The virtuous Human Resource-practitioner

Can virtue ethics support the emerging role for the HR-profession in a changing labour market?
Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the possibilities of applying virtue ethics in the HR-profession by presenting the foundation for virtue ethics and addressing how it could be transformed into virtue ethical principles for HR-practitioners in Swedish work-life. I address the questions how virtue ethics could support HR-practitioners in doing ”the right thing” and how a HR-practitioner should be. I argue that the fit between virtue ethics and the HR-profession rests on principles of moral consciousness and intellectual reflection and on the principles of practice and developing excellence. I also argue that moral institutionalization through measures of professional ethical codification could form an important practical feature. Mediated by the concept of phronesis, I define four core virtues for HR-practitioners: trustworthiness, cooperation, justice and integrity. I conclude that virtue ethics could be pivotal in promoting positive culture, forming the basis of increased trust, confidence and security within organizations.

Keywords: virtue ethics, HR, work-life, practice, profession, culture, trust.
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1. General introduction

This chapter aims at introducing the topic of normative ethics and its implications for the Human Resource (HR) profession. I will briefly present the structure of the study and also present the purpose and research questions that is the foundation for this thesis.

1.1 The need for a normative ethics discussion in the HR-profession.

HR qualifies as a human service profession (Kurzman, 1997), in a sense that the HR-practitioner is at the very centre of providing professional services aimed at maintaining and increasing people’s well being within organizations. What is so special with the HR-profession is that this focus on human services is also combined with responsibilities in contributing to organizational dedication to productivity and profit (Bratton & Gold, 2012).

As such, a key element of the HR-profession incorporates the balancing of several professional responsibilities. Not only does the HR-role encompass responsibilities to provide welfare, health and development for employees, the HR-practitioner must also assume a continuous responsibility for business- and strategic issues. Considering this role duality and constant source of loyalty conflict, it is not hard to realize the possible dilemmas and moral conflicts that might arise within the HR-professional domains. As a natural consequence, the HR-profession carries a great responsibility as a guardian of the ethos and values that must be embedded in an organizational culture, if HR-practitioners are to be successful (Bratton & Gold, 2012).

But what happens when interests and loyalties diverge or conflict and how should the HR-practitioner act? The emergence of a deepened normative ethics discussion aimed at providing the HR-profession with ethical tools should be ever evident. The body of ethical theories to support such a discussion is rich, however, in the recent decades there has been a revival of virtue ethics with notable contributions from Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre and Rosalind Hursthouse. Together with the emergence of, often virtue based, codified ethics within certain professions, the aim of this thesis is to apply a virtue ethical perspective and try to evaluate the possibility how a HR-practitioner should be. I will try to lead a normative ethics discussion based on the premise that virtue ethics could be applied as a normative foundation for the HR-profession. Is it at all possible and what can be learned from applying a virtue ethical perspective on HR as a profession?
1.2 Structure and purpose of the study

1.2.1 The purpose of this thesis

The purpose of this thesis is to present a modest attempt to evaluate the possibilities of applying a virtue ethical perspective to the HR-profession. The general question is to try to evaluate if it is at all feasible to conclude how a HR-practitioner should be in a modern context. I will try to describe the general and rapidly changing conditions for the HR-profession today and also try to analyze how a HR-practitioner should be in order to cope with the challenges of modern work-life.

1.2.2 Research questions

- What is the foundation for virtue ethics and how could it be transformed into virtue ethical principles applicable for a HR-practitioner in a Swedish work-life context?
- How can a virtue ethical perspective help HR-practitioners in doing “the right thing” and what are the possible practical implications?
- How should a modern HR-practitioner be, given a virtue ethical perspective?

1.2.3 Method and methodology

I will adopt a qualitative approach utilizing a methodology of critical and comparative literature analysis evaluating the arguments within the limits of select ethical theory.

1.2.4 Disposition/structure

Following the introductory content of chapter 1, I will proceed in chapter 2 to explore and analyze the HR-profession. In this chapter, I will describe the responsibilities and functions of HR-work. I will mainly focus on the Swedish labour market and the changes that have occurred within recent decades. In chapter 3, I will set the stage for an ethical discussion by defining major ethical challenges that the HR-profession must face. Chapter 4 will dwell into the foundation and implications of virtue ethics. I will also cover virtue ethics in a business and work context. In chapter 5, I will analyze and discuss if and how the different components of the HR-profession and virtue ethics can be applied, implemented and combined. This analysis will form the basis for the conclusion in chapter 6, where I will try to formulate answers to my initial research questions and summarize the findings.
2. The HR-profession

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a contextual and historical background as to what constitutes the modern HR-profession. The chapter will start off by covering the origins of HR switching to the general scope and functions of the HR-profession. I will then move on by elaborating the most commonly referred typicalities of the Swedish labour market. This will be followed by a description of the changing labour market. Finally, I will address HR and the general issues of workplace ethics, together with some concluding remarks on possible ethical challenges for contemporary and future HR-practitioners.

2.2 The origins of HR

Ever since the dawn of the “Industrial Revolution”, in the late eighteenth century, people management has evolved as an important component to support efficient business and organization management (Bratton & Gold, 2012). Once the sole domain of the management level, the rapid social movements and political development, beginning in the end of the 19th century, began to dismantle the firm grip of management. Following the collapse of the hitherto strong societal power structures and due to the influx of democratic values following the First World War, more and more corporate focus was aimed at recognizing and also handling employees as important stakeholders. This social change was also fuelled by the emerging trade union movement, which led to the inevitable emergence of legally based employee rights and also corporate organizational systems for the management of these complex employee relations (Bratton & Gold, 2012). One of the concrete results of this development was the birth of “modern” HR. A paradoxical merit of the much-criticized Taylorism in the 1920s, bore with it more focus on employer welfare and employer health. A “Human Resource-ball” was set in motion on both sides of the Atlantic, which steadily grew in size and pace during the 1930s and 1940s and also gave birth to a whole new field of science. Originating from sociology, it converged with the academic fields of psychology, finance and pedagogy to form the academic science of human resources (Nilsson, Wallo, Rönqvist, Davidson, 2011). Primarily developing in the United Kingdom and the USA, this new research area focused on the systematic management of work and people. This research quickly recognized a need for HR as an institutionalized function. Thus, in the years before World War 2, HRM or Human Resource Management, evolved into becoming a vital
corporate aid in supporting and handling recruitment, employee development, union relations, legal issues, pay and benefit issues, health and safety promotion and also staff turnover and employee contract termination issues. In fact, the HR-function emerged as necessary to handle all employee related issues basically incorporating the employee inflow, employee internal and employee outflow processes in any company or equivalent organization. As a result of this development, the industrialized world had new and powerful, research based people management tools to support the reconstruction of the damaged industry and severely hampered global business after World War 2. In the 1950s, the Keynesian doctrine was the dominant element in the European industrial rise. Combining democratic values and strong government planned economies with a free market rationale, this turned out to be successful in reconstructing Europe after World War 2. HR has had a natural place in this development ever since.

Since the 1980s there has been an increasing shift from traditional industry-based economies towards more knowledge-based economies, based on information processing. Traditional market boundaries have evaporated and the birth of global markets, globalization, has seen a rapid change in work-life conditions and employee relations (Bratton & Gold, 2012). This emerging global economy has put enormous pressure on national governments in order to adjust legislation and facilitating growing markets and new corporate needs. This globalization process has also seen a growing demand for cheap labour and the emergence of “economies of scale” and “economies of location” (Bratton & Gold, 2012). It could be stated that strong neo-liberal and corporate controlled forces have challenged the European societies and their labour markets, originally forged in the Keynesian collective tradition. Work-life seems to be one of the battlefields in this conflict.

2.3 The scope and functions of the HR-profession
A body of knowledge and an assortment of skills and practices to do with the organization and management of employment and employee relations characterize the HR-profession. As an effective link between the executive management and the collective work force, the scope of HR includes multidimensional and multidirectional responsibilities. According to Bratton & Gold (2012), the two main areas of functional responsibilities cover Human Resource Management (HRM) and Human Resource Development (HRD). There is no clear and defined boundary between these functional areas and some of the components of the two areas coincide and even interact to some degree (Nilsson etal. 2011; Mankin, 2009). In fact,
several HR-theorists consider HRM to be the overall area of responsibility, with HRD as a subdivision, while other theorists dispute this, claiming HRD as a field of it’s own. In this study, I will follow Bratton and Gold’s (2012) definition of modern HRM, which adheres to the tradition of dividing HRM into the specific functions, skills, and contingencies that HR-professionals needs to handle (Bratton & Gold, 2012). The HRM-functions include planning, integrating, staffing, developing, motivating, designing, managing relations, change management and evaluating HR-issues. The HRM-skills needed to be proficient in these functions include communication, legal, power, instructional, interpersonal, cognitive and technical skills. The main HRM-contingencies or contextual environments include organizational, strategic and external context (Bratton & Gold, 2012). Usually the work force flowing within an organization is divided into inflow, internal flow and outflow (Nilsson et al., 2011). According to Bratton and Gold (2012) the main “hands-on” HR-processes within this work force flow include both operational and strategic responsibilities for:

**Inflow**
- Employer branding
- Recruitment and selection
- Introduction

**Internal flow**
- Competencies development
- Salaries and benefits
- Healthcare promotion measures and work environment issues
- Trade union and liaison and negotiation issues.

**Outflow**
- Exit and employee turnover issues
- Termination of employment contract

This general presentation of the main components within the HR-profession offers the possibility for the emergence a “professional identity” by pinpointing highly specialized HR-practices, as listed above.
The parallel development of the HR-profession as an established academic field and the following body of academic studies within the HR-field has led to different theoretical frameworks. A highly influential analytical framework, designed to describe the HR-profession, originates from the so-called Michigan Model (Bratton & Gold, 2012). In this model “HRM” (including HRD), as a component, forms a triad within a modern organizational context besides “Mission and strategy” and “Organizational structure”. This triad forms a nucleus, which is moderated by a combined societal force field composed of political, cultural and economic forces (Bratton and Gold, 2012). According to the Michigan model, HRM covers four constituent components: selection, performance appraisal, development and rewards. These components can be described forming a HRM-cycle which has turned out to be the most commonly used theoretical framework in explaining the scope and functions of the key HR-practices that make up the complex field of HR (Bratton & Gold, 2012; Mankin, 2009).

2.4 The Swedish labour market

Mabon (1995) describes a major shift in conditions over the last couple of decades. What used to be the idol image of a solid tradition in labour market harmony has evolved into much more dynamic, fluid and insecure labour market conditions. According to Mabon (1995), the traditional harmony had its origins in the 1937 agreement between central trade unions and employers, also called “The Saltsjöbaden agreement”. This was an extensive and fundamental agreement between the major employer and employee parties in Sweden. In the middle of the 20th century, this agreement had massive impact on the reform policy in the decades to follow, which, up until the 1980s, worked smoothly and resulted in extensive market labour legislation. This created a collective, all out institutionalized trust (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burton and Camerer, 1998) for the whole of the Swedish labour market, which formed the basis of organizationally based trust on every level. Opinions may have diverged between individual employers and employees, but the structures for people management and HR practices were solid. This trust may be the result of highly pitched and legislative control (Rousseau et al., 1998), but nevertheless; a relatively solid state of trust prevailed on an institutional and collective basis in the Swedish labour market for several decades.
In the 1980s, international market decline created economical and political unrest, which started a process of radical national political change. This led to tension within the “Swedish model” which created serious questioning and debate, which, within a couple of decades may have rendered the whole concept more or less obsolete (Berglund & Schedin, 2009; Mabon, 1995). Destructive labour market conflicts followed, raised by changing market conditions and ever increasing political differences between the bulk of the Swedish unions and employer organizations (SAF). The major financial crisis in the early 1990s added fuel to this change by hitting hard on the collective labour force (Berglund & Schedin, 2009). This resulted in massive unemployment, which has had long lasting effects in most Swedish labour market sectors. The increased segregation that followed in the labour market was also exacerbated by the creativity of the employer organizations in exploiting the rapidly changing market conditions. The traditional solidity of the employer contract was thus dismantled.

More recent studies have reassured the notions of Mabon and according to Berglund and Schedin (2009), these changes have in fact led to new employee forms emerging and the creation of a segmented labour market. This segmented labour market consists of minority with secure and well-fared employee conditions and a majority with insecure, low wage employee conditions. Furåker (2009) further strengthens these notions by pointing out that in recent years there has been a split in the Swedish labour market into a primary and a secondary market. This has created a nucleus of a relatively small, qualified, highly competent labour force with secure employee contracts and a comparatively larger peripheral labour force with a lesser degree of competence and qualifications, which is also characterized by dynamic and more insecure employee contracts.

What does this leave for work today? According to Mabon (1995), the key word for the new work force is flexibility. This flexibility is expressed in employer needs for dynamic forms of employment and employee contracts, such as part-time, available on-call or limitations in time. Employers seek less work force rigidity which shapes the role of a ”new” Swedish HRM. According to Mabon (1995) this change would seem to be moving irrevocably from the old “steady state” of personnel administration into a more demanding and more fluidly differentiated role of HR as an integral part of business management.
2.5 Labour market change

According to Sennet (1998) some of the key developmental tendencies in the modern labour market are deregulation and internationalization. As a consequence, organizations interact on a much more competitive market than before. At the same time, the modern corporate euphemisms describing these changes include notions of free enterprise, work flexibility. This corporate posture also promotes an increased willingness to accept individual risk, assuming this will give individuals in the labour force more freedom to shape their lives (Sennet, 1998). This development is also described by Bratton and Gold (2012) as having impact on the HR field. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s they describe this change as a result of a neo-liberalistic shift in people management. Sennet (1998) describes this new system as developing and creating new regulatory mechanisms instead of just dismantling the old ones, rather like “old wine in new bottles”. The problem is that these new regulatory mechanisms tend to be ambiguous and hard to construe when organizations change or merge and where job opportunities appear and disappear without clear conjunction.

Deregulation is also mentioned by Allvin, Aronsson, Hagström, Johansson and Lundberg (2006) as a central tenet of the new work life. The deregulation process increases the demands on the individual to plan, organise and assume responsibility for the work. As a consequence, the boundaries between work and spare time gets less clear (what is also called work life balance). According to Allvin et al. (2006), in practice, this results in individual emphasize on being able to cope with information handling, prioritization and the utilization of the knowledge needed in a variety of circumstances. These increased demands on social skills and the capability of being flexible and adaptive leads to the abandonment of the traditional collective approach to work life, into a more individualistic development- or survival project. (Allvin et al., 2006). This has resulted in employment conditions, which combine flexibility and less need for competence and qualifications. Such labour force is replaceable and can be maintained by having short-term employments and insecure employment contracts (Börnfelt, 2009).

Adding to this, Sennet (1999) describes this need for individual flexibility as creating uncertainty and conflict between individual needs for long-term stability, predictability and organizational failure in providing the means to evaluate the consequences or what is in store. Allvin et al. (2006) further enhances this notion by implying a positive development, through increased empowerment among individuals, in the work life. The backside being increased
stress as a result of this responsibility and the new possibilities this carries with them. This decollectivization process in working life tends to lead into increased differentiation and polarization (Allvin et al., 2006). Such heterogenic work life places a lot more emphasize on individual choice and responsibility than before. The general consequences in individual health and well-being are negative: increased workload, social alienation (unpredictable, complex, increased demands), increased insecurity (Allvin et al., 2011). Adding to this, the traditional inequality based on hierarchical order has switched to a new inequality, based on labour force competition (Allvin et al., 2011). These consequences has lead to new forms of work related health issues which Allvin et al. (2011) calls a new unhealthiness carrying strong tendencies for evolving psychological health problems (i.e. fatigue, worries, anxiety, depression).

Doherty (2009) points out that the negative feelings of uncertainty and insecurity may not be directly inferred from direct working conditions of the individual. Instead, he addresses the notion of collective aspects in societal change, as a whole, i.e. the state of things, may be a more relevant causal explanation. What seems to be needed is more trust to combat the growing insecurity. In addressing these issues, Giddens (1996) points out trust as traditionally being a key issue in the relations between the individual and organization. He explains trust as being the key concept in individual conceptions on what the individual can achieve, how individual worth can be strengthened or diminished depending on whether the individual is acknowledged or rejected (Giddens, 1996). This may be an indication that measures to increase trust could be a key tenet for the modern HR-practitioner to increase the welfare of the workforce.
3. HR and work place ethics

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I start by describing the ethical aspects due to the above described tensions between the individual and collective. This will be followed by briefly describing stakeholder theory and how it affects employer-employee relations. Next, conflicts of interests will be described due to particular role ambiguity of the HR-practitioner. I will also introduce an attempt to codify HR-ethics created by one of the Swedish trade unions organizing academic professionals, which I cover in further discussion in chapter 5. In closing this chapter, I will offer a proposition of key tensions, which create ethical challenges for the HR-practitioner in the modern work place.

3.2 The individual and collective

The shift from a collective towards a more individualistic approach in the organizational world is emphasized by Taskin and Devos (2005). They describe HRM as biased toward a more strategic imperative, which leads to integration of people into more flexible and adaptive employee roles. The implied kickback for the employees is the promotion of perceived individual needs for autonomy and responsibilities. As a result of this individualization process, modern HR-practices tend increase the individualization of employer contracts and contacts. According to Taskin and Devos (2005) this HR-practice development may lead to two general paradoxes with possible ethical implications: 1. The individual-collective dilemma, which rests on the notion of the dual responsibilities and loyalties of HR towards both employer and employees, when integrating individuals into a collective and how to balance the tensions resulting from this clash of interests. 2. The autonomy-control paradox, which is described as the strive to offer more autonomy and responsibilities to the employee in order to empower him, with the constraint that this process also transfers potential risks onto the individual.

Taskin and Devos (2005) offers a view that this transfer of risk contributes to the workload and creates an additional mental burden. Also, the promotion of autonomy, at first seems to decrease organizational needs for controlling individuals but this is an illusion. The rapid and parallel technological development offers a variety of control modes, which shifts the character of control, but, alas, does not make controlling disappear (Taskin & Devos, 2005).
Karlsson (2009) adds to this notion by observing depreciation of the value of “work” with the consequences that work has lost its value as a collective identity, culture or political act. Work, people’s lives is no longer the foundation for personal identity. This is a consequence of the societal development where people tend to change work more often and having more dynamic employee relations and insecure employee contracts. Karlsson (2009) points out that there is research pointing out that an overwhelming majority of people within the work-force community view secure employee contracts as important or even very important.

When employees feel that the organizational commitment towards the employees do not match the expectations, there is a high probability that this will have a negative impact on the dedication, well being and productivity. From an ethical perspective, a counter strategy of balancing commitment and expectations will thus likely increase the sense of security, loyalty and deepened trust. The emergence of trust in an employment relation is a function of the organizational capability of creating an organizational context in which mutual trust can develop over time. Therefore it is necessary to discuss how changes in production, power and relational structures may increase the trust between employees and employer and also what consequences this will have on the employee contribution in the organization (Rousseau et al., 1998).

Rousseau, (1998) identifies three kinds of trust emerging in organisations: 1. Calculative trust based on rational choice, where trust is gained when the trustee perceives that a trustee intends to act in a beneficial way. 2. Institutional trust, which focuses on the collective and 3. Relational trust, which focuses on the individual. Rousseau et al. (1998) also observes a societal change towards individualism, which she views as leading to an increased level of small scale and generally more flexible relations. Rousseau et al. (1998) also identifies a developmental line starting with calculative and/or institutional trust, which evolves into relational trust. The key issues for this to happen rely on achieving reliability and dependability.
3.3 Stakeholder theory

The stakeholder theory has been a popular theoretical framework for business ethics in the growing debate regarding corporate and management social responsibilities. As formulated by Freeman (1984), a key feature in this theory is the value analysis. Freeman (1984) admits the difficulty surrounding this, but nevertheless proposes it as indispensable. The aim is to achieve a state of moral universalism in the strive for consistency in the corporate behaviour towards all the different stakeholders, among which the employees are central, by asking the key question “what do we stand for?” (Freeman, 1984). Freeman (1984) recognizes the possible divergence between individual values and organizational values. The solution, according to the author, is a step-by-step structured analysis of the intrinsic value differences between stakeholders and management within an organization, which will identify value conflicts that can be solved, once surfaced. Particular consideration is given by Freeman (1984) concerning social issues analysis where social issues of stakeholders are addressed. Carroll (2006) extends this social value perspective within the stakeholder theory by formulating a social contract concept when focusing on employees as stakeholders. Carroll (2006) addresses the societal change where the revision of values has had a great impact on the workplace. There seems to be a growing stakeholder interest in values.

Carroll (2006) identifies a new social contract which must be understood and recognized by anyone assuming personnel responsibility within organizations and corporations. This new social contract is described by Carroll (2006) as being influenced by a workforce with more mobility, less loyalty and being more diverse than two decades ago. The volatility and insecurity of the labour market forces the employee to act individually, assuming more of a free agent posture than before. This makes collective, long term and “solid” employee-employer relations more and more obsolete. The driving forces are described by Carroll (2006) as market driven with globalization, technology, deregulation and increased shareholder activism as the key drivers. A substantial part of the previous work life responsibilities have been shifted to the employee as a stakeholder in the organization. As such, the employer expects the employee to assume more responsibility for risks (such as downsizing measures or direct personnel liability). Also Duska (2002) observes that stakeholder theory is applicable in the modern context of a contractual relationship between the employer and employee rather than obsolete virtues as loyalty and obligation. As such, Duska (2002) claims that the employee forms a constituency with rights, which the HR-practitioner is obliged to honour. These rights expand those explicitly defined in a written
contract and covers moral rights such as equality, privacy, participation etc. It seems stakeholder theory strengthens the notion of growing work life insecurity and increasing conflicts between the opposing agents within a work life context. This stresses the duality problem and increasing loyalty conflicts facing HR-practitioners.

3.4 Conflict of interests
Stakes can be sources for ethical conflict and therefore a particular interest for human professionals should be how to handle conflicts of interest. According to Davis (1998) this may occur if the moral agent is in relationship with a moral subject to whom the moral agent also has responsibilities and particular interests, which conflicts or interferes with the proper exercise of judgement in that relationship. The particular role of the HR-practitioner, with its responsibilities and loyalties towards both employer and employees, puts extra emphasis on these kinds of situations. However, Davis (1998) points out that what makes conflicts of interests delicate, is that they are often ambiguous. They are not mere bias, but tendencies towards bias. They are not explicit conflicts of roles, but problems of exercising proper judgement within a specific role. They are neither problems of pure impartiality, independence or objectivity. As Davis (1998) points out, the sources of conflicts may be causes but they could just as well be mere effects, indirectly representing differing interests that may be relatively easy to directly address and solve. Davis (1998) describes two problematic strategies: avoidance and viewing all conflicts of interest as problematic. Avoidance merely postpones any problems. Davis (1998) argues that avoidance could be destructive since conflicts of interest may be solved with constructive solutions, based on moral reasons. Instead Davis (1998) proposes two key strategies that work by dismantling the foundations of the conflict of interest. Disclosure of the conflict, before it results in negative consequences, is a preventive strategy. Also escaping a conflict of interest by redefining the underlying relationship or divesting one self of the interest creating the conflict. Davis (1998) suggests a mediation of these two strategies as the best option.

3.5 An example of HR-ethics codification
Considering the purpose of this thesis, the attempt in codifying HR-professional ethics by one of the Swedish trade unions organizing academic professionals, Akademikerförbundet, SSR, is particularly interesting. It is called “Ethics in human resource management. Ethical code for the HR-profession” (Etik i personalarbetet. Etisk kod för personalvetare) and is aimed at providing a general ethical code for all HR-professionals, irrespective of business or organization. The purpose is to offer a foundation for the role of ethics within HR-work,
increase ethical awareness, provide ethical guidelines and also stimulate ethical discussion within the HR-profession (SSR, 2010). It is specifically pointed out in the document that the content is not to be viewed as set rules to follow but should be viewed as more of a reminder of the values and norms connected with the profession as such. The document covers a brief description of the conditions for general HR-work where the complex loyalty situation is addressed and also the important responsibility for individual integrity. The importance of culture and societal responsibility is emphasized as important ethical values. There are also parts addressing questions on human value, fundamental questions on ethics and also a brief overview on the most important principles in ethics including integrity, justice and professional autonomy.

Of particular interest, considering the topic of this thesis, is the part covering needed character traits. These are elaborated as needed for persons with ethical consciousness and moral matureness (SSR, 2010). Their list of attainable character traits include such virtues as integrity, critical self-assessment, modesty, courage, patience, sense of justice, responsibility, wisdom, tolerance, democratic competence, honesty, trustworthiness, perceptiveness, empathy, kindness and assuming an equal stance towards other people. It is explained that these character traits should primarily be found within individuals but that some traits are more directly connected with actions (SSR, 2010). There is a minor and very brief part aimed at explaining how the individual, by engaging in professional practices, should develop these character traits. A set of discussion questions are also provided along with practical guidelines and advice.

3.6 Addressing the tensions
Ciulla (2002) points out that modern management is often characterized by differences between what management says and how it acts. The modern management language in terms of teamwork, empowerment, loyalty and commitment results in individual confusion and fear, which paradoxically makes people, work harder than ever. Ciulla (2002) addresses two key questions: Is it a matter of trust and should the management achieve trust when employees fear the actions? Maybe there is a stronger emphasis on the mediating role of future HR? According to Ciulla (2002), the virtues of trust, loyalty and commitment are often emphasized by management, but this level often fails to live up to these very principles. Since they can be described as reciprocal values, if you expect these values you also have to give them and live them. Moral action is stronger than psychological or social interventions (Ciulla, 2002). This
particular situation emphasizes the duality problem apparent within the HR-profession: the constant balance of loyalties and responsibilities between employers and employees.

The pushes and pulls within the realms of the developing capitalistic system is also addressed by Kurzman (1998) and he claims that the tensions are affecting the traditional values and goals of the human services. To countermand this development, Kurzman (1998) outlines three parallel theories as a guidance for ethics in human service professions: theory of virtue, theory of duty and theory of common good. The theory of virtue emphasizes honesty, probity, and respect for others. The theory of duty invokes a sense of duty to refrain from prohibited interventions but also obligation to engage and promote social responsibility within the scope of the specific human profession. The theory of common good is described by Kurzman (1998) as being the most complex. Its complexity stems from the basic problem of defining what really outlines the common good? The theory of common good also addresses equity issues in and distributive justice. According to Kurzman, when promoting the common good in human service professions, the issue of social justice should be addressed.

In discussing the fundamental conflict of loyalties that arises within the profession, Kurzman (1998) stresses the need to reflect on whose agents the human service professional represent. This is especially critical when conflicts arise in issues addressing both the commitment to people well being and the industry’s dedication to productivity and profit. The key in the professional challenge, says Kurzman (1998), is to recognize the symbiotic relationship and discover the equilibrium that optimizes the common interest of both parties. Role clarity is thus needed in the constant strive of the human professional to help the corporation to fulfil its social obligations AND its commitment to improving the quality of life for its workforce.
4. **Virtue ethics**

4.1 **Introduction**

In this chapter I will start by briefly describing the foundations for virtue ethics, its origins, premises, basic arguments in general. I will source the roots but also present a few modern interpretations of virtue ethics including some of the most important critical points levelled against virtue ethics. This will be followed by a more specific description of virtue ethics applied in a business context with focus on employee relations and HR-practices.

4.2 **Virtue ethics; origins, premises and basic arguments**

The roots of virtue ethics can be traced to Aristotle (2012) and his notion of what constitutes the supreme human good, i.e. *eudaimonia* or “human flourishing”. In reaching this covetable state of mind Aristotle (2012), claims the development of character, by exercising virtues, as central for individuals in order to flourish and evoke admiration. The definition of virtues is described as finding the poise and middle-way between extremes, hence *courage* as a balance between the extreme opposites of *cowardness* and *rashness* (Aristotle, 2012). In outlining the concept of virtues Aristotle (2012) divides the human character into five types of stable dispositions (or *hexis*):

- Episteme (knowledge)
- Sophia (wisdom)
- Nous (intellect)
- Techne (art as in ”skills”)
- Phronesis (practical judgement).

According to Aristotle (2012), Sophia, a kind of ultimate wisdom (a combination of episteme and nous) is required for us to keep the direction in our lives and is thus the ultimate virtue. However, sophia, as the revelation of universal truths, offers no guidance in the rational choice of how an individual should be. According to Aristotle (2012) we thus cannot reach sophia without the specific virtue of *phronesis*, which can be described as a form of practical judgement used in the decision process for practical actions on an overall basis. The special characteristics of phronesis are its roots in practice and, as such, can only exist in relation to an actual act and can only be learned through practical acts. So, phronesis is an experience based tool to handle the challenges we encounter in life and through practice, it hones our
ability to increase our practical wisdom. According to Aristotle (2012), phronesis thus tells us how to act and it would be impossible to adopt phronesis without having ethical virtues, as such phronesis represents a kind of “judgemental force” in guiding the choice of acts.

Foot (2002) argues that virtues have a general quality of being beneficial in such a way that human beings need them to get on well. She argues that virtues are rooted in human nature and that the virtues are corrective to our human predispositions. The temptations offered by our inherent desires can thus be corrected by virtues (Foot, 2002). What is needed, according to Foot (2002) is the will and she emphasizes that it is the intentions and innermost desires that should be morally judged. Foot (2002) claims, that virtues, like courage, can be used in situations where the agent is pursuing evil results which raises the question of how virtues can really be of help in doing the right thing. Foot (2002) answers this by examining the ends. If the end result is bad then the exercised virtues are used in bad ways.

MacIntyre (2011) calls phronesis a virtue, which is “a prerequisite for the possession of other virtues” and goes on to argue that virtues carry with them the goodness which are internal to the contextual practice, explaining the practice as an important concept of virtue ethics. In a comparison with art he states that practices involve certain standards of excellence but also rules as well as the strive for goods. As in art, virtues are subjugated to public scrutiny and there will be a kind of general standard defining what is truly excellent according to particular rules and measures of goodness (MacIntyre, 2011). He also describes this practice orientation as representing a kind of moral authority, which rules out subjectivism and emotivism in virtues. MacIntyre (2011) thus defines the modern concept of virtues as:

A virtue is an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.
(MacIntyre, 2011, p.222)

MacIntyre (2011) explains *internal* goods of practice as dissociated from *external* goods of practice in its appeal to the inherent values of practice and contribution to the collective good, whilst external goods of practice lend itself to competition, power and status. MacIntyre (2011) illustrates this by the analogy of mastering a game. Winning by cheating would only serve external goods of practice but winning by really excelling in the game would appeal to the inner goods of the practice (i.e. the game). In further elaboration of the critical definition
of virtues, MacIntyre (2011) makes an explicit point that the practices and accompanying virtues should not be considered as mere skills or rules according to certain defined goals. As with art, virtues develop over the course of time, it never ends but constantly improves, with new skills and new goals depending on historical context (MacIntyre, 2011). As the three most important virtues, MacIntyre (2011) claims justice, courage and honesty. He says that achieving moral excellence cannot be achieved without practising these central virtues.

MacIntyre (2011) also offers a modernist perspective in analysing the problem of modernity in its propensity to partition the larger whole of the human life into parts, thus raising the problems of maintaining coherent virtues. What it all comes down to, according to MacIntyre (2011) is that this could explain many moral conflicts. Virtues act as mere moral skills in separate episodes of a partitioned human life. MacIntyre (2011) claims that true virtue ethics should emanate from the long-term intentions in a human being’s life rather than based on fragmented episodes. As MacIntyre (2011) describes, much of work today is predominantly focused at pursuing external goods, such as instrumental value or career, as a cost for the internal goods, which have diminished. These changes affect both employer and employee and has led to a general view that the conception of a “common good” in society, has diminished and also that the concept of virtues has been misunderstood as rule-based (MacIntyre, 2011). According to MacIntyre (2011) this creates a clash between modern society and the traditions of virtues and comes down to a basic moral conflict between individualism and virtue ethics where the values of Aristotelian virtue ethics could pose a way of improving a society in decline. MacIntyre (2011) also advocates the important role of institutions in creating, fostering and developing moral cultures and key virtues in society.

Hursthouse (1999) is another modern interpreter of virtue ethics in an application of what she defines as “neo-aristotelianism”. Without adhering to some of the controversial and out-dated Aristotelian views, Hursthouse (1999) adopts the concepts of eudaimonia, virtues, the distinction between acting from reason and mere desiring and the complex psychological relation between beliefs and desires as basis for acting. Hursthouse (1999) makes a point that the exercise of virtues is not just tendencies to act but acquire a much more profound and solid basis for choosing the right act. Virtues form a concept that makes someone good and forms clear premises for actions. Hursthouse (1999) points out the “agent centre” in virtue ethics and explains the key concept, that of a right action is an action that a perfectly virtuous person would usually do, given the particular circumstances. The key question is to ask
oneself what kind of person I should be, rather than asking what kind of acts I should do (Hursthouse, 1999). One central tenet in Hursthouse (1999) is that virtue ethics cannot be explicitly codified into particular rules. Although virtue ethics may provide principal guidelines for action, she argues that there is no way to simplify virtue ethics in a way that can direct or instruct a non-virtuous person to become virtuous. Hursthouse (1999) elaborates this in her discussion on the different kinds of dilemmas that virtuous people can encounter where non-virtuous people would falter, with or without rules. She utilizes the concept of action guidance and action assessment in which the former raises the question; “What is the morally right decision for me to make here?” and the latter raises the question; “What is the morally right thing for me to do here?” The answers may conflict in situations with complicated dilemmas but Hursthouse (1999) argues, that for a truly virtuous individual, the action guidance and assessment would probably never deviate from each other. This also harmonizes with Aristotle (2012) notion that character is more important than action.

The aim of this thesis is not to offer balancing critique of virtue ethics, however, some important points of criticism might be relevant. Rachels (2010) addresses some critical points in its tendency for relativity and claims that specific virtues certainly do vary and are dependent on individual as well as environmental and social differences and context. Although certain key virtues may apply anywhere and anytime, the relativity of virtues opens up for specific virtue categories applicable within certain professional work-life boundaries. This tendency towards relativism is elaborated by Rachels (2010) in pointing out virtue ethics as having an inadequacy defect. In what is usually described as the application problem, Rachels (2010) offer three main objections: 1. There seems to be no adequate and exhaustive way in specifying what characterizes the goodness of a specific virtue. 2. The oft conflicting reasons for the rationality of goodness which results in a fundamental ambiguity in how and when specific virtues should be utilized. 3. How to handle situations when specific virtues conflict or are equally permissible. Rachels (2010) raises the important question, how to choose?

Louden (1984), expresses the notion that in having a strong agent focus, virtue ethics might lack what many people expect any ethical theory to supply: proper guidance in how to act. Louden (1984) also asks how we are to evaluate who is really virtuous and who is really vicious when we focus on qualities of persons rather than qualities of acts. It seems that humans intuitively infer character by observing conduct and Louden (1984) points out that
doing it “the other way around” poses practical problems. Another critique offered by Louden (1984) stems from the notion that the agent focus makes the act far less important than character. As such the relatively minor focus on results may pose the potentially dangerous problem in as long as an individual is considered virtuous, it doesn’t matter what the results are. Louden (1984) specifies this particular problem by the notion that even truly virtuous persons may act in ways that have tragic outcomes.

Despite this critique, in later work (Louden, 1998) Louden also tries to address to the application problem by a few constructive remarks supporting virtue ethics. First, he points out the need for moral education in order to develop a good moral character, which is needed to specify the goodness in virtues. Louden (1998) exemplifies the feasibility of this by referring to the various codes of professional ethics that exist. Next, he claims that all ethical theory requires informed judgement. This is not unique to virtue ethics but apply to all ethical theories, judgement is always needed he claims (Louden, 1998). Finally, the moral dilemma issue and problem of incommensurable values also apply to all ethical theories. He implies that the expressed virtue of practical judgement (i.e. phronesis) is the key to solving the application problem. According to Louden (1998), virtue ethics has an emphasis on sound judgement and skills and most important, situational awareness. Louden (1998) discusses how to define and justify defining moral virtues and applies the concept of phronesis when evaluating relations among the virtues. Louden (1998) closes by two strong pro-arguments for virtue ethics founded on the practice-based rationality: 1. Virtue ethics generate positive instructions for action! 2. Virtue ethics are close to real life, and thus better equipped to deal with real moral problems!

4.3 Virtue ethics in a work and business context

The work-life and business context could be described as practice-oriented area of activities where certain goals and internal values are considered as important. As MacIntyre (2011) argues, such conditions may necessitate specific moral virtues within the professional role of the specific work context. Rachels (2010) and Solomon (2002) points out the problem of relativism imbued in the sense of virtue ethics. They argue what might be considered as virtues in one context may be viewed as vices in other contexts. Without dwelling into the complex discussion on moral relativism, moral objectivity and moral universalism, there are reasons to assume that professional virtues could be viewed as institution specific and not general. Solomon (2002) adds further weight to this notion by claiming that virtues stem from
practices that could be viewed as instrumental for achieving excellence within a defined context. He describes this by comparing it to how to be best in the game. Solomon (2002) argues that the particular context thus sets the frame for what kind of virtues is relevant. In this aspect, Solomon (2002) lists honesty, courage, temperance, justice, toughness, trustworthiness, cooperation and generosity as important virtues. He points out that virtues do not require deliberation in the making of acts and also stresses what differentiates virtue ethics from other ethical theories in the underlying rationale that being virtuous is to be something. In addressing the possible problems of subjective and relativistic virtues within a business context, Solomon (2002) nevertheless proposes that trustworthiness and cooperation ought to be considered as true non-relative business virtues to aspire to.

Koehn (1995) offers an elaborated analysis how applied virtue ethics could contribute in understanding business practice. Koehn (1995) emphasizes the Aristotelian point of view that makes the act, in itself, as the primary focus for virtue ethics. As such, Koehn (1995) argues that the reasoning behind the act is just as important as moral obligations or calculated consequences. To be able to think through the full meaning of the proposed act is central to applying virtue ethics. Koehn (1995) describes this as reflecting over motives and constantly evaluating reasons. Koehn (1995) offers six distinctive contributions by virtue ethics in a business context. First he stresses the conformity between right thinking and desires. A virtuous business individual habitually desires to do what is generally accepted as good and noble. Next, he offers the notion that virtue ethics help business individuals to identify and thus also become “role models”. As a third contribution, Koehn (1995) mimics Loudens (1998) observation in presenting the idea that virtue ethics can help individuals evaluate reasons for acts and actions on a long term basis. Recognizing patterns of good behaviour over long periods of time help fostering a virtuous character. The fourth contribution of virtue ethics in business is fostering cooperation and collective efforts in the notion that good acts create a desire for other individuals to participate and interact. This supports Henriksen and Vetlesen (2001) notion of applied virtue ethics utilized in creating a foundation for good things fostering a good culture. This culture may not be confined solely to the business organization but could also contribute to the value of society as a whole. As the fifth contribution Koehn (1995) argues that virtue ethics help businesses in striving towards roles of excellence. Virtue ethics allows moral agents to stand out and foster self-confidence and courage. The last contribution is described as allowing individuals within the business organization to develop and explore the potential to the full. It thus allows individuals to
really become what they are, within the context of the community, be it the business
organization or society as a whole.

In a human service profession perspective Kurzman (1998) observes the possible dilemma in
the conflict of interests between peoples well-being and productivity and profit. This may lead
to a danger of compromising our virtues. In addition to this, Kurzman (1998) points out that
the virtues of the organization are as significant as the virtue of the individual. According to
Kurzman, this necessitates a clear definition of the function and clarity on the role
responsibility. One particular responsibility is the issue of confidentiality, where there might
be tension between right to privacy and the organizations (or society’s) right to know. Kurzman
(1998) argues that confidentiality is thus always relative, but that the basis in
evaluating the good act is that the human service professional always must act with a motif in
supporting the common good. In this capacity, Kurzman (1998) advises human service
professionals to adopt a focus on advocacy. He proposes that it should be more or less
considered as an ethical guideline for human service professionals to act in ways that have
positive impact on social conditions within the whole of society. He thus argues that the
primary ethical responsibility for human resource professionals should be in promoting more
equitable provisions for people in general. Along with Kurzman (1998), Henriksen and
Vetlesen (2001) also revolve around a work context founded in human professions. As such
the claim that such work based virtue ethics result in attitudes, which makes people capable of
doing the right thing. Henriksen and Vetlesen (2001) point out the practical wisdom,
expressed as phronesis above, as utmost important in human professions. According to them
work based virtue ethics should be instrumental in creating an institutional culture within the
area of profession. As such, Henriksen and Vetlesen identify three main influences; first, the
virtues founded within the individual, second, the virtues connected to the realization of what
good things contribute to culture and third, what is attractive as a virtue in itself. This last
notion supports self-actualization. Based on these main influences, Henriksen and Vetlesen
(2001) argue that virtue ethics in human professions should form a balanced unity and that all
virtues are socially defined. As such, they must have clear roles and functions, based on
practices. These practices represent defined and predictable behaviour patterns based on
attitudes and values and can be used to solve concrete problems within the work context.
Henriksen and Vetlesen (2001) points out that it is important to collectively clarify the salient
virtues in the work context.
5. Virtue ethics and HR

5.1 Introduction
In this chapter I will analyse the implications of a possible adoption of virtue ethics for the HR-practitioner. A brief overview of ethical challenges will be offered followed by an elaboration of the changing role of the HR-practitioner. This will be followed by an analysis of several key areas, which will be addressed focusing possible practices emanating from the application of virtue ethics.

5.2 Ethical challenges for contemporary and future HR
Adopting the perspective of the HR-profession as a mix of specific functions, skills and contingencies, the described changes within the labour market offers a wide array of new professional challenges to achieve professional goals. However, professional skills and competencies are not enough to fulfil these functions. It could be argued that from an ethical viewpoint, the particular changes related to new contingencies offers specific ethical challenges for any HR-practitioner. In the pursuit of reaching professional goals, the inevitable exploration of ways to properly handle these new contingencies probably necessitates an increased emphasis on moral matureness or moral consciousness, specifically related to the HR-profession. In this pursuit, the HR-practitioner could be instrumental in guiding employees and employers in enhancing a person’s ability to lead a good work life. It is thus evident that there is a strong case for contemporary HR in assuming a bigger responsibility in supporting ethical commitment on all levels of an organization.

Based on the body of literature for this thesis, I propose two main ethical challenges, with accompanying problems, for the HR profession. These challenges could be summarized and described as how to:

• invoke trust (thus addressing the problem of loyalty and less identification with employer).
• build confidence and security (thus addressing the problem of imposed autonomy, insecurity, flexibility and individual responsibility).

5.3 The changing role of the HR-practitioner
The HR-profession used to represent a relatively ”steady state” service with a solid and grounded framework for personnel administration work. This whole concept is now rapidly changing. Long gone are the days of clear boundaries for responsibilities and well-defined inner organizational jurisdiction, which led to a fairly well defined and structured profession,
on all levels. Nowadays, the flexibility and relative insecurity of the work life seems to imply a shift from a fairly set and strictly corporate representative role into a more ambiguous and dynamic role. Not only must the HR-practitioner learn the skills to properly manage all the needed practical HR-functions, but the skills to properly manage complex relations and loyalties are also added. The emergence of new contingencies, which stress the need for accurate role analysis and guidance how to handle difficult loyalty considerations, is clear. Also, the HR-profession exercises power over people and with power follows responsibilities. As described in the stakeholder theory, the power of the HR-profession works two ways: handling the stakes of the management and handling the stakes of the work force. This situation clearly puts the HR-practitioner as a source of power and influence between the two main opposing agents; employers and employees. This is analogous with the Aristotelian concept of defining virtues by finding the middle-way between two opposites and thus the nature of the HR-professional role should be considered as finding this Aristotelian poise between extremes. In the professional context of HR, also following MacIntyres (2012) view on justice as a key virtue, I claim that this poise necessitates clear autonomy and a need for strong integrity. To support this, it would seem that the HR-profession would need firmly rooted ethical guidelines, detached from the subjective biases of the two agents. In this difficult task, proper and well-defined ethical tools may help. These particular conditions with emphasis on integrity and role clarity are strong incentives for ethical values based on inner conviction and higher values.

As a result of this, a particular change of roles may necessitate a more counselling approach within the HR-profession. With a flexible work force not bound by static and collective loyalties and more management pressure to increase productivity the effort to retain key staff is critical. The skills thus needed in managing personnel-management relationships and attaining a delicate mediating role between work force and management seems obvious.
5.4 Virtue ethics applied.

5.4.1 Basic principles

In order to outline the possibilities of applying virtue ethics in the HR-profession, perhaps an attempt to outline the basic principles, making it a good fit for virtue ethics, would be in order. First of all, the principle that virtue ethics represents moral consciousness and intellectual reflection represents a professional stand well suited for HR-practice. This principle could service as a safeguard for professional integrity. In the choice of actions, the virtuous HR-practitioner must make rational choices based on reflective practice, where specific, and professionally objective moral standards should form reflective guidelines.

The practice based stand of virtue ethics forms another professional principle, well suited for HR related work. Despite the critique, the way an application of solid virtue ethics serves to offer positive instructions for practical action could make it a useful moral tool to which it is possible to adhere for any HR-practitioner, regardless of individual moral stands. The individual could easily adopt, and adhere to an elaborated and clearly formulated virtue ethical structure, in which support for the choice for practical actions can be traced. The practice-based principles of virtue ethics would probably serve HR-practitioners in the notion that applied virtue ethics are rooted in the practices of solving real life problems.

A third principle for virtue ethics is its inherent characteristics of developing excellence within its professional domain. This principle would not only serve the individual in professional self-development, but could also serve as a collective developmental force within the whole HR-community. As such, virtue ethics would not only serve in enhancing professional practices but could also be instrumental in elevating the respect and authority of the profession in itself, within society. The creation and enhancement of a recognized HR professional identity, with increased prestige, would support and protect integrity needed in a changed work life.

5.4.2 Phronesis

If accepting the premise of practice-based ethics, it would seem reasonable discussing the concept of phronesis and how it might be fruitful. A particular reason for this would be the role for ethics in creating positive institutional cultures. Following the reasoning of Henriksen and Vetlesen, adopting phronesis with this presumption would be very important. The practical wisdom required to adhere to this culture would thus form to be a specific form of
professionally grounded “HR-phronesis”. In order to countermand the application problem, articulated by Rachels (2010), firstly, there arises a need to specify what exactly represents the goodness of the “HR-culture”. Despite the particular objections by Hursthouse, moral codification and even specific rules or principles may present an option in this respect. Secondly, there must be some kind of guidance within the formulated culture how to deal with conflicting virtues. Finding ways into institutionalizing accumulated practical individual and collective experience into a solid body of knowledge may provide a helpful tool. Phronesis can only be gained through experience but I claim that the moral lessons of practical judgement can be collectively learned. There is surely no need to invent the wheel a second time! Thirdly, I believe that with the support of codification of what represents moral goodness, combined with established learning procedures, resulting in the institutionalized knowledge of practical experiences, the HR-profession may utilize the combined effects in the effort to evaluate conflicting reasons for the rationality of goodness. If utilized as a reflective tool this will help the HR-practitioner in evaluating how and when specific virtues should be utilized. The overall effect of utilizing the sophia and phronesis concept in this way could provide the necessary leverage in providing the needed integrity and autonomy in the changing work life.

5.4.3 Codifying virtue ethics?
As Hursthouse (1999) points out, virtue ethics provides a specification as to what a virtuous person would do. Such specification may not qualify as moral rules or laws, and Hursthouse (1999) does argue against formalised decision procedures and rules, rather it provides a guidance as to what constitutes virtuous behaviour. Clearly, Hursthouse (1999) does not rule out all kinds of formalisation in her discussion on the codifiability of virtues. She claims that there might still be a need for some generalizations or general principles (though founded on individual judgement) in order to specify virtues. I agree with Hursthouse (1999) in her claim that aspiring to virtues cannot be learned from rules but has to be experienced in practice. Perhaps it is a semantic discussion on the precise meaning of the word code and codification? In order to evade such a debate I will continue to use the words code and codification not as representing a collection of strict rules or decision procedures, but more in the meaning of a guide, i.e. some formalised practices to start of from and use as a reflective tool in the development of character through practice.
Also, according to Beauchamp and Childress (2009), professional practice has traditionally had a function of cultivating particular virtues that constitute professional standards and professional role responsibilities. In some respect this may also correspond with MacIntyres (2011) notion of the support of societal institutions in the construction of virtue ethics, alas; he gives no clear answer how this ought to be done. The agent perspective of virtue ethics and the key concept of how a human being should be, holds that the status of virtues should be considered more than just tendencies or mere rules in the judgement of acts. In the effort of trying to excel in the choice of acts, through applying the moral judgemental force of phronesis, mere rules would not count for much. Based on the need for specification and guidance of virtues, I argue that the codification of professional HR-virtues should avoid a strict rule based approach and rather aim at providing an action guide covering the whole spectrum of Beauchamp and Childress (2009) obligation and beyond obligation continuum. A proper moral guide should thus provide guidance in ways to achieve virtue excellence (MacIntyre, 2011), which necessitates an individual will (Foot, 2002) and should be founded on a solid basis of values for the choice of actions (Hursthouse, 1999).

I thus argue that trying to adopt professional virtue ethics requires some kind of formalisation of moral values and needed virtues necessary to achieve professional excellence and aspire to professional ideals. Maybe the Hippocratic oath, with its inherent aim at developing virtues within health care professionals, and other examples in society could serve as models to emulate? Professions within law and law enforcement as well as within the armed forces offer further examples that could provide guidance. The creation of normative ethical guides (or “codes”) within the HR-profession would thus emanate from the practices that represent defined and predictable behaviour patterns, based on attitudes and values and can be used to solve concrete problems within the particular HR-work context. This does not imply creating a kind of algorithm posed at solving every problem within the profession. Unifying this into a solid, universal code of ethics is no easy task and it is not within the scope of this thesis to offer a solution to this, I just argue that in order to succeed in adopting true virtue ethics and long term effects, such groundwork for particular normative ethical behaviour within the HR-profession must be articulated. In using MacIntyres (2011) vocabulary, I think this could be a constructive way in institutionalizing the moral development. In order to achieve this, my firm opinion is that the HR-profession needs tools and guides to help create, foster and develop moral cultures and key virtues. As such, ethical guidance in the form of HR-ethical codes could offer a constructive approach.
The example provided by SSR is such an attempt and though it is called a code, I regard the context of its content to be much closer to being a guide as it does not contain a clear set of ethical rules (which it also clearly states), but has a content much more suited as a tool for moral guidance and reflection. As its purpose states, it is primarily a document to increase the ethical awareness, provide ethical guidelines and promote ethical discussions and reflection. As described in the ethical code by SSR (2010), the needed character traits represents an advanced ideal, but should not be viewed as utopian. They are described as character traits, which can be appealing and an endeavour. In experiencing an attraction towards such character traits –and realizing their relevance to both life and profession –the code implies that the individual HR-practitioner has an option to develop them a favourable way. The ethical code by SSR (2010) thus exemplifies an approach in defining the principal difference between a set of rules and a guide, supporting the development of character through practice.

With such ambitions, the code by SSR appears to be a constructive and ambitious attempt. The description of ethics and values is quite rich and balanced and the discussion questions seem well suited for its purpose. However, as a code of ethics promoting the development of particular HR-virtues it is a bit of a disappointment. The list of preferred character traits is lengthy but offers no further guidance why and how these virtues could support HR-work. Also, the connection with practice and emphasis on moral judgement is more or less absent. Perhaps the most important part, how to successfully develop these character traits, is very brief and not elaborate enough. I believe that in order to qualify as a proper ethical guide and provide a useful ethical tool for the virtuous HR-practitioner, the work by SSR, in its present state, is too meagre in its content and not elaborated enough in defining goodness and practices and thus would not suffice. Above all, it does not elaborate the different virtue-based aspects and does not provide any guidelines on how a HR-practitioner should develop to really be virtuous.

5.4.4 How should a HR-practitioner be?

The question how a HR-practitioner should be may be considered an overly complex question and too contextually dependent to answer. Leaving particular trade or business area specifics aside and based on the body of literature studied for this thesis, I argue that there might still be some general character traits that should form a moral foundation for any HR-practitioner.

In the code by SSR (2010) ethical consciousness and moral matureness are outlined as the basic reasons to develop needed character traits, which seem to harmonize with the core
presumptions of virtue ethics. Counting 15 virtues, the code defines quite an ambitious list of character traits. However likeable and sympathetic all of these virtues may appear, I hold it to be quite a formidable task trying to attain all of them. Apart from the sheer number of virtues, some are also very similar. For example, I see no substantial difference between honesty and trustworthiness or kindness and empathy. By this, I am not dismissing the virtues in the SSR Code of ethics, I’m only arguing that they are too ambitious and not enough elaborated. Though it may be a constructive approach to have such a multitude of virtues, I believe every virtue has to be explained and analysed into solid guidance how each and every virtue could be developed. Maybe some kind of priority or “grading” of the most important virtues might be helpful? Solomon (2002) lists eight virtues and argues that possibly a few of them qualify as truly non-relative and thus stand out as especially important. I argue that in order to further develop the work done by SSR (2010), in their code of ethics, there is a need for simplifying and narrowing down the needed virtues. Such a list of select virtues would then have to be constructively elaborated; maybe as possible ways how to individually develop them. I hold, that apart from wisdom, which I claim could be a mediating practice-based virtue applied in the above described form of phronesis, what would constitute how a HR-practitioner should be, must emanate from the main challenges faced by contemporary and future HR-professionals. As an outcome of my current work-life description I have offered two major ethical challenges; how to invoke trust and how to build confidence and security within each of the two principal agents, employer and employee.

Based on the perception that virtue ethics emanates from real life, I believe that the challenge for applied virtue ethics, in this respect, rests in key notion of the ability to have situational awareness (Louden, 1998) and the emphasis on practice (Hursthouse, 1999; MacIntyre, 2011). The concept of situational awareness harmonizes with phronesis in that the evaluation of choices stems from the problem at hand and how come to a conclusion what ought to be done, with professional practical wisdom. Being situationally aware, the two prime non-relative virtues of trustworthiness and cooperation, offered by Solomon (2002), perfectly fits the challenges offered by me. Trustworthiness seems to qualify as a true virtue without question but I argue that cooperation may seem as much more of an act (or series of acts) than a true virtue. However, I regard the notion of cooperation as a virtue in the definition that it represents the ability and preference in working together to achieve common goals and a unified vision. As such I regard the ability for cooperation as a character trait and together with trustworthiness stand out as two possible key virtues for the HR-practitioner. One way
to invoke trust and build confidence and security is through cultural measures. This is also supported by the stakeholder theory, which emphasises values and clear notions on what the organization stands for. Central in communicating such values is the management of good organizational or corporate culture, where the merger between individual and organizational values is a key tenet. This is also much in line with Henriksen and Vetlesen (2001) and Koehn (1995), in their statement that virtue ethics is well suited as a tool to create such positive cultures. One important cultural aspect is justice and the notion that the organization is just and fair. Justice is also viewed by MacIntyre (2002) as vital to virtue ethics and is also listed both by SSR (2010) and Solomon (2002) as equally important. It would also appear that trustworthiness would seem impossible without an explicit sense of justice. Justice would thus be the third key virtue for the HR-profession. I also offer integrity as a fourth option for objective virtue based ethics. Integrity forms a vital virtue in that it could be viewed as a mediating and balancing factor between trustworthiness and cooperation and may provide an instrumental virtue in handling conflicts of interests. I argue that integrity support the ability to resolve conflicts by the strategies of disclosure or escaping by way of aiding the HR-practitioner in assuming a constructive role in the process of redefining the underlying relationships creating the conflict.

Supported by a system of other codified virtues (as proposed by SSR, 2010) together with professional practical wisdom, the merged virtues of cooperative trust, justice and integrity may form a powerful judgemental force for the virtuous HR-practitioner in developing multilevel trust-based loyalty and also creating individual and organizational confidence and security.

5.4.5 Problems?

I have already addressed some possible solutions to the application problem. There are of course several other possible obstacles to be overcome. An apparent issue might be conflicts of interest based on legal issues, concerning contractual obligations, which may conflict the application of virtues and what an HR-practitioner ought to do. This problem is not analogous with other strong virtue based professions. Health care professionals are, in most countries, protected by well-established sets of laws, protecting professional needs for confidentiality and integrity, which imbues these professionals with a particular legal status.

Another main area of problems in applying virtue ethics might stem from the already discussed problem of moral inadequacy, elaborated by Rachels (2010) as the application
problem As discussed, there are certainly different trades, different business- and operational contexts that offer different rationales for virtues. Also, cultural and socio-demographic differences, due to national, regional or ethnic preferences and habits might pose challenges in reaching consensus over a solid virtue based code of ethics for the HR-profession. In short, *the game* is not the same everywhere and might necessitate truly non-relative virtues. A solution may be found in defining internationally similar trade and/or operational areas where sufficient bases for collaboration might form, which may result in universally trade specific virtues applicable in an international context.
6. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction
I will in this chapter conclude the findings and present the resulting answers to my research questions, by summarizing how virtue ethics may contribute in supporting contemporary and future HR-practitioners.

6.2 Can virtue ethics contribute?
The purpose of this thesis was to present a modest attempt to evaluate the possibilities of applying a virtue ethical perspective on the HR-profession. I set out to try to answer if it would be at all feasible to conclude how a HR-practitioner should be in a modern context. As a result of the description of the HR-profession and the changing Swedish work life I believe there is a solid case for virtue ethics in the HR-profession. I base this belief on my description of the foundation for virtue ethics, which I have traced, back to its Aristotelian roots as well as presenting modern interpretations applicable in a modern work life context. Virtue ethics, applied within a HR-context, may pose a constructive route towards a Aristotelian middle-way posture in effectively coping with the role duality found within HR-practice; the constant struggle for HR-practitioners in balancing the loyalties and responsibilities between employers and employees.

I have offered three main principles in applying professional virtue ethics within a HR-context; consciousness with intellectual reflection, practice-based stand and developing excellence. I have also offered the idea that applying the concept of phronesis would be a strong contribution to the virtue ethical perspective, in supporting HR-professionals in doing the right thing. I have offered arguments why an increased institutionalization of accumulated practical knowledge may elevate and enhance the collective effects of phronesis. I have also shown that a practical implication of applied virtue ethics, within the HR-profession, necessitates a stronger emphasis on codification of values and virtues based on practices.

In my combined analysis of the current work life situation, together with reflections on modern profession based virtue ethics, I have presented a modest foundation that may provide grounds for sufficiently objective HR-practitioner virtues. I offer four basic virtues as options that I claim will support contemporary and future HR-practitioners in their efforts to achieve professional excellence in the changing modern work life; trustworthiness, cooperation,
justice and integrity. This claim is supported by the notion that an application of phronesis, as a concept of applied professional practical wisdom, forms an essential part in realizing these virtues.

As a final conclusion I would like to emphasise the inherent qualities of virtue ethics in having the potential of contributing in building positive cultures and stimulating individual and collective efforts. These qualities should not be underestimated and as a final note I claim that virtue ethics may be unique amongst ethical theories in its potential to generate positive organizational cultures. This value of virtue ethics, in building positive organizational and corporate cultures, should be considered as an important possibility for every management level in general and for HR-practitioners in particular. Such is the power of building institutional and relational trust within organizations that the potential of virtue ethics in creating trust based cultures should not be neglected, especially since the HR-profession embodies the image as a guardian of the ethos and values that must be embedded in organizational cultures. I believe that this prime rationale for virtue ethics could very well pose a reasonable option for the HR-profession in combating the modern health problems resulting from the ever present changes in society and work life.
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