



SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AS APPLIED ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the social work ethics as a separate area of knowledge. The actuality of the issue is brought forward by the necessity for heightening the “ethical conscience” of the professional participants in social work, as well as the social workers’ community responsibility towards the society.

The formation and establishment of ethics of social work as a researchable scientific field and academic branch is being analyzed in the context of the entire change in content and nature of humanitarian knowledge, in particular of ethics. The formation of applied ethics is a manifestation of the said change.

This work pays special attention to the relationship between ethics and applied ethics, and the reasons for the rise of applied ethics.

The content parameters of the social work ethics, being one of the problematic areas in the field of applied ethics, are derived as a result of a lengthy process of rethinking the terms of applied ethics. It defends the thesis of social works ethics as means of solving moral problems, which are related to decision making 1) with regard to certain individuals as participants in a given social situation, and 2) in problematic situations, for the successful solving of which the participants’ professional skills, knowledge, and expertise are insufficient.

Key words: Applied ethics, Ethics of Social Work, Ethical decision making

The formation and establishment of ethics of social work as a researchable scientific field and an academic branch is being carried in the conditions of a complete change in the contents and nature of the humanitarian knowledge that philosophy and ethics are a part of. One of the manifestations of that change is formation of applied ethics. The social works ethics is developing as a problematic area in the field of applied ethics.

Ethics, in its most common meaning, can be defined as a systematic drive to understand our individual and social moral experience in such a way that enables establishing rules which are to govern people’s behavior, to define values which are worth sticking to, and also to encourage such character traits in people which oneself is worth to develop. This drive should be constant and therefore goes beyond

activities thinking people are willing to undertake in their everyday life, thinking over their moral experience to give meaning to and organizing it, and trying to convert it into logically contiguous and universal. When a person takes up ethics through the prism of the divine revelation – by means of the Bible or religious teachings for example – it can be referred to as theological or religious ethics. If ethics is evaluated disregarding the influence of religious faith and with the exclusive usage of arguments based on rational principles in their applicability to people’s non-religious experience, then we have *philosophical ethics*. Since this subject attempts to establish the rules and values which are worth adhering to, it can easily be differentiated from anthropology, sociology, and psychology. The latter illustrate people’s behavior, but they usually do not prescribe a specific way to behave. Ethics applies to human behavior and in this work it means human activity, accomplished in a conscious manner and largely voluntarily.

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As far as ethics is involved with the way people are expected to behave, its character is universal. Any system of methods of practical activities, any acting rules, and any actions can be evaluated by means of questioning: are they ethical? Even though something may be considered to be an accepted way of behavior or just because a form of activity is established by law, they may not be morally justified. Some forms of activities may be generally accepted yet morally vicious, just as something may be lawful and yet be morally vicious.

Since the second half of the 20th Century, ethics has suddenly transformed from a strict academic discipline into a subject of interest to all people. Such change may be observed in all cases when ethics gets closer to an individual involved in politics, business, ecology, hunger and poverty issues, when ethics goes out in the streets and its concepts and principles turn into slogans of mass movements. In other words, only when ethics is involved with problems annoying people, often problems new to ethics itself, it becomes a part of their very life and this tendency is a characteristic trait of ethics throughout the times of the second half of the 20th Century.

Another reason for this change is shifting of the focus of ethics on similar problematic fields. The new image of ethics is being born and formed – *applied ethics*, which solely explains the process of redirection of ethics of the 1960s towards specific and practical issues. This is the only way to explain the vast diversity of practical issues which ethics is involved with. Fields of activities, including politics, medicine, business, and ecology, are grouped together due to ethical problems they cause. Since issues applied ethics is involved with are too many and too diverse, and each of the subfields that it consists of (such as bioethics, social work ethics, business ethics, ecology ethics, etc.) are self-sufficient enough, it requires a more holistic evaluation and development of each of them.

Without a doubt, formation of applied ethics and the special attention it gets are some of the most important ethics-related events from the end of the 20th century (1). The origin of this special type of ethics and the reasons for it are mostly related to developments in knowledge and technological capabilities. The rise of problems concerning food and energy resource distribution, population boom, the alarming

possibility of global disasters (ecological, demographic, etc.) explain the interests of many people in the field of ethics in search of answers to a number of difficult issues. In that sense, applied ethics turns out to be a reflection of people's fears and anxiety in the end of the 20th century. Different trends in it reflect the great number of subjects of those fears and anxieties – from medicine to ecology and business, due to which for the time being it's too early yet to consider it a fully developed type of applied ethics, or a final solution to its issues.

In the popular context, applied ethics is defined as an application of ethical and moral concepts and arguments to specific and often complex and contradicting situations. The process of this application itself, though, is not merely a process of concretization of generic terms in an empirical world. This is a process related to the real insolvability of many moral situations, when totally contradictory positions and types of behavior appear to be equally correct. It is a process that creates moral dilemmas and its outcome requires unifying great human efforts. It is in this process that behavioral rules and requirements are not only tested, but often created as well. It is in this process that such rules, prohibitions, and codes are created, and often later they develop into legal acts and behavioral norms.

By the time being, the drive to apply ethical knowledge and criteria to solve a number of practical issues, in different fields of practical activity – politics, business, medicine, ecology, upbringing is considered as a defining trait of western ethics. This is related to yet another trait of contemporary ethics – continuation and expansion of close contacts with other scientific fields – medicine, psychiatry, economics, pedagogy, ecology, etc., which also results in the birth of such branches of applied ethics as business ethics, political ethics, pedagogical ethics, etc. Of course, this circumstance does not mean that applied ethics and its different branches owe its development to those scientific fields. Rather, the development of those scientific fields initiated the development of ethics in the given specific directions, but such outside influence alone would be insufficient, if it doesn't match with the opposite movement of theoretical ethics, driven by the logic of its whole internal development. Considering such circumstance as an explanation for the birth of applied ethics

in the end of the 20th century would be insufficient, because applied ethics is not simply a group of auxiliary methods, applicable to the solution of practical issues. Such explanation is often a result of an analogy with other practical natural scientific fields, and it does not consider the specifics of ethics as a special kind of knowledge, related to the individual.

Applied ethics offers a new understanding of moral issues and in this sense it represents a new type of ethics, a new approach to issues of ethics itself. And in the same way metaethics is distinguished from traditional normative ethics; applied ethics differs from both of them. More so, the change of the image of ethics does not merely constitute a change of the label attached to the word, like “bio”, “meta”, etc. Normative ethics itself is changed when it turns into applied ethics, and to be more specific – the laws of human interaction take on a new meaning, the field of moral issues and ways to solve them changes, as well as the research area of ethics, a number of its evaluations, advices, and recommendations, in short – all of its issue-related contents.

Therefore, the main reason for the origin of applied ethics is the logic of common civilization processes – the humanization of both individual’s and society’s whole life, as well as the understanding of individualistic and personal values.

Applied ethics, as well as its separate branches (including the social work ethics) appears there and then, where a threat to human life appears or is going to appear, as well as risk of breaching one’s rights and interests, be it a biological experiment, healthcare, social care or ecological survival, where experiments are repeatedly carried to go further “avoiding ethics”, while emphasizing profits, economic necessity, or one’s interests, pushing ethical considerations in the background, in short – where life is endangered and fear of death arises. Ethics is being drawn to such fields, in order to protect an individual’s interest and his life, to remind him of his rights and his pride, about his self-evaluation and priority to anything else. This *necessity of new human protection* in the new conditions at the end of the 20th Century is also the main reason for applied ethics’ birth, including *social work ethics*.

Social work, as an activity (defined in the Aristotelian context as a social activity, based on some common understanding of the goals pursued by means of it, as well as generally accepted standards of the quality of this activity) brings forward a number of a new issues, like those of poverty and social exclusion, social change, justice, and distribution of wealth, caring about people who are deprived of resources, etc., which require a specific subjectification of the language of ethics. The reflexion over these new issues is impossible without relevant professional expertise, or without the knowledge of the specific empirical context of specialized social practice or social institutions, where such problems arise. Social work ethics, as a form of applied ethics starts with facts and sticks to them. Issues are being treated in a critical and analytical way, in the context of their appearance. Therefore ethics experts have left their role as a “mere” analyst. In this context, social work ethics is a form of improvement of social work as a professional and highly specialized practice. It takes a critical, analytical, and corrective part in this practice.

Considering social work ethics as applied ethics cannot cover all types of “moral issues”. (2, 3). Currently, the subject of applied normative ethics is a special kind of moral issues – the so-called moral dilemmas. The latter have been defined as issues which do not have a single solution, while containing a contradiction that cannot be formally analyzed. Their conception is related to the fact that different people’s rights and interests may contradict each other, and following some of them may require that others shall be broken (e.g., a conflict between moral duty and personal interest). The trickiest question related to the nature of moral dilemmas is whether a certain contradiction is related to morals or it is a practical dilemma, i.e. a hard to take decision. Apparently, there are practical issues. But more important in this case is the fact that internal problems exist in the very moral of the situation regarding its practical applicability. That is why moral is the space where dilemmas arise and solving them is an individual’s task. Ethics originates from solving moral dilemmas, from evaluating them, and from discussing them during their analyses. Conclusions and recommendations of applied ethics and therefore social work ethics, though, are only valid when problems facing specific individuals can be considered extra-

personally legitimate, i.e. they can be acknowledged, grounded, and defended by means of ideas and real experience. Contemporary social work ethics is provoked by the necessity of solving moral dilemmas, which arise from different situations – from thermal conditioning to environment pollution and risks of financial and market losses; from situations that bring forth questions like “What should a social worker do when considering whether to inform his client he’s terminally ill” or “What should a worker do if he knows that the policy of the agency he works for does not follow ethical code rules”.

Thus, social work ethics just as applied ethics solves contemporary moral problems related to

making decisions about 1) certain individuals as participants in a specific situation and 2) problematic situations, for which professional knowledge, skills, and expertise of those involved are not sufficient to provide an exit and adequate solution.

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