

Supererogation in Social Work: Deciding Whether To Go Beyond the Call of Duty

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Abstract

This article introduces the concept of supererogation (i.e., going beyond the call of duty). Approaches from moral philosophy, particularly virtue ethics, can be helpful in deciding whether to take actions that might endanger our safety or well-being. Svara's ethics triangle (2007) generates questions to consider when facing supererogatory dilemmas.

Keywords: social work ethics, whistleblowing, supererogation, going beyond the call of duty, virtue ethics, ethics triangle

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore how to decide whether to go beyond the call of duty if doing so could jeopardize our own or a loved one's well-being, livelihood, or even safety. I begin the article by defining supererogation, the term philosophers use for acts that are not morally obligatory but would be approved as nevertheless worthy. The standard teaching is that, if going beyond the call of duty is dangerous, then it is ethical to refrain from supererogatory acts. Perspectives from moral philosophy can lend support to this reasoning, but they also can provoke a deeper analysis of whether to go the extra mile when facing a particular situation or ethical issue. Svara's ethics triangle, adapted to social work (Svara, 2007 & 2015; Bibus, 2013), is a useful tool for thinking through supererogatory dilemmas that social workers face when they advocate for clients, confront colleagues'

unethical conduct or impairment, challenge harmful workplace practices or policies, respond to public emergencies, or address systemic failures similar to those involved in the recent incident described below. After analyzing a typical example using the ethics triangle, I close the article by recommending questions to consider when deciding whether to go beyond the call of duty.

In 2014, social worker Germaine Clarno joined other employees to expose secret lists in U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) hospitals and health care clinics that hid delays for patients seeking care (Social Workers Speak, May 15, 2014). According to her statements to the press (e.g., Babwin & Keyser, May 30, 2014), staff members who raised objections to this falsification of VA records faced resentment, retaliation, harassment, or other punishments when they reported it internally; therefore, Clarno decided to report it publically, despite the potential personal and professional risks.

This is an example of social workers dealing with a prospective whistleblower's dilemma. According to ethical standards, we usually have a duty to comply with the expectations, procedures, policies, and rules set by our employer or agency; however, standards also require us to object to agency that practices violate social work ethics. For instance, Section 3.09(a) of the *Code of Ethics* of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2008, p. 21) reads, "Social workers generally should adhere to commitments made to employers and employing organizations." Yet, loyalty

to our employer or agency is not absolute, and subsequent paragraphs in this section of the code also require that social workers “work to improve employing agencies’ policies and procedures” and “not allow an employing organization’s policies, procedures, regulations, or administrative orders to interfere with their ethical practice of social work” (Sections 3.09 [b & d]). Internal efforts to make improvements or encourage corrective measures are often constructive, but when working within the organization is not effective, whistleblowing may be the ethical option (Mansbach & Bachner, 2002; Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008). See Reamer’s discussion of whistleblowing and the importance of deliberately considering alternatives (2013, pp. 174-177).

What if, though, taking action to improve policies and procedures or to abide by ethical principles threatens our own livelihood or safety? Is there not a level of risk to our life and well-being or that of our loved ones that is so high that it would be ethically prudent to consider refraining from such action? In other words, may whistleblowing be considered to be going beyond the call of duty?

2. Supererogation Defined

These questions raise the concept of *supererogation*, a philosophical term that in contemporary usage refers to taking action that is not morally required or expected but is instead optional: going above and beyond usually for the purpose of helping or protecting others. Its roots in Latin are *super*, meaning “over and above” and *erogare*, meaning “to ask for or obtain for some purpose...” (Simpson, 1960, p. 218). In his entry on supererogation in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Heyd reviews the complex religious and moral history of supererogation and suggests a rough definition of supererogatory acts as those that “are morally good although not (strictly) required” (2012, p.1). Strom-Gottfried defines supererogation simply as “the performance of more work than duty requires” (2015, p. 33).

Stony Brook Medicine public health and English professor Andrew Flescher (2003) offers

an engaging and helpful introduction of issues related to supererogation in his book *Heroes, Saints, and Ordinary Morality*. He explains that the concept of duty has two essential features: “The first is the idea of moral necessity. One *must* perform one’s duty. A duty is a morally binding *requirement*” (Flescher, p. 41; emphasis in the original). The second essential feature of duty is that others may demand that we abide by our duty and act accordingly; we are accountable to the obligations imposed by duty. Addressing what we ought then to do, that is, what is obligatory and *not* supererogatory, Flescher suggests that there are three kinds of “oughts” (pp. 239-241): 1) a set of basic “oughts” that apply to all of us; 2) a duty we each have to keep developing morally; and 3) additional duties given our individual level of development that are beyond what would ordinarily be required; in Flescher’s view these transform what used to be “beyond duty” into actual “duty.”

As will be discussed below, this last category of additional duties raises implications for responding to situations that, at first glance, may appear to necessitate going beyond the call of duty, but that may actually require following our duty as we see it at that point in our moral development. “What we formerly were justified in regarding as supererogatory becomes obligatory” (Flescher, p. 241). Hence, I may conclude that, because of the moral person I hope now to have become and despite the risks, I ought to take an action that others may not be obliged to take, because it is for them supererogatory.

3. Standard Response

The standard response to the dilemma of deciding whether to take action that puts us in harm’s way is that we are not ethically obliged to risk our life, well-being, or employment. “Most contemporary defenses of supererogation rest on the claim that agents cannot be required to do good if the cost would be disproportionately great” (McNaughton & Rawling, 2006, p. 448). This rationale would apply even to social workers who, as helping professionals, arguably have a wider than average range of duties to aid vulnerable or

disenfranchised people. For example, while encouraging social workers to develop the fortitude to act upon ethical principles, Strom-Gottfried adds, “Yet acting with moral courage need not put one’s life or livelihood at risk” (Strom-Gottfried, 2015, p. 23). To do so may be to go beyond what most social workers would do.

Discussing the duty to aid as long as the cost is not considerable, Reamer (1993) reiterates Donagan’s (1977) qualifications. “First, no one is morally obliged to promote the well-being of others at disproportionate inconvenience to oneself...Second, one has the right to expect those in need to assume some responsibility for their own welfare” (p. 75). Reamer continues: “John Rawls (1971), for example, refers to obligatory actions as *natural duties*: the duty of helping another when he or she is in need or jeopardy, provided one can do so without unreasonable risk to oneself...” (pp. 75-76; emphasis in the original). On the other hand, according to Rawls (1971, p. 114) as quoted by Reamer: “Supererogatory acts are not required, though normally they would be were it not for the loss or risk involved for the agent himself.” In this standard view, individuals can choose to go beyond duty; “generally speaking, however, onerous self-sacrifice is morally praiseworthy but remains optional...It is traditionally held that we cannot ever be blamed for declining to go above and beyond” (Flescher, p.75 & p. 252).

4. Further Thinking: Virtue Ethics

As a social work professor and trainer, I routinely taught the above standard response to situations that might involve going beyond the call of duty. Eventually, though, I began to ask myself: Why is going beyond the call of duty not ethically required? Or more to the point: Aren’t there some situations when going beyond the call of duty *would* be ethically required? This inquiry led me to virtue ethics, whose commentators deal with issues related to supererogation.

Until relatively recently, virtue ethics has not been prominent in social work ethics texts in the United States, which focused primarily on two other approaches from moral philosophy:

deontological (considering ideal universal principles to judge whether our actions are inherently right or wrong) and utilitarian or consequential (considering potential good or bad outcomes of actions to judge whether they are right or wrong). The standard response to supererogatory dilemmas summarized above relies on deontological analysis to identify our duty and on utilitarian calculations to weigh the risks and benefits to ourselves, loved ones, clients, agency, community, or others should we decide to take action beyond that duty. Each of these two approaches highlights the principles upon which decisions can be made and actions can be taken. Virtue ethics focuses attention back on the character and motivations of the decision maker and actor.

In a research study involving human service providers working with older people in Australia, Shannon McDermott (2011) gives an example of practitioners deciding that they were ethically obliged to go beyond the call of duty even when that decision may have jeopardized their own livelihood. Her qualitative study explored how workers serving older people living in squalor addressed ethical dilemmas in respecting clients’ self-determination on the one hand and on the other hand securing clients’ health and safety. She found that in addition to the principles of autonomy and beneficence, elements from ethics of care and virtue ethics played important roles. Several of the study’s twenty-four participants described circumstances when they decided to provide services outside their job descriptions, such as directly handling and cleaning up rubbish in clients’ residences. Regulations specified that these practitioners should have instead called a professional cleaning service, and thus they may have been not only endangering their health but also risking legal sanction and their future employment.

Deontological reasoning might question any decision to violate established rules (perhaps following an absolute principle that regulations should always be obeyed); conversely, a deontological approach could also override obeying this regulation in order to abide by a higher absolute principle to always directly help others when we

can. Utilitarian reasoning could emphasize the workers' and agencies' liability if legal guidance was ignored; but it could also justify giving hands-on help to clean up the residences because the beneficial outcomes would outweigh the harm possibly resulting from delay necessitated by referral to a professional cleaning service.

Likewise, virtue ethics could support or reject the decision to ignore the regulation. Virtue ethics would attend to the workers' motivations and actions and how they compared to the motivations and actions of a virtuous practitioner in a similar circumstance. McDermott's study found that "the motivation to foster good outcomes in these situations inspired nine professionals to act in ways that went beyond what was called for in their job descriptions by providing hands-on cleaning in situations of squalor," potentially in violation of Occupational Health and Safety regulations (p. 66). Evidently, these participants believed that their decision to take this supererogatory action was right. From the perspective of virtue ethics, they could be described as acting on virtues including courage, practical wisdom, care, and compassion.

Virtues are habits and strengths of character that actively embody a meaningful, flourishing, good life that benefits ourselves and others. The term *virtue ethics* is used for various philosophical systems that focus on human qualities associated with striving for moral excellence. For introductory reading on virtue ethics and social work, see Adams, 2009; Annas, 2006; Banks, 2010 & 2012; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Barsky, 2013; Bibus, 2013; Boss, 2014; Flescher, 2003; Fowers, 2005; Hursthouse, 1999 & 2012; Lovat & Gray, 2008; MacIntyre, 1985 & 1999; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Oakley & Cocking, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Pullen-Sansfaçon, 2010; Statman, 1997; Van Slyke et al., 2013; Webb, 2010; Webster, 2011; and Winter, 2012. Roots of virtue ethics can be found in ancient Greek philosophy and global religious traditions, and until the Enlightenment it was the mainstay in Western moral philosophy. After the emergence of deontological and utilitarian

approaches in the 18th and 19th centuries, virtue ethics faded in influence; however, during the latter half of the 20th century to the present, virtue ethics has been revisited as a fruitful perspective.

In its several versions, virtue ethics focuses attention on the influence of habits, motivation, and character strengths on our decisions and actions when facing ethical choices. We develop virtues such as integrity and compassion in relationship with others, particularly mentors or exemplars (paragons of virtue). According to virtue ethics, and subsequently reinforced by recent advancements in neuroscience, through this process of developing virtues, we build dependable, sustainable habits of moral character that potentially lead to more ethical behavior (Peterson, 2013; Sparrow & Hutchinson, 2013). No single virtue alone is sufficient for ethical decision making; rather, a constellation of virtues is needed to tap the right combination of personal qualities that best responds to an ethical issue or dilemma at a particular time. Citing Beauchamp and Childress's influential 2001 text on biomedical ethics, Reamer (2013, pp. 32-33) lists five core professional virtues: compassion, discernment, trustworthiness, integrity, and conscientiousness. See Bibus (2013, Table 1) for a list of virtues identified by other authors as relevant for social workers.

The congruence of virtue ethics with cultural and religious traditions worldwide resonates with social work values such as social justice and cultural competence. Indeed, psychologists Fowers and Davidov (2005) identify the virtue they call "openness to others" as a key to multicultural practice. Reflecting on ourselves as moral actors from the perspective of virtue ethics can result in wholehearted implementation of decisions to act in accordance with our duty to serve others, which is a core social work value. With its focus on honing strengths, developing virtues through lifelong personal work, practicing virtues accountably, and taking a holistic perspective, virtue ethics is a good fit with social work, and it can help in thinking through supererogatory dilemmas. For example, McBeath and Webb (2002, p. 1033) remark upon

“the inconvenience of supererogation” when our conscience is tweaked: “That is, virtue demands as a matter of course that one do more than one’s duty; indeed duty is not a moral factor....Virtue calls upon the inner sense of the essential rightness of one’s stance commensurate with the situation and the determination of a moral dialogue with the rest of society.” Fowers (2005, p. 193) adds that if we have good character, we’ll “want to go beyond the minimum prescribed by the *Code of Ethics*.”

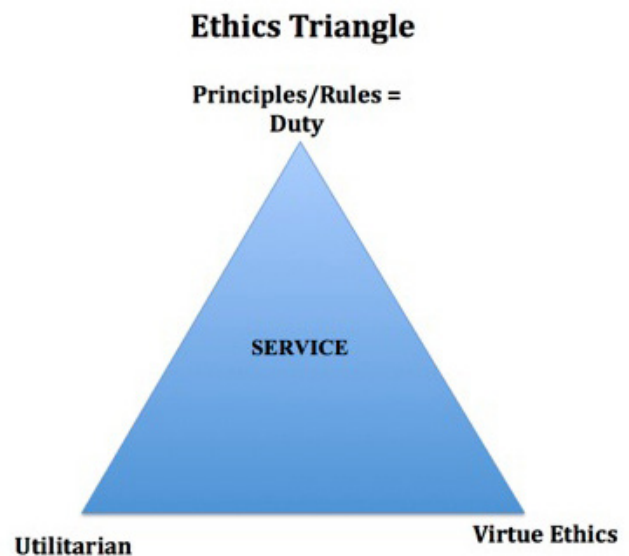
Virtue ethics can appear to be dependent upon circular reasoning: A virtuous and ethical act is what a virtuous ethical social worker would do; thus, each perspective from moral philosophy has limitations as well as advantages. A decision based on following rules using deontological reasoning can contradict utilitarian analysis of expected best consequences while virtue ethics could justify a decision different from those arrived at using either of the other two approaches. Fortunately, these three approaches also can complement each other in the process of coming to a decision as will be seen while applying the Ethics Triangle to a typical example of a supererogatory dilemma in the next section.

5. Using the Ethics Triangle

The “Ethics Triangle” was developed by Professor James Svara at the University of North Carolina School of Government, a political scientist and public administration educator (2007 & 2015). I have adapted it for social work (Bibus, 2013). On the points of the triangle are the three approaches to making ethical decisions focused on in this article. At the top is the deontological approach based on universal, absolute, ideal principles: “certain actions are inherently right or wrong, or good or bad, without regard to their consequences” (Reamer, 2013, p. 70). Utilitarian analysis, determining the rightness of an act based on the goodness of its consequences (Reamer, 2013, p. 70) and virtue ethics are at the other points of the triangle. Depending on the user’s knowledge of other approaches from moral philosophy (such as ethics of care, contractarian, feminist, communitarian, anti-oppressive, environmental, existential, etc.), other perspectives could be substituted or

added. Svara’s view is that any one approach by itself can lead us astray. “Using all the approaches together helps to prevent the shortcomings of using any of the approaches alone” (Svara, 2007, p. 68). Also, because he first developed this tool for public administrators, the duty of *public interest* is in the center of the original version of the triangle. I have changed that to *service*, which is the first value listed in the NASW’s code.

To demonstrate how the Ethics Triangle could be helpful for thinking through questions of whether or how to take supererogatory action, we will consider an example that is a composite of dilemmas encountered by my students and workshop participants from various settings in recent years. Names and the agency setting have been changed to protect anonymity. Risks to safety and well-being are moderate; time to think and confer with others is also built in, which is not always available in actual practice. The example thus presents typical elements of tough supererogatory dilemmas, but not the acute danger that social workers can sometimes encounter.



"Ethics Triangle" adapted from Svara, 2007, p. 68

Case Example:

A licensed social worker, whom we'll call Jane, has begun work in her first professional position as a temporary coverage intake worker for a large nursing home. During her first few weeks on the job, she notices that the home's administrative director has a habit of telling off-color jokes and making suggestive remarks to the staff. When Jan mentions her discomfort with the content and tone of the director's talk, her colleagues and her immediate supervisor shrug off her concerns: "That's just the way he is, Jane—he means no harm, you'll get used to it; besides, he's the boss and he's been the boss for years."

Despite her coworkers' comments, Jane is still troubled, especially when she observes a family member giggling awkwardly upon overhearing one of the director's louder stories containing derogatory language. This seems to be the kind of climate of sexual innuendos and harassment that she remembers reading about and discussing in one of her social work classes; she didn't think that she'd actually encounter such situations out in real life. She decides to confer again with her most trusted colleague at work.

This friend fills her in on background history related to previous attempts to intervene with the director's behavior and warns her not to make waves, particularly in light the facts that she is on the job, in a temporary position, and subject to dismissal without cause; moreover, she could call attention to herself, and

the director could refuse to give her a good reference. She's told that the director's standard response to complaints from staff is to the effect that no one is "court ordered" to work at the facility and that if staff don't like it, they can leave. Still not satisfied, especially after checking NASW's *Code of Ethics*, Jane decides to seek consultation with a former teacher or classmate from her social work program.

Let's imagine that we are the former teacher or classmate meeting with Jane. We suggest using the Ethics Triangle to help her determine which actions to take, some of which might be doing her duty and others of which might be going beyond the call of duty in circumstances that could jeopardize her employment. For example, if she confronts the director's behavior, she might be fired; on the other hand, a decision to take no action upon witnessing behavior she has reason to believe is offensive and perhaps abusive to staff and clients could be unethical. In either case, perhaps it is not part of Jane's duty in her position to intervene with the director's behavior – after all, "supervise the boss" is probably not in her job description. The following discussion is not exhaustive but rather suggestive, giving a flavor of factors and questions that arise with a supererogatory issue.

5.1 Deontological Perspective

Using the Ethics Triangle, Jane should first center herself in the value of service to her clients as expressed in NASW's *Code of Ethics*: "*Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems*" (2008, p. 5, italics in the original). Her own self-interest, while not to be ignored, should be secondary. At the top of the triangle, using a deontological approach, she could identify other ideal universal and absolute principles that may give rise to ethical duties; these principles may be reflected in standards set

forth in the *Code of Ethics* and regulations in her jurisdiction's licensing law. Human rights, social justice, and respect for the dignity of each person are fundamental principles in social work (Banks, 2012; IASSW & IFSW, 2102; Reamer, 2013; Strom-Gottfried, 2015). Laws pertinent to the care of vulnerable people, health regulations, as well as personnel and human resources policies are relevant in this situation because they reflect these principles. Guidelines from professional associations and the nursing home's rules also should be consulted. Deontological reasoning establishes duties to abide by moral principles regardless of whether they appear in laws or codes; this perspective seeks to identify moral imperatives that apply to us all and that exist separate from, take precedence over, and could thus override regulatory statutes or standards.

The process of reviewing these sources as they articulate ethical principles and rules will likely clarify Jane's duties. Sections 1.11 and 2.08 of NASW's *Code of Ethics* (2008, pp. 13, 17) prohibit sexual harassment of clients, supervisees or colleagues, including verbal conduct of a sexual nature. Section 2.11 of the *Code of Ethics* also requires that "social workers should take adequate measures to discourage, prevent, expose and correct the unethical conduct of colleagues" (NASW, 2008, 2.11[a], p. 18). This section of the code also states that social workers should "seek resolution by discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such discussion is likely to be productive" (2.11[c]); and when necessary, we should take action through appropriate formal channels (2.11[d]). Greene and Latting have combined these and other relevant provisions of NASW's code in a handy table (2004, p. 222).

Along with ethical codes, state laws and licensing standards suggest duties such as professional conduct and compliance with laws and regulations; in this example, those related to discrimination and harassment of employees and clients could pertain. Licensing statutes may explicitly list clients' rights to non-discriminatory and non-harassing conduct by the licensee; certainly they would require

Jane to make reasonable efforts to foster the best interests clients (see for example, the Association of Social Work Boards' 2012 *Model Social Work Practice Act*, Part 2 General Practice Parameters, Subpart 1: Client Welfare). As a licensed social worker, Jane may be obliged to report the director's conduct to the relevant board or disciplinary body that regulates his practice as a health facility administrator. Also, there is likely a bill of rights for residents of the nursing home, sections of which stipulate that residents have a right to be free from verbal abuse or harassment; whether exposure to an off-color joke constitutes abuse may be a question for Jane to research with the help of legal resources or consultants. Moreover, mandatory reporting under the state's statutes and policies protecting vulnerable adults may be in order. Gathering sound evidence and following a good problem solving process, informed by laws protecting whistleblowers or reporters from retaliation, are means to carry out the principles of fairness and justice, as well as lay a foundation for effective action (Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008, p. 197).

At this point in the process of thinking through her dilemma, we see that Jane cannot ethically refrain from taking some action to uphold and foster basic respect for the human dignity of residents and staff at the nursing home. Even if she decides to leave her employment, she would still have a duty to address the harm to residents and staff that is posed by the director's behavior. However, which specific actions she should take to carry out her duty are not yet clear, nor is it evident whether she should go beyond the call of duty.

Because they are meant to apply universally, many of the principles and rules that guide social workers in identification of our duty tend to be abstract. In addition, in a given situation we may have to choose between one principle (e.g., upholding privacy and confidentiality of clients) and another (e.g., social justice and well-being of clients) such as when a mandatory vulnerable adult abuse report is mandated. In the situation Jane faces, clients' and colleagues' right to safety may trump the director's right to self-expression. The

left point on the triangle can help in determining which principles should take precedence in weighing potential outcomes of prospective actions.

5.2 Utilitarian Perspective

Utilitarian approaches focus on the consequences of potential actions Jane might decide to take. Thus, they are classified as a form of consequentialist or teleological moral reasoning. Reamer identifies two major schools of teleological thought: “egoism and utilitarianism”; he continues: “Egoism is not typically found in social work; according to this point of view, when faced with conflicting duties, people should maximize their own good and enhance their self-interest.... In contrast, utilitarianism holds that an action is right if it promotes the maximum good” (2013, p. 71). At this point in the triangle, Jane has moved past considering actions that are exclusively in her own interests, so she probably will find the utilitarian school more helpful here than egoism.

Under utilitarian thinking, those actions that lead to the greatest good would be right, even if they violated a general principle such as always being honest. There are a variety of utilitarian approaches; they differ as to whether they focus on immediate or long-term consequences or on which act would result in the highest total of good outcomes or in good outcomes for the highest number of people. (See Reamer’s 2013 discussion of forms of act, rule, good-aggregate, or locus-aggregate utilitarianism on pp. 70-75.)

In Jane’s situation, we would have her consider possible benefits or harms for residents, colleagues, the director, the nursing home, the community at large, and the social work profession, as well as for herself, that would be probable results of prospective actions. While she should take some action, risks to herself and others should be part of her calculations. For example, if she were to decide to talk to the director in private, ask him to refrain from telling off-color jokes and other potentially offensive or harassing behaviors, and if he is persuaded to apologize and promise to act more professionally, those living and working

at the facility would likely enjoy an improved organizational climate though the director may lose face and have to learn non-intimidating ways to do his job. Perhaps more likely, based on what Jane knows about his personality and history, he could react to her confrontation with angry retaliation against her, resulting in not only harm to Jane but at least near-term turmoil among staff and residents as they witness his reaction and as they continue to suffer from his unprofessional conduct. Hence, we may advise her to consider actions that have a chance to protect residents and staff from harassment and enhance the quality of care at the facility and its reputation while not jeopardizing her own employment or safety. This “cost-benefit” analysis is common for observers of sexual harassment when trying to find the most effective response while minimizing risks (Bowes-Sperry & O’Leary-Kelly, 2005, p. 300.)

“One problem with utilitarianism,” as Reamer observes (2013, p. 72), “is that this framework, like deontology, sometimes can be used to justify competing options,” such as Jane directly confronting the director or Jane not directly confronting the director. And of course, it is not possible to predict with certainty the actual outcomes of whatever actions Jane decides to take. Also, consequentialism assumes that there is no room for distinguishing Jane’s duty from supererogatory actions, reasoning that once Jane weighs potential results of her decision, she is obliged then to take the action with the best probable outcome; in other words, Jane has a duty to continue acting for the greater good. In this view, no actions are beyond duty and we may never have done enough. “In consequentialism, the goal is to routinize our actions so that they will always produce the best results in terms of the overall good” (Flescher, pp. 269-270). Again, it appears that Jane has a duty to take some action, but it is not clear which actions constitute doing her duty, which actions would be going beyond the call of duty, and whether she should nevertheless take them. So, we turn to the third point of the triangle to see if virtue ethics can shed more light on her dilemma.

5.3 Virtue Ethics Perspective

The deontological perspective helped Jane concentrate on where her duty may lie and which potential acts could best fulfill her duty. The utilitarian perspective helped her compare the potential good and potential harm to her clients, her colleagues, her employer, and herself, should she take certain actions in carrying out her duty or should she decide to take other actions that go beyond the call of duty. Using the perspective of virtue ethics, she has the opportunity to reflect on her character and the kind of human being she wants to be as a social worker. What are her motives? They are likely to be mixed, including the desire to have a safe workplace and to do the right thing (Miceli et al., 2008). Does she want only to do what is her technical, legal duty and what her calculations determine might bring about the least harm and most good? Does she want to act as well with her whole heart and soul? What would a good social worker do given her situation?

Presuming that Jane intends to do her part in creating a healthy working and living environment for her clients, her colleagues, her organization, and herself, we as her consultants would ask which of her reliable strengths of character and which constellation of her virtues should be prominent as she decides on a course of action and then as she carries out her decision. Certainly, courage will be essential. Employees who notice wrongdoing typically “are not inclined to act” unless they see it as part of their job to report (Miceli et al., 2008, p. 23), so it might be easiest for Jane not to take any action. Moreover, Strom-Gottfried observes that identifying an ethical course of action is a necessary but not sufficient step in addressing a dilemma; we must also have the courage to act accordingly, sometimes “under adverse circumstances,” such as when we may face attacks on our competence, experience, reputation, or self-esteem, or when we are standing up to an authority figure who is in the wrong (2015, pp. 22-23). Retaliation against those reporting wrongdoing can include dismissal or involuntary transfer, poor performance review, and multiple, pervasive, informal

retaliatory social behavior, such as the “silent treatment” and other stigmatization; using external channels to report wrongdoing makes retaliation even “more likely” (Miceli, pp. 14-15 & p. 115). Neither timid nor reckless, being courageous involves not just a single act but persistence in carrying out whatever it takes to correct the wrong. This means having integrity.

The virtue of integrity offers the backbone that courage requires. “Moral integrity means soundness, reliability, wholeness, and integration of moral character” (Reamer, 2013, p. 32). Banks’ analysis of professional integrity (2010) elucidates the complex features of this virtue. Among several understandings of integrity, she identifies professional moral integrity as “maintaining and acting upon a deeply held set of values, often in a hostile climate” (Banks, 2010, p. 2170). Integrity then includes: 1) conforming both the whole of ourselves and particular actions to professional codes of ethics and to standards of conduct; 2) demonstrating a life-long, coherent commitment to social work values and principles; and 3) continually strengthening our competence and capacity for effective, ethical action.

Acting with integrity requires courage, strength of purpose, and abiding identification with our professional community. We are then trustworthy and ready to stand up for what is right while also respecting the judgment of other social workers. Banks notes that integrity may entail commitment to ideals that “go beyond extant norms” (p. 2171), possibly taking actions that exceed narrowly defined minimal duties. As professionals, we are required to go beyond what other citizens would do or may even be allowed to do (Adams, 2009).

The virtue of practical wisdom will help guide Jane in choosing a course of action that best fulfills her professional role as a social worker and limits harm to herself as well as others. Tapping into her social work knowledge and skills, using the person-in-environment perspective and empathy, she should assess the situation she faces at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, considering possible impacts of her intended actions and

possible resources or impediments at each level. A good resource in this assessment is Miceli et al.'s comprehensive review of research regarding what we know about the experience and effectiveness of whistleblowing (2008). In addition, reviewing safety protocols is always important. Practical wisdom will help Jane apply the approaches from moral philosophy appropriately, combining their strengths and diminishing the impacts of their limitations. It will highlight, for example, how deontological thinking can stabilize the gyrations in virtue ethics' circular logic. "The deontological concepts of duty and supererogation allow one to come to a determination about the right action that does not rely on the potentially ambiguous notion of 'what a virtuous person would do'" (Flescher, 2003, p. 257).

The virtue of humility will be crucial for Jane in identifying what she might be missing in her analysis. Compassion and care are virtues that will call her attention to the effects of her decisions on each person involved, including the director. While reflecting on the complex interactions in the system of work at the facility and on her own motivations and biases, Jane may employ the virtue of loyalty both to her employer and to the profession of social work. Using the virtue of openness to others, factors related to gender, cultural, and racial differences between administration, staff, and residents will come to the forefront.

As her consultants, we could finally ask Jane to recall a mentor or exemplar in social work whom she admires and predict how that social worker might respond given her dilemma. Then, she should check through the steps of a systematic framework for ethical decision-making such as Barsky's (2010, p. 246), Reamer's (2013, p. 78) or Strom-Gottfried's questions (Strom-Gottfried, 2015, pp. 42-71). Whatever she decides to do, her actions should not be half-hearted, and she should carefully attend to how she carries out her decision. If the process she chooses is seen by others as "legitimate," her actions, whether via internal or external channels, are more likely to be effective (Miceli et al., 2008, p. 143).

Based on one of the actual scenarios from which this case is drawn, it is possible that Jane could successfully recruit a senior colleague who has a good relationship with the director to take the lead in talking with the director, explaining the concerns of the staff regarding his use of humor on the job, and requesting that he discontinue offensive jokes and other untoward remarks. In that way, she abides by her duty to take some action while not going beyond the call of duty to the extent that her own employment and subsequent livelihood are imperiled. If the director fails to respond or attempts to take retaliatory action, the staff as a group will need to commit to reporting the director's behavior to regulatory authorities and to improving the climate of work and life at the nursing home. It will be critical for Jane to evaluate the outcomes of her decision and actions based on how closely they reflected core principles and values of social work, the best results possible for the highest number of people, and her ideals of what it means to her to be a good social worker; further, she should document the process of her decision-making and results of her actions.

6. Concluding Thoughts

In the case example explored above, Jane might have decided not to take supererogatory action, at least not at that point in her professional and moral development. By definition, supererogation is not ethically required. The option she chose or other options short of going beyond the call of duty could, fortunately, be effective. If Jane abides by what is legally termed the "standard of care," that is, what an "ordinary, reasonable and prudent" social worker would do given similar circumstances, she would not be considered negligent (Reamer, 2013, pp. 182-183). Still, later in Jane's career and professional development, facing a similar dilemma, she could decide that she has a further duty, perhaps this time taking the lead in confronting unethical conduct or policies even if it could cost her job. There are circumstances when, having conformed minimally to our duty, upon reflection we wonder if we should have done more,

despite risks to our well-being or that of our loved ones. As we develop morally, what was previously for us beyond the call of duty becomes obligatory. Flescher contends that “morality requires different things from different people at different times.... What we are in every case obligated to

do, however, is to reflect both upon the decision at which we arrive and upon the decision making process itself” (2003, p. 238 & 279). Would the kind of social worker we want to be have done more in that situation?

This kind of question can be helpful as we sort through supererogatory dilemmas. Here are some other questions, many from virtue ethics, that can also tease out the factors to take into account as we decide whether or not to go beyond the call of duty. In this situation:

Which social work values and principles apply?

What do laws, regulations, rules, and policies (including licensing) require?

What is my duty?

What is not my duty?

Considering going beyond my duty, what are probable benefits and what are probable harms to my:

clients?

agency?

colleagues?

collateral contacts?

community?

profession?

loved ones?

self?

What safety concerns should I consider (see Newhill, 2003, and Spencer & Munch, 2003)?

Where does my heart – i.e., core values, beliefs, aspirations, ideals – lead me?

“What are my motivations” (Banks, 2010, pp. 2179-2180; Fowers & Davidov, 2005, pp. 584)?

What am I overlooking (Barsky, 2010, p. 260; Flescher, 2003, p. 310)?

What virtues will I need to have at hand?

What would a virtuous social worker do?

“What kind of person do I want to be” (Fowers, 2005, p. 64)?

As is evident in the example presented in the introduction of this article, deciding whether we have a duty to whistleblow can be among the most difficult of ethical dilemmas and can raise supererogatory issues. “Social workers have an obligation to confront misconduct responsibly,” Reamer writes (2013, p. 177). Drawing on management, policy, and legal research literature (e.g., Miceli, Near, & Dworkin, 2008, and Fleishman & Payne, 1980), Reamer advises that social workers who become aware of corrupt, illegal or unethical conduct, procedures, or policies in their work environments should carefully consider several points before deciding whether to blow the whistle,

including the severity of the wrongdoing, credibility and sufficiency of evidence, possible effects on colleagues and agency, their motives, and viable alternatives (2013, p. 173). It can be reassuring to know that reporting wrongdoing is often a “positive response to negative circumstances” (Miceli et al., p. 34). Once we have decided to report, carefully attending to the process of using internal or external channels is critical. Social workers in supervisory positions should be aware of research showing how important their support is for fostering a climate where reporting wrongdoing is encouraged and retaliating against whistleblowers is discouraged (Miceli et al., 2008).

Greene and Latting (2004, pp. 224-226) developed guidelines to follow when deciding whether to blow the whistle if we become aware of ethical violations. These steps are also useful in dealing with other supererogatory dilemmas. While they include assessing our readiness to act and the potential loss of employment or negative reactions from colleagues, simply concluding that we need not put our own livelihood in danger is insufficient. We should not retreat into the comfort of moral complacency. Rather, there is value in striving for virtue while expanding our involvement as social workers in potentially perilous circumstances. The admiration we have for colleagues who go out of their way to assist in epidemics or disasters, for example, can reinforce our motivation to engage in similar efforts with courage, compassion, and practical wisdom. When facing a dilemma that might call on us to risk our own well-being or livelihood, we should reflect on how our decision fits with the kind of human being and social worker we want to be and then act accordingly. As Flescher concludes, "ethics is as much about *being* a certain sort of person as it is about *doing* certain things" (2003, p. 298; emphasis in the original).

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