Seeking the good life - higher education careers services and moral philosophy

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One perspective on careers work is that it is a kind of moral philosophy. We seek to help our clients and students discover and live a good life, a question central to philosophy. However, the notion of good seems under-examined in our profession.

This article reviews the three main theories of good in moral philosophy and examines careers practice from their perspective. A moral foundation that focuses on social justice is proposed as a necessary consequence of a claim of rationality and agency on the part of careers services.

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Why think about careers services philosophically?

It is relatively easy to list the activities of a careers service. We help people write CVs and job applications; we prepare them for interviews; we promote job vacancies, internships and placements; we provide workshops and online resources, visits from employers, careers fairs and so on. Underlying these is a conceptual toolkit consisting of approaches to decision making, career exploration and planning as well as employability; our clients gain skills and attributes that enable them to promote themselves successfully to potential employers.

But is that the essence of what we do or just a particular (albeit complex) set of ways of addressing a question that everyone has: what is a good life and how can I live it? And do we, as practitioners, have ways of thinking about the good we do, if any? If we did, would it help us to respond to the demands of our ever-changing environment or provide us with a central anchor from which to support and extend our work?

Morality, ethics, good

Anyone who has studied philosophy will immediately recognise this question of what good is as one of its primary concerns, present in its discourses (both in the ancient Greek and Eastern traditions) for almost three millennia. It retains its significance right up to the modern era.

Philosophy (except to philosophers) sometimes has a poor reputation, seemingly concerning itself with abstract and baffling ideas about reality that serve no useful everyday purpose. This may well contain a grain of truth in fields such as metaphysics and logic but everyone has a view about what 'good' is. And this is all moral philosophy is – a debate about good – and one that everyone can relate to and grasp.

In the West, its roots are in ethics, the ancient Greek concern with character. We owe our current word 'moral' to the Romans (as we owe so much else). The Latin word 'moralis' was simply the Roman writer Cicero translating the Greek 'ethika' to Latin as MacIntyre (2011: 46) points out. They mean the same and they both mean a search for the meaning of 'good'.

Theories of good and their manifestations in careers work

Philosophy offers us three main ways to think about good; we can be good, do good or follow good rules. The philosophers jargon calls these *virtue ethics, utilitarianism* and *deontology* respectively.

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Virtue ethics

This is the argument that good is what good people do; it encourages us to develop our character and personal attributes. It has its roots in Aristotle's *Ethics*. Aristotle tells us that the purpose of human life is happiness (1955:66). If you work with students in a careers service this seems like a great hook to hang a lot of our discussions and activities on. But we have to be careful – Aristotle doesn't equate power and wealth with happiness as the 21st century seems so often to do. In fact (and he has been deservedly criticised for this) he seems eventually to believe the highest good is a life of contemplation attainable only to a few such as him. It may be the earliest careers advice on record and it is not all that encouraging. However, on the way to this conclusion he has much to offer us, some of which lives on in our time.

Aristotle did not talk about happiness in the way we conceive it now. He advocated *eudaemonia* (1995:33). It is very nearly untranslatable but covers something like the deep satisfaction of a whole life lived with a strong sense of purpose and for the benefit of one's community. And in order to do this one needs to acquire and constantly practise what Aristotle called virtues. These are characteristics or attributes such as courage, wit, truthfulness, righteous indignation and many others which he laid out in a table (1955:104).

Aristotle's analysis suggests that the virtues are best found by seeking harmony; his famous 'golden mean' between deficit and excess. Courage, for example, is found between cowardice and rashness. How much of our day to day careers work is about encouraging students to try new ideas and plans for their future whilst doing so rationally and carefully, avoiding recklessness?

And I think the virtues live on. Many universities actively promote, as part of their careers work and their institutional offer, the graduate attributes; a set of characteristics and behaviours that strongly resemble Aristotle's table of virtues.

My own institution, King's College London, is clearly Aristotelian about this (2016:35, 9):

> Employers will actively seek King's graduates, not only because they are subject experts, but also because they demonstrate a strong character and the wisdom to use their knowledge and research for the benefit of others.

and

> King's graduates are distinguished not just by the content of the curriculum but by their character and service ethic.

One criticism that might be levelled (one that KCL avoids by situating its view of virtue in a sense of purpose and community benefit) is that virtue can become its own good, circular and narcissistic. Nietzsche showed us the dangers of this – losing his mind, eventually, to a megalomaniac and unattainable vision of individual development (1991:158) entirely cut off from social connection.

Utilitarianism

More recently than Aristotle, though taking the same departure point of human happiness being the purpose of life, we have Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. Their utilitarianism, as analysed by Bertrand Russell (2004: 698-705) proposes that good is what maximises happiness for the greatest number of people. Rather than cultivating character as Aristotle proposes, here the focus is very much on doing good. Philosophers call this *consequentialism* because it judges good on the consequences of carrying out an action or actions. It is the dominant moral and political in philosophy of our era and very easy to spot in the claims of politicians or in the rationale of almost any large project.

Utilitarianism prospers in a particular way in the life of universities and in public policy towards them in a focus on wealth. In the UK, at the moment, one major purpose of the university is seen to be doing good by contributing to the wealth of both individuals and society generally through creating highly skilled and employable graduates.

In careers services, this comes to a very sharp point in the work we do with our clients. Higher education is now seen as much as being about getting a well-paid professional job as it is about any of its other purposes. Careers services are often seen as an instrument in achieving that goal and universities are judged and funded on their students' employment

outcomes; all our employability strategies are rooted in it and generated by it.

One of the great difficulties of utilitarianism is that it is possible to use it to justify carrying out almost any type of activity, even those which can have negative impacts and result in unhappiness, so long as that unhappiness is the unhappiness of a minority. Our academic colleagues and our students have a grievance here; they see other 'goods', perhaps more important and valuable in their eyes, such as intellectual curiosity and the freedom of thought and criticism that are also central to the mission of higher education.

Recently, however, there has been a change. The means by which employment outcomes are measured, the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, has been reformed. Whilst the consequentialist dimension has been maintained (good still means a good outcome), we are moving to a new Graduate Outcomes Survey to replace DLHE. Amongst the things it will seek to measure as identified by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), is whether or not graduates perceive they are engaged in meaningful or important activity in the professional roles they eventually secure (2017).

This is a significant departure and, of course, the meanings of 'meaningful' and 'important' are open to debate. They are just the sort of thing philosophers love to discuss. The survey will leave that interpretation to the respondents but the ideas of value and goodness seem inescapable here. Building moral philosophical thinking into careers education could prove helpful for our clients' thinking on this issue.

Duty

The final major strand of morality is *deontology* – duty. Happiness does not figure here; deontology is all about rules that one has a duty to obey without question. We do not have to look far in careers work for this. Our ethical codes are supremely deontological. The Career Development Institute (CDI) ethical code (2014) contains sixteen uses of the word 'must' in its twelve principles, a sure sign of a claim to moral authority that has to be obeyed.

Deontology can feel a bit like a police action, with the threat of punishment for transgressors. But I think, at least in the example I've chosen, there is something clearly rooted in moral philosophy about it. The CDI's code traces itself, consciously or not, from Kant, described by Russell (2004: 644-5), whose categorical imperative requires any moral law to be universal, applicable to everyone and not exploitative. Kant's famous principle, that people should be treated as ends in themselves (2004:644-5) and not as means to ends, seems very difficult to object to and in our day to day work often sharply real. We are there for them, not for us. Any satisfaction or happiness we feel in our work is pleasant but not necessary. In Kant's world, a careers consultant could be personally miserable, but still do good so long as the focus stays with the clients and their needs. It also seems very difficult to imagine a professional practice without boundaries and commitment to standards. Who would engage with one without the reassurance they provide, for example, on confidentiality and impartiality?

Deontological views of good have one great stumbling block. Rules based systems find it very difficult to deal with exceptions and contingency. A rule is a rule or it is not. In careers work, for example, this issue surfaces regularly in the debate about payment for internships. Many careers services, sticking close to Kant, will not promote unpaid internships on the grounds that they are a form of exploitation. But there are industries where unpaid work is the only chance to gain essential experience. Blocking it means blocking progress for some of our clients. So we have to create an exception and weaken our rule in order to stick to our view of good or risk charges of hypocrisy creating a risk that the rules could become unmanageably complex or even collapse under the weight of their exceptions.

Why be good?

One of the joys of philosophy is its invitation to question the obvious. Doesn't everyone know one should try to be and do good?

Is morality a set of social rules that we evade if we think we can get away with it? Do we not see this happening in the modern world with the rich and powerful indulging all sorts of abuses, perhaps attempting to justify their abuse on utilitarian grounds?

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Is morality, as Plato says Thrasymachus (1997:992) puts it, just a confidence trick, the rules of the powerful? Or could it require something else to avoid this charge?

Plato (1997: 1000) explores this in his tale of the Ring of Gyges. Gyges accidentally acquires a magical ring that makes him invisible. He makes full use of it, taking over a kingdom, slaughtering the king and sleeping with his wife. He goes on to rule a prosperous and successful state, dying peacefully in his bed at a ripe old age, suffering no punishment or bad consequences for his actions. In the story, Socrates, who appears as one of the characters, suggests that Gyges is not good because he is not free. Gyges is, Socrates argues, a slave to his appetites and wrongdoing. Someone rejecting such slavery is the more rational, freer and happier person and by implication, we would say nowadays, the morally better person.

I think this tale has some resonance for careers work. We tend not to regard our clients as a modern day version of Gyges, instead seeing them as Socrates would, as rational, free and inherently good people. And indeed we regard ourselves as such. All of us are better than mere seekers of what we can snatch for ourselves, basing our sense of good on something rational, that allows us agency. Articulating this is valuable: it should free us and keep us free of the danger of being the stooges of power. This is the source of Socrates' famous dictum that an unexamined life is not worth living. To stay free, to have agency and responsibility, we must continuously exercise our rationality in everything we believe and do.

Duty, rules or reason as a foundation?

Western philosophers have failed, for thousands of years, to solve the problem of morality. At least one, Alasdair McIntyre (2011:1-5) regards the modern era as a moral disaster zone, adrift from all sense of good, suffering from a catastrophe so great we cannot even see it. Russell's survey of utilitarianism makes clear (2004: 698-705) the failure, after exhaustive and exhausting effort, to locate the *summum bonum*; the underlying and universal moral principle from which morality can claim its authority. Again, according to Russell (2004: 644-5) Kant believed he had solved the

problem with his categorical imperative, but this is not now widely accepted.

If we reflect critically on MacIntyre's moral apocalypse how, in a careers service, could we begin to make positive use of what philosophers have offered us and shape our services so we can make a claim to be doing good?

In philosophy the questions of agency, responsibility and freedom are not settled and there are still vigorous debates about them. But for the sake of the current argument I will proceed in company with Socrates and Plato and assume we are (or at least aspire to being) free, rational agents. What, then, should motivate careers professionals and what should we be trying to achieve, if we accept that? We need to look beyond a set of inflexible rules and appeal to reason, in a particular way.

I think the answer lies in an essential condition of our existence; we are social animals whose individual interests are most effectively served by cooperation and mutual benefit. This is an idea that has appeared many times in philosophy but in modern times is most often ascribed to Thomas Hobbes.

Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, as analysed by Russell (2004: 504-5), said that life in a world where there was unlimited competition between individuals (he called it the war of all against all) would be 'nasty, brutish and short'. Hobbes and his contemporaries proposed a variety of means of founding a binding social contract that would optimise co-operation between people. Their solutions vary, but what they all share is a central idea that one's own individual interests are best and most rationally met by serving the interests of the groups we belong to. So, do we now have a good case to make for careers practice that focuses on social justice, rationality, agency and freedom?

Different questions, different answers?

Implicit in most careers activity is a question:

- What should or could I do in my career?

I don't want to dismiss this question – it is important. But I want to suggest some more questions that could

lie behind that first question, ones that will often emerge in careers consultations and workshops:

- What sort of world do I want to live in?

- How could I contribute to bringing that about?

- How can I use my skills and knowledge for the benefit of others?

- How can I learn to collaborate effectively for my own and others benefit?

What might consideration of all these factors mean for our practice? How would it change? The careers landscape offers some tempting opportunities. Charities such as 80,000 Hours take this exact view, showing their clients how to have a career that benefits others. Another organisation, Effective Altruism, offers something allied, in using a base of academic research to look at how altruism can be practised effectively. Small consultancy firms such as Koreo, with a mission to promote social justice as the core of its work, are appearing in the same space. The United Kingdom has a strong social enterprise sector employing almost one and a half million people with 78% of these enterprises planning to grow (DDsCMS and BEIS:2017). These enterprises have social benefits as an essential feature. It seems the more you look, the more examples you are likely to find of career opportunities that meet the kind of moral requirements this paper is arguing for.

The mission of the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) (1995) is explicitly about social justice and Tristram Hooley (2017) has challenged neo-liberalism in careers work, arguing for alternative perspectives on 'good'. A career in corporate social responsibility is now commonplace with some very large, profit driven organisations.

As facilitators and advisers, we could strongly articulate and promote the benefits of collaboration and show how to get the most from it, rather like the university departments that support entrepreneurs, which tend to take much more of a team approach. Maybe we need to be even more explicit and set up teams of students who plan their careers in collaboration and work together for several years for each other's benefit, with formal training in peer mentoring. Our classroom workshops could be more overtly planned and delivered on the basis

of collaboration and aim to help participants plan to deliver social justice in their careers. Perhaps our online help sheets and resources need to start including and more actively promoting the many organisations and opportunities of this kind.

This development in practice would favour even more emphasis on values and self-awareness than there is already in all our work, starting from Socrates with his demand to examine our lives and returning (in a modified way) to Aristotle, teaching that development of oneself is only rational, worthwhile and meaningful in service of the good of one's community, restoring at least some of the losses and disasters identified by MacIntyre.

However, we have seen the difficulties associated with attempting to revive Aristotelian virtue ethics even though this has been helpful to the analysis. A strict set of inflexible duties as a guiding framework has also been rejected because of its inability to deal comfortably with exceptions. What remains is a form of utilitarianism that retains the value of student outcomes as a way of judging good but in a way that promotes social justice. This is in turn depends on our valuing rationality and freedom in the way that Socrates did, exercising this in constant reflection on our work. Combining this with Hobbes' claim that our interests are most rationally served by serving our community we will have a compelling argument for our careers practise expanding our interest in and commitment to social justice.

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