree of integrity that is a condition of the development of professional collective activity. According to Banks, codes of practice articulate the ethical responsibility of professionals, regulate their conduct and

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[2] In this context the issue of a possible tension between professional values and institutional values is not addressed although we are aware of the fact that representatives of various professions whose professional codices can differ may work in the same institution.

distinguish their role from others (Banks, 2001, pp. 106–124). Still, unquestioning and mindless observance of rules, insisting on formal requirements, submitting to duties resulting from institutionally set rules may lead to amoral conduct.

Harmful consequences of social conformism are pointed out by, e.g. H. Arendt, who enriched the ethical theory with the term 'banal evil' in this context. 'Banal evil' is to describe the evil created as a consequence of mindless fulfilment of orders and duties. Thoughtlessness, an inability to reflect on one's activity from the general moral perspective, can lead to the worst crimes against humanity. In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Arendt, 1994), Arendt showed that even a person without sadist tendencies, not a psychopath or sociopath, is capable of the worst atrocities as a result of mindless fulfilment of professional duties. "I was only following orders" (Arendt, 1994), Eichmann defended his conduct. It can be summed up that so-called 'banal evil' can be committed by persons who do not question the rules of their institutions but only follow them. They fulfil their duties imposed by the institutions but do not think about their more general moral quality, i.e. do not confront the institution's rules with universal moral values.

It is evident that submitting to the whole and unquestioning obedience is certainly not a guarantee of good. The phenomenon of 'banal evil' gives reasons for the necessity to complete the institution's essentially heteronomous ethics with autonomous ethics, thus the training of future social workers should not be focused on formal gaining of ethics codes only, as it potentially involves the danger of **defensive** practice putting the institutional manuals and codes above the needs and interests of service users (clients). Within **defensive** practice service users are being transformed to suit the practices of the organization, rather than the organization being reshaped so as to be able to respond to individual client needs (Banks, 2001)[3] The risk of 'banal evil' can be surmounted only if the institution's ethics is constantly confronted with autonomous ethics, which should be not only of relative validity, as in the case of heteronomous ethics, but of universal validity. When Kant emphasizes that moral duty should be motivated exclusively by 'respect to the moral law,' he inclines to the autonomous concept of ethics, rejecting reductionism because he does not want to derive moral conduct from non-moral facts.

The complex of norms and values followed by any institution can be regarded the morals of an institution. The morals of an institution is of instrumental character because it is a means of fulfilment of the particular institution's objective

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[3] Sarah Banks points to differences of attitudes to practice among those involved in social work, including the model of bureaucratic social work.

(purpose) that does not necessarily fall into the field of morality or can even contradict morals. On the basis of the morality of purpose, institutions can be divided into three groups: 1) institutions the purpose of which is morally neutral; 2) institutions the purpose of which is immoral because it presumes direct violation of universally valid moral norms and values; and 3) institutions the purpose of which is to do moral good. These include institutions focusing on social work because altruism as a purpose is a moral value.

Altruism can be defined as an ethical principle ordering unselfish conduct focused on satisfying other people's interests.[4] The term altruism was introduced by A. Comte to describe the attitude contrary to egoism. "Live for others" is the requirement of altruism as articulated by A. Comte. It is evident that the corresponding idea had existed even before and could be expressed, e.g. in terms of charity, kindness, care, concern or liking. Altruism was understood as reduction of personal interest for the sake of general interest, and sometimes even social interest under the influence of utilitarianism in the 19th century.

Altruism was even interpreted as a historical type of morals by some moralists, e.g. J. Bentham, I. Kant, A. Schopenhauer or W. James. In this sense altruism could be understood as the shaping of the type of morals surmounting the egoist types of morals (e.g. eudaemonist, hedonism, asceticism or perfectionism), which are primarily focused on the life of an individual. Individuals need to live in society and depend on it but have a tendency to define themselves against society and defend and advance their own interests in their lives, i.e. to prefer their *egos* in relation to society. Such an attitude is incorrect and even unrealizable in its escalated form. Here the well-known paradox of 'absolute egoism' is found, showing that egoism cancels itself because the possibility to satisfy one's own interests and needs depends on the functioning of the social whole. Still, individuals must restrict their *egos* for the sake of the whole in order to enable the functioning of the social whole. Altruism as a type of morals cultivates awareness of the necessary sense of belonging and protests against egoism that at least ignores the social character of human life.

The issues related to altruism were developed mainly in the context of research into various forms of prosocial behaviour or solidarity and mutual help in the 20th century. Nevertheless, it is necessary to point out that the dilemma 'altruism versus egoism' does not in fact express the discrepancy between 'private and social interest' but 'my and someone else's interest'. The definition of the term altruism

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4   Cf., "Altruism – a desire to benefit someone else for his or her sake rather than one's own"… Batson, C. D., 2011, *Altruism in Humans*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, part II, p. 3.

implies that it is not the supporting of general interest but someone else's interest. Altruism differs from collectivism subordinating an individual to the interests of the group.

The definition of altruism implies a number of problems, and some of them should be pointed out in particular. First of all, who and in what way should judge someone else's interests, especially in a situation when the others are not capable of evaluating their real interest, i.e. they are not sovereigns of their lives. How to evaluate the application of altruism to the other who is a bad person, i.e. breaking norms of behaviour, doing injustice, etc. What criteria should one take into account when distributing material aid in a situation where social resources are limited? How to evaluate when help becomes 'disservice', i.e. it is more harmful than helpful. Limitless altruism does not motivate individuals because relying on external help prevents one's own endeavour. Limitless altruism demoralizes because charity as undeserved enrichment contradicts the principle of justice. Limitless altruism gets into internal conflict also because preference of one's interests leads to the harm of someone else in the socially interconnected world.

Limits of professional ethics and their impact on practicing. Human being within the tension of moral goals and means

The ethics of social work is applied ethics because it does not concern universal morality but morality of partial validity. The moral space of applied ethics is determined and defined by the purpose of the particular specialized conduct. Thus, a relative moral space is created. At the same time, every specialized conduct is part of the general moral space where universal ethics applies. Universal morality (morality of duty) gives orders and bans that are absolutely necessary, i.e. their violation is impossible from the moral perspective.

Every human conduct is always guided by a specific purpose, and thus it comes in the area of applied ethics that formulates norms regulating conduct in the specific area. At the same time, every conduct is part of the universal moral space where ethical laws should be valid. Ethical imperatives of applied ethics are hypothetical imperatives because they are conditioned by partial specific purposes; on the contrary, imperatives of the universal space (ethical laws) are categorical imperatives because they are unconditional.

The principle of altruism, as institutionalized in social work, is related to the needy, i.e. persons whose lives are not of the normal course because they do not achieve the quality regarded standard in a particular society. In other words, the

objective of social work is not to help all the people generally but only those who do not manage without help. Charity realized in this way cannot be an absolute moral value because it cancels universal values such as, e.g. equality.

The principle of altruism cannot be absolutized (its application requires a number of limitation and strictly set rules); and this is the reason why it becomes the principle of applied ethics, focusing not on the universal moral space, where ethical laws are valid as absolutely necessary norms, but on the particular space where norms are of relative validity, are valid only in relation to their partial purpose. The purpose of a social institution is to help people under certain conditions who cannot help themselves for various reasons.

We believe that it is rational to base applied ethics on the ethics of utilitarianism because certain rational calculation heading to the maximization of benefit is justifiable in the field of applied ethics; at the same time, a rational calculation should not cancel ethical laws completely. These should postulate only the unsurpassable ethical minimum formulated in the form of necessary orders and bans. Still, setting the necessary ethical minimum and thus defining the limits of applied ethics and its specific norms is not so easy and causes ethical dilemmas.

In general, ethical dilemmas arise at the moment when different moral spaces and values constituting different moral spaces become contradictory. The issue of ethical dilemmas is intensively reflected on in the contemporary ethics literature, and elaborated procedures of their solutions are proposed (e.g., Reamer, 2011). It is certain that employees in social work face various dilemmas too.[5] There is an opinion that contrary to an ethical problem, an ethical dilemma is characterized by having no 'right' solution and is a mere choice of unwanted options (cf., Mátel, 2010, p. 110). We do not share this opinion because the choice may be good from the viewpoint of space and bad from a different viewpoint. The only thing that is really bad is a compromise when one gets into conflict with all the values, i.e. conduct cannot be justified at all from the perspective of values. This should not happen because the principle of justification has to be regarded a universal moral criterion. The fact that every human decision is always imperfect necessarily does not mean that is has to always be bad; all the more so, because the so-called lesser evil is also a certain lesser evil. An ethical decision in a dilemmatic situation simply requires prioritizing some value over another. In such a context, the training of future social workers should involve the drilling and test running of dilemma solving. Ethical competencies and their practicing involves the ability to identify

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[5]   The environment of social work is characterized by continuous proximity of a fall into an ethical problem or dilemma.

ethical issues in complex, multi-layered contexts and to adjust conduct in accordance with ethical frameworks, social responsibility and other considerations. Systematic introduction of a value-based approach[6] encourages students to engage in reflection for periods of time in order to better understand themselves and the impact of their attitudes, decisions and behaviours on others. (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008)

What is considered the fundamental dilemma of every field of applied ethics, and thus the ethics of social work, is the contradiction between heteronomous and autonomous morals. Heteronomous ethics is based on relative values, i.e. values valid in a specific area defined by the set purpose; on the contrary, autonomous ethics is based on absolute values, i.e. values not conditioned by a partial purpose but are of necessary validity in the general universal moral space. This dilemma manifests itself also in the evaluation of the moral quality of an individual. An individual submitting to morals (values and corresponding norms) is evaluated as a good person. The morals to which one is to submit as a good person are of both heteronomous and autonomous character. A good employee is one performing their profession correctly, i.e. in harmony with heteronomous morals. Still, a good employee has to obey rules and values of autonomous morals to be regarded a good person as well.

When constructing ethics and ethical training it is fundamental to realize that human conduct is always of teleological orientation because it always serves the realization of certain goals. Every moral, i.e. autonomous moral too, is thus of instrumental nature because it serves the realization of certain values defined as desirable goals of our conduct. What is the absolute moral requirement imposed on a person is the requirement of participation in the creation of a better world. Ethical laws formulated and reasoned by general ethics express an ideal state of society. The purpose of ethical laws is to create a stable moral basis of social life; on the contrary, the purpose of relative norms formulated and reasoned by applied ethics is to ensure the realization of partial goals in specific areas of human conduct. The purpose of ethical laws is to determine the way the world should be in order to get closer to a particular moral ideal, i.e. a certain absolute target value.

What we regard as inspirational in this context is Kant's ethics; he defines the absolute target value in the second formulation of categorical imperative: "Act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as end and never merely as means (Kant, 2002, pp. 46–47; G 4:429).

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[6]   Rather than viewing values as an appendage to be taught alongside other subjects.

If social work is rated among the categories of institutions the objective of which is a moral value this is stated because the moral good is traditionally related to charity exceeding duty. Kant's perspective of equal treatment is opposed by the idea of asymmetric moral commitment to someone else in the form of help. It is charity expressed by the principle of altruism that can be regarded a constitutive basis of the ethics of social work. Its compliance is not obligatory; still, exercising it is definitely a desirable complement of this ethical minimum defined by the autonomous ethics of duty.

Conclusion

A number of authors stressed mutual interconnection of social work and ethics with the emphasis on professionals' ethical conduct; still, we would like to point out some significant issues: social work is an ethical project in principle, i.e. "all social workers must become ethically articulate and have high levels of ethical virtues, knowledge and skills" (Bowles, 2006, p. 220), and thus ethics must become the core (and not a marginal subject) of the training of social workers. The emphasis on the ethical practice means that ethics becomes everyone's business (not only the matter of experts) (cf., Hugman, 2005). Unless social workers understand and can act upon the ethical dimension to their practice, they will be unable to work coherently towards their goals of social justice, altruism and human wellbeing

The ethical training of a future social worker cannot be approached as mere study of what is good, as simply memorizing specific rules and standards of practice for every situation that may arise. It is rather a requirement of developing sensitivity for the identification of ethically dilemmatic situations, capability of their critical reflection[7] and subsequent search for ethically correct solutions (and conduct) and acquisition of the knowledge of theoretical starting points justifying proposed solutions. Ethical competence requires responsible, reflective and reflexive actors, aware of their multiple accountabilities, and of their socially and historically differentiated locations (cf., O'Hagan, 2007, p. 76).

Therefore, ethical training of students should involve value-based moral and character education grounded in social interactions in the classroom (across the

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[7] Critical reasoning is a skill of being able to analyse a situation and decide on the best decision to take.

spectrum of subjects) and in the institutions of practice, because ethical practice requires professional self-awareness, critical thinking, and the ability to manage complex information, values and principles from a variety of sources.

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