Virtue Ethics in Psychotherapy: A Systematic Review of the Literature

Carmel Proctor, Ph.D.[1]

Abstract

A number of current theoretical psychologists and philosophers have begun to consider the application of virtue ethics in psychotherapeutic practice. Emerging fields of study, such as positive psychology, and renewed interest in traditional fields of study, such as humanistic psychology, have resulted in a revival of interest and enthusiasm with regards to virtue ethics. Primarily based in Aristotelian (c. 330 BCE/1980) philosophy, virtue ethics in psychotherapy brings ancient philosophy into modern day practice. A systematic review of the extant literature was conducted, resulting in seven publications for review. Presented is a review and critique of the yielded literature. The work concludes with a discussion of virtue ethics in psychotherapeutic practice, which is demonstrated by way of two brief vignettes. Aristotle's virtue ethics is demonstrated as being unquestionably worthy of our consideration and application in facing the existential givens presented for examination and exploration in psychotherapy.

Keywords: virtue ethics; Aristotle; philosophy; systematic review; eudaimonia

Clinical Impact Statement

This literature review considers the application of virtue ethics in practice. This review advances the idea of how therapists can weave virtue ethics into their psychotherapeutic practice and become attuned to opportunities that afford them the ability to open up and unpack virtue ethical themes, such as character strengths, values, and virtues.

Introduction

With renewed interest in traditional fields of study, such as humanistic psychology, and the advent of positive psychology, there has been a revival of interest in the study of human flourishing and the good life. Moreover, given that the foundations of positive psychology rest in Aristotelian philosophy, consideration of ancient concepts, such as eudaimonia, have come to the fore. Indeed, Aristotle provides the starting point for considering the intersection of philosophy, positive psychology, and psychotherapy with regards to the cultivation of character in pursuit of human goods.

> According to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, virtue ethics is one of the three major approaches in normative ethics … identified as the one that emphasizes the virtues, or moral character, in contrast to the approach that emphasizes duties or rules (deontology) or that emphasizes the consequences of actions (consequentialism). (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2016)

As such, virtue ethics does not aim to identify universal principals to be applied across moral situations, but emphasises the role of practical wisdom in the application of character and virtue—traits derived from natural human tendencies, which can be nurtured and developed

[1] PPRC (Positive Psychology Research Centre); carmel@pprc.gg

(Athanassoulis, 2017). In the West, virtue ethics takes its inspiration primarily from Aristotle and Plato, however the focus of this review is on Aristotle's philosophy[2] (for a review of Plato, see Brickhouse & Smith, 2017; Kraut, 2013).

The Nicomachean Ethics

The Nicomachean Ethics (Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980) is the primary philosophical source for considerations and explorations of the good life (Fowers, 2012a, 2012b). Virtue ethicists consider broad moral questions, such as "How should I live?" and "What is the good life?" (Athanassoulis, 2017). Three ancient Greek concepts derived from Aristotle's philosophy underlie historic and modern conceptualisations of virtue ethics: *arête* (excellence or virtue), *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom), and *eudaimonia* (happiness or flourishing).

According to Aristotle (c. 330 BCE/1980), the ultimate function of human beings—that which gives meaning to being—is the exercising of virtue or excellence (i.e., arête). Aristotle's philosophy indicates that in order for activities to be virtuous or produce excellence, they must avoid excesses and deficit. That is, they must be chosen "at the right times, with reference to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive, and in the right way" (p. 38). In order to achieve this, it is necessary to exercise practical wisdom (i.e., phronesis) with regards to the use of virtues in everyday life. This takes practice, and Aristotle likened the process of working towards eudaimonia as *habituating* into virtue. Indeed, Aristotle indicates that becoming virtuous not only takes practice, but also involves both pleasure and pain in working towards the objectively desirable life. However, once virtue has been obtained (e.g., temperance, magnanimity), we are no longer pained by the exercising of it, but rejoice in the wellbeing we experience naturally through the exercising of it—that is, we will be "pained by the things that we ought [i.e., vice]" (Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980, p. 32). Unquestionably, eudaimonia is a process—an end in itself—that is engaged with throughout life. It involves actively choosing to exercise what is best within us and to become our choices. Howbeit, our ability to do this is hinged on our understanding of ourselves and the rules of morality—neither of which matter if our actions are not based on an intelligent understanding of the reason for them.

Method

A review of the relevant databases and search engines to be employed in conducting the systematic search was undertaken in November 2016. In the first instance, various small literature searches were conducted in the topic area to determine selection. Based on the outcome of these initial small searches, four online databases with resultant literature in the topic area were chosen for inclusion: two major psychology databases (PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES), one cross-disciplinary database (Web of Science), and one topic-specific database (Religion and Philosophy Collection by EBSCOhost).

Procedure

Literature to be included in this systematic review was established using three search strategies. First, each of the four chosen databases (i.e., PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, Religion and Philosophy Collection, and Web of Science) was searched from their inception to November

[2] Included references to "Aristotle's ethics" or "Aristotle's philosophy," refer to Aristotle (c. 330 BCE/1980).

2016—limited by English language and Academic Journals. Abstracts in each of these databases were searched with the following specific search terms: *psychotherapy* and *virtue ethics*. The search results from these specific search terms were then screened via the title and abstract for their relevance for inclusion in this review. Non-empirical comment/reply, foreign language, and book review publications were not included. Further, only publications that unequivocally examined "psychotherapy" and "virtue ethics" as they pertain to psychotherapeutic practice were included. That is, publications that examined *ethics*, *virtue*, and/or *psychotherapy* as individual search terms were not included, nor were publications that examined virtue ethics as it applies to codes of professional conduct (e.g., Brabender & Fallon, 2009; Clegg, 2000; Dalal, 2014).

Data Analysis and Results

Using this strategy, a total of 21 abstracts were identified for review. From the 21 abstracts obtained, 16 publications were excluded from inclusion in the review: 3 comment/reply, 1 introduction to a special edition, 2 book reviews, 2 theological, 2 other topic, and 6 ethical publications. Therefore, from the first search strategy, a total of 5 publications were retained for review. References obtained from the search performed using the first strategy are listed in the first column in Table 1 (next page).

Second, using the ancestry method (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998), the 5 identified publications chosen for inclusion had their references screened by title for other relevant publications. These publications were then collected and this process repeated until no further relevant references were derived. This process yielded 2 additional publications. References obtained from the search performed using the second strategy are listed in the second column in Table 1.

Third, references that were known by the author to be directly relevant to the review, but not detected using the other two search strategies, were also considered. This process yielded no further publications for inclusion in the review. Therefore, the three strategies employed yielded a total of 7 publications for review.

Literature Review

In this section, the seven publications identified for inclusion in the review are presented in independent sections. As this review will demonstrate, a number of current theoretical psychologists and philosophers have begun to consider the application of virtue ethics in psychotherapeutic practice. Indeed, as noted by Harrist and Richardson (2014), there has been an overall revival of virtue ethics during the course of the last 70 years, which has sparked enthusiasm across various intellectual arenas. This zeitgeist is exemplified by the birth of new fields of interest, such as positive psychology, and growth or rejuvenation of traditional fields of study, such as humanistic psychology. Important to recent theoretical discussion is the publication of Fowers' (2005) *Virtue and Psychology: Pursuing Excellence in Ordinary Practices*. Based on Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia*, Fowers' focus is on ethics and the good life and the role of character strengths in its attainment (Harrist & Richardson, 2014). Pivotal to Fowers' philosophy is the conceptualisation of virtues as embodied—existing in concrete activity—not residing in "fine ideas located in the heads of individual agents" (Harrist & Richardson, 2014, p. 208). Therefore, Fowers' virtue ethics differs from modern conceptualisation of "values" as internal subjective personal possessions—they are "experienced as central to constituting a particular way of life" (Guignon, 1993, p. 230).

Table 1. Literature Search Strategy Results

Search Strategy 1	Search Strategy 2	Search Strategy 3	Exclusion Criteria
1. (Richardson, 2012)			
2. (Slife, 2012)	(Fowers, 2012a, 2012b)		
3. (Aho, 2012)			(1) Comment/Reply
4. (Kim & Enright, 2016)			
5. (Woolfolk, 2012)			(2) Comment/Reply
6. (Waring, 2012)			
7. (Waring, 2012)			(3) Comment/Reply
8. (Dalal, 2014)			(1) Ethical
9. (Ivey, 2014)			(2) Ethical
10. (Burns et al., 2013)			
11. (Stewart-Sicking, 2008)			(1) Book Review
12. (Brabender & Fallon, 2009)			(3) Ethical
13. (Winship, 2011)			(2) Book Review
14. (Harrist & Richardson, 2014)			(1) Other Topic
15. (Clegg, 2000)			(4) Ethical
16. (Schulz, 2004)			(1) Intro to Special Edition
17. (Utsch & Frick, 2015)			(1) Theological
18. (Brabender, 2007)			(5) Ethical
19. (Tjeltveit, 2006)			(2) Theological
20. (Evans & Paewai, 1999)			(2) Other Topic
21. (Williams, 1997)			(6) Ethical

On Psychology and Virtue Ethics (Richardson, 2012)

Richardson (2012) attempts to build on the work of Fowers (2005) by exploring some of the implications of the virtue ethics perspective as it applies in psychology and psychotherapy. Richardson begins by addressing the question of whether moral or spiritual values are created or discovered and briefly reviews various modern and pre-modern accounts from moral philosophy. He refers to Fowers in presenting the root of the confusion concerning morality as residing in the "distinctively modern 'fact-value split'" (p. 26). Richardson suggests that virtue-ethics helps us overcome individualism and instrumentalism—that is, the idea that human beings first determine their goals subjectively and then second implement them in the social world in a value-neutral means-ends manner, which suggests that means adopted to reach ends are unrelated to character or morality—by providing "rationality" to human action. As highlighted by Slife, Smith, and Burchfield (2003), individualism and instrumentalism lead us to conclude we should "value being value free" (p. 60) whereas Fowers (2005) concludes that "instrumentalism is itself an ethical framework because it dictates that choices of values and goals *should* be left to individuals" (p. 58). Richardson suggests that virtue ethics may be a credible alternative perspective, one that enables us to pursue social and personal excellence outside of ideologies

purporting we are embedded in a meaningful cosmos and without moral confusion (MacIntyre, 1981; Richardson, 2012).

Richardson argues that values are not out there to be gained as personal possessions or conceived as ideas by a select few—they are the activities of daily living. That is, they exist in our daily practices, such as in friendships, relationships, and community, and thus enable us to do away with the "fact value split" (p. 27). Indeed, the virtue ethical perspective holds that our emotions reveal the sort of person we are—that is, our character or expression of our character excellences. According to this view, the development of character comes from the non-judgmental schooling of one's emotions over time, such that one is able to act in a way that is consistent with them and reflective of living the "best kind of life" (p. 28).

Richardson highlights that Fowers (2005) makes the notion of *internal goods* central to his account of virtue ethics (cf. Harrist & Richardson, 2014). As reviewed by Richardson, internal goods are not only qualitatively different from *external goods*, but also found in meaningfully different ways. Importantly, internal goods can only be attained by acting in ways that reflect or embody those goods, whereas external goods are the outcome of separable activity aimed at gaining possession of some *thing*, such as wealth or power. Further, in the sphere of virtue and excellence, it appears that means are not necessarily separable from ends but experienced as a way of being—for example, exercising regularly or eating a healthy diet as part of being a healthy person (cf. Guignon, 1993; Proctor & Tweed, 2016). Therefore, in accordance with Fowers, Richardson argues that internal goods have a primacy in human life in that we share a common understanding of what is *good*—being born into a world in which long-established practices and perspectives on how to live are in place.

Richardson goes on to demonstrate the degree to which moral philosophy and psychology overlook the modes of excellence brought to light by virtue ethical practice—that is, the cultivation of character in Aristotelian terms—despite it being exactly what so many of us admire in others or aspire to in ourselves and our loved ones. He suggests that virtue ethics offers a "compelling diagnosis of and creative response to" the predicament of society's tendency to slide into narcissism in our attempts to find shortcuts to attaining internal goods (p. 31). Richardson concludes by suggesting that notions of virtue and moral excellence are essential to what is considered "strong relationality" (p. 31). According to Richardson, strong relationality is ontological in nature and truly relational, involving openness, authenticity, and connectedness between individuals. This he contrasts with the vast majority of psychological theories, which posit relationality as mere interaction between individuals—or weak relationality. In agreement with Fowers, Richardson argues that virtues and moral excellence only exist in relation—because we come to know ourselves only in relation with another.

Virtue Ethics in Practice: The Greenbrier Academy (Slife, 2012)

Slife (2012) begins by noting his belief that Western culture and science have been hampered by abstractionist ontology (e.g., materialism, dualism, realism, and idealism) and argues for a truly relational ontology in practice—that is, nothing can be understood apart from its context. In line with this, he describes how a therapeutic boarding school, The Greenbrier Academy, he co-founded in West Virginia based exclusively on strong relationality led them to Aristotle's virtue ethics.

Students come to the school for a variety of reasons, including substance abuse and conduct disorder. All members of staff function under a strong relational philosophy, which in practice means putting the focus on the quality of relationships that the students have with each

other, the staff, and the overall context. In generating quality interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and good community, the authors note Aristotle's virtue ethics as an ethical framework that met their relational criteria.

According to Slife, Greenbrier uses specific agreed upon features of virtue ethics in their formulation of the programmes they offer and provides a description of "The Aspirations" as an example of how they relate explicitly to virtue ethics. The Aspirations are five virtues that relate to different aspects or stages of virtuous relationships: (1) respect for self and others, (2) courtesy and compassion, (3) empathy and forgiveness, (4) humility and honour, (5) trust of self and others. Greenbrier students aspire towards these character strengths as worthwhile ends in themselves and by "living into" them, such that they acquire them as part of their moral character (p. 40). The Greenbrier staff chose these five values specifically, and students are required to demonstrate their acquisition of each virtue before moving on to the next. As students progress "from one aspiration to the next, they receive additional relational opportunities and 'privileges' with peers, staff, visitors, parents, and friends" (p. 40). The author notes that these privileges do not imply a token economy, but a virtue ethical advancement to greater community responsibilities. According to Slife, the Greenbrier virtues included in The Aspirations meet the relational criteria and reviews each one in the conclusion.

An Aristotelian Framework for the Human Good (Fowers, 2012a)

Fowers (2012a) examines and critiques the recent increase in interest in virtue ethics in psychology and reviews Aristotle's philosophy in an attempt to disambiguate misguided conceptualisations in the literature. Further, Fowers argues that psychology is committed to an unacknowledged vision of the human good based on culture and is not as value neutral as it claims to be. From Fowers' perspective, psychology has attempted to avoid entanglement with conceptions of the human good and in doing so has aligned itself with individualism and instrumentalism by way of the goods it does promote, such as autonomy. In particular, Fowers aims to demonstrate that Aristotle's ethics is an "excellent resource for transcending the individualistic and instrumentalist ideologies that underlie much psychological theory and research" (p. 11). Specifically, he notes that it is particularly apt as an ethics for our time, as it does not prescribe a solitary notion of the good life, but leaves room for a diversity of goods.

As reviewed by Fowers, Aristotle presents two types of goods or ends, those chosen for themselves and those chosen as means to other ends. Fowers refers to ends in themselves as *constitutive* and those as meant to other ends *instrumental*. As noted by Fowers, Aristotle is clear to indicate that we do not carry out all activity for the sake of something else, otherwise we would go on ad infinitum and our lives would be futile. Accordingly, instrumental goods are essential to a good life and provide the infrastructure to constitutive ends, which fall into two categories: (1) chosen for itself; and (2) chosen for itself and happiness. Aristotle is clear to indicate that eudaimonia (i.e., happiness), is the highest, most complete life and therefore many have preferred to use the term *flourishing* as a synonym—"a lifelong pattern of activity devoted to choiceworthy ends and pursued in accordance with virtue" (p. 14).

He also highlights that Aristotle's philosophy is based on a view of humans as natural beings (i.e., the function argument), tied inherently to our natural tendencies—that is, virtue and the exercising of character strengths in the pursuit of eudaimonia is rooted in our biology, it is what it is to be human (cf. Wright, 1994).

Placing Virtue and the Human Good in Psychology (Fowers, 2012b)

Fowers (2012b) presents another critique of the growing interest in psychology of virtue and virtue ethics, specifically eudaimonia. As noted by Fowers, historically psychology has shied away from virtue and character and opted instead for a focus on personality. Fowers also argues that, in keeping with Aristotle's original conceptualisation, psychologists' tendency to separate virtue from eudaimonia is misguided. As stated by Fowers: "From an Aristotelian perspective, virtues are simply the excellences that make it possible to live the good life, meaning that these two concepts mutually entail one another" (p. 1).

According to Fowers, ontological hermeneutics (i.e., a phenomenological theory of human nature) has supplied psychology with the most sustained critique of ideologies that have attempted to separate facts and values in their account of human action. Fowers highlights that according to hermeneutic philosophy, individuals "are always living out a vision of the human good every day" (p. 3). That is, human beings exist in a world with historical understandings of the good and have a unique capacity to reflect, re-evaluate, and interpret any given tradition, enabling us not to be trapped by inherited values. However, he notes that a "substantive account of the human good … has remained elusive," despite the call of hermeneutics for just such a theory that it does not appear to have the resources to provide (p. 3). According to Fowers, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980) is the source behind hermeneutics and "the premier guide regarding a substantive perspective on the human good" (p. 3)—"remaining relevant over the course of two millennia" (p. 4). Although there are other accounts and explorations of the human good and the good life (e.g., Plato), Fowers argues that Aristotle's ethics not only put good at the centre of human action (e.g., "the good has rightly been declared to be that at which all things aim" (Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980, p. 1)), but also avoids being prescriptive, enabling more than one type of good life for humans.

Fowers concludes by arguing that the misconception with regards to eudaimonia is the basic understanding that Aristotle intended us to know—that is, that it is a way of living or being-in-the-world that is inherently defined by being a *good* person, and therefore, it cannot be examined in a value-neutral way. Furthermore, he suggests that psychologists and others who study virtue often do so by focusing on a single virtue or set of virtues, which is problematic because these scholars often have a limited understanding of what a virtue is (i.e., human excellence or character strengths). Overall, it is Fowers' aim to make a case for the systematic theorising of virtues in psychology and present the virtue ethics framework as a promising approach to doing so.

"State and Trait Forgiveness": A Philosophical Analysis and Implications for Psychotherapy (Kim & Enright, 2016)

Kim and Enright (2016) draw on virtue ethics in examining forgiveness therapy. According to Kim and Enright, there is conceptual confusion regarding "forgiveness therapy" and "forgiveness" as it applies in the therapeutic context, leading both therapists and clients to misunderstand this important construct in practice. As highlighted by these authors, much of the confusion stems from growth in examination of this construct as a personality trait (e.g., dispositional, state, and trait forgiveness conceptualisations of personality). The authors "argue that intentionally distinguishing trait forgiveness from state forgiveness which is often done when forgiveness is studied within the field of personality psychology, contradicts the essence of what forgiveness is"—that is, "part of the moral virtue of magnanimity" (p. 33). The authors

draw upon Aristotle's description of moral virtues in their presentation and argument for forgiveness as a moral virtue and what that means for psychotherapeutic practice. Kim and Enright suggest that in accordance with Kraut (2014), two more characteristics, in addition to the eight points commonly discussed with regards to Aristotle's definition of the moral virtues, are required: (1) the person mature in a given virtue has a love of that virtue and (2) the person mature in the virtues includes these virtues as part of his or her identity, or what Aristotle described as deliberately becoming a philosopher who cultivates and lives by the virtues (as cited in Kim & Enright, 2016, p. 34). That is, a person self-identifies as being a "forgiving person" and values being so.

From this perspective, forgiveness is more than being "good tempered" or "high-minded," it is magnanimous in that injustices do not require the forgiveness of the "forgiving" person, because the moral virtue has been acquired and therefore the forgiving person was already prepared to forgive those who commit grave injustices towards them. Thus, forgiveness as a moral virtue is defined by what it is not—that is, feelings of hatred, revenge, or resentment—rather than by what it appears—that is, a conscious act of pardon or mercy, which it can be when conceptualised as a state or trait (cf. Proctor & Tweed, 2016). Moreover, to truly take the Aristotelian view, forgiveness is a characteristic of a *good* person and is not practiced in isolation but in conjunction with other moral virtues, such as justice and wisdom, and is the product of maturity.

Further, the Aristotelian perspective of forgiveness as a moral virtue implies that the construct exists on a continuum from state operationalisations to trait identity formation. Based on this, three areas of false thinking that might emerge for clients during psychotherapy are put forward: (1) the developmental nature of forgiveness is missed and therefore forgiving actions may be seen as ends in themselves rather than movement towards greater development of the virtue; (2) a focus on forgiveness as a personality trait implies that individuals may be devoid of this characteristic and therefore it cannot be attained; and (3) a focus on forgiveness as a static personality trait that one may not possess may lead to a lack of incentive to "do the very hard work of forgiveness" (p. 40).

The Virtuous Patient: Psychotherapy and the Cultivation of Character (Waring, 2012)

Waring (2012) examines how virtue ethics relates to clients and presents an argument for cultivation of client virtues within therapy and for virtues to be seen as psychotherapeutic goals that clients can strive towards.

As noted by Waring (2012), virtue ethics concerns itself with not only what kind of person the therapist should be, but also what kind of person the client should be, which separates it from ethical considerations of therapeutic codes of conduct. Waring suggests that similar to a therapist having virtues consistent with psychotherapeutic practice, there may be virtues that clients should develop in working towards their psychotherapeutic aims. That is, clients may wish to overcome or deal with certain mental illnesses through the development and/or acquisition of virtues. Waring operationally defines virtue as: "a quality of character that manifests a strong and stable disposition to respond affectively, cognitively, and behaviorally to items of ethical concern with either excellence or sufficient goodness" (p. 19).

Using Christine Swanton's (2003) theory of virtue ethics, Waring presents case examples whereby clients have cultivated virtues to meet the ethical challenges of their presenting problems. Similarly to Swanton's theory, Warring suggests that a theory of virtue ethics should be pluralistic—that is, with no ideal standard of what it is to be healthy or which virtues to

cultivate. Waring suggests that the psychotherapeutic goals elucidated in virtue ethical terms include: greater self-love, respect for others, and anger management; and the treatment goals in ethical terms include: desirable changes in emotional response and a cognitive understanding of how one should treat oneself and others that is expressed better in behaviour (p. 30). However, Waring admits that such an analysis raises many questions with regards to the theory and practice of virtue ethics, such as how psychotherapy might influence the ethical motivation in clients and what to do if clients are devoid of ethical motivation—that is, how do psychotherapists enable and influence ethical motivation in clients? He notes that any exercise in educative ethics in psychotherapy will necessarily require intervention on the part of the therapist.

Psychotherapy as Moral Encounter: A Crisis of Modern Conscience (Burns, Goodman, & Orman, 2013)

In this work, Burns et al. (2013) present the crisis that exists in psychology and psychotherapy today of attempting to remain neutral or value-free given the inherent impact these disciplines have on morality/ethics, both broadly as it applies to society and specifically to clients of therapy. Further, they argue that "psychotherapy is a moral encounter and has the potential to assist in elevating and dignifying the client" and suggest that "the values and morality of the client and therapist can become a more significant and salient feature of the language spoken" (p. 2). Burns et al. review the moral crisis within the field of psychology and consider how clinicians are hampered currently to attend to the moral dimensions of their clients' lives and in what way this may change by considering virtue ethics, positive psychology, and philosophical enquiry.

The authors suggest, that in understanding human behaviour and dysfunction, psychology shifted away from predetermined pronouncements to cognitive processes and scientific evidence. These shifts resulted in a loss of moral language (e.g., virtues and values) and an increase in descriptive vocabulary (e.g., traits and attributes), along with the implementation of the medical model—a way of legitimising the field alongside medicine. They suggest that the version of psychology that was promoted in modernist contexts was built from scientific models and hence the therapist becomes a technician or expert who relates to the client's cognitions or behaviours, without attending directly to their moral and ethical relationship with the client. However, they go on to argue that there has been a "postmodern turn of thought" (p. 5), that has resulted in consideration of persons as products of their "local truths." That is, that each person comes to an encounter with locally created norms, values, and teleological ends and that these cannot be avoided—"[m]oral encounters are ubiquitous … [t]hey are built into the fabric of human relations" (p. 5). Unquestionably, as human beings we are actively engaged in moral reasoning during encounters, whether we realise this or not.

The authors go on to suggest that psychology has been slow to respond to postmodern critiques with regards to morality and argue that part of the reason for this is the pressure of today's "quick-fix" culture and growing "ontological individualism" that constricts the possibility of a language of morality developing (p. 5; cf. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Ritzer, 2004). Nevertheless, as the authors point out, "it is an untenable position to believe that values are not ever-present in the psychotherapeutic process. Postmodern thought denies psychology any illusory claim otherwise" (p. 6). Accordingly, they suggest this is true on two levels. Firstly, therapists' personal values are not just cerebral—they are embodied and lived during their interaction with clients. Secondly, the psychotherapeutic system, regardless of modal technique, maintains it own moral lexicon about the human person—"what constitutes proper

functioning, how symptoms are to be understood, and how change can take place. Each therapeutic discourse has its core paradigmatic assumptions about these questions, along with epistemological, ontological, metaphysical, and moral determinations about personhood" (p. 6). As such, the psychotherapeutic space opens up the possibility of moral and ethical discourse. It presents opportunity for clients' moral systems to be called into question and "openly discussed in a trusting and empathic relationship"—giving space for disavowed moral traditions and beliefs to be unpacked and explored (p. 6).

Critique

Psychotherapy by its very nature concerns itself with ethics, both with regards to codes of conduct and in practice. Indeed, it is widely agreed that psychotherapy is very much "value-laden" and not "value-free," as early contributors to the field had suggested (Waring, 2012; Woolfolk, 2012). Clients come to psychotherapy to explore "the gap between the persons they would like to be and the persons they are" (Tjeltveit, 2004; Waring, 2012, p. 26). Furthermore, as noted by Fowers (2012b), in order to guide individuals to and inform them of *better* or *worse* ways to live, the therapist must have some idea of what is required to promote human welfare—and this does not come from a value-neutral stance. Nevertheless, given the complexities of human nature and motivations, many therapeutic approaches train practitioners to take a neutral stance with regards to their clients' decision making (van Deurzen, 1999). However, as stated by van Deurzen (1999): "there is no such thing as value-free dialogue or even a value-free statement" (p. 584). Simply by interacting in relational dialogue with our clients, we express our views of the world. By attempting to be neutral, we remove the possibility of opening up debate and challenge, and therefore the possibility for clients to truly explore who they are, what they believe, how they would like to change, and what this will look like for them.

Critique of Literature Review

Richardson's (2012) aim was to build on the work of Fowers (2005) by exploring some of the implications of virtue ethics as it applies in psychology and psychotherapy. In doing so, he posits virtue ethics as a credible alternative perspective to individualistic and instrumentalist ideologies—one that bridges the gap between humanistic and cognitive approaches. He presents a structured argument for the primacy of internal goods in life and our shared human understanding of what is *good* and the benefits of the virtue ethical perspective providing the opportunity for *strong relationality*. However, Richardson also leaves much in question. Although he highlights hermeneutic philosophy and virtue ethics as perspectives that can contribute sensitively and accurately with regards to a greater wisdom about the art of living, he does not suggest how it might achieve this in practice. Further, his account does not provide for those who are not, for example, "fully functioning" (see Rogers, 1961) and able to live a life where their emotions are consistent with acting well—such as individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder who have limitations with regards to the non-judgmental schooling of their behaviours and emotions—and therefore, feels idealistic.

In contrast, Slife (2012) offers an example of what he believes is true relational ontology in practice—that is, virtue ethics in practice—by way of The Greenbrier Academy. On paper, The Greenbrier Academy appears to be an excellent example of applied virtue ethics, with an Aristotelian-based therapeutic framework embedded in strong relationality. However, the school

is excessively elitist, accepting only 50 students at one time, with current tuition of $269.59/day[3]. As noted by Aho (2012), "[t]he question for Slife is whether his eudaimonic model of psychotherapy can be actualized in more modest socioeconomic circumstances and made more widely available in the modern world" (pp. 47-48). Further, we may question whether Aristotle's philosophy is elitist in itself—a "balanced, lifelong human flourishing … that can only be actualized by those privileged few who have the leisure time and money to afford it" (Aho, 2012, p. 47). Nevertheless, The Greenbrier Academy's creators claim Aristotle's virtue ethics meets the relational criteria for their ethical framework. For instance, students aspire towards character strengths as worthwhile ends in themselves and work towards acquiring them through practice as part of their moral character. However, existentially we may question whether the students are in "good faith" (see Sartre, 1943) as they progress through the various stages of virtuous relationships for which they must demonstrate acquisition of virtue in order to gain "privileges." That is, in order to be ourselves we must be true to ourselves and the structure of demonstration of acquisition of moral character traits at Greenbrier opens up the possibility for students to "play a role" or be in "bad faith" to get what they want.

As pointed out by Fowers (2012a), Aristotle presents two types of goods, constitutive and instrumental. If the students of Greenbrier are acting in bad faith, their acquisition of goods is instrumental—a means to gain privileges. According to Fowers, Aristotle's philosophy provides us with a framework for living *into* virtue to be *in process* towards human flourishing. Much in keeping with Maslow's (1954) conceptualisation of progress beyond deficiency needs (basic needs of food, air, water), Roger's (1959) notion of *becoming* fully functioning, and Frankl's (1967) self-transcendence model (primary motivational need of seeking (i.e., the will to meaning) and finding meaning (i.e., the meaning-mindset)), Fowers brings to our attention the inherent hierarchy within Aristotle's philosophy of working beyond instrumental activities towards constitutive activities; to have "a lifelong pattern of activity devoted to choiceworthy ends" (p. 14). However, left unconsidered is the fact that many human beings are not in a social position that affords them adaptation of such notions, nor do some possess the intellectual wherewithal to understand such philosophical conceptualisations of the "human good." Thus, we again appear to be faced with attainment of human flourishing by the elite few. Howbeit, Aristotle's philosophical work was written within a cultural milieu that was accepting of social inequality (e.g., sexual inequality and slavery) and therefore is elitist by nature. Accordingly, as illuminated by Fower's discussion, there is a need to translate Aristotle's ancient philosophy into working practice, both on the individual and broader community level, in a manner that takes into consideration such concerns.

In order to move away from individualism and instrumentalism towards a notion of *good* for humankind, based on our nature as a species, translation in pragmatic terms of Aristotle's philosophy and Fowers' suggestions for psychology is essential. Of course, Aristotle's philosophy suggests that exercising the eudaimonic life is the living of our essence, our purpose, and what is good for humans is that which is in keeping with the exercising of virtue—our ultimate function. However, Aristotle's philosophy also suggests that eudaimonia involves conscious choice to live in accordance with our natural tendencies. That is, he suggests that we can live otherwise, but that this comes at the cost of a less fulfilled existence. Accordingly, Sartre (1943) suggested that our existence precedes our essence—that is, that our nature is mutable whereas the mere fact of our being is not. Thus, as noted by Fowers, Aristotle's philosophy is attractive today because it does not proscribe how to live, but leaves room for a diversity of

[3] Obtained from The Greenbrier Academy website (www.greenbrieracademy.com)

goods enabling us to give meaning to being through existing itself in accordance with our natural tendencies (Crowell, 2015; Fowers, 2012a). Indeed, as advocated by Wong and Reilly (2017), Aristotle's philosophy is also consistent with Frankl's self-transcendence model, which postulates that man is self-determining—that is, we do not simply exist, but choose our existence and our behaviour at every moment. Importantly, Frankl's (1963, 1967) model hinges on the responsible use of freedom in all situations.

Fowers (2012b) extends his arguments by critiquing the recent increase in interest in virtue ethics and the good life in psychology. He posits that this renewed interest and work is subject to persistent, disguised commitments to the ideologies of individualism (e.g., self-determination theory) and instrumentalism (e.g., positive psychology). Fowers also notes that he believes psychologists' tendency to separate virtue and eudaimonia is theoretically misguided, because Aristotle saw them as mutually entailing one another. Overall, Fowers is good at pointing the finger at positive psychology for its focus on a set of character strengths and possible misconceptions with regards to Aristotle's meaning of eudaimonia and virtue, however he offers no suggestion of how such philosophising (i.e., virtue ethics) can be incorporated into today's society outside of psychotherapeutic practice (cf. Stewart-Sicking, 2008). Surely, we may question how, without relying on a set of identified character strengths in keeping with Aristotle's philosophy, we can gain "practical wisdom" and realise ourselves through virtues of which we know not nor understand? That is, how can we achieve eudaimonia without some formal conceptualisation of what characteristics are constitutive of virtue and which ones are not and how come? However, from Fowers' perspective, what is simply required is an understanding of what a virtue is: "Virtues are, simply, human excellences or character strengths that make it possible for individuals to pursue characteristically human goods (e.g., social connections, knowledge) that allow them to flourish as human beings" (p. 6).

Thus, it appears that Fowers suggests that there is an inherent human capacity to know virtue and to choose to exercise it in order to realise our full potential. However, society in general is far from Fowers in its understanding of virtue and what *is* good, although each of us at the same time has an innate sense of it, even if poorly conceptualised in action. He offers The Greenbrier Academy as an example of how we can teach those who are languishing (see Keyes, 2002), however the school is in an elitist sense also out of reach for most. As psychologists and therapists, surely we are duty bound to offer others more than armchair psychology and philosophy and can use our knowledge to reach others where they are functioning—practicing humility in our basic practice and understanding that most are not in possession of our esoteric and elitist knowledge and education. Without language, we cannot speak—by providing others the foundations to do so through formulated understandings of character strengths and virtue, we begin to allow others to learn language and find their own meaning. In fact, positive psychological techniques and practices appear to be in keeping with Fowers' argument of applying ontological hermeneutics (cf. Harrist & Richardson, 2014)—that is, "that people are always living out a vision of the human good every day, both personally and professionally" (p. 3)—by drawing attention through strengths-based exercises to those aspects of our human nature that we can so easily become unattuned to, such as "our capacity to act generously, loyally, courageously, and justly" (p. 6). That is, positive psychology provides the language that enables us to name our human capacities and actions and become through practice mindful and appreciative of them and our own and others' use of them (e.g., strengths spotting, see Linley, 2008).

Similarly, drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics, Kim and Enright (2016) propose four recommendations for forgiveness therapy in order to assist therapists and clients in avoiding conceptual confusion with regards to forgiveness. The authors present their case for forgiveness to be reconceptualised by therapists and clients alike as part of the virtue of magnanimity—moving away from state and trait conceptualisations—and meaningfully connect their arguments with Aristotelian philosophy. In keeping with Fowers (2012a, 2012b), they also highlight the necessity for forgiveness to be lived *into* in order to be realised—that is, to self-identify as a forgiving person and live as such. However, they suggest that the realised adaptation of the virtue of forgiveness is manifested in "being forgiving," which they note the "gift of forgiveness is given without being withheld for any reason … the high-minded person … was already prepared to forgive those who commit deep injustices against him or her" (p. 34). Therefore, attainment of pure magnanimity from Kim and Enright's perspective appears to be in keeping with the notion of being in process, striving towards pure virtue (cf. Frankl, 1963; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1959). Hence, in keeping with the Rogerian notion of *becoming* fully functioning, less defensive, and more open, those who are forgiving are more attuned to those they have an expectation of goodness and absence of injustice. However, this does not imply that it is virtuous to continually accept grave injustices against us. In accordance with the Aristotelian perspective, the authors note that misuse or overuse of forgiveness when justice is required is equivalent to vice.

From an existential perspective, in order to forgive one must first have to have conceived consciously that an injustice was done and decide to forgive—there is a subtle, but marked, difference between *conceiving* of ourselves as forgiving and being *capable* of forgiving. The Aristotelian perspective suggests choosing to live as a forgiving person, one who looks at others in kindness and with wisdom, struggling throughout life to be better at *being* forgiving—never truly becoming magnanimous—accepting that we are in process, a project that is never complete until death (Heidegger, 1962; Sartre, 1943). Nevertheless, in keeping with the existential perspective, the authors note that a state-trait focus on forgiveness may lead clients to falsely believe that they lack this characteristic and therefore there is no point in doing the hard work of developing the virtue (as a way of life) because it is unattainable. According to Kim and Enright, the error is in missing the developmental nature of forgiveness, which removes the fallacy that it cannot be achieved in some measure. Nonetheless, forgiveness is inherently difficult for clients. Forgiveness by its very nature is wrapped up in our existential being. It is a boundary situation, a crisis requiring us to not only forgive others, but to re-evaluate (and possibly forgive) ourselves (Jaspers, 1969). Notwithstanding this, the authors depart from the existential perspective in their prescriptive proposition of four implications and recommendations for forgiveness therapy, which includes the suggestion of a self-help book on developing a more mature understanding of forgiveness. Overall, the presented arguments go a long way to disseminating much of the confusion with regards to forgiveness and successfully demonstrate it as a moral virtue in keeping with Aristotelian philosophy.

In keeping with Kim and Enright (2016), Waring (2012) argues for virtues to be seen as psychotherapeutic goals toward which clients ought to strive with the facilitation of the therapist. From this perspective, virtues are acquired by way of responding to real world situations in a virtue ethical manner that meets the ethical challenges of individuals' presenting (mental health) problems. According to Waring, there are three categories of the virtues of practice indicative of achieving psychotherapeutic goals in virtue ethical terms: (1) the "mental disorder or problem in living that is best illustrated by an other-regarding, morally objectionable character fault for

which the patient can be sensibly held capable of and responsible for changing"; (2) "the desirable outcome or goal of the psychotherapy"; and (3) the "concerted effort by the therapist and client to replace character faults with character strengths and virtues" (pp. 26-27). Although Waring's perspective allows us to understand a client's goals in virtue ethical terms, it departs from traditional Aristotelian virtue ethics. Indeed, Waring's account provides an example of the development of a client's character, which would traditionally have been described within a therapeutic context, according to Swanton's (2003) understanding of the transformation of a suffering individual (Woolfolk, 2012). Thus, despite Waring's perspective being situationist and directive, it provides us with a platform for character to function as a meaningful concept in psychotherapy.

Waring also fails to suggest how virtue ethics look in practice broadly—seemingly offering Swanton's (2003) triadic analysis as the sine qua non of a virtual ethical application and interpretation. Moreover, Waring does not offer an operational definition of character or flesh out the difference between character strengths and virtues. Although we may assume an implicit knowledge and understanding of what "character" and "virtues" are, Waring's use of the terms interchangeably without the provision of an operational definition further muddies the virtue ethical water. Further, Waring appears to suggest that identification of character flaws starts with an ostensible mental disorder or DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) diagnosis. Such a view departs from an existential perspective and suggests that a diagnosis provides the guide for the therapist on which values and virtues to nurture—precluding any exploration and natural phenomenological unpacking of what the client brings to therapy.

Furthermore, we might question whether an ethical motivation is the only good reason for change. Not all clients access therapy from a personal desire to remedy an internal turmoil or attend to a problem with living. In fact, it may be that a client does not believe that what others might consider to be a character flaw is indeed a flaw at all, but an accepted or eccentric quality that they have positively identified with. In keeping with Woolfolk (2012), despite the clinical utility of Waring's perspective, a general rather than selective application of virtue ethics (e.g., DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) Cluster B Personality Disorder) would be more broadly beneficial in psychotherapy. Clients suffer from problems with living that are ameliorated by therapy, such as loneliness, chronic pain, physical disability, and relationship difficulties, which do not fit neatly into a diagnosis. Indeed, considering we all are faced with the existential givens of life, we may question whether there is any human being who would not benefit from therapy.

Finally, Burns et al. argue (2013) for psychologists and psychotherapists to understand themselves as moral agents and psychotherapy as a moral encounter. According to Burns et al., there is a latent moral crisis in psychology that has not been resolved by postmodern shifts in the field. Moreover, they believe that therapists are ideologically hampered in their ability to attend to the moral dimensions of their clients' lives. The authors argue for the acknowledgement that clients come to therapy with an inherent dignity and worth as human beings, before ever entering the psychotherapeutic context. Therefore, therapists can help clients use the psychotherapeutic space to understand the relationship they are having with themselves and their own worth by virtue of their humanity. The authors successfully argue for psychotherapy to be viewed as a moral encounter and psychotherapists to be considered as moral agents. In the case presented, the authors illustrate how the therapeutic space can be utilised to open up discussion with clients about specific problems with living, such as relationships, by considering existing in a morally dissonant manner. That is, through their case example, they demonstrate how a virtue ethical

discussion enabled a client to move towards living in accordance with their core values and subsequently how this resulted in increased happiness and satisfaction. Overall, they skilfully demonstrate how by approaching the psychotherapeutic space as a naturally moral forum, therapy can be successfully utilised to facilitate clients in realising their inherent dignity and to function in accordance with their humanity. Moreover, the authors elucidate the necessity for self-reflection and consultation among colleagues in assessing a virtue ethical way forward with a client presenting with an issue of moral dissonance or a morally contrasting belief system.

Virtue Ethics in Practice

Practicing from a virtue ethical perspective begins with the acknowledgment that as therapists and psychologists, we have "some stance on how best to live and present these views for critical scrutiny and debate" (Fowers, 2005, p. 85). Approaching a client from this perspective requires moral perception and practical wisdom in the true Aristotelian sense. Development of character occurs over a long period of time, and clients must habituate into the changes that cultivate the character strengths they wish to develop to enhance their lives. A virtue ethical therapist is mindful that "virtues are good in themselves *because* virtues are the mode through which human beings can be our best selves"—they do not have "independent value in the absence of an overall pursuit of a good life" (Fowers, 2005, p. 67).

Weaving Virtue Ethics into Psychotherapeutic Practice

A virtue ethical perspective can be employed from the point of assessment. For example, this can be done by opening up discussion with regards to specific psychotherapeutic *goals for change*—considerations of which form the foundations of the work. These need not necessarily be presented by the client as desire for character development or change or related to a specific diagnosis, but an expression of an overall desire to improve how they are in-the-world-with-others or how they experience living. As noted by Yalom (1980), part of the human condition is our confrontation with the existential givens of existence, such as freedom, responsibility, agency, death, facticity, isolation, and meaninglessness, and it is our response to these givens that informs our living or our dysfunction with living. From my clinical experience, many clients respond to the existential givens by engaging in self-destructive behaviours that facilitate escape and avoidance of confrontation, such as self-harm, obsessive cleaning, drinking, or gambling. Such behaviours provide fertile ground for considering how a client may approach things differently and move away from behaviours having a negative impact on life or well-being by engaging in activities that naturally give meaning to being—to begin to live the life they desire by choosing it actively.

Thought experiments are a useful way of engaging clients in consideration of virtue related themes. For example, *wisdom* related exercises, such as having a client reflect on what their elderly self would want to see when looking back on their life, provides an opening for discussing how the client would like to be, the life they would like to live, and what values they hold (cf. Macaro, 2006). Considerations of what changes they can make in the now to get to their *imagined future self* can be the beginnings with a client on reflecting on their behaviour and its "goodness" or "rightness" for them and their life. Are they engaging in promiscuity, when in fact a held core value is monogamy? Are they alone, when they desire to be in a relationship? Do they experience themselves as false, when they desire to be authentic? The virtue ethical approach opens up opportunities for consideration with clients whether what they desire and

what they are doing are at odds with one another and therefore facilitates discussion about values and their impact on their lives. If a client is experiencing difficulty in life as a result of living in a *morally dissonant* manner, a virtue ethical approach facilitates consideration and discussion with regards to how they can begin to make changes in their lives *in the now* that will enable them to live more in accordance with their values and reach their *desired tomorrow*. Indeed, a virtue ethical approach affords consideration of their inherent *freedom of will* and their ability to choose to change at any instant—they are not predetermined, but self-determined. Existentially speaking, the virtue ethical perspective clears the way for addressing temporality with clients and the notion of creating a new future past.

Exploring with a client the relationship they are having with themselves and whether it is a good or kind one, can also set the foundation for working virtue ethically. Considerations of the impact on life that being kinder to oneself would have opens up additional related virtue ethical themes, such as *forgiveness*. What does forgiveness look like for the client? Is it pardon, acceptance, or coming to peace? If they are willing to explore being kinder to themselves, how does this translate out to living into *kindness* and does this then require them to forgive themselves for not being kinder before? In keeping with the Aristotelian notion of virtue, forgiveness and/or being forgiving does not exist in isolation of other virtues, such as *kindness*, *justice*, and *wisdom*. Working through with a client what living into their virtues will look like *for them* is the beginning of change in the now—movement towards the expression of their virtue in life and the way in which they choose to be-in-the-world.

For example, consider this brief illustrative vignette[4]. A 30 year-old bisexual woman engaged in a long-standing (but platonic) same-sex relationship, sexually assaulted by a man in her late teens and physically and emotionally abused by her father throughout childhood, describes herself as not allowing herself to feel *love* for fear of being hurt. Her expressed unwillingness to let her barrier down in order to let others in opened up a natural space for a virtue ethical consideration of love and our ability to love others, if we do not love ourselves. This client was able to acknowledge her dislike of herself and her embodied expression of this by not allowing others to touch her and abusing herself through cutting, binge drinking, excessive smoking, and overindulging in food. Applying virtue ethics in practice, this client was open to considering how she could treat her body better and *love* herself more through diet, exercise, and re-engaging in "fun" and approaching life with more *humour*—and to seek these out with intention. Moreover, broad discussions of love enabled her to explore and consider the various forms love takes (e.g., *friendship*), what love means, and the difference between love and sexual attraction, and to reflect overall on her feelings and beliefs about love in light of the abuse she experienced.

Clients often present with statements with regards to a specific virtue they believe they hold and live into. Such instances are opportunities for direct consideration of Aristotelian notions of virtue. That is, for example, *honesty* or *bravery* at the right time and in the right way and to the right degree. Similarly, virtues can be exercised and increased through the Franklian idea of *paradoxical intention* or facilitated by *de-reflection* away from self-absorption to some activity of *self-transcendence.* Clients' attention can be drawn to *responsible* conscious decision making with regards to living in accordance with a higher purpose, facilitating a *meaning-mindset* through self-distancing and mindfulness (Wong & Reilly, 2017).

[4] De-identification used for all presented case material.

Moreover, exploration of one virtue naturally leads to examination and exploration of related virtues. For example, explorations of honesty lend themselves to further consideration of *authenticity*—what does authenticity mean for the client, how do they experience authenticity, when do they feel they are being authentic, and what meaning does it hold? What is the difference between *honesty* and *integrity*? What other character traits are being used or experienced when we are deciding how *honest* to be? What about *kindness*, *humility*, and *friendship*? Finding windows of opportunity to discuss values and virtues opens up the possibility of considering strengths of character as they exist in clusters, how they develop over time, and which ones we experience ourselves using most—or not at all. For instance, how do our virtues impact on our lives and what meaning do they bring to existence? Furthermore, unpacking with a client how they might live out their virtue illuminates the benefits they might experience in their lives and their wellbeing from living in accordance with their values. Consider the following two illustrative examples:

> (1) A 21-year-old student describes herself as being known among her friends as someone who can always be counted on to be "brutally honest" and "say how it really is." The expressed idea of being brutally honest opened up a space for exploring with this client what that means to her—that is, how she defines or understands what it is to be *brutally* honest. She explained by way of noting, for instance, that she would tell a friend if they *really* looked good in an outfit or not. Her example opened up the space to consider her self-identification with *honesty* as a moral virtue and explore from the Aristotelian perspective the difference between using it virtuously and unvirtuously—to consider "[t]hat moral virtue is a mean … and in what sense it is so, and that it is a mean between two vices, the one involving excess" (e.g., insult), "the other deficiency" (e.g., disingenuousness) (Aristotle, c. 330 BCE/1980, p. 45). She was struck by the realisation that insult could be hidden in so-called *honesty* (and *humour*), which presented the opportunity to consider if telling others the *real truth* fit with her self-identification and ownership of being an *honest* person.
>
> (2) A 24-year-old student expresses valuing honesty as one of their core values. During the session they note that they "get away with" using the same train ticket sometimes for months without having to purchase a new one. Their behaviour stands in contrast to their espoused value of honesty. Challenging them to consider that honesty involves not only truth telling, but also authentic presentation of self to others, and living as an honest person would do (with *integrity*), offers the opportunity to apply virtue ethics in practice. This client at first presentation of being challenged with regards to their dishonest behaviour became defensive and expressed that a *small* dishonesty, such as a train ticket, surely did not *count*. They were open however to considering the difference between believing in honesty and self-identification with it and living the virtue in practice. Therefore, opening up discussion around these themes, which facilitated for this client the unpacking of what authenticity and integrity mean to them, caused them to re-examine their behaviour in light of how they desired to be-in-the-world.

Discussion

The primary aim of this review was to examine virtue ethics in psychotherapy. Overall, the review makes a significant contribution to the knowledge area. In particular, the reviewed

literature provides an assessment of the current knowledge and understanding of virtue ethics in psychotherapeutic practice and highlights the theoretical and philosophical debate and zeitgeist that currently exists in this area. The value of the review is evidenced not only by the fact that no other systematic reviews have been previously conducted, but also by the timely nature of the review given the resurgence of interest in virtue ethics in psychotherapy in particular and psychology more broadly. Moreover, the reviewed literature provides a foundation from which areas where there are notable dearths in the theoretical and research literature can be investigated. Other notable strengths of the review are evidenced by the dissemination and disambiguation of Aristotle's philosophy as it applies to virtue ethical practice. Further, uniquely the review provides the opportunity to consider Aristotle's philosophy and virtue ethics in practice more broadly by way of vignettes and a case example.

Notwithstanding the contributions to the knowledge area and the notable strengths of the review, several limitations are noteworthy. Firstly, space precluded the ability to discuss and critique the yielded publications in full. Secondly, the review would have benefited from a section more fully considering the application and development of virtue ethics by positive psychology and the similarities and differences with existential-phenomenological perspectives. Finally, the review would have benefited from a discussion and consideration of ethical codes of conduct in psychotherapeutic practice and the relationship and differences between these and virtue ethical practice. Future research in this area may look to expand on the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings and framework of virtue ethical practice by way of additional presentation of how it is applied in psychotherapeutic practice[5].

Relevance to Counselling Psychology and Existential Psychotherapy

Virtue ethical practice is inherently relevant to counselling and existential psychotherapy—not least because Aristotle's philosophy is existential in nature, but more so because this ancient source remains fundamental for considerations and explorations of the good life. Moreover, in keeping with existential-phenomenological psychotherapeutic practice, Aristotle's virtue ethics emphasises the role of practical wisdom in the application of character and virtue and is not prescriptive or directive in nature. As evidenced by this review, therapists can weave virtue ethics into their psychotherapeutic practice simply by being attuned to opportunities that afford them the ability to open up and unpack virtue ethical themes, such as character, strengths, values, and virtues.

Essential to counselling and existential psychotherapy is the knowledge of the psychotherapeutic space as a place to explore what the good life means to the client and how they can move towards it. Inherently, as therapists, we work with individuals to facilitate change in a psychotherapeutically fleshed out manner consistent with clients' desired or discovered direction. Therefore, by the very nature of our work, we engage in the application of virtue ethics—simply by our consideration of broad moral questions, such as how we should live and how we find meaning. Thus, fundamentally, an increased awareness and appreciation of virtue ethical philosophy and practice can only inspire and strengthen our use of the space to this end. For example, by engaging in using the language of virtue and strengths and highlighting these to

[5] For further discussion see: Fowers, B. J. (2005). *Virtue and psychology: Pursuing excellence in ordinary practices*. Washington, DC: APA Press Books and Macaro, A. (2006). *Reason, virtue and psychotherapy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

the client, therapists can begin to enable clients to consider themselves and their psychotherapeutic growth from this perspective.

Conclusion

Aristotle considered friendship "at the core of a well-lived life" (Fowers, 2005, p. 96). He believed that true character friendship was essential to a virtuous life—providing more than just pleasurable association. Character friends share a mutual understanding of what is good and a shared commitment to seeking it, coming together because they recognise each other's character strengths, enabling each other to pursue shared goals through teamwork (Fowers, 2005). A true *constitutive* or *internal* good, character friendship is the mirror that reflects *being* (how we are in-the-world-with-others) and enables the habituation and development of virtue—thereby moving us towards eudaimonia. Importantly, however, the "only way to have this kind of friendship is to *be* this kind of friend" (Fowers, 2005, p. 100). Accordingly, true virtue ethical practice necessitates a "friendship" with the client. For the room to be the arena in which a client can through their relationship with the therapist reflect, explore, and develop their character strengths and virtues—engaging virtue ethically with the client in an "I-thou" (Buber, 1986) manner that results in both therapist and client coming away from the relationship changed and having received some good.

Overall, this review has investigated virtue ethics as it could be applied in psychotherapeutic practice. Fleshed out by this process is the vital role of moral perception and practical wisdom in working virtue ethically. Moreover, it has illuminated the benefits of utilising the psychotherapeutic space as moral encounter, a safe place where a client can explore and consider what the *good life* looks like for them.

References

Aho, K. (2012). Assessing the role of virtue ethics in psychology: A commentary on the work of Blaine Fowers, Frank Richardson, and Brent Slife. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*(1), 43-49.

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Anderson, G., & Arsenault, N. (1998). *Fundamentals of educational research*. London, UK: Routledge.

Aristotle. (c. 330 BCE/1980). *The Nicomachean Ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Athanassoulis, N. (2017). Virtue ethics. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Retrieved from http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/. ISSN 216-0002.

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: Individualism and commitment in the American life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Brabender, V. (2007). The ethical group psychotherapist: A coda. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 57*(1), 41-47.

Brabender, V., & Fallon, A. (2009). Ethical hot spots of combined individual and group therapy: Applying four ethical systems. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 59*(1), 127-147.

Brickhouse, T., & Smith, N. D. (2017 Edition). Plato. Retrieved from http://www.iep.utm.edu/plato/. ISSN 216-0002.

Buber, M. (1986). *I and thou*. New York, NY: Scribner.

Burns, J. P., Goodman, D. M., & Orman, A. J. (2013). Psychotherapy as moral encounter: A crisis of modern conscience. *Pastoral Psychology, 62*, 1-12.

Clegg, J. (2000). Beyond ethical individualism. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research, 44*(1), 1-11.

Crowell, S. (2015). Existentialism. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*: Retrieved from http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/

Dalal, F. (2014). Ethics versus compliance. The institution, ethical psychotherapy practice, (and me). *Goup Analysis, 47*(1), 62-81.

Evans, I. M., & Paewai, M. K. (1999). Functional analysis in a bicultural context. *Behaviour Change, 16*(1), 20-36.

Fowers, B. J. (2005). *Virtue and psychology: Pursuing excellence in ordinary practices*. Washington, DC: APA Press Books.

Fowers, B. J. (2012a). An Aristotelian framework for the human good. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*(1), 10-23.

Fowers, B. J. (2012b). Placing virtue and the human good in psychology. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*(1), 1-9.

Frankl, V. E. (1963). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

Frankl, V. E. (1967). *Psychotherapy and existentialism: Selected papers on logotherapy*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press.

Guignon, C. (1993). Authenticity, moral values, and psychotherapy. In C. B. Guignon (Ed.), *Cambridge companion to Heidegger* (pp. 215-239). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Harrist, R. S., & Richardson, F. C. (2014). Pathologizing the normal, individualism, and virtue ethics. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, 44*, 201-211.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Hursthouse, R., & Pettigrove, G. (Winter 2016 Edition). Virtue ethics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ethics-virtue/

Ivey, G. (2014). The ethics of mandatory personal psychotherapy for trainee psychotherapists. *Ethics & Behavior, 24*(2), 91-108.

Jaspers, K. (1969). Boundary situations (E. B. Ashton, Trans.) *Philosophy, vol. 2: Existential elucidation* (pp. 177-222). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Keyes, C. L. M. (2002). Mental health continuum: From languishing to flourishing in life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 43*(2), 207-222. https://doi.org/10.2307/3090197

Kim, J. J., & Enright, R. D. (2016). "State and trait forgiveness": A philosophical analysis and implications for psychotherapy. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice, 3*(1), 32-44.

Kraut, R. (2013). Plato. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato/

Kraut, R. (2014). Aristotle's ethics. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. Retrieved from https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-ethics/

Linley, P. A. (2008). *Average to A+: Realising strengths in yourself and others*. Coventry, UK: CAPP Press.

Macaro, A. (2006). *Reason, virtue and psychotherapy*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
MacIntyre, A. (1981). *After virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
Maslow, A. H. (1954). *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper.
Proctor, C., & Tweed, R. (2016). Measuring eudaimonic well-being. In J. Vitterso (Ed.), *Handbook of eudaimonic well-being* (pp. 277-294). Chalm, Switzerland: Springer International.
Richardson, F. C. (2012). On psychology and virtue ethics. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*(1), 24-34.
Ritzer, G. (2004). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
Rogers, C. R. (1959). A theory of therapy, personality, and interpersonal relationships as developed in the client-centered framework. In S. Koch (Ed.), *Psychology: A study of a science: Vol. 3. Formulations of the person and the social context* (pp. 184-256). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
Rogers, C. R. (1961). *On becoming a person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. London, UK: Constable.
Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*. London, UK: Routledge.
Schulz, B. (2004). Introduction to professional issues in counselling practice. *Canadian Journal of Counselling, 38*(1), 3-4.
Slife, B. D. (2012). Virtue ethics in practice: The Greenbrier Academy. *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology, 32*(1), 35-42.
Slife, B. D., Smith, A. F., & Burchfield, C. M. (2003). Psychotherapists as crypto-missionaries: An exemplar on the crossroads of history, theory, and philosophy. In D. Hill & M. Krall (Eds.), *About psychology: As the crossroads of history, theory, and philosophy* (pp. 55-72). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Stewart-Sicking, J. A. (2008). Virtues, values, and the good life: Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics and its implications for counseling. *Counseling and Values, 52*, 156-171.
Swanton, C. (2003). *Virtue ethics: A pluralistic view*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
Tjeltveit, A. C. (2004). The good, the bad, the obligatory, and the virtuous. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 14*(2), 149-167.
Tjeltveit, A. C. (2006). Psychology's love-hate relationship with love: Critiques, affirmations, and Christian reports. *Journal of Psychology and Theology, 34*(1), 8-22.
Utsch, M., & Frick, E. S. J. (2015). Religiosity and spirituality in psychotherapy. *Psychotherapeut, 60*(5), 451-466.
van Deurzen, E. (1999). Common sense or nonsense: Intervening in moral dilemmas. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 27*(4), 581-586.
Waring, D. R. (2012). The virtuous patient: Psychotherapy and the cultivation of character. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, 19*(1), 25-35.
Williams, M. H. (1997). Boundary violations: Do some contended standards of care fail to encompass commonplace procedures of humanistic, behavioral and eclectic psychotherapies? *Psychotherapy, 34*(3), 238-249.
Winship, G. (2011). Review of Gabriel's angel. *Therapeutic Communities, 32*(3), 249-250.
Wong, P., & Reilly, T. (2017). Frankl's self-transcendence model and virtue ethics. Retrieved from http://www.drpaulwong.com/frankls-self-transcendence-model-and-virtue-ethics/
Woolfolk, R. L. (2012). Virtue and psychotherapy. *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology, 19*(1), 41-43.

Wright, R. (1994). *The moral animal*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.